

## **Introduction**

## **Novels**

[A Cantic for Leibowitz](#)

[The Reluctant Traitor](#), Amazing: Jan 1952

[Saint Leibowitz And The Wild Horse Woman \(with Terry Bisson\)](#)

## **Short Fiction**

[Anybody Else Like Me? \(aka Command Performance\)](#), Galaxy: Nov 1952

[The Big Hunger](#), Astounding: Oct 1952

[Big Joe and the Nth Generation \(aka It Takes a Thief\)](#), IF: May 1952

[Bitter Victory](#), IF: Mar 1952

[Blood Bank](#), Astounding: June 1952

[Check and Checkmate](#), IF: Jan 1953

[Cold Awakening](#), Astounding: Aug 1952

[Conditionally Human](#), Galaxy: Feb 1952

[The Corpse in Your Bed is Me](#) (w Lincoln Boone), Venture, May, 1957

[Crucifixus Etiam \(aka The Sower Does Not Reap\)](#), Astounding: Feb 1953

[The Darfsteller](#), Astounding: Jan 1955 (won Hugo Award)

[Dark Benediction](#), Fantastic Adventures: Sept 1951

[Death of a Spaceman \(aka Memento Homo\)](#), Amazing: Mar 1954

[Dumb Waiter](#), Astounding: April 1952

[A Family Matter](#), Fantastic Story Magazine, Nov 1952

[Gravesong](#), Startling Stories: Oct 1952

[The Hooper](#), Fantastic Universe: Sept 1955

[I, Dreamer](#), Amazing: June/July 1953

[I Made You](#), Astounding: Mar 1954

[Izzard and the Membrane](#), Astounding: May 1951

[Let My People Go](#), IF: July 1952

[The Lineman](#), F&SF: Aug 1957

[The Little Creeps](#), Amazing: Dec 1951

[No Moon for Me](#), Astounding: Sept 1952

[Please Me Plus Three](#), Other Worlds, Aug 1952

[Secret of the Death Dome](#), Amazing Stories: Jan 1951

[Six and Ten Are Johnny](#), Fantastic: Summer 1952

[The Song of Marya \(aka Vengeance for Nikolai\)](#), Venture, Mar 1957

[The Song of Vorhu](#), Thrilling Wonder Stories: Dec 1951

[The Soul-Empty Ones](#), Astounding: Aug 1951

[The Space Witch](#), Amazing: Nov 1951

[The Ties that Bind](#), IF: May 1954

[The Triflin' Man \(aka You Triflin' Skunk\)](#), Fantastic Universe: Jan 1955

[Way of a Rebel](#), IF: April 1954

[The Will](#), Fantastic: Jan/Feb 1954

[Wolf Pack](#), Fantastic: Sept/Oct 1953

[The Yokel](#), Amazing: Sept 1953

## **Introduction**

You are holding in your hands (or, more likely, on your hard drive) the complete science fiction of Walter M Miller Jr. Alas, it is not his complete works. There are at least two stories I could not find, 'MacDoughal's Wife' in *American Mercury* (March 1950) and 'Month of Mary' in *Extension Magazine* (May 1950), both of which are non-genre. If anyone has a copy of either of those magazines, please scan those stories, and mail a copy to gorgon776@hotmail.com.

For a good summary of Miller's works, see  
<http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/8/samuelson8art.htm>.

The stories are presented here in alphabetical order, and were scanned from original sources whenever possible. When available, the original artwork is included.

I scanned and proofed these stories because I have been a Miller fan ever since I read *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. When I started looking for other works by him, I found a few easily...and then the supply dried up. It took almost five years for me to find copies of everything he has written, and it was expensive both in time and money. Many of these stories were never re-printed, and because of tangled copyrights, probably never will be.

That's a shame, but it isn't enough reason to let his stories die, so here they are.

## Novels

The novel "The Reluctant Traitor" is usually included as a novella in bibliographies of Miller's work, but its' length qualifies it (barely) as a novel, so is included as such here.

## A Canticle For Leibowitz

### Fiat Homo

1

## B

rother Francis Gerard of Utah might never have discovered the blessed documents, had it not been for the pilgrim with girded loins who appeared during that young novice's Lenten fast in the desert.

Never before had Brother Francis actually seen a pilgrim with girded loins, but that this one was the bona fide article he was convinced as soon as he had recovered from the spine-chilling effect of the pilgrim's advent on the far horizon, as a wiggling iota of black caught in a shimmering haze of heat. Legless, but wearing a tiny head, the iota materialized out of the mirror glaze on the broken roadway and seemed more to writhe than to walk into view, causing Brother Francis to clutch the crucifix of his rosary and mutter an Ave or two. The iota suggested a tiny apparition spawned by the heat demons who tortured the land at high noon, when any creature capable of motion on the desert (except the buzzards and a few monastic hermits such as Francis) lay motionless in its burrow or hid beneath a rock from the ferocity of the sun. Only a thing monstrous, a thing preternatural, or a thing with addled wits would hike purposefully down the trail at noon this way. Brother Francis added a hasty prayer to Saint Raul the Cyclopean, patron of the misborn, for protection against the Saint's unhappy protégés. (For who did not then know that there were monsters in the earth in those days? That which was born alive was, by the

law of the Church and the law of Nature, suffered to live, and helped to maturity if possible, by those who had begotten it. The law was not always obeyed, but it was obeyed with sufficient frequency to sustain a scattered population of adult monsters, who often chose the remotest of deserted lands for their wanderings, where they prowled by night around the fires of prairie travelers.) But at last the iota squirmed its way out of the heat risers and into clear air, where it manifestly became a distant pilgrim; Brother Francis released the crucifix with a small Amen.

The pilgrim was a spindly old fellow with a staff, a basket hat, a brushy beard, and a waterskin slung over one shoulder. He was chewing and spitting with too much relish to be an apparition, and he seemed too frail and lame to be a successful practitioner of ogre-ism or highwaymanship. Nevertheless, Francis slunk quietly out of the pilgrim's line of sight and crouched behind a heap of rubbled stone where he could watch without being seen. Encounters between strangers in the desert, while rare, were occasions of mutual suspicion, and masked by initial preparations on both sides for an incident that might prove either cordial or warlike. Seldom more than thrice annually did any layman or stranger travel the old road that passed the abbey, in spite of the oasis which permitted that abbey's existence and which would have made the monastery a natural inn for wayfarers if the road were not a road from nowhere, leading nowhere, in terms of the modes of travel in those times. Perhaps, in earlier ages, the road had been a portion of the shortest route from the Great Salt Lake to Old El Paso; south of the abbey it intersected a similar strip of broken stone that stretched east-and westward. The crossing was worn by time, but not by Man, of late.

The pilgrim approached within hailing distance, but the novice stayed behind his mound of rubble. The pilgrim's loins were truly girded with a piece of dirty burlap, his only clothing except for hat and sandals. Doggedly he plodded ahead with a mechanical limp while assisting his crippled leg with the heavy staff. His rhythmic gait was that of a man with a long road behind him and a long way yet to go. But, upon entering the area of the ancient ruins, he broke his stride and paused to reconnoiter.

Francis ducked low.

There was no shade amid the cluster of mounds where a group of age-old buildings once had been, but some of the larger stones could, nevertheless, provide cooling refreshment to select portions of the anatomy for travelers as wise in the way of the desert as the pilgrim soon proved himself to be. He searched briefly for a rock of suitable proportions. Approvingly, Brother Francis noted that he did not grasp the stone and rashly tug, but instead, stood at a safe distance from it and, using his staff as a lever and a smaller rock for a fulcrum, he jostled the weightier one until the inevitable buzzing creature crawled forth from below. Dispassionately the traveler killed the snake with his staff and flipped the still wriggling carcass aside. Having dispatched the occupant of the cool cranny beneath the stone, the pilgrim availed himself of the cool cranny's ceiling by the usual method of overturning the stone. Thereupon, he pulled up the back of his loincloth, sat with his withered buttocks against the stone's relatively chilly underside, kicked off his sandals, and pressed the soles of his feet against what had been the sandy floor of the cool cranny. Thus refreshed, he wiggled his toes, smiled toothlessly and began to hum a tune. Soon he was singing a kind of crooning chant in a dialect not known to the novice. Weary of crouching, Brother Francis shifted restlessly.

While he sang, the pilgrim unwrapped a biscuit and a bit of cheese. Then his singing paused, and he stood for a moment to cry out softly in the vernacular of the region: "Blest be *Adonoi Elohim*, King of All, who maketh bread to spring forth from the earth," in a sort of nasal bleat. The bleat being finished, he sat again, and commenced eating.

The Wanderer had come a long way indeed, thought Brother Francis, who knew of no adjacent realm governed by a monarch with such an unfamiliar name and such strange pretensions. The old man was making a penitential pilgrimage, hazarded Brother Francis—perhaps to the "shrine" at the abbey, although the "shrine" was not yet officially a shrine, nor was its "saint" yet officially a saint. Brother Francis could think of no alternate explanation of the presence of an old wanderer on this road leading to nowhere.

The pilgrim was taking his time with the bread and cheese, and the novice grew increasingly restless as his own anxiety waned. The rule of silence for the Lenten fast days did not permit him to converse

voluntarily with the old man, but if he left his hiding place behind the rubble heap before the old man departed, he was certain to be seen or heard by the pilgrim, for he had been forbidden to leave the vicinity of his hermitage before the end of Lent.

Still slightly hesitant, Brother Francis loudly cleared his throat, then straightened into view.

“Whup!”

The pilgrim’s bread and cheese went flying. The old man grabbed his staff and bounded to his feet.

“Creep up on me, will you!”

He brandished the staff menacingly at the hooded figure which had arisen from beyond the rock pile. Brother Francis noticed that the thick end of the staff was armed with a spike. The novice bowed courteously, thrice, but the pilgrim overlooked this nicety.

“Stay back there now!” he croaked. “Just keep your distance, sport. I’ve got nothing you’re after—unless it’s the cheese, and you can have that. If it’s meat you want, I’m nothing but gristle, but I’ll fight to keep it. Back now! *back!*”

“Wait—” The novice paused. Charity, or even common courtesy, could take precedence over the Lenten rule of silence, when circumstances demanded speech, but to break silence on his own decision always left him slightly nervous.

“I’m not a sport, good simpleton,” he continued, using the polite address. He tossed back his hood to show his monastic haircut and held up his rosary beads. “Do you understand these?”

For several seconds the old man remained in catlike readiness for combat while he studied the novice’s sun-blistered, adolescent face. The pilgrim’s had been a natural mistake. Grotesque creatures who prowled the fringes of the desert often wore hoods, masks, or voluminous robes to hide deformity. Among them were these whose deformity was not limited to the body, those who sometimes looked on travelers as a dependable source of venison.

After a brief scrutiny, the pilgrim straightened.

“Oh—one of *them*.” He leaned on his staff and scowled.

“Is that the Leibowitz Abbey down yonder?” he asked, pointing toward the distant cluster of buildings to the south.

Brother Francis bowed politely and nodded at the ground.

“What are you doing out here in the ruins?”

The novice picked up a chalklike fragment of stone. That the traveler might be literate was statistically unlikely, but Brother Francis decided to try. Since the vulgar dialects of the people had neither alphabet nor orthography, he chalked the Latin words for “Penance, Solitude, and Silence,” on a large flat stone, and wrote them again below in ancient English, hoping, in spite of his unacknowledged yearning for someone to talk to, that the old man would understand and leave him to his lonely Lenten vigil.

The pilgrim smiled wryly at the inscription. His laugh seemed less a laugh than a fatalistic bleat. “Hmmm-hnnn! Still writing things backward,” he said; but if he understood the inscription, he did not condescend to admit it. He laid aside his staff, sat on the rock again, picked his bread and cheese out of the sand, and began scraping them clean. Francis moistened his lips hungrily, but looked away. He had eaten nothing but cactus fruit and one handful of parched corn since Ash Wednesday; the rules of fast and abstinence were rather strict for vocational vigils.

Noticing his discomfort, the pilgrim broke his bread and cheese; he offered a portion to Brother Francis.

In spite of his dehydrated condition, caused by his meager water supply, the novice’s mouth flooded with saliva. His eyes refused to move from the hand that offered the food. The universe contracted; at its exact geometric center floated that sandy tidbit of dark bread and pale cheese. A demon commanded the muscles of his left leg to move his left foot half a yard forward. The demon then possessed his right leg to move the right foot ahead of the left, and it somehow forced his right pectorals and biceps to swing his arm until his hand touched the hand of the pilgrim. His fingers felt the food; they seemed even to taste the food. An involuntary shudder passed over his half-starved body. He closed his eyes and saw the Lord Abbot glaring at him and brandishing a bullwhip. Whenever the novice tried to visualize the Holy Trinity,

the countenance of God the Father always became confused with the face of the abbot, which was normally, it seemed to Francis, very angry. Behind the abbot a bonfire raged, and from the midst of the flames the eyes of the Blessed Martyr Leibowitz gazed in death-agony upon his fasting protégé, caught in the act of reaching for cheese.

The novice shuddered again. “*Apaga Satanas!*” he hissed as he danced back and dropped the food. Without warning, he spattered the old man with holy water from a tiny phial sneaked from his sleeve. The pilgrim had become indistinguishable from the Archenemy, for a moment, in the somewhat sun-dazed mind of the novice.

This surprise attack on the Powers of Darkness and Temptation produced no immediate supernatural results, but the natural results seemed to appear *ex opere operante*. The pilgrim-Beelzebub failed to explode into sulfurous smoke, but he made gargling sounds, turned a bright shade of red, and lunged at Francis with a bloodcurdling yell. The novice kept tripping on his tunic as he fled from flailing of the pilgrim’s spiked staff, and he escaped without nail holes only because the pilgrim had forgotten his sandals. The old man’s limping charge became a skippity hop. He seemed suddenly mindful of scorching rocks under his bare soles. He stopped and became preoccupied. When Brother Francis glanced over his shoulder, he gained the distinct impression that the pilgrim’s retreat to his cool spot was being accomplished by the feat of hopping along on the tip of one great toe.

Ashamed of the odor of cheese that lingered on his fingertips, and repenting his irrational exorcism, the novice slunk back to his self-appointed labors in the old ruins, while the pilgrim cooled his feet and satisfied his wrath by flinging an occasional rock at the youth whenever the latter moved into view among the rubble mounds. When his arm at last grew weary, he flung more feints than stones, and merely grumbled over his bread and cheese when Francis ceased to dodge.

The novice was wandering to and fro throughout the ruins, occasionally staggering toward some focal point of his work with a rock, the size of his own chest, locked in a painful embrace. The pilgrim watched him select a stone, estimate its dimensions in hand-spans, reject it, and carefully select another, to be pried free from the rock jam of the rubble, to be hoisted by Francis and stumblingly hauled away. He dropped one stone after a few paces, and, suddenly sitting, placed his head between his knees in an apparent effort to avoid fainting. After panting awhile, he arose again and finished by rolling the stone end-over-end toward its destination. He continued this activity while the pilgrim, no longer glaring, began to gape.

The sun blazed its midday maledictions upon the parched land, laying its anathema on all moist things. Francis labored on in spite of the heat.

When the traveler had washed down the last of his sandy bread and cheese with a few squirts from his waterskin, he slipped feet into sandals, arose with a grunt, and hobbled through the ruins toward the site of the novice’s labors. Noticing the old man’s approach, Brother Francis scurried to a safe distance. Mockingly, the pilgrim brandished his spiked cudgel at him, but seemed more curious about the youth’s masonry than he seemed eager for revenge. He paused to inspect the novice’s burrow.

There, near the east boundary of the ruins, Brother Francis had dug a shallow trench, using a stick for a hoe and hands for a shovel. He had, on the first day of Lent, roofed it over with a heap of brush, and used the trench by night as refuge from the desert’s wolves. But as the days of his fasting grew in number, his presence had increased his spoor in the vicinity until the nocturnal lupine prowlers seemed unduly attracted to the area of the ruins and even scratched around his brush heap when the fire was gone.

Francis had first attempted to discourage their nightly digging by increasing the thickness of the brush pile over his trench, and by surrounding it with a ring of stones set tightly in a furrow. But on the previous night, something had leaped to the top of his brush pile and howled while Francis lay shivering below, whereupon he had determined to fortify the burrow, and, using the first ring of stones as a foundation, had begun to build a wall. The wall tilted inward as it grew; but since the enclosure was roughly an oval in shape, the stones in each new layer crowded against adjacent stones to prevent an inward collapse. Brother Francis now hoped that by a careful selection of rocks and a certain mount of juggling, dirt-tamping, and pebble-wedging, he would be able to complete a dome. And, a single span of

unbuttressed arch, somehow defying gravity, stood there over the burrow as a token of this ambition. Brother Francis yelped like a puppy when the pilgrim rapped curiously at this arch with his staff.

Solicitous for his abode, the novice had drawn nearer during the pilgrim's inspection. The pilgrim answered his yelp with a flourish of the cudgel and a bloodthirsty howl. Brother Francis promptly tripped on the hem of his tunic and sat down. The old man chuckled.

"Hmmm-hnnn! You'll need a strange shape of a rock to fit that gap," he said, and rattled his staff back and forth in a vacant space in the highest tier of stones.

The youth nodded and looked away. He continued to sit in the sand, and, by silence and by his lowered gaze, he hoped to tell the old man that he was neither free to converse nor free to accept willingly another's presence in his place of Lenten solitude. The novice began writing with a dry twig in the sand: *Et ne nos inducas in...*

"I've not offered to change these stones into bread for you yet, have I?" the old traveler said crossly.

Brother Francis glanced up quickly. So! the old man *could* read, and read Scripture, at that. Furthermore, his remark implied that he had understood both the novice's impulsive use of holy water and his reason for being here as well. Aware now that the pilgrim was teasing him, Brother Francis lowered his eyes again and waited.

"Hmmm-hnnn! So you're to be left alone, are you? Well, then, I'd best be on my way. Tell me, will your brothers at the abbey let an old man rest a bit in their shade?"

Brother Francis nodded. "They'll give you food and water too," he added softly, in charity.

The pilgrim chuckled. "For that, I'll find you a rock to fit that gap before I go. God with you."

*But you need not*—The protest died unspoken. Brother Francis watched him hobbling slowly away. The pilgrim wandered in and about among the rubble mounds. He paused occasionally to inspect a stone or pry at one with his staff. His search would surely prove fruitless, the novice thought, for it was a repetition of a search which the youth himself had been making since mid-morning. He had decided at last that it would be easier to remove and rebuild a section of the highest tier than to find a keystone that approximated the hourglass shape of the gap in that tier. But, surely, the pilgrim would soon exhaust his patience and wander on his way.

Meanwhile, Brother Francis rested. He prayed for the recovery of that inward privacy which the purpose of his vigil demanded that he seek: a clean parchment of the spirit whereon the words of a summons might be written in his solitude—if that other Immensurable Loneliness which was God stretched forth Its hand to touch his own tiny human loneliness and to mark his vocation there. The *Little Book*, which Prior Cherokee had left with him on the preceding Sunday, served as a guide to his meditation. It was centuries old, and it was called *Libellus Leibowitz*, although only an uncertain tradition attributed its authorship to the Beatus himself.

"*Parum equidem te diligebam, Domine, juventute mea; quare doleo nimis . . .* Too little, O Lord, did I love Thee in the time of my youth; wherefore I grieve exceedingly in the time of my age. In vain did I flee from Thee in those days..."

"Hoy! Over here!" came a shout from beyond the rubble mounds.

Brother Francis glanced up briefly, but the pilgrim was not in sight. His eyes fell again to the page.

"*Repugnans tibi, ausus sum quaerere quid, quid doctius mihi fide, certius spe, aut dulcius caritate visum esset. Quis itaque stultior me...*"

"Hey boy!" the cry came again. "I found you a stone, one likely to fit."

This time when Brother Francis looked up, he caught a glimpse of the pilgrim's staff waving signals to him beyond the top of a rubble heap. Sighing the novice returned to his reading.

"*O inscrutabilis Scrutator animarum, cui patet omne cor, si me vocaveras, olim a te fugeram. Si autem nunc velis vocare me indignum . . .*"

And, irritably from beyond the rubble mound: "All right, then, suit yourself. I'll mark the rock and set a stake by it. Try it or not, as you please."

"Thank you," the novice sighed, but doubted that the old man heard him. He toiled on with the text:

"*Libera me, Domine, ab vitiis meis, ut solius tuae voluntatis mihi cupidus sim, et vocationis .*

..”

“There, then!” the pilgrim shouted. “It’s staked and marked. And may you find your voice soon, boy. *Olla allay!*”

Soon after the last shout faded and died, Brother Francis caught a glimpse of the pilgrim trudging away on the trail that led toward the abbey. The novice whispered a swift blessing after him, and a prayer for safe wayfaring.

His privacy having been restored, Brother Francis returned the book to his burrow and resumed his haphazard stonemasonry, not yet troubling himself to investigate the pilgrim’s find. While his starved body heaved, strained, and staggered under the weight of the rocks, his mind, machinelike kept repeating the prayer for the certainty of his vocation:

*“Libere me, Domine, ab vitiis meis . . . Set me free, O Lord, from my own vices, so that in my own heart I may be desirous of only Thy will, and be aware of Thy summons if it come . . . ut solius tuae voluntatis mihi cupidus sim, et vocatinonis tuae conscius si digneris me vocare. Amen.*

“Set me free, O Lord, from my own vices, so that in my own heart...”

A sky-herd of cumulus clouds, on their way to bestow moist blessings on the mountains after cruelly deceiving the parched desert, began blotting out the sun and trailing dark shadow-shapes across the blistered land below, offering intermittent but welcome respite from the searing sunlight. When a racing cloud-shadow wiped its way over the ruins, the novice worked rapidly until the shadow was gone, then rested until the next bundle of fleece blotted out the sun.

It was quite by accident that Brother Francis finally discovered the pilgrim’s stone. While wandering thereabouts, he stumbled over the stake which the old man had driven into the ground as a marker. He found himself on his hands and knees staring at a pair of marks freshly chalked on an ancient stone:

The marks were so carefully drawn that Brother Francis immediately assumed them to be symbols, but minutes of musing over them left him still bemused. Witch markings perhaps? But no, the old man had called: “God-with-you,” as a witch would not. The novice pried the stone free from the rubble and rolled it over. As he did so, the rock mound rumbled faintly from within; a small stone clattered down the slope. Francis danced away from a possible avalanche, but the disturbance was momentary. In the place where the pilgrim’s rock had been wedged, however, there now appeared a small black hole.

Holes were often inhabited.

But this hole seemed to have been so tightly corked by the pilgrim’s stone that scarcely a flea could have entered it before Francis had overturned the rock. Nevertheless, he found a stick and gingerly thrust it into the opening. The stick encountered no resistance. When he released it, the stick slid into the hole and vanished, as if into a larger underground cavity. He waited nervously. Nothing slithered forth.

He sank to his knees again and cautiously sniffed at the hole. Having noticed neither an animal odor nor any hint of brimstone, he rolled a bit of gravel into it and leaned closer to listen. The gravel bounced once, a few feet below the opening, and then kept rattling its way downward, struck something metallic in passing, and finally came to rest somewhere far below. Echoes suggested an underground opening the size of a room.

Brother Francis climbed unsteadily to his feet and looked around. He seemed alone, as usual, except for his companion buzzard which, soaring on high, had been watching him with such interest lately that other buzzards occasionally left their territories near the horizons and came to investigate.

The novice circled the rubble heap, but found no sign of a second hole. He climbed an adjacent heap and squinted down the trail. The pilgrim had long since vanished. Nothing moved along the old roadway, but he caught a fleeting glimpse of Brother Alfred crossing a low hill a mile to the east in search of firewood near his own Lenten hermitage. Brother Alfred was deaf as a post. There was no one else in view. Francis foresaw no reason whatever to scream for help, but to estimate in advance the probable results of such a scream, if the need should arise, seemed only an exercise of prudence. After a careful scrutiny of the terrain, he climbed down from the mound. Breath needed for screaming would be better used for running.

He thought of replacing the pilgrim’s stone to cork the hole as before, but the adjacent stones had shifted slightly so that it no longer fit its previous place in the puzzle. Besides, the gap in the highest tier of

his shelter wall remained unfilled, and the pilgrim was right: the stone's size and shape suggested a probable fit. After only brief misgivings, he hoisted the rock and staggered back to his burrow.

The stone slipped neatly into place. He tested the new wedge with a kick; the tier held fast, even though the jolt caused a minor collapse a few feet away. The pilgrim's marks, though blurred by his handling of the stone, were still dear enough to be copied. Brother Francis carefully redrew them on another rock, using a charred stick as a stylus. When Prior Cheroki made his Sabbath tour of the hermitages, perhaps the priest would be able to say whether the marks had meaning, either as charm or curse. To fear the pagan cabals was forbidden, but the novice was curious at least to learn what sign would be overhanging his sleeping pit, in view of the weight of the masonry on which the sign was written.

His labors continued through the heat of the afternoon. A corner of his mind kept reminding him of the hole—the interesting, and yet fearsome, little hole—and the way the rattle of gravel had caused faint echoes from somewhere below ground. He knew that the ruins all about him here were very old. He knew also, from tradition that the ruins had been gradually eroded into these anomalous heaps of stone by generations of monks and occasional strangers, men seeking a load of stone or looking for the bits of rusty steel which could be found by shattering the larger sections of columns and slabs to extract the ancient strips of that metal, mysteriously planted in the rocks by men of an age almost forgotten to the world. This human erosion had all but obliterated the resemblance to buildings, which tradition ascribed to the ruins in an earlier period, although the abbey's present master-builder still took pride in his ability to sense and to point out the vestige of a floor plan here and there. And there was still metal to be found, if anyone cared to break enough rock to find it.

The abbey itself had been built of these stones. That several centuries of stonemasons might have left anything of interest still to be discovered in the ruins, Francis regarded as improbable fancy. And yet, he had never heard anyone mention buildings with basements or underground rooms. The master-builder, he recalled at last, had been quite specific in saying that the buildings at this site had had aspects of hasty construction, lacked deep foundations, and had rested for the most part on flat surface slabs.

With his shelter approaching completion, Brother Francis ventured back to the hole and stood looking down at it; he was unable to put off the desert-dweller's conviction that wherever a place exists to hide from the sun, something is already hiding in it. Even if the hole was now uninhabited, something would certainly slither into it before tomorrow's dawn. On the other hand, if something already lived in the hole, Francis thought it safer to make its acquaintance by day than by night. There seemed to be no tracks in the vicinity except his own, the pilgrim's, and the tracks of the wolves.

Making a quick decision, he began clearing rubble and sand away from the hole. After half an hour of this, the hole was no larger, but his conviction that it opened into a subterranean pit had become a certainty. Two small boulders, half buried, and adjoining the opening, were obviously jammed together by the force of too much mass crowding the mouth of a shaft; they seemed caught in a bottleneck.

When he pried one stone toward the right, its neighbor rolled left, until no further motion was possible. The reverse effect occurred when he pried in the opposing direction, but he continued to jostle at the rock-jam.

His lever spontaneously leaped from his grasp, delivered a glancing blow to the side of his head, and disappeared in a sudden cave-in. The sharp blow sent him reeling. A flying stone from the rockslide struck him in the back and he fell gasping, uncertain whether or not he was falling into the pit until the instant his belly hit solid ground and he hugged it. The roar of the rockfall was deafening but brief.

Blinded by dust, Francis lay gasping for breath and wondering whether he dared to move, so sharp was the pain in his back. Having recovered a little breath, he managed to get one hand inside his habit and groped for the place between his shoulders where a few crushed bones might be. The place felt rough, and it stung. His fingers came away damp and red. He moved, but groaned and lay quietly again.

There was a soft beating of wings. Brother Francis glanced up in time to see the buzzard preparing to alight on a rubble heap a few yards away. The bird took wing again at once, but Francis imagined that it had eyed him with a sort of motherly concern in the manner of a worried hen. He rolled over quickly. A whole black heavenly host of them had gathered, and they circled at a curiously low altitude. Just skimming the mounds. They soared higher when he moved. Suddenly ignoring the possibility of chipped



vertebrae or a crushed rib, the novice climbed shakily to his feet. Disappointed, the black sky-horde rode back to altitude on their invisible elevators of hot air, then disbanded and dispersed toward their remoter aerial vigils. Dark alternatives to the Paraclete whose coming he awaited, the birds seemed eager at times to descend in place of the Dove; their sporadic interest had been unnerving him of late, and he promptly decided, after some experimental shrugging, that the sharp rock had done no more than bruise and scrape

A dust column which had plumed up from the site of the cave-in was tapering away on the breeze. He hoped someone would see it from the abbey's watchtowers and come to investigate. At his feet, a square opening yawned in the earth, where one flank of the mound had collapsed into the pit below. Stairs led downward, but only the top steps remained unburied by the avalanche which had paused for six centuries in mid-fall to await the assistance of Brother Francis before completing its roaring descent.

On one wall of the stair well a half-buried sign remained legible. Mustering his modest command of pre-Deluge English, he whispered the words haltingly:

## FALLOUT SURVIVAL SHELTER

Maximum Occupancy: 15

Provision limitations, single occupant: 180 days; divide by actual number of occupants. Upon entering shelter, see that First Hatch is securely locked and sealed, that the intruder shields are electrified to repel contaminated persons attempting entry, that the warning lights are *ON* outside the enclosure...

The rest was buried, but the first word was enough for Francis. He had never seen a "Fallout," and he hoped he'd never see one. A consistent description of the monster had not survived, but Francis had heard the legends. He crossed himself and backed away from the hole. Tradition told that the Beatus Leibowitz himself had encountered a Fallout, and had been possessed by it for many months before the exorcism which accompanied his Baptism drove the fiend away.

Brother Francis visualized a Fallout as half-salamander, because, according to tradition, the thing was born in the Flame Deluge, and as half-incubus who despoiled virgins in their sleep, for, were not the monsters of the world still called "children of the Fallout"? That the demon was capable of inflicting all the woes which descended upon Job was recorded fact, if not an article of creed.

The novice stared at the sign in dismay. Its meaning was plain enough. He had unwittingly broken into the abode (deserted, he prayed) of not just one, but fifteen of the dreadful beings! He groped for his phial of holy water.

## 2

"A spiritu fornicationis,  
*Domino, libera nos.*  
From the lightning and the tempest,  
*O Lord, deliver us.*  
From the scourge of the earthquake,  
*O Lord, deliver us.*  
From plague, famine, and war,  
*O Lord, deliver us.*

"From the place of ground zero,  
*O Lord, deliver us.*

From the rain of the cobalt,  
    *O Lord, deliver us.*  
From the rain of the strontium,  
    *O Lord, deliver us.*  
From the fall of the cesium,  
    *O Lord, deliver us.*

“From the curse of the Fallout,  
    *O Lord, deliver us.*  
From the begetting of monsters,  
    *O Lord, deliver us.*  
From the curse of the Misborn,  
    *O Lord deliver us.*  
A morte perpetua,  
    *Domine, libera nos.*

“Peccatores,  
    *te rogamus, audi nos.*  
That thou wouldst spare us,  
    *we beseech thee, hear us.*  
That thou wouldst pardon us,  
    *we beseech thee, hear us.*  
That thou wouldst bring us truly to penance,  
    *te rogamus, audi nos.”*

## S

natches of such versicles from the Litany of the Saints came whispering on each panting breath as Brother Francis lowered himself gingerly into the stair well of the ancient Fallout Shelter, armed as he was only with holy water and an improvised torch lighted from the banked embers of last night’s fire. He had waited more than an hour for someone from the abbey to come investigate the dust plume. No one had come.

To abandon his vocational vigil even briefly, unless seriously ill or unless ordered to return to the abbey, would be regarded as an *ipso facto* renunciation of his claim of a true vocation to life as a monk of the Albertian Order of Leibowitz. Brother Francis would have preferred death. He was faced, therefore, with the choice of investigating the fearsome pit before sunset, or of spending the night in his burrow in ignorance of whatever might lurk in the shelter and might reawaken to prowl in darkness. As a nocturnal hazard, the wolves already made trouble enough, and the wolves were merely creatures of flesh and blood. Creatures of less solid substance, he preferred to meet by the light of day; although, to be sure, scant daylight fell into the pit below, the sun now being low in the west.

The debris which had crashed down into the shelter formed a hill with its crest near the head of the stairs, and there was only a narrow squeezeway between the rocks and the ceiling. He went through it feet first and found himself forced to continue feet first, because of the steepness of the slope. Thus confronting the Unknown face-to-backside, he groped for footholds in the loose heap of broken stone and gradually worked his way downward. Occasionally, when his torch flickered low, he paused to tilt its flame downward, letting the fire spread further along the wood; during such pauses, he tried to appraise the danger about him and below. There was little to be seen. He was in an underground room, but at

least one third of its volume was filled by the mound of debris that had fallen through the stair well. The cascade of stone had covered all the floor, crushed several pieces of furniture that he could see, and perhaps had completely buried others. He saw battered metal lockers leaning awry, waist-deep in rubble. At the far end of the room was a metal door, hinged to swing toward him, and tightly sealed by the avalanche. Still legible in flaking paint on the door were the stenciled letters:

## INNER HATCH SEALED ENVIRONMENT

Evidently the room into which he was descending was only an antechamber. But whatever lay beyond INNER HATCH was sealed there by several tons of rock against the door. Its environment was SEALED indeed, unless it had another exit.

Having made his way to the foot of the slope, and after assuring himself that the antechamber contained no obvious menace, the novice went cautiously to inspect the metal door at closer range by torchlight. Printed under the stenciled letters of INNER HATCH was a smaller rust-streaked sign:

**WARNING:** This hatch must not be sealed before all personnel have been admitted, or before all steps of safety procedure prescribed by Technical Manual CD-Bu-83A have been accomplished. When Hatch is sealed, air within shelter will be pressurized 2.0 p.s.i. above ambient barometric level to minimize inward diffusion. Once sealed, the hatch will be automatically unlocked by the servomonitor system when, but not before, any of the following conditions prevail: (1) when the exterior radiation count falls below the danger level, (2) when the air and water repurification system fails, ( 3 ) when the food supply is exhausted, (4) when the internal power supply fails. See CD-Bu-83A for further instructions.

Brother Francis found himself slightly confused by the Warning, but he intended to heed it by not touching the door at all. The miraculous contraptions of the ancients were not to be carelessly tampered with, as many a dead excavator-of-the-past had testified with his dying gasp.

Brother Francis noticed that the debris which had been lying in the antechamber for centuries was darker in color and rougher in texture than the debris which had weathered under the desert sun and in the sandy wind before today's cave-in. One could tell by a glance at the stones that Inner Hatch had been blocked not by today's rockslide but by one more ancient than the abbey itself. If Fallout Shelter's Sealed Environment contained a Fallout, the demon had obviously not opened Inner Hatch since the time of the Flame Deluge, before the Simplification. And, if it had been sealed beyond the metal door for so many centuries, there was small reason, Francis told himself, to fear that it might come bursting through the hatch before Holy Saturday.

His torch burned low. Having found a splintered chair leg, he set it ablaze with his waning flame, then began gathering bits of broken furniture with which to build a dependable fire, meanwhile pondering the meaning of that ancient sign: FALLOUT SURVIVAL SHELTER.

As Brother Francis readily admitted, his mastery of pre-Deluge English was far from masterful yet. The way nouns could sometimes modify other nouns in that tongue had always been one of his weak points. In Latin, as in most simple dialects of the region, a construction like *servus puer* meant about the same thing as *puer servus*, and even in English *slave boy* meant *boy slave*. But there the similarity ended. He had finally learned that *house cat* did not mean *cat house*, and that a dative of purpose or possession, as in *mihi amicus*, was somehow conveyed by *dog food* or *sentry box* even without inflection. But what of a triple appositive like *fallout survival shelter*? Brother Francis shook his head. The Warning on Inner Hatch mentioned food, water, and air; and yet surely these were not necessities for the fiends of Hell. At times, the novice found pre-Deluge English more perplexing than either Intermediate Angelology or Saint Leslie's theological calculus.

He built his fire on the slope of the rubble pile, where it could brighten the darker crannies of the antechamber. Then he went to explore whatever might remain uncovered by debris. The ruins above ground had been reduced to archaeological ambiguity by generations of scavengers, but this underground

ruin had been touched by no hand but the hand of impersonal disaster. The place seemed haunted by the presences of another age. A skull, lying among the rocks in a darker corner, still retained a gold tooth in its grin—clear evidence that the shelter had never been invaded by wanderers. The gold incisor flickered when the fire danced high.

More than once in the desert had Brother Francis encountered, near some parched arroyo, a small heap of human bones, picked clean and whitening in the sun. He was not especially squeamish, and one expected such things. He was, therefore, not startled when he first noticed the skull in the corner of the antechamber, but the flicker of gold in its grin kept catching his eye while he pried at the doors (locked or stuck) of the rusty lockers and tugged at the drawers (also stuck) of a battered metal desk. The desk might prove to be a priceless find, if it contained documents or a small book or two that had survived the angry bonfires of the Age of Simplification. While he kept trying to open the drawers, the fire burned low; he fancied that the skull began emitting a faint glow of its own. Such a phenomenon was not especially uncommon, but in the gloomy crypt, Brother Francis found it somehow most disturbing. He gathered more wood for the fire, returned to jerk and tug at the desk, and tried to ignore the skull's flickering grin. While a little wary yet of lurking Fallouts, Francis had sufficiently recovered from his initial fright to realize that the shelter, notably the desk and the lockers, might well be teeming with rich relics of an age which the world had, for the most part, deliberately chosen to forget.

Providence had bestowed a blessing here. To find a bit of the past which had escaped both the bonfires and the looting scavengers was a rare stroke of luck these days. There was, however, always a risk involved. Monastic excavators, alert for ancient treasures, had been known to emerge from a hole in the ground, triumphantly carrying a strange cylindrical artifact, and then—while cleaning it or trying to ascertain its purpose—press the wrong button or twist the wrong knob, thereby ending the matter without benefit of clergy. Only eighty years ago the Venerable Boedullus had written with obvious delight to his Lord Abbot that his small expedition had uncovered the remains of, in his own words, “the site of an intercontinental launching pad, complete with several fascinating subterranean storage tanks.” No one at the abbey ever knew what the Venerable Boedullus meant by “intercontinental launching pad,” but the Lord Abbot who had reigned at that time sternly decreed that monastic antiquarians must, on pain of excommunication, avoid such “pads” thenceforth. For his letter to the abbot was the last that anyone ever saw of the Venerable Boedullus, his party, his “launching pad” site, and the small village which had grown up over that site; an interesting lake now graced the landscape where the village had been, thanks to some shepherds who diverted the course of a creek and caused it to flow into the crater to store water for their flocks in time of drought. A traveler who had come from that direction about a decade ago reported excellent fishing in that lake, but the shepherds thereabouts regarded the fish as the souls of the departed villagers and excavators; they refused to fish there because of Bo’dollos, the giant catfish that brooded in the deep.

“...nor shall any other excavation be initiated which does not have as its primary purpose the augmentation of the Memorabilia,” the Lord Abbot’s decree had added—meaning that Brother Francis should search the shelter only for books and papers, not tampering with interesting hardware.

The gold-capped tooth kept winking and glittering at the corner of his eye while Brother Francis heaved and strained at the desk drawers. The drawers refused to budge. He gave the desk a final kick and turned to glare impatiently at the skull: *Why don't you grin at something else for a change?*

The grin remained. The gold-toothed residuum lay with its head pillowed between a rock and a rusty metal box. Quitting the desk, the novice picked his way across the debris at last for a clever inspection of the mortal remains. Clearly, the person had died on the spot, struck down by the torrent of stones and half buried by the debris. Only the skull and the bones of one leg had not been covered. The femur was broken, the back of the skull was crushed.

Brother Francis breathed a prayer for the departed, then very gently lifted the skull from its resting place and turned it around so that it grinned toward the wall. Then his eye fell on the rusty box.

The box was shaped like a satchel and was obviously a carrying case of some kind. It might have served any number of purposes, but it had been rather badly battered by flying stones. Gingerly he worked it loose from the rubble and carried it closer to the fire. The lock seemed to be broken, but the

lid had rusted shut. The box rattled when he shook it. It was not an obvious place to look for books or papers, but—obviously too—it was designed to be opened and closed, and might contain a scrap or two of information for the Memorabilia. Nevertheless, remembering the fate of Brother Boedullus and others, he sprinkled it with holy water before attempting to pry it open, and he handled the ancient relic as reverently as was possible while battering at its rusty hinges with a stone.

At last he broke the hinges, and the lid fell free. Small metal tidbits bounced from trays, spilled among the rocks, some of them falling irretrievably into crevices. But, in the bottom of the box in the space beneath the trays, he beheld—papers! After a quick prayer of thanksgiving, he regathered as many of the scattered tidbits as he could, and, after loosely replacing the lid, began climbing the hill of debris toward the stair well and the thin patch of sky, with the box hugged tightly under one arm.

The sun was blinding after the darkness of the shelter. He scarcely bothered to notice that it was sinking dangerously low in the west, but began at once to search for a flat slab on which the contents of the box could be spread for examination without risk of losing anything in the sand.

Minutes later, seated on a cracked foundation slab, he began removing the tidbits of metal and glass that filled the trays. Most of them were small tubular things with a wire whisker at each end of each tube. These, he had seen before. The abbey's small museum had a few of them, of various size, shape and color. Once he had seen a shaman of the hill-pagan people wearing a string of them as a ceremonial necklace. The hill people thought of them as "parts of the body of the god"—of the fabled *Machina analytica*, hailed as the wisest of their gods. By swallowing one of them, a shaman could acquire "Infallibility," they said. He certainly acquired Indisputability that way, among his own people—unless he swallowed one of the poison kind. The similar tidbits in the museum were connected together too—not in the form of a necklace, but as a complex and rather disorderly maze in the bottom of a small metal box, exhibited as: "Radio Chassis: Application Uncertain."

Inside the lid of the carrying case, a note had been glued; the glue had powdered, the ink had faded, and the paper was so darkened by rusty stains that even good handwriting would have been hard enough to read, but this was written in a hasty scrawl. He studied it intermittently while emptying the trays. It seemed to be English, of a sort, but half an hour passed before he deciphered most of the message:

Carl—

Must grab plane for [undecipherable] in twenty minutes.

For God's sake, keep Em there till we know if we're at war.

Please! try to get her on the alternate list for the shelter. Can't get her a seat my plane. Don't tell her why I sent her over with this box of junk, but try to keep her there till we know [undecipherable] at worst, one of the alternates not show.

I.E.L.

P.S. I put the seal on the lock and put TOP SECRET on the lid just to keep Em from looking inside. First tool box I happened to grab. Shove it in my locker or something.

The note seemed hasty gibberish to Brother Francis, who was at the moment too excited to concentrate on any single item more than the rest. After a final sneer at the notewriter's hasty scrawl, he began the task of removing the trayracks to get at the papers in the bottom of the box. The trays were mounted on a swinging linkage which was obviously meant to swing the trays out of the box in stair-step array, but the pins were rusted fast, and Francis found it necessary to pry them out with a short steel tool from one of the tray compartments.

When Brother Francis had removed the last tray, he touched the papers reverently: only a handful of folded documents here, and yet a treasure; for they had escaped the angry flames of the Simplification, wherein even sacred writings had curled, blackened, and withered into smoke while ignorant mobs howled and hailed it a triumph. He handled the papers as one might handle holy things, shielding them from the wind with his habit, for all were brittle and cracked from age. There was a sheaf of rough

sketches and diagrams. There were hand-scribbled notes, two large folded papers, and a small book entitled *Memo*.

First he examined the jotted notes. They were scrawled by the same hand that had written the note glued to the lid, and the penmanship was no less abominable. *Pound pastrami*, said one note, *can kraut, six bagels,—bring home for Emma*. Another reminded: *Remember—pick up Form 1040, Uncle Revenue*. Another was only a column of figures with a circled total from which a second amount was subtracted and finally a percentage taken, followed by the word *damn!* Brother Francis checked the figures; he could find no fault with the abominable penman's arithmetic at least, although he could deduce nothing about what the quantities might represent.

*Memo*, he handled with special reverence, because its title was suggestive of "Memorabilia." Before opening it, he crossed himself and murmured the Blessing of Texts. But the small book proved a disappointment. He had expected printed matter, but found only a hand-written list of names, places, numbers and dates. The dates ranged through the latter part of the fifth decade, and earlier part of the sixth decade, twentieth century. Again it was affirmed!—the contents of the shelter came from the twilight period of the Age of Enlightenment. An important discovery indeed.

Of the larger folded papers, one was tightly rolled as well, and it began to fall apart when he tried to unroll it; he could make out the words *RACING FORM*, but nothing more. After returning it to the box for later restorative work, he turned to the second folded document; its creases were so brittle that he dared inspect only a little of it, by parting the folds slightly and peering between them.

A diagram, it seemed, but—a diagram of white lines on dark paper!

Again he felt the thrill of discovery. It was dearly a blueprint!—and there was not a single original blueprint left at the abbey, but only inked facsimiles of several such prints. The originals had faded long ago from overexposure to light. Never before had Francis seen an original, although he had seen enough hand-painted reproductions to recognize it as a blueprint, which, while stained and faded, remained legible after so many centuries because of the total darkness and low humidity in the shelter. He turned the document over—and felt brief fury. What idiot had desecrated the priceless paper? Someone had sketched absent-minded geometrical figures and childish cartoon faces all over the back. What thoughtless vandal—

The anger passed after a moment's reflection. At the time of the deed, blueprints had probably been as common as weeds, and the owner of the box the probable culprit. He shielded the print from the sun with his own shadow while trying to unfold it further. In the lower right-hand corner was a printed rectangle containing, in simple block letters, various titles, dates, "patent numbers," reference numbers, and names. His eye traveled down the list until it encountered:

"CIRCUIT DESIGN BY: *Leibowitz, I. E.*"

He closed his eyes tightly and shook his head until it seemed to rattle. Then he looked again. There it was, quite plainly:

CIRCUIT DESIGN BY: *Leibowitz, I. E.*

He flipped the paper over again. Among the geometric figures and childish sketches, dearly stamped in purple ink, was the form:

The name was written in a clear feminine hand, not in the hasty scrawl of the other notes. He looked again at the initialed signature of the note in the lid of the box: *I. E. L.*—and again at "CIRCUIT DESIGN BY . . ." And the same initials appeared elsewhere throughout the notes.

There had been argument, all highly conjectural, about whether the

beatified founder of the Order, if finally canonized, should be addressed as Saint Isaac or as Saint Edward. Some even favored Saint Leibowitz as the proper address, since the Beatus had, until the present, been referred to by his surname.

*"Beate Leibowitz, ora pro me!"* whispered Brother Francis. His hands were trembling so violently that they threatened to ruin the brittle documents.

He had uncovered relics of the Saint.

Of course, New Rome had not yet proclaimed that Leibowitz was a saint, but Brother Francis was so convinced of it that he made bold to add: *"Sancte Leibowitz, ora pro me!"* Brother Francis wasted no idle logic in leaping to his immediate conclusion: he had just been granted a token of his vocation by Heaven itself. He had found what he had been sent into the desert to find, as Brother Francis saw it. He was called to be a professed monk of the Order.

Forgetting his abbot's stern warning against expecting a vocation to come in any spectacular or miraculous form the novice knelt in the sand to pray his thanks and to offer a few decades of the rosary for the intentions of the old pilgrim who had pointed out the rock leading to the shelter. *May you find your Voice soon, boy*, the wanderer had said. Not until now did the novice suspect that the pilgrim meant *Voice* with a capital V.

*"Ut solius tuae voluntatis mihi cupidus sim, et vocationis tuae conscius, si digneris me vocare..."*

It would be left to the abbot to think that his "voice" was speaking the language of circumstances and not the language of cause and effect. It would be left to the *Promotor Fidei* to think that "Leibowitz," perhaps, was not an uncommon name before the Flame Deluge, and that I. E. could as easily represent "Ichabod Ebenezer" as "Isaac Edward." For Francis, there was only one.

From the distant abbey, three bell notes rang out across the desert, a pause, then the three notes were followed by nine.

*"Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariae,"* the novice dutifully responded glancing up in surprise to see that the sun had become a fat scarlet ellipse that already touched the western horizon. The rock barrier around his burrow was not yet complete.

As soon as the Angelus was said, he hastily repacked the papers in the rusty old box. A call from Heaven did not necessarily involve charismata for subduing wild beasts or befriending hungry wolves.

By the time twilight had faded and the stars had appeared, his makeshift shelter was as well fortified as he could make it; whether it was wolf-proof remained to be tested. The test would not be long in coming. He had already heard a few howls from the west. His fire was rekindled, but there was no light left outside the circle of firelight to permit the gathering of his dally collection of purple cactus fruit—his only source of nourishment except on Sundays, when a few handfuls of parched corn were sent from the abbey after a priest had made his rounds with the Holy Sacrament. The letter of the rule for a Lenten vocational vigil was not so strict as its practical application. As applied, the rule amounted to simple starvation.

Tonight, however, the gnawing of hunger was less troublesome to Francis than his own impatient urge to run back to the abbey and announce the news of his discovery. To do so would be to renounce his vocation no sooner than it had come to him; he was here for the duration of Lent, vocation or no vocation, to continue his vigil as if nothing extraordinary had occurred.

Dreamily, from near the fire, he gazed into the darkness in the direction of Fallout Survival Shelter and tried to visualize a towering basilica rising from the site. The fantasy was pleasant, but it was difficult to imagine anyone choosing this remote stretch of desert as the focal point of a future diocese. If not a basilica, then a smaller church—The Church of Saint Leibowitz of the Wilderness—surrounded by a garden and a wall, with a shrine of the Saint attracting rivers of pilgrims with girded loins out of the north. "Father" Francis of Utah conducted the pilgrims on a tour of the ruins, even through "Hatch Two" into the splendors of "Sealed Environment" beyond, the catacombs of the Flame Deluge where . . . where . . . well, afterwards, he would offer Mass for them on the altar stone which enclosed a relic of the church's name-saint—a bit of burlap? fibers from the hangman's noose? fingernail clippings from the bottom of the

rusty box?—or perhaps *RACING FORM*. But the fantasy withered. The chances of Brother Francis becoming a priest were slight—not being a missionary Order, the Brothers of Leibowitz needed only enough priests for the abbey itself and a few smaller communities of monks in other locations. Furthermore, the “Saint” was still only a Beatus officially, and would never be formally declared a saint unless he wrought a few more good solid miracles to underwrite his own beatification, which was not an infallible proclamation, as canonization would be, although it permitted the monks of the Leibowitz Order formally to venerate their founder and patron, outside of the Mass and the Office. The proportions of the fantasy church dwindled to the size of a wayside shrine; the river of pilgrims shrank to a trickle. New Rome was busy with other matters, such as the petition for a formal definition on the question of the Preternatural Gifts of the Holy Virgin, the Dominicans holding that the Immaculate Conception implied not only indwelling grace, but *also* that the Blessed Mother had had the preternatural powers which were Eve’s before the Fall; some theologians of other Orders, while admitting this to be pious conjecture, denied that it was necessarily the case, and contended that a “creature” might be “originally innocent” but not endowed with preternatural gifts. The Dominicans bowed to this, but contended that the belief had always been implicit in other dogma—such as the Assumption (preternatural immortality) and the Preservation from Actual Sin (implying preternatural integrity) and still other examples. While attempting to settle this dispute, New Rome had seemingly left the case for the canonization of Leibowitz to gather dust on the shelf.

Contenting himself with a small shrine of the Beatus and a casual trickle of pilgrims, Brother Francis drowsed. When he awoke, the fire was reduced to glowing embers. Something seemed amiss. Was he quite alone? He blinked around at the encompassing darkness.

From beyond the bed of reddish coals, the dark wolf blinked back.

The novice yelped and dived for cover.

The yelp, he decided as he lay trembling within his den of stones and brush, had been only an involuntary breach of the rule of silence. He lay hugging the metal box and praying that the days of Lent might pass swiftly, while padded feet scratched about his enclosure.

### 3

“...and then, Father, I almost took the bread and cheese.”

“But you didn’t take it?”

“No.”

“Then there was no sin by deed.”

“But I wanted it so badly, I could taste it.”

“Willfully? Did you deliberately enjoy the fantasy?”

“No.”

“You tried to get rid of it.”

“Yes.”

“So there was not culpable gluttony of thought either. Why are you confessing this?”

“Because then I lost my temper and splashed him with holy water.”

“You what? *Why?*”

Father Cheroki, wearing his stole, stared at the penitent who knelt in profile before him in the scorching sunlight on the open desert; the priest kept wondering how it was possible for such a youth (not particularly intelligent insofar as he could determine) to manage to find occasions or near-occasions of sin while completely isolated on barren desert, far from any distraction or apparent source of temptation. There should be very little trouble a boy could get into out here, armed as he was with only a rosary, a flint, a penknife, and a prayerbook. So it seemed to Father Cheroki. But this confession was taking up quite a lot of time; he wished the boy would get on with it. His arthritis was bothering him again, but because of the presence of the Holy Sacrament on the portable table which he took with him on his



rounds, the priest preferred to stand, or to stay on his knees along with the penitent. He had lighted a candle before the small golden case which contained the Hosts, but the flame was invisible in the sun-glare, and the breeze might even have blown it out.

"But exorcism is permissible these days, without any specific higher authorization. What are you confessing—being angry?"

"That too."

"At whom did you become angry? At the old man—or at yourself for almost taking the food?"

"I—I'm not sure."

"Well, make up your mind," Father Cherokee said impatiently. "Either accuse yourself, or else not."

"I accuse myself."

"Of what?" Cherokee sighed.

"Of abusing a sacramental in a fit of temper."

"'Abusing'? You had no rational reason to suspect diabolic influence? You just became angry and squirted him with it? Like throwing the ink in his eye?"

The novice squirmed and hesitated, sensing the priest's sarcasm. Confession was always difficult for Brother Francis. He could never find the right words for his misdeeds, and in trying to remember his own motives, he became hopelessly confused. Nor was the priest helping matters by taking the "either-you-did-or-else-you-didn't" stand—even though, obviously, either Francis had or else he hadn't.

"I think I lost my senses for a moment," he said finally.

Cherokee opened his mouth, apparently meaning to pursue the matter, then thought better of it. "I see. What next then?"

"Gluttonous thoughts," Francis said after a moment.

The priest sighed. "I thought we were through with that. Or is this another time?"

"Yesterday. There was this lizard, Father. It had blue and yellow stripes, and such magnificent hams—thick as your thumb and plump, and I kept thinking how it would taste like chicken, roasted all brown and crisp outside, and—"

"All right," the priest interrupted. Only a hint of revulsion crossed his aged face. After all, the boy was spending a lot of time in the sun. "You took pleasure in these thoughts? You didn't try to get rid of the temptation?"

Francis reddened. "I—I tried to catch it. It got away."

"So, not merely thought—deed as well. Just that one time?"

"Well-yes, just that."

"All right, in thought and deed, willfully meaning to eat meat during Lent. Please be as specific as you can after this. I thought you had examined your conscience properly. Is there anything else?"

"Quite a lot."

The priest winced. He had several hermitages to visit; it was a long hot ride, and his knees were hurting. Please get on with it as quickly as you can," he sighed.

"Impurity, once."

"Thought, word, or deed?"

"Well, there was this succubus, and she—"

"Succubus? Oh—nocturnal. You were asleep?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then why confess it?"

"Because afterwards."

"Afterwards what? When you woke up?"

"Yes. I kept thinking about her. Kept imagining it all over again."

"All right, concupiscent thought, deliberately entertained. You're sorry? Now, what next?"

All this was the usual sort of thing that one kept hearing time after endless time from postulant after postulant, novice after novice, and it seemed to Father Cherokee that the least Brother Francis could do would be to bark out his self-accusations *one, two, three*, in a neat orderly manner, without all this prodding and prompting. Francis seemed to find difficulty in formulating whatever he was about to say;

the priest waited.

"I think my vocation has come to me, Father, but—" Francis moistened his cracked lips and stared at a bug on a rock.

"Oh, has it?" Cherokee's voice was toneless

"Yes, I think—but would it be a sin, Father, if when I first got it, I thought rather scornfully of the handwriting? I mean?"

Cherokee blinked. Handwriting? Vocation? What kind of a question was—He studied the novice's serious expression for a few seconds, then frowned.

"Have you and Brother Alfred been passing notes to each other?" he asked ominously.

"Oh, no, Father!"

"Then whose handwriting are you talking about?"

"The Blessed Leibowitz."

Cherokee paused to think. Did there, or did there not, exist in the abbey's collection of ancient documents, any manuscript penned personally by the founder of the Order?—an original copy? After a moment's reflection, he decided in the affirmative; yes, there were a few scraps of it left, carefully kept under lock and key.

"Are you talking about something that happened back at the abbey? Before you came out here?"

"No, Father. It happened right over there—" He nodded toward the left. "Three mounds over, near the tall cactus."

"Involving your vocation, you say?"

"Y-yes, but—"

"Of *course*," Cherokee said sharply, "you could *NOT POSSIBLY* be trying to say that—you have received—from the Blessed Leibowitz, dead now, lo, the last six hundred years—a handwritten invitation to profess your solemn vows? And you, uh, deplored his handwriting?—Forgive me, but that's the impression I was getting."

"Well, it's something like that, Father."

Cherokee sputtered. Becoming alarmed, Brother Francis produced a scrap of paper from his sleeve and handed it to the priest. It was brittle with age and stained. The ink was faded.

"*Pound pastrami*," Father Cherokee pronounced, slurring over some of the unfamiliar words, "*can kraut, six bagels—bring home for Emma*." He stared fixedly at Brother Francis for several seconds "This was written by whom?"

Francis told him.

Cherokee thought it over. "It's not possible for you to make a good confession while you're in *this* condition. And it wouldn't be proper for me to absolve you when you're not in your right mind." Seeing Francis wince, the priest touched him reassuringly on the shoulder. "Don't worry, son, we'll talk it over after you're better. I'll hear your confession then. For the present—" He glanced nervously at the vessel containing the Eucharist. "I want you to gather up your things and return to the abbey at once."

"But, Father, I—"

"I command you," the priest said tonelessly, "to return to the abbey at once."

"Y-yes, Father."

"Now, I'm not going to absolve you, but you might make good act of contrition and offer two decades of the rosary as penance anyhow. Would you like my blessing?"

The novice nodded, fighting tears. The priest blessed him arose, genuflected before the Sacrament, recovered the golden vessel, and reattached it to the chain around his neck. Having pocketed the candle, collapsed the table, and strapped it in place behind the saddle, he gave Francis a last solemn nod, then mounted and rode away on his mare to complete his circuit of the Lenten hermitages. Francis sat in the hot sand and wept.

It would have been simple if he could have taken the priest to the crypt to show him the ancient room, if he could have displayed the box and all its contents, and the mark the pilgrim had made on the rock. But the priest was carrying the Eucharist, and could not have been induced to climb down into a rock-filled basement on his hands and knees, or to paw through the contents of the old box and enter into

archaeological discussions; Francis had known better than to ask. Cherokee's visit was necessarily solemn, as long as the locket he was wearing contained a single Host; although, alter it was empty, he might be amenable to some informal listening. The novice could not blame Father Cherokee for leaping to the conclusion that he had gone out of his mind. He was a little groggy from the sun, and he had stammered quite a bit. More than one novice had turned up with addled wits after a vocational vigil.

There was nothing to do but obey the command to return.

He walked to the shelter and glanced into it once again, to reassure himself that it was really there; then he went to get the box. By the time he had it repacked and was ready to leave, the dust plume had appeared in the southeast, heralding the arrival of the supply carrier with water and corn from the abbey. Brother Francis decided to wait for his supplies before starting the long trek home.

Three donkeys and one monk ambled into view at the head of the dust streamer. The lead donkey plodded under the weight of Brother Fingo. In spite of the hood, Francis recognized the cook's helper from his hunched shoulders and from the long hairy shins that dangled on either side of the donkey so that Brother Fingo's sandals nearly dragged the ground. The animals that followed came loaded with small bags of corn and skins of water.

"*Sooooee pig-pig-pig! Sooe pig!*" Fingo called, cupping his hands to his mouth and broadcasting the hog-call across the ruins as if he had not seen Francis waiting for him beside the trail. "*Pig pig pig!—Oh, there* you are, Francisco! I mistook you for a bone pile. Well, we'll have to fatten you up for the wolves. There you are, help yourself to the Sunday slops. How goes the hermit trade? Think you'll make it a career? Just one waterskin, mind you, and one sack of corn. And watch Malicia's hind feet; she's in rut and feels frolicky—kicked Alfred back there, *crunch!* right in the kneecap. Careful with it!" Brother Fingo brushed back his hood and chortled while the novice and Malicia fenced for position. Fingo was undoubtedly the ugliest man alive, and when he laughed, the vast display of pink gums and huge teeth of assorted colors added little in his charm; he was a sport, but the sport could scarcely be called monstrous; it was a rather common hereditary pattern in the Minnesota country from whence he came; it produced baldness and a very uneven distribution of melanin, so that the gangling monk's hide was a patchwork of beef-liver and chocolate splashes on an albino background. However, his perpetual good humor so compensated for his appearance that one ceased to notice it after a few minutes; and after long acquaintance, Brother Fingo's markings seemed as normal as those of a painted pony. What might have seemed hideous if he were a sulking fellow, managed almost to become as decorative as clown's make-up when accompanied by exuberant good cheer. Fingo's assignment to the kitchen was punitive and probably temporary. He was a woodcarver by trade, and normally worked in the carpenter's shop. But some incident of self-assertion, in connection with a figure of the Blessed Leibowitz which he had been permitted to carve, had caused the abbot to order him transferred to the kitchen until he showed some signs of practicing humility. Meanwhile, the figure of the Beatus waited in the carpentry shop, half-carved.

Fingo's grin began to fade as he studied Francis' countenance while the novice unloaded his grain and water from the frisky she-ass. "You look like a sick sheep, boy," he said to the penitent. "What's the trouble? Is Father Cherokee in one of his slow rages again?"

Brother Francis shook his head. "Not that I could tell."

"Then what's wrong? Are you really sick?"

"He ordered me back to the abbey."

"Wha-a-at?" Fingo swung a hairy shin over the jackass and dropped a few inches to the ground. He towered over Brother Francis, clapped a meaty hand on his shoulder, and peered down into his face. "What is it; the jaundice?"

"No. He thinks I'm—" Francis tapped his temple and shrugged.

Fingo laughed. "Well, that's true, but we *all* knew that. Why is he sending you back?"

Francis glanced down at the box near his feet. "I found some things that belonged to the Blessed Leibowitz. I started to tell him, but he didn't believe me. He wouldn't let me explain. He—"

"You found *what*?" Fingo smiled his disbelief, then dropped to his knees and opened the box while the novice watched nervously. The monk stirred the whiskered cylinders in the trays with one finger

and whistled softly. "Hill-pagan charms, aren't they? This is old, Francisco, this is really old." He glanced at the note in the lid. "What's this gibberish?" he asked, squinting up at the unhappy novice.

"Pre-Deluge English."

"I never studied it, except what we sing in choir."

"It was written by the Beatus himself."

"*This?*" Brother Fingo stared from the note to Brother Francis and back to the note. He shook his head suddenly, clamped the lid back on the box, and stood up. His grin had become artificial. "Maybe Father's right. You better hike back and have Brother Pharmacist brew you up one of his toad-stool specials. That's the fever, Brother."

Francis shrugged, "Perhaps."

"Where did you find this stuff?"

The novice pointed. "Over that way a few mounds. I moved some rocks. There was a cave-in, and I found a basement. Go see for yourself."

Fingo shook his head. "I've got a long ride ahead."

Francis picked up the box and started toward the abbey while Fingo returned to his donkey, but after a few paces the novice stopped and called back.

"Brother Spots—could you take two minutes?"

"Maybe," answered Fingo; "What for?"

"Just walk over there and look in the hole."

"Why?"

"So you can tell Father Cherokee if it's really there."

Fingo paused with one leg half across his donkey's back.

"Ha!" He withdrew the leg. "All right. If it's not there, I'll tell *you*."

Francis watched for a moment while the gangling Fingo strode out of sight among the mounds; then he turned to shuffle down the long dusty trail toward the abbey, intermittently munching corn and sipping from the waterskin. Occasionally he glanced back. Fingo was gone much longer than two minutes. Brother Francis had ceased to watch for his reappearance by the time he heard a distant bellow from the ruins far behind him. He turned. He could make out the distant figure of the woodcarver standing atop one of the mounds. Fingo was waving his arms and vigorously nodding his head in affirmation. Francis waved back, then hiked wearily on his way.

Two weeks of near-starvation had exacted their tribute. After two or three miles he began to stagger. When still nearly a mile from the abbey, he fainted beside the road. It was late afternoon before Cherokee, riding back from his rounds, noticed him lying there, hastily dismounted, and bathed the youth's face until he gradually brought him around. Cherokee had encountered the supply donkeys on his way back and had paused to hear Fingo's account, confirming Brother Francis' find. Although he was not prepared to believe that Francis had discovered anything of real importance, the priest regretted his earlier impatience with the boy. Having noticed the box lying nearby with its contents half-spilled in the road, and having glanced briefly at the note in the lid, while Francis sat groggy and confused at the edge of the trail, Cherokee found himself willing to regard the boy's earlier babblings as the result of romantic imagination rather than of madness or delirium. He had neither visited the crypt nor closely examined the contents of the box, but it was obvious, at least, that the boy had been misinterpreting real events rather than confessing hallucinations.

"You can finish your confession as soon as we get back," he told the novice softly, helping him to climb up behind the saddle on the mare. "I think I can absolve you if you don't insist on personal messages from the saints. Eh?"

Brother Francis was too weak at the moment to insist on anything.

“

Y

ou did the right thing,” the abbot grunted at last. He had been slowly pacing the floor of his study for perhaps five minutes, his wide peasant face wearing a thick-furrowed muscular glower, while Father Cherokee sat nervously on the edge of his chair. Neither priest had spoken since Cherokee had entered the room in answer to his ruler’s summons; Cherokee jumped slightly when Abbot Arkos finally grunted out the words.

“You did the right thing,” the abbot said again, stopping in the center of the room and squinting at his prior, who finally began to relax. It was nearly midnight and Arkos had been preparing to retire for an hour or two of sleep before Matins and Lauds. Still damp and disheveled from a recent plunge in the bathing barrel, he reminded Cherokee of a were-bear only incompletely changed into a man. He was wearing a coyote-skin robe, and the only hint of his office was the pectoral cross that nestled in the black fur on his chest and flashed with candlelight whenever he turned toward the desk. His wet hair hung over his forehead, and with his short jutting beard and his coyote skins, he looked, at the moment, less like a priest than a military chieftain, full of restrained battle-anger from a recent assault. Father Cherokee, who came of baronial stock from Denver, tended to react formally to men’s official capacities, tended to speak courteously to the badge of office while not allowing himself to see the man who wore it, in this respect following the Court customs of many ages. Thus Father Cherokee had always maintained a formally cordial relationship with the ring and the pectoral cross, with the office, of his abbot, but permitted himself to see as little as possible of Arkos the man. This was rather difficult under present circumstances, the Reverend Father Abbot being fresh out of his bath, and padding around his study in his bare feet. He had apparently just trimmed a corn and cut too deep; one great toe was bloody. Cherokee tried to avoid noticing it, but felt very ill at ease.

“You do know what I’m talking about?” Arkos growled impatiently.

Cherokee hesitated. “Would you mind, Father Abbot, being specific—in case it’s connected with something I might have heard about only in confession?”

“Hah? Oh! Well, I’m bedeviled! You did hear his confession. I clean forgot. Well, get him to tell you again, so you can talk—though Heaven knows, it’s all over the abbey anyhow. No, don’t go see him now. I’ll tell you, and don’t answer on whatever’s sealed. You’ve seen that stuff?” Abbot Arkos waved toward his desk where the contents of Brother Francis’ box had been emptied for examination.

Cherokee nodded slowly. “He dropped it beside the road when he fell. I helped gather it up, but I didn’t look at it carefully.”

“Well, you know what he claims it is?”

Father Cherokee glanced aside. He seemed not to hear the question.

“All right, all right,” the abbot growled, “never mind what he *claims* it is. Just go look it over carefully yourself and decide what you think it is.”

Cherokee went to bend over the desk and scrutinize the papers carefully, one at a time, while the abbot paced and kept talking, seemingly to the priest but half to himself.

“It’s impossible! You did the right thing to send him back before he uncovered more. But of course that’s not the worst part. The worst part is the old man he babbles about. It’s getting too thick. I don’t know anything that could damage the case worse than a whole flood of improbable ‘miracles.’ A few real incidents, certainly! It has to be established that the intercession of the Beatus has brought about the

miraculous—before canonization can occur. But there can be too much! Look at the Blessed Chang—beatified two centuries ago, but never canonized—so far. And *why*? His Order got too eager, that's why. Every time somebody got over a cough, it was a miraculous cure by the Beatus. Visions in the basement, evocations in the belfry; It sounded more like a collection of ghost stories than a list of miraculous incidents. Maybe two or three incidents were really valid, but when there's that much chaff—well?"

Father Cherokee looked up. His knuckles had whitened on the edge of the desk and his face seemed strained. He seemed not to have been listening. "I beg your pardon, Father Abbot?"

"Well, the same thing could happen here, that's what," said the abbot, and resumed his slow padding to and fro.

"Last year there was Brother Noyon and his miraculous hangman's noose. Ha! And the year before that, Brother Smirnov gets mysteriously cured of the gout—how?—by touching a probable relic of our Blessed Leibowitz, the young louts say. And now this Francis, he meets a pilgrim—wearing *what?*—wearing for a kilt the *very* burlap cloth they hooded Blessed Leibowitz with before they hanged him. And with what for a belt? A rope. What rope? Ahh, the very same—" He paused, looking at Cherokee. "I can tell by your blank look that you haven't heard this yet? No? All right, so you can't say. No, no, Francis didn't say that. All he said was—" Abbot Arkos tried to inject a slightly falsetto quality into his normally gruff voice. "All Brother Francis said was—'I met a little old man, and I thought he was a pilgrim heading for the abbey because he was going that way, and he was wearing an old burlap sack tied around with a piece of rope. And he made a mark on the rock, and the mark looked like *this*.' "

Arkos produced a scrap of parchment from the pocket of his fur robe and held it up toward Cherokee's face in the candle-glow. Still trying, with only slight success, to imitate Brother Francis: " 'And I couldn't figure out what it meant. Do *you* know?' "

Cherokee stared at the symbols and shook his head.

"I wasn't asking *you*," Arkos gruffed in his normal voice. "That's what Francis said. I didn't know either."

"You do now?"

"I do now. Somebody looked it up. That is a *lamedh*, and that is a *sadhe*. Hebrew letters."

"*Sadhe lamedh?*"

"No. Right to left. *Lamedh sadhe*. An ell, and a tee-ess sound. If it had vowel marks, it might be 'loots,' 'lots,' 'lets,' 'lets,' 'latz,' 'litz'-anything like that. If it had some letters between those two, it might sound like *Lllll-guess-who*."

"Leibo-Ho, *no!*"

"Ho, yes! Brother *Francis* didn't think of it. Somebody else thought of it. Brother *Francis* didn't think of the burlap hood and the hangman's rope; one of his chums did. So what happens? By tonight, the whole novitiate is buzzing with the sweet little story that Francis met the Beatus himself out there, and the Beatus escorted our boy over to where that stuff was and told him he'd find his vocation."

A perplexed frown crossed Cherokee's face. "Did Brother Francis say that?"

"*NOO!*" Arkos roared. "Haven't you been listening? Francis said no such things. I wish he had, by gum; then I'd *HAVE* the rascal! But *he* tells it sweet-and-simple, rather stupidly, in fact, and lets the others read in the meanings. I haven't talked to him myself. I sent the Rector of the Memorabilia to get his story."

"I think I'd better talk to Brother Francis," Cherokee murmured.

"*Do!* When you first came in, I was still wondering whether to roast you alive or not. For sending him in, I mean. If you had let him stay out there on the desert, we wouldn't have this fantastic twaddle going around. But, on the other hand, if he'd stayed out there, there's no telling what *else* he might have dug out of that cellar. I think you did the right thing, to send him in."

Cherokee, who had made the decision on no such basis, found silence to be the appropriate policy.

"See him," growled the abbot. "Then send him to me."

It was about nine on a bright Monday morning when Brother Francis rapped timidly at the door of the abbot's study. A good night's sleep on the hard straw pallet in his old familiar cell, plus a small bite of

unfamiliar breakfast, had not perhaps done any wonders for starved tissue or entirely cleared the sun-daze from his brain, but these relative luxuries had at least restored him to sufficient clarity of mind to perceive that he had cause to be afraid. He was, in fact, terrified, so that his first tap at the abbot's door went unheard. Not even Francis could hear it. After several minutes, he mustered the courage to knock again.

"*Benedicamus Domine.*"

"*Deo? gratias?*" asked Francis.

"Come in, my boy, come *in!*" called an affable voice, which, after some seconds of puzzling, he recognized with amazement to have been that of his sovereign abbot.

"You twist the little *knob*, my son," said the same friendly voice after Brother Francis had stood frozen on the spot for some seconds, with his knuckles still in position for knocking.

"Y-y-yes—" Francis scarcely touched the knob, but it seemed that the accursed door opened anyway; he had hoped that it would be tightly stuck.

"The Lord Abbot s-s-sent for—me?" squawked the novice.

Abbot Arkos pursed his lips and nodded slowly. "Mmmm—yes, the Lord Abbot sent for—*you*. *Do* come in and shut the door."

Brother Francis got the door closed and stood shivering in the center of the room. The abbot was toying with some of the wire-whiskered things from the old toolbox.

"Or perhaps it would be more fitting," said Abbot Arkos, "If the Reverend Father Abbot were sent for *by you*. Now that you have been so favored by Providence and have become so famous, eh?" He smiled soothingly.

"Heh heh?" Brother Francis laughed inquiringly. "Oh n-n-no, m'Lord."

"You do not dispute that you have won overnight fame? That Providence elected you to discover *THIS*—" he gestured sweepingly at the relics on the desk "—this *JUNK* box, as its previous owner no doubt rightly called it?"

The novice stammered helplessly, and somehow managed to wind up wearing a grin.

"You are seventeen and plainly an idiot, are you not?"

"That is undoubtedly true, m'Lord Abbot."

"What excuse do you propose for believing yourself called to Religion?"

"No excuse, Magister meus."

"*Ah?* So? Then you feel that you have no vocation to the Order?"

"Oh, I *do!*" the novice gasped.

"But you propose no excuse?"

"None."

"You little cretin, I am asking your reason. Since you state none, I take it you are prepared to deny that you met anyone in the desert the other day, that you stumbled on this—this *JUNK* box with no help, and that what I have been hearing from others is only—feverish raving?"

"Oh, no, Dom Arkos!"

"Oh, no, what?"

"I cannot deny what I saw with my own eyes, Reverend Father."

"So, you did meet an angel—or was it a saint?—or perhaps not yet a saint?—and he showed you where to look?"

"I never said he was—"

"And *this* is your excuse for believing yourself to have a true vocation, is it not? That this, this—shall we call him a 'creature'?—spoke to you of finding a voice, and marked a rock with his initials, and told you it was what you were looking for, and when you looked, under it—there *THIS* was. Eh?"

"Yes, Dom Arkos."

"What is your opinion of your own execrable vanity?"

"My execrable vanity is unpardonable, m'Lord'n'Teacher."

"To imagine yourself important enough to be *unpardonable* is an even vaster vanity," roared the sovereign of the abbey.

"M'Lord, I am indeed a worm."

"Very well, you need only deny the part about the pilgrim. No one else saw such a person, you know. I understand he was supposed to have been headed in this direction? That he even said he might stop here? That he inquired about the abbey? Yes? And where would he have disappeared to, if he ever existed? No such person came past here. The brother on duty at that time in the watchtower didn't see him. Eh? Are you now ready to admit that you imagined him?"

"If there are not really two marks on that rock where he—then maybe I might—"

The abbot dosed his eyes and sighed wearily. "The marks are there—faintly," he admitted. "You might have made them yourself."

"No, m'Lord."

"Will you admit that you imagined the old creature?"

"No, m'Lord."

"Very well, do you know what is going to happen to you now?"

"Yes, Reverend Father"

"Then prepare to take it."

Trembling, the novice gathered up his habit about his waist and bent over the desk. The abbot withdrew a stout hickory ruler from the drawer, tested it on his palm, then gave Francis a smart whack with it across the buttocks.

"*Deo gratias!*" the novice dutifully responded, gasping slightly.

"Care to change your mind, my boy?"

"Reverend Father, I can't deny—"

WHACK!

"*Deo gratias!*"

WHACK!

"*Deo gratias!*"

Ten times was this simple but painful litany repeated, with Brother Francis yelping his thanks to Heaven for each scorching lesson in the virtue of humility, as he was expected to do. The abbot paused after the tenth whack. Brother Francis was on tip-toe and bouncing slightly. Tears squeezed from the corners of clenched eyelids.

"My dear Brother Francis," said the Abbot Arkos "are you *quite* sure you saw the old man?"

"certain," he squeaked, steeling himself for more.

Abbot Arkos glanced clinically at the youth, then walked round his desk and sat down with a grunt. He glowered for a time at the slip of parchment bearing the letters

"Who do you suppose he could have been?" Abbot Arkos muttered absently.

Brother Francis opened his eyes, causing a brief shed of water.

"Oh, you've convinced me, boy, worse luck for *you*.

Francis said nothing, but prayed silently that the need to convince his sovereign of his veracity would not often arise. In response to an irritable gesture from the abbot, he lowered his tunic.

"You may sit down," said the abbot, becoming casual if not genial

Francis moved toward the indicated chair, lowered himself halfway into it, but then winced and stood up again. "If it's all the same to the Reverend Father Abbot—"

"All right, then stand. I won't keep you long anyhow. You're to go out and finish your vigil." He paused, noticing the novice's face brighten a little. "Oh no you don't!" he snapped. "You're not going back to the same place. You'll trade hermitages with Brother Alfred, and not go near those ruins again. Furthermore, I command you not to discuss the matter with anyone, except your confessor or with me, although, Heaven knows, the damage is already done. Do you know what you've started?"

Brother Francis shook his head. "Yesterday being Sunday, Reverend Father, we weren't required to keep silent, and at recreation I just answered the fellows' questions. I thought—"

"Well, your *fellows* have cooked up a very cute explanation, dear son. Did you know that it was the Blessed Leibowitz himself you met out there?"

Francis looked blank for a moment then shook his head again. "Oh, no, m'Lord Abbot. I'm sure it



couldn't have been. The Blessed Martyr wouldn't do such a thing."

"Wouldn't do such-a-*what* thing?"

"Wouldn't chase after somebody and try to hit him with a stick that had a nail in one end."

The abbot wiped his mouth to hide an involuntary smile. He managed to appear thoughtful after a moment. "Oh, I don't know about that, now. It was you he was chasing, wasn't it? Yes, I thought so. You told your fellow novices about that part too? Yes, eh? Well, you see, *they* didn't think that would exclude the possibility of his being the Beatus. Now I doubt if there are very *many* people that the Beatus would chase with a stick, but—" He broke off, unable to suppress laughter at the expression on the novice's face. "All right, son—but who do you suppose he could have been?"

"I thought perhaps he was a pilgrim on his way to visit our shrine, Reverend Father."

"It isn't a shrine yet, and you're not to call it that. And anyway he wasn't, or at least, he didn't. And he didn't pass our gates, unless the watch was asleep. And the novice on watch denies being asleep, although he admitted feeling drowsy that day. So what do *you* suggest?"

"If the Reverend Father Abbot will forgive me, I've been on watch a few times myself."

"And?"

"Well, on a bright day when there's nothing moving but the buzzards, after a few hours you just start looking up at the buzzards."

"Oh you do, do you? When you're supposed to be watching the trail!"

"And if you stare at the sky too long, you just kind of blank-out—not really asleep, but, sort of, preoccupied."

"So that's what you do when you're on watch, do you?" the abbot growled.

"Not necessarily. I mean, no, Reverend Father, I wouldn't know it if I had, I don't think. Brother Je—I mean—a brother I relieved once was like that. He didn't even know it was time for the watch to change. He was just sitting there in the tower and staring up at the sky with his mouth open. In a daze."

"Yes, and the first time you go stupefied that way, along'll come a heathen war-party out of the Utah country, kill a few gardeners, tear up the irrigating system, spoil our crops, and dump stones in the well before we can start defending ourselves. Why are you looking so—oh, I forgot—you were Utah-born before you ran away, weren't you? But never mind, you could, just possibly, be right about the watch—how he could have missed seeing the old man, that is. You're sure he was just an *ordinary* old man—not anything more? Not an angel? Not a beatus?"

The novice's gaze drifted ceilingward in thought, then fell quickly to his ruler's face. "Do angels or saints cast shadows?"

"Yes—I mean no, I mean—how should I know! He did cast a shadow, didn't he?"

"Well—it was such a small shadow you could hardly see it."

"*What!*"

"Because it was almost noon."

"Imbecile! *I'm* not asking you to tell me *what* he was. I know very well what he was, if you saw him at all." Abbot Arkos thumped repeatedly on the table for emphasis. "I want to know if you—You!—are *sure beyond a doubt* that he was just an ordinary old man!"

This line of questioning was puzzling to Brother Francis. In his own mind, there was no neat straight line separating the Natural from the Supernatural order, but rather, an intermediate twilight zone. There were things that were *clearly* natural, and there were Things that were *clearly* supernatural, but between these extremes was a region of confusion (his own)—the preternatural—where things made of mere earth, air, fire, or water tended to behave disturbingly like *Things*. For Brother Francis, this region included whatever he could see but not understand. And Brother Francis was never "sure beyond a doubt," as the abbot was asking him to be, that he properly understood much of anything. Thus, by raising the question at all, Abbot Arkos was unwittingly throwing the novice's pilgrim into the twilight region, into the same perspective as the old man's first appearance as a legless black strip that wriggled in the midst of a lake of heat illusion on the trail, into the same perspective as he had occupied momentarily when the novice's world had contracted until it contained nothing but a hand offering him a particle of food. If some creature more-than-human chose to disguise itself as human, how was he to penetrate its disguise, or suspect

there was one? If such a creature did not wish to be suspected, would it not remember to cast a shadow, leave footprints, eat bread and cheese? Might it not chew spice-leaf, spit at a lizard, and remember to imitate the reaction of a mortal who forgot to put on his sandals before stepping on hot ground? Francis was not prepared to estimate the intelligence or ingenuity of hellish or heavenly beings, or to guess the extent of their histrionic abilities, although he assumed such creatures to be either hellishly or divinely clever. The abbot, by raising the question at all, had formulated the nature of Brother Francis' answer, which was: to entertain the question itself, although he had not previously done so.

"Well, boy?"

"M'Lord Abbot, you don't suppose he *might* have been—"

"I'm asking you not to suppose. I'm asking you to be flatly certain. Was he, or was he not, an ordinary flesh-and-blood person?"

The question was frightening. That the question was dignified by coming from the lips of so exalted a person as his sovereign abbot made it even more frightening, though he could plainly see that his ruler stated it merely because he wanted a *particular* answer. He wanted it rather badly. If he wanted it that badly, the question must be important. If the question was important enough for an abbot, then it was *far* too important for Brother Francis who *dared not* be wrong.

"I-I think he was flesh and blood, Reverend Father, but not exactly "ordinary." In some ways, he was rather *extraordinary*."

"What ways?" Abbot Arkos asked sharply.

"Like-how straight he could spit. And he could *read*, I think."

The abbot dosed his eyes and rubbed his temples in apparent exasperation. How easy it would have been flatly to have told the boy that his pilgrim was only an old tramp of some kind, and then to have commanded him not to think otherwise. But by allowing the boy to see that a question was possible, he had rendered such a command ineffective before he uttered it. Insofar as thought could be governed at all, it could only be commanded to follow what reason affirmed anyhow; command it otherwise, and it would not obey. Like any wise ruler, Abbot Arkos did not issue orders vainly, when to disobey was possible and to enforce was not possible. It was better to look the other way than to command ineffectually. He had asked a question that he himself could not answer by reason, having never seen the old man, and had thereby lost the right to make the answer mandatory.

"Get *out*," he said at last, without opening his eyes.

## 5

# S

omewhat mystified by the commotion at the abbey, Brother Francis returned to the desert that same day to complete his Lenten vigil in rather wretched solitude. He had expected some excitement about the relics to arise, but the excessive interest which everyone had taken in the old wanderer surprised him. Francis had spoken of the old man, simply because of the part he had played, either by accident or by design of Providence, in the monk's stumbling upon the crypt and its relics. The pilgrim was only a minor ingredient, as far as Francis was concerned, in a mandala design at whose center rested a relic of a saint. But his fellow novices had seemed more interested in the pilgrim than in the relic, and even the abbot had summoned him, not to ask about the box, but to ask about the old man. They had asked him a hundred questions about the pilgrim to which he could reply only: "I didn't notice," or "I wasn't looking right then," or "If he said, I don't remember," and some of the questions were a little weird. And so he questioned himself: *Should I have noticed? Was I stupid not to watch what he did? Wasn't I paying enough attention to what he said? Did I miss something important because I was dazed?*

He brooded on it in the darkness while the wolves prowled about his new encampment and filled the nights with their howling. He caught himself brooding on it during times of the day that were assigned as proper for the prayers and spiritual exercises of the vocational vigil, and he confessed as much to Prior Cheroki the next time the priest rode his Sunday circuit. "You shouldn't let the romantic imaginations of the others bother you; you have enough trouble with your own," the priest told him, after chiding him for neglecting the exercises and prayers. "They don't think up questions like that on the basis of what *might be true*; they concoct the questions on the basis of what *might be sensational* if it just happened to be true. It's ridiculous! I can tell you that the Reverend Father Abbot has ordered the entire novitiate to drop the subject." After a moment, he unfortunately added: "There really *wasn't* anything about the old man to suggest the supernatural—was there?" with only the faintest trace of hopeful wonder in his tone.

Brother Francis wondered too. If there had been a suggestion of the supernatural, he had not noticed it. But then too, judging by the number of questions he had been unable to answer, he had not noticed very much. The profusion of the questions had made him feel that his failure to observe had been, somehow, culpable. He had become grateful to the pilgrim upon discovering the shelter. But he had not interpreted events entirely in terms of his own interests, in accordance with his own longing for some shred of evidence that the dedication of his lifetime to the labors of the monastery was born not so much of his own will as it was of grace, empowering the will, but not compelling it, rightly to choose. Perhaps the events had a vaster significance that he had missed, during the totality of his self-absorption.

What is your opinion of your own execrable vanity?

*My execrable vanity is like that of the fabled cat who studied ornithology, m'Lord.*

His desire to profess his final and perpetual vows—was it not akin to the motive of the cat who became an ornithologist?—so that he might glorify his own ornithophagy, esoterically devouring *Penthestes atricapillus* but never eating chickadees. For, as the cat was called by Nature to be an ornithophage, so was Francis called by his own nature hungrily to devour such knowledge as could be taught in those days, and, because there were no schools but the monastic schools, he had donned the habit first of a postulant, later of a novice. But to suspect that God as well as Nature had beckoned him to become a professed monk of the Order?

What else could he do? There was no returning to his homeland, the Utah. As a small child, he had been sold to a shaman, who would have trained him as his servant and acolyte. Having run away, he could not return, except to meet grisly tribal "justice." He had stolen a shaman's property (Francis' own person), and while thievery was an honorable profession among the Utah, getting caught was a capital crime when the thief's victim was the tribal warlock. Nor would he have cared to lapse back into the relatively primitive life of an illiterate shepherd people, after his schooling at the abbey.

But what else? The continent was lightly settled. He thought of the wall-map in the abbey's library, and of the sparse distribution of the crosshatched areas, which were regions—if not of civilization—then of civil order, where some form of lawful sovereignty, transcending the tribal, held sway. The rest of the continent was populated, very thinly, by the people of the forest and the plain, who were, for the most part, not savages, but simple clanfolk loosely organized into small communities here and there, who lived by hunting, gathering, and primitive agriculture, whose birth rate was barely high enough (discounting monster-births and sports) to sustain the population. The principal industries of the continent, excepting a few seacoast regions, were hunting, farming, fighting, and witchcraft—the last being the most promising "industry" for any youth with a choice of careers and having in mind as primary ends, maximum wealth and prestige.

The schooling which Francis had been given at the abbey prepared him for nothing which was of practical value in a dark, ignorant, and workaday world, where literacy was nonexistent and a literate youth, therefore, seemed of no worth to a community unless he could also farm, fight, hunt or show some special talent for inter-tribal theft, or for the divining of water and workable metal. Even in the scattered domains where a form of civil order existed, the fact of Francis' literacy would help him not at all, if he must lead a life apart from the Church. It was true that petty barons sometimes employed a scribe or two, but such cases were rare enough to be negligible, and were as often filled by monks as by monastery-schooled laymen.

The only demand for scribes and secretaries was created by the Church herself, whose tenuous hierarchic web was stretched across the continent (and occasionally to far-distant shores, although the diocesans abroad were virtually autonomous rulers, subject to the Holy See in theory but seldom in practice, being cut off from New Rome less by schism than by oceans not often crossed) and could be held together only by a communication network. The Church had become, quite coincidentally and without meaning to be, the only means whereby news was transmitted from place to place across the continent. If plague came to the northeast, the southwest would soon hear of it, as a coincidental effect of tales told and retold by messengers of the Church, coming and going from New Rome.

If the nomadic infiltration in the far northwest threatened a Christian diocese, an encyclical letter might soon be read from pulpits far to the south and east, warning of the threat and extending the apostolic benediction to “men of any station, so long as they be skilled at arms, who, having the means to make the journey, may be piously disposed to do so, in order to swear fealty to Our beloved son, N., lawful ruler of that place, for such a period of time as may seem necessary for the maintenance of standing armies there for defense of Christians against the gathering heathen horde, whose ruthless savagery is known to many and who, to Our deepest grief, tortured, murdered, and devoured those priests of God which We Ourselves sent to them with the Word, that they might enter as lambs into the fold of the Lamb, of whose flock on Earth We are the Shepherd; for, while We have never despaired nor ceased to pray that these nomadic children of the darkness may be led into the Light and enter Our realms in peace (for it is not to be thought that peaceful strangers should be repelled from a land so vast and empty; nay, they should be welcomed who come peacefully, even should they be strangers to the visible Church and its Divine Founder, so long as they hearken to that Natural Law which is written in the hearts of all men, binding them to Christ in spirit, though they be ignorant of His Name), it is nevertheless meet and fitting and prudent that Christendom, while praying for peace and the conversion of the heathen, should gird itself for defense in the Northwest, where the hordes gather and the incidents of heathen savagery have lately increased, and upon each of you, beloved sons, who can bear arms and shall travel to the Northwest to join forces with those who prepare rightfully to defend their lands, homes, and churches, We extend, and hereby bestow, as a sign of Our special affection, the Apostolic Benediction.”

Francis had thought briefly of going to the northwest, if he failed to find a vocation to the Order. But, although he was strong and skillful enough with blade and bow, he was rather short and not very heavy, while—according to rumor—the heathen was nine feet tall. He could not testify as to the truth of the rumor, but saw no reason to think it false.

Besides dying in battle, there was very little that he could think of to do with his lifetime—little that seemed worth the doing—if he could not devote it to the Order.

His certainty of his vocation had not been broken, but only slightly bent, by the scorching administered to him by the abbot, and by the thought of the cat who became an ornithologist when called only by Nature to become an ornithophage. The thought made him unhappy enough to permit him to be overcome by temptation, so that, on Palm Sunday, with only six days of starvation remaining until the end of Lent, Prior Cheroki heard from Francis (or from the shriveled and sun-scorched residuum of Francis, wherein the soul remained somehow encysted) a few brief croaks which constituted what was probably the most succinct confession that Francis ever made or Cheroki ever heard:

“Bless me, Father; I ate a lizard.”

Prior Cheroki having for many years been confessor to fasting penitents, found that custom had, with him, as with a fabled gravedigger, given it all “a property of easiness,” so that he replied with perfect equanimity and not even a blink: “Was it an abstinence day, and was it artificially prepared?”

Holy Week would have been less lonely than the earlier weeks of Lent, had the hermits not been, by then, past caring; for some of the Passiontide liturgy was carried outside the abbey walls to touch the penitents at their vigil sites; twice the Eucharist came forth, and on Maundy Thursday the abbot himself made the rounds, with Cheroki and thirteen monks, to perform the Mandatum at each hermitage. Abbot Arkos’ vestments were concealed under a cowl, and the lion almost managed to seem humble kitten as he knelt, and washed and kissed the feet of his fasting subjects with maximum economy of movement and a minimum of flourish and display, while the others chanted the antiphons.

*“Mandatum novum do vobis: ut diligatis invicem...”* On Good Friday a Procession of the Cross brought out a veiled crucifix, stopping at each hermitage to unveil it gradually before the penitent, lifting the cloth inch by inch for the Adoration, while the monks chanted the Reproaches:

*“My people, what have I done to thee? or in what have I grieved thee? Answer...I exalted thee with virtuous power; and thou hangest me from the gibbet of a cross...”*

And then, Holy Saturday.

The monks carried them in one at a time—famished and raving. Francis was thirty pounds lighter and several degrees weaker than he had been on Ash Wednesday. When they set him on his feet in his own cell, he staggered, and before he reached the bunk, he fell. The brothers hoisted him into it, bathed him, shaved him, and anointed his blistered skin, while Francis babbled deliriously about something in a burlap loincloth, addressing it at times as an angel and again as a saint, frequently invoking the name of Leibowitz and trying to apologize.

His brethren, forbidden by the abbot to speak of the matter, merely exchanged significant glances or nodded mysteriously among themselves.

Reports filtered to the abbot.

“Bring him here,” he grunted at a recorder as soon as he heard that Francis could walk. His tone sent the recorder scurrying.

“Do you deny saying these things?” Arkos growled.

“I don’t remember saying them, m’Lord Abbot,” said the novice, eyeing the abbot’s ruler. “I may have been raving.”

“Assuming that you *were* raving—would you say it again now?”

“About the pilgrim being the *Beatus*? Oh, no, Magister meus!”

“Then assert the contrary.”

“I don’t *think* the pilgrim was the *Beatus*”

“Why not just a straightforward *He was not*?”

“Well, never having seen the Blessed Leibowitz personally, I wouldn’t—”

“*Enough!*” the abbot ordered. “*Too much!* That’s *all* I want to see of you and hear of you for a long, long time! Out! But just one thing—*DON’T* expect to profess your vows with the others this year. You won’t be permitted.”

For Francis it was like a blow in the stomach with the end of a log.

## 6

# A

s topic for conversation, the pilgrim remained forbidden subject matter in the abbey; but with respect to the relics and the fallout shelter the prohibition was, of necessity, gradually relaxed—except for their discoverer who remained under orders not to discuss them, and preferably to think of the matter as little as possible. Still, he could not avoid hearing things now and again, and he knew that in one of the abbey’s workshops, monks were at work on the documents, not only his own but some others that had been found in the ancient desk, before the abbot ordered that the shelter be closed.

*Closed!* The news jolted Brother Francis. The shelter scarcely had been touched. Beyond his own adventure, there had been no attempt to penetrate further into the secrets of the shelter except to open the desk which he had tried to open, with no success, before he noticed the box. *Closed!* With no attempt to discover what might lie beyond the inner door marked “Hatch Two” nor to investigate “Sealed Environment.” Without even removing the stones or the bones. *Closed!* The investigation abruptly choked off, without apparent cause.

Then there began a rumor.

*“Emily had a gold tooth. Emily had a gold tooth. Emily had a gold tooth.”* It was, in fact,

quite true. It was one of those historical trivialities that manage somehow to outlive important facts which someone should have bothered to remember but which went unrecorded until some monastic historian was forced to write: "Neither the contents of the Memorabilia nor any archaeological source yet uncovered disclose the name of the ruler who occupied the White Palace during the middle and late sixties, although Fr. Barcus has claimed, not without supporting evidence, that his name was—"

And yet, it was clearly recorded in the Memorabilia that Emily had worn a gold tooth.

It was not surprising that the Lord Abbot commanded that the crypt be sealed forthwith. Remembering how he had lifted the ancient skull and turned it to face the wall, Brother Francis suddenly feared the wrath of Heaven. Emily Leibowitz had vanished from the face of the Earth at the beginning of the Flame Deluge, and only after many years would her widower admit that she was dead.

It was said that God, in order to test mankind which had become swelled with pride as in the time of Noah, had commanded the wise men of that age, among them the Blessed Leibowitz, to devise great engines of war such as had never before been upon the Earth, weapons of such might that they contained the very fires of Hell, and that God had suffered these magi to place the weapons in the hands of princes, and to say to each prince: "Only because the enemies have such a thing have we devised this for thee, in order that they may know that thou hast it also, and fear to strike. See to it, m'Lord, that thou fearest them as much as they shall now fear thee, that none may unleash this dread thing which we have wrought."

But the princes, putting the words of their wise men to naught, thought each to himself: If I but strike quickly enough, and in secret, I shall destroy these others in their sleep, and there will be none to fight back; the earth shall be mine

Such was the folly of princes, and there followed the Flame Deluge

Within weeks—some said days—it was ended, after the first unleashing of the hell-fire. Cities had become puddles of glass, surrounded by vast acreages of broken stone. While nations had vanished from the earth, the lands littered with bodies, both men and cattle, and all manner of beasts, together with the birds of the air and all things that flew, all things that swam in the rivers, crept in the grass, or burrowed in holes; having sickened and perished, they covered the land, and yet where the demons of the Fallout covered the countryside, the bodies for a time would not decay, except in contact with fertile earth. The great clouds of wrath engulfed the forests and the fields, withering trees and causing the crops to die. There were great deserts where once life was, and in those places of the Earth where men still lived, all were sickened by the poisoned air, so that, while some escaped death, none was left untouched; and many died even in those lands where the weapons had not struck, because of the poisoned air.

In all parts of the world men fled from one place to other places, and there was a confusion of tongues. Much wrath was kindled against the princes and the servants of the princes and against the magi who had devised the weapons. Years passed, and yet the Earth was not cleansed. So it was clearly recorded in the Memorabilia.

From the confusion of tongues, the intermingling of the remnants of many nations, from fear, the hate was born. And the hate said: *Let us stone and disembowel and burn the ones who did this thing. Let us make a holocaust of those who wrought this crime, together with their hirelings and their wise men; burning, let them perish, and all their works, their names, and even their memories. Let us destroy them all, and teach our children that the world is new, that they may know nothing of the deeds that went before. Let us make a great simplification, and then the world shall begin again.*

So it was that, after the Deluge, the Fallout, the plagues, the madness, the confusion of tongues, the rage, there began the bloodletting of the Simplification, when remnants of mankind had torn other remnants limb from limb, killing rulers, scientists, leaders, technicians, teachers, and whatever persons the leaders of the maddened mobs said deserved death for having helped to make the Earth what it had become. Nothing had been so hateful in the sight of these mobs as the man of learning, at first because they had served the princes, but then later because they refused to join in the bloodletting and tried to oppose the mobs, calling the crowds "bloodthirsty simpletons."

Joyfully the mobs accepted the name, took up the cry: *Simpletons! Yes, yes! I'm a simpleton! Are*

*you a simpleton? We'll build a town and we'll name it Simple Town, because by then all the smart bastards that caused all this, they'll be dead! Simpletons! Let's go. This ought to show 'em! Anybody here not a simpleton? Get the bastard, if there is!*

To escape the fury of the simpleton packs, such learned people as still survived fled to any sanctuary that offered itself. When Holy Church received them, she vested them in monks' robes and tried to hide them in such monasteries and convents as had survived and could be reoccupied, for the religious were less despised by the mob except when they openly defied it and accepted martyrdom. Sometimes such sanctuary was effective, but more often it was not. Monasteries were invaded, records and sacred books were burned, refugees were seized and summarily hanged or burned. The Simplification had ceased to have plan or purpose soon after it began, and became an insane frenzy of mass murder and destruction such as can occur only when the last traces of social order are gone. The madness was transmitted to the children, taught as they were—not merely to forget—but to hate, and surges of mob fury recurred sporadically even through the fourth generation after the Deluge. By then, the fury was directed not against the learned, for there were none, but against the merely literate.

Isaac Edward Leibowitz, after a fruitless search for his wife, had fled to the Cistercians where he remained in hiding during the early post-Deluge years. After six years, he had gone once more to search for Emily or her grave, in the far southwest. There he had become convinced at last of her death, for death was unconditionally triumphant in that place. There in the desert he quietly made a vow. Then he went back to the Cistercians, took their habit, and after more years became a priest. He gathered a few companions about him and made some quiet proposals. After a few more years, the proposals filtered to "Rome," which was no longer Rome (which was no longer a city), having moved elsewhere, moved again, and still again—in less than two decades, after staying in one place for two millennia. Twelve years after the proposals were made, Father Isaac Edward Leibowitz had won permission from the Holy See to found a new community of religious, to be named after Albertus Magnus, teacher of Saint Thomas, and patron of men of science. Its task, unannounced and at first only vaguely defined, was to preserve human history for the great-great-great-grandchildren of the children of the simpletons who wanted it destroyed. Its earliest habit was burlap rags and bindlestiffs—the uniform of the simpleton mob. Its members were either "bookleggers" or "memorizers," according to the tasks assigned. The bookleggers smuggled books to the southwest desert and buried them there in kegs. The memorizers committed to rote memory entire volumes of history, sacred writings, literature, and science, in case some unfortunate book smuggler was caught, tortured, and forced to reveal the location of the kegs. Meanwhile, other members of the new Order located a water hole about three days' journey from the book cache and began the building of a monastery. The project, aimed at saving a small remnant of human culture from the remnant of humanity who wanted it destroyed, was then underway.

Leibowitz, while taking his own turn at booklegging, was caught by a simpleton mob; a turncoat technician, whom the priest swiftly forgave, identified him as not only a man of learning, but also a specialist in the weapons field. Hooded in burlap, he was martyred forthwith, by strangulation with a hangman's noose not tied for neck-breaking, at the same time being roasted alive—thus settling a dispute in the crowd concerning the method of execution.

The memorizers were few, their memories limited.

Some of the book kegs were found and burned, as well as several other bookleggers. The monastery itself was attacked thrice before the madness subsided.

From the vast store of human knowledge, only a few kegs of original books and a pitiful collection of hand-copied texts, rewritten from memory, had survived in the possession of the Order by the time the madness had ended.

Now, after six centuries of darkness, the monks still preserved this Memorabilia, studied it, copied and recopied it, and patiently waited. At the beginning, in the time of Leibowitz, it had been hoped—and even anticipated as probable—that the fourth or fifth generation would begin to want its heritage back. But the monks of the earliest days had not counted on the human ability to generate a new cultural inheritance in a couple of generations if an old one is utterly destroyed, to generate it by virtue of lawgivers and prophets, geniuses or maniacs; through a Moses, or through a Hitler, or an ignorant but tyrannical

grandfather, a cultural inheritance may be acquired between dusk and dawn, and many have been so acquired. But the new “culture” was an inheritance of darkness, wherein “simpleton” meant the same thing as “citizen” meant the same thing as “slave.” The monks waited. It mattered not at all to them that the knowledge they saved was useless, that much of it was not really knowledge now, was as inscrutable to the monks in some instances as it would be to an illiterate wild-boy from the hills; this knowledge was empty of content, its subject matter long since gone. Still, such knowledge had a symbolic structure that was peculiar to itself, and at least the symbol-interplay could be observed. To observe the way a knowledge-system is knit together is to learn at least a minimum knowledge-of-knowledge, until someday–someday, or some century–an Integrator would come, and things would be fitted together again. So time mattered not at all. The Memorabilia was there, and it was given to them by duty to preserve, and preserve it they would if the darkness in the world lasted ten more centuries, or even ten thousand years, for they, though born in that darkest of ages, were still the very bookleggers and memorizers of the Beatus Leibowitz; and when they wandered abroad from their abbey, each of them, the professed of the Order–whether stable-hand or Lord Abbot–carried as part of his habit a book, usually a Breviary these days, tied up in a bindlestiff.

After the shelter was closed, the documents and relics which had been taken from it were quietly rounded up, one at a time and in an unobtrusive manner, by the abbot. They became unavailable for inspection, presumably locked in Arkos’ study. For all practical purposes, they had vanished. Anything which vanished at the level of the abbot’s study was not safe subject matter for public discussion. It was something to be whispered about in quiet corridors. Brother Francis seldom heard the whispers. Eventually, they stopped, only to be revived when a messenger from New Rome muttered with the abbot in the refectory one night. An occasional snatch of their muttering reached adjacent tables. The whispers lasted for a few weeks after the messenger’s departure, then subsided again.

Brother Francis Gerard of Utah returned to the desert the following year and fasted again in solitude. Once more he returned, weak and emaciated, and soon was summoned into the presence of Abbot Arkos, who demanded to know whether he claimed further conferences with members of the Heavenly Hosts.

“Oh, no, m’Lord Abbot. Nothing by day but buzzards.”

“By night?” Arkos asked suspiciously.

“Only wolves,” said Francis, adding cautiously: “I think.”

Arkos did not choose to belabor the cautious amendment, but merely frowned. The abbot’s frown, Brother Francis had come to observe, was the causative source of radiant energy which traveled through space with finite velocity and which was as yet not very well understood except in terms of its withering effect upon whatever thing absorbed it, that thing usually being a postulant or novice. Francis had absorbed a five-second burst of the stuff by the time the next question was put to him.

“Now what about last year?”

The novice paused to swallow. “The–old–man?”

“The old man.”

“Yes, Dom Arkos.”

Trying to keep any hint of a question mark out of his tone, Arkos droned: “Just an old man. Nothing more. We’re sure of that now.”

“I *think* it was just an old man, too.”

Father Arkos reached wearily for the hickory ruler.

WHACK!

“Deo gratias!”

WHACK!”

“*Deo . . .*”

As Francis returned to his cell, the abbot called after him down the corridor: “By the way, I intended to mention...”

“Yes, Reverend Father?”

“No vows this year,” he said absently, and vanished into his study.



# B

rother Francis spent seven years in the novitiate, seven Lenten vigils in the desert, and became highly proficient in the imitation of wolf calls. For the amusement of his brethren, he summoned the pack to the vicinity of the abbey by howling from the walls after dark. By day, he served in the kitchen, scrubbed the stone floors, and continued his classroom study of antiquity.

Then one day a messenger from a seminary in New Rome came riding to the abbey on an ass. After a long conference with the abbot, the messenger sought out Brother Francis. He seemed surprised to find that youth, now fully a man, still wearing the habit of a novice and scrubbing the kitchen floor.

"We have been studying the documents you discovered, for some years now," he told the novice. "Quite a few of us are convinced they're authentic."

Francis lowered his head. "I'm not permitted to mention the matter, Father," he said.

"Oh, that." The messenger smiled and handed him a scrap of paper bearing the abbot's seal, and written in the ruler's hand: *Ecce Inquisitor Curiae. Ausculta et obsequere. Arkos, AOL, Abbas.*

"It's all right," he added hastily, noticing the novice's sudden tension. "I'm not speaking to you officially. Someone else from the court will take your statements later. You know, don't you, that your papers have been in New Rome for some time now? I just brought some of them back."

Brother Francis shook his head. He knew less, perhaps, than anyone, concerning high-level reactions to his discovery of the relics. He noticed that the messenger wore the white habit of the Dominicans, and he wondered with a certain uneasiness about the nature of the "court" whereof the Black Friar had spoken. There was an inquisition against Catharism in the Pacific Coast region, but he could not imagine how that court could be concerned with relics of the Beatus. *Ecce Inquisitor Curiae*, the note said. Probably the abbot meant "investigator." The Dominican seemed a rather mild-humored man, and was not carrying any visible engines of torture.

"We expect the case for canonization of your founder to be reopened soon," the messenger explained. "Your Abbot Arkos is a very wise and prudent man." He chuckled. "By turning the relics over to another Order for examination, and by having the shelter sealed before it was fully explored—Well, you do understand, don't you?"

"No, Father. I had supposed he thought the whole thing too trivial to spend any time on."

The Black Friar laughed. "Trivial? I think not. But if your Order turns up evidence, relics, miracles, and whatever, the court has to consider the source. *Every* religious community is eager to see its founder canonized. So your abbot very wisely told you: 'Hands off the shelter.' I'm sure it's been frustrating for all of you, but—better for the cause of your founder to let the shelter be explored with other witnesses present."

"You're going to open it again?" Francis asked eagerly.

"No, not I. But when the court is ready, it will send observers. Then anything that is found in the shelter that might affect the case will be safe, in case the opposition questions its authenticity. Of course, the only reason for suspecting that the contents of the shelter might affect the cause is—Well, the things you found."

"May I ask how that is, Father?"

"Well, one of the embarrassments at the time of the beatification was the early life of Blessed Leibowitz—before he became a monk and a priest. The advocate for the other side kept trying to cast doubt on the early period, pre-Deluge. He was trying to establish that Leibowitz never made a careful

search—that his wife might even have been alive at the time of his ordination. Well, it wouldn't be the first time, of course; sometimes dispensations have been granted—but that's beside the point. The *advocatus diaboli* was just trying to cast doubt on your founder's character. Trying to suggest that he had accepted Holy Orders and taken vows before being certain his family responsibility was ended. The opposition failed, but it may try again. And if those human remains you found really are—" He shrugged and smiled.

Francis nodded. "It would pinpoint the date of her death."

"At the very beginning of the war that nearly ended everything. And in my own opinion—well, that handwriting in the box, it's either that of the Beatus or a very clever counterfeit."

Frauds reddened.

"I'm not suggesting that you were involved in any counterfeit scheme," the Dominican added hastily, upon noticing the blush.

The novice, however, had only been remembering his own opinion of the scrawl.

"Tell me, how did it happen?—how you located the site, I mean. I'll need the whole story of it."

"Well, it started because of the wolves."

The Dominican began taking notes.

A few days after the messenger's departure from the abbey, Abbot Arkos called for Brother Francis. "Do you still feel that your vocation is with us?" Arkos asked pleasantly.

"If m'Lord Abbot will pardon my execrable vanity—"

"Oh, let's ignore your execrable vanity for a moment. Do you or don't you?"

"Yes, Magister meus."

The abbot beamed. "Well, now, my son. I think we're convinced of it too. If you're ready to commit yourself for all time, I think the time's ripe for you to profess your solemn vows." He paused for a moment, and, watching the novice's face, seemed disappointed not to detect any change of expression. "What's this? You're not glad to hear it? You're not—? Ho! what's wrong?"

While Francis' face had remained a politely attentive mask, the mask gradually lost color. His knees buckled suddenly.

Francis had fainted.

Two weeks later, the novice Francis, having perhaps set an endurance record for survival time on desert vigils, left the ranks of the novitiate and, vowing perpetual poverty, chastity, obedience, together with the special pledges peculiar to the community, received blessings and a bindlestiff in the abbey, and became forever a professed monk of the Albertian Order of Leibowitz, chained by chains of his own forging to the foot of the Cross and the rule of the Order. Thrice the ritual inquired of him: "If God calleth thee to be His Booklegger, wilt thou then suffer death before betraying thy brethren?" And thrice Francis responded: "Aye, Lord."

"Then arise Brother Bookleggers and Brother Memorizers and receive the kiss of brotherhood. *Ecce quam bonum, et quam jucundum . . .*"

Brother Francis was transferred from the kitchen and assigned to less menial labor. He became apprentice copyist to an aged monk named Horner, and, if things went well for him, he might reasonably look forward to a lifetime in the copyroom, where he would dedicate the rest of his days to such tasks as the hand-copying of algebra texts and illuminating their pages with olive leaves and cheerful cherubim surrounding tables of logarithms.

Brother Horner was a gentle old man, and Brother Francis liked him from the start. "Most of us do better work on the assigned copy," Horner told him, "if we have our own project too. Most of the copyists become interested in some particular work from the Memorabilia and like to spend a little time at it on the side. For example, Brother Sarl over there—his work was lagging, and he was making mistakes. So we let him spend an hour a day on a project he chose for himself. When the work gets so tedious that he starts making errors in copy, he can put it aside for a while and work on his own project. I allow everyone to do the same. If you finish your assigned work before the day's over but don't have your own project, you'll have to spend the extra time on our perennials.

"Perennials?"

"Yes, and I don't mean plants. There's a perennial demand from the whole clergy for various

books—Missals, Scripture, Breviaries, the *Summa*, encyclopediae, and the like. We sell quite a lot of them. So when you don't have pet project, we'll put you on the perennials when you finish early. You've plenty of time to decide."

"What project did Brother Sarl pick?"

The aged overseer paused. "Well, I doubt if you'd even understand it. I don't. He seems to have found a method for restoring missing words and phrases to some of the old fragments of original text in the Memorabilia. Perhaps the left-hand side of a half-burned book is legible, but the right edge of each page is burned, with a few words missing at the end of each line. He's worked out a mathematical method for finding the missing words. It's not foolproof, but it works to some degree. He's managed to restore four whole pages since he began the attempt."

Francis glanced at Brother Sarl, who was an octogenarian and nearly blind. "How long did it take him?" the apprentice asked.

"About forty years," said Brother Horner. "Of course he's only spent about five hours a week at it, and it does take considerable arithmetic."

Francis nodded thoughtfully. "If one page per decade could be restored, maybe in a few centuries—"

"Even less," croaked Brother Sarl without looking up from his work. "The more you fill in, the faster the remainder goes. I'll get the next page done in a couple of years. After that, God willing, maybe—" His voice tapered off into a mumble. Francis frequently noticed that Brother Sarl talked to himself while working.

"Suit yourself," said Brother Horner. "We can always use more help on the perennials, but you can have your own project when you want one."

The idea came to Brother Francis in an unexpected flash.

"May I use the time," he blurted, "to make a copy of the Leibowitz blueprint I found?"

Brother Horner seemed momentarily startled. "Well—I don't know, son. Our Lord Abbot is, well—just a little sensitive on that subject. And the thing may not belong in the Memorabilia. It's in the tentative file now."

"But you know they fade, Brother. And it's been handled a lot in the light. The Dominicans had it in New Rome for so long—"

"Well—I suppose it would be a rather *brief* project. If Father Arkos doesn't object, but—" He wagged his head in doubt.

"Perhaps I could include it as one of a set," Francis hastily offered. "What few recopied blueprints we have are so old they're brittle. If I made several duplicates—of some of the others—"

Horner smiled wryly. "What you're suggesting is, that by including the Leibowitz blueprint in a set, you might escape detection."

Francis reddened.

"Father Arkos might not even notice, eh?—if he happened to wander through."

Francis squirmed.

"All right," said Horner, his eyes twinkling slightly. "You may use your unassigned time to make duplicates of any of the recopied prints that are in bad condition. If anything else gets mixed up in the lot, I'll try not to notice."

Brother Francis spent several months of his unassigned time in redrawing some of the older prints from the Memorabilia's files before daring to touch the Leibowitz print. If the old drawings were worth saving at all, they needed to be recopied every century or two anyhow. Not only did the original copies fade, but often the redrawn versions became nearly illegible after a time, due to the impermanence of the inks employed. He had not the slightest notion why the ancients had used white lines and lettering on a dark background, in preference to the reverse. When he roughly resketched a design in charcoal, thereby reversing the background, the rough sketch appeared more realistic than the white-on-dark, and the ancients were immeasurably wiser than Francis; if they had taken the trouble to put ink where blank paper would ordinarily be, and leave slivers of white paper where an inked line would appear in a

straightforward drawing, then they must have had their reasons. Francis recopied the documents to appear as nearly like the originals as possible—even though the task of spreading blue ink around tiny white letters was particularly tedious, and quite wasteful of ink, a fact which caused Brother Horner to grumble.

He copied an old architectural print, then a drawing for a machine part whose geometry was apparent but whose purpose was vague. He redrew a mandala abstraction, titled “STATOR WNDG MOD 73-A 3-PH 6-P 1800-BPM 5-HP CL-A SQUIRREL CAGE,” which proved completely incomprehensible, and not at all capable of imprisoning a squirrel. The ancients were often subtle; perhaps one needed a special set of mirrors in order to see the squirrel. He painstakingly redrew it anyhow.

Only after the abbot, who occasionally passed through the copyroom, had seen him working at another blueprint at least three times (twice Arkos had paused for a quick look at Francis’ work), did he summon the courage to venture to the Memorabilia files for the Leibowitz blueprint, nearly a year after beginning his free-time project.

The original document had already been subjected to a certain amount of restorative work. Except for the fact that it bore the name of the Beatus, it was disappointingly like most of the others he had redrawn.

The Leibowitz print, another abstraction, appealed to nothing, least of all to reason. He studied it until he could see the whole amazing complexity with his eyes closed but knew no more than he had known before. It appeared to be no more than a network of lines connecting a patchwork of doohickii, squiggles, quids, laminulae, and thingumbob. The lines were mostly horizontal or vertical, and crossed each other with either a little jump-mark or a dot; they made right-angle turns to get around doohickii, and they never stopped in mid-space but always terminated at a squiggle, quiggle, quid, or thingumbob. It made so little sense that a long period of staring at it produced a stupefying effect. Nevertheless he began work at duplicating every detail, even to the copying of a central brownish stain which he thought might be the blood of the Blessed Martyr, but which Brother Jeris suggested was only the stain left by a decayed apple core.

Brother Jeris, who had joined the apprentice copyroom at the same time as Brother Francis, seemed to enjoy teasing him about the project. “What, pray,” he asked, squinting over Francis’ shoulder, “is the meaning of “Transistorized Control System for Unit Six-B,” learned Brother?”

“Clearly, it is the title of the document,” said Francis, feeling slightly cross.

“Clearly. But what does it mean?”

“It is the *name* of the diagram which lies before your eyes, Brother Simpleton. What does ‘Jeris’ mean?”

“Very little, I’m sure,” said Brother Jeris with mock humility. “Forgive my density, please. You have successfully defined the name by pointing to the creature named, which is truly the meaning of the name. But now the creature-diagram itself represents something, does it not? What does the diagram represent?”

“The transistorized control system for unit six-B, obviously.”

Jeris laughed. “Quite clear! Eloquent! If the creature is the name, then the name is the creature. ‘Equals may be substituted for equals,’ or ‘The order of an equality is reversible,’ but may we proceed to the next axiom? If ‘Quantities equal to the same quantity may substitute for each other’ is true, then is there not some ‘same quantity’ which *both* name *and* diagram represent? Or is it a closed system?”

Francis reddened. “I would imagine,” he said slowly, after pausing to stifle his annoyance, “that the diagram represents an abstract concept, rather than a concrete *thing*. Perhaps the ancients had a systematic method for depicting a pure thought. It’s clearly not a recognizable picture of an object.”

“Yes, yes, it’s *clearly* *unrecognizable*!” Brother Jeris agreed with a chuckle.

“On the other hand, perhaps it *does* depict an object, but only in a very formal stylistic way—so that one would need special training or—”

“Special eyesight?”

“In my opinion, it’s a high abstraction of perhaps transcendental value expressing a thought of the

Beatus Leibowitz.”

“Bravo! Now what was he thinking about?”

“Why—‘Circuit Design,’” said Francis, picking the term out of the block of lettering at the lower right.

“Hmmm, what discipline does *that* art pertain to, Brother? What is its genus, species, property, and difference? Or is it only an ‘accident’?”

Jeris was becoming pretentious in his sarcasm, Francis thought, and decided to meet it with a soft answer. “Well, observe this column of figures, and its heading: ‘Electronics Parts Numbers.’ There was once, an art or science, called Electronics, which might belong to both Art and Science.”

“*Uh-huh!* Thus settling ‘genus’ and ‘species.’ Now as to ‘difference,’ if I may pursue the line. What was the subject matter of Electronics?”

“That too is written,” said Francis, who had searched the Memorabilia from high to low in an attempt to find clues which might make the blueprint slightly more comprehensible—but to very small avail. “The subject matter of Electronics was the electron,” he explained.

“So it is written, indeed. I am impressed. I know so little of these things. What, pray, was the ‘electron’?”

“Well, there is one fragmentary source which alludes to it as a “Negative Twist of Nothingness.”

“What! How did they negate a nothingness? Wouldn’t that make it a somethingness?”

“Perhaps the negation applies to ‘twist.’ “

“Ah! Then we would have on “Untwisted Nothing,” eh? Have you discovered how to untwist a nothingness?”

“Net yet,” Francis admitted.

“Well keep at it, Brother! How clever they must have been, those ancients—to know how to untwist nothing. Keep at it, and you may learn how. Then we’d have the “electron” in our midst, wouldn’t we? Whatever would we do with it? Put it on the altar in the chapel?”

“All right,” Francis sighed, “I don’t know. But I have a certain faith that the ‘electron’ existed at one time, although I don’t know how it was constructed or what it might have been used for.”

“How touching!” chuckled the iconoclast, and returned to his work.

The sporadic teasing of Brother Jeris saddened Francis, but did nothing to lessen his devotion to his project.

The exact duplication of every mark, blotch, and stain proved impossible, but the accuracy of his facsimile proved sufficient for the deception of the eye at a distance of two paces, and therefore adequate for display purposes, so that the original might be sealed and packed away. Having completed the facsimile, Brother Francis found himself disappointed. The drawing was too stark. There was nothing about it to suggest at first glance that it might be a holy relic. The style was terse and unpretentious—fittingly enough, perhaps, for the Beatus himself, and yet—

A copy of the relic was not enough. Saints were humble people who glorified not themselves but God, and it was left to others to portray the inward glory of the saintly by outward, visible signs. The stark copy was not enough: it was coldly unimaginative and did not commemorate the saintly qualities of the Beatus in any visible way.

*Glorificemus*, thought Francis, while he worked on the perennials. He was copying pages of the Psalms at the moment for later rebinding. He paused to regain his place in the text, and to notice meaning in the words—for after hours of copying, he had ceased to read at all, and merely allowed his hand to retrace the letters which his eyes encountered. He noticed that he had been copying David’s prayer for pardon, the fourth penitential psalm, “*Miserere mei, Deus*...for I know my iniquity, and my sin is always before me.” It was a humble prayer, but the page before his eyes was not written in a humble style to match. The *M* in *Miserere* was gold-leaf inlay. A flourishing arabesque of interwoven gold and violet filaments filled the margins and grew into nests around the splendid capitals at the beginning of each verse. However humble the prayer itself, the page was magnificent. Brother Francis was copying only the body of the text onto new parchment, leaving spaces for the splendid capitals and margins as wide as the text lines. Other craftsmen would fill in riots of color around his simply inked copy and would construct

the pictorial capitals. He was learning to illuminate, but was not yet proficient enough to be trusted at gold-inlay work on the perennials.

*Gloreficemus*. He was thinking of the blueprint again.

Without mentioning the idea to anyone, Brother Francis began to plan. He found the finest available lambskin and spent several weeks of his spare time at curing it and stretching it and stoning it to a perfect surface, which he eventually bleached to a snowy whiteness and carefully stored away. For months afterward, he spent every available minute of his free time looking through the Memorabilia, again seeking clues to the meaning of the Leibowitz print. He found nothing resembling the squiggles in the drawing, nor anything else to help him interpret its meaning, but after a long time he stumbled across a fragment of a book which contained a partially destroyed page whose subject matter was blueprinting. It seemed to be a piece of an encyclopaedia. The reference was brief and some of the article was missing, but after reading it several times, he began to suspect that he—and many earlier copyists—had wasted a lot of time and ink. The white-on-dark effect seemed not to have been a particularly desirable feature, but one which resulted from the peculiarities of a certain cheap reproduction process. The original drawing from which the blueprint had been made had been black-on-white. He had to resist a sudden impulse to beat his head against the stone floor. All that ink and labor to copy an accident! Well, perhaps Brother Horner need not be told. It would be a work of charity to say nothing about it, because of Brother Horner's heart condition.

The knowledge that the color scheme of blueprints was an accidental feature of those ancient drawings lent impetus to his plan. A glorified copy of the Leibowitz print could be made without incorporating the accidental feature. With the color scheme reversed, no one would recognize the drawing at first. Certain other features could obviously be modified. He dared change nothing that he did not understand, but surely the parts tables and the block-lettered information could be spread symmetrically around the diagram on scrolls and shields. Because the meaning of the diagram itself was obscure, he dared not alter its shape or plan by a hair; but since its color scheme was unimportant, it might as well be beautiful. He considered gold inlay for the squiggles and doohickii, but the thingumbob was too intricate for goldwork, and a gold quid would seem ostentatious. The quiggles just *had* to be done jet black, but that meant that the lines should be off-black, to assert the quiggles. While the unsymmetrical design would have to stay as it was, he could think of no reason why its meaning would be altered by using it as a trellis for a climbing vine, whose branches (carefully dodging the quiggles) might be made to furnish an impression of symmetry or render asymmetry natural. When Brother Horner illuminated a capital M, transmuting it into a wonderful jungle of leaves, berries, branches, and perhaps a wily serpent, it nevertheless remained legible as *M*. Brother Francis saw no reason for supposing that the same would not apply to the diagram.

The general shape, over-all, with a scrolled border, might well become a shield, rather than the stark rectangle which enclosed the drawing in the print. He made dozens of preliminary sketches. At the very top of the parchment would be a representation of the Triune God, and at the very bottom—the coat of arms of the Albertian Order, with, just above it the image of the Beatus.

But there was no accurate likeness of the Beatus in existence, so far as Francis knew. There were several fanciful portraits, but none dating back to the Simplification. There was, as yet, not even a conventional representation, although tradition told that Leibowitz had been rather tall and somewhat stooped. But perhaps when the shelter was reopened—Brother Francis' preliminary sketchwork was interrupted one afternoon by his sudden awareness that the presence which loomed behind him and cast its shadow across his copy-table was that of—was that of—*No! Please! Beate Leibowitz, audi me! Mercy, Lord! Let it be anybody but—*

“Well, what have we here?” rumbled the abbot, glancing over his designs.

“A drawing, m'Lord Abbot.”

“So I notice. But what is it?”

“The Leibowitz blueprint.”

“That one you found? What? It doesn't look much like it. Why the changes?”

“It’s going to be—”

“Speak louder!”

“—*AN ILLUMINATED COPY!*” Brother Francis involuntarily shrieked.

“Oh.”

Abbot Arkos shrugged and wandered away.

Brother Horner, a few seconds later, while wandering past the apprentice’s desk was surprised to notice that Francis had fainted.

## 8

# T

o the amazement of Brother Francis, Abbot Arkos no longer objected to the monk’s interest in the relics. Since the Dominicans had agreed to examine the matter, the abbot had relaxed; and since the cause for the canonization had resumed some progress in New Rome, he appeared at times to forget entirely that anything special had happened during the vocational vigil of one Francis Gerard, AOL, formerly of Utah, presently of the scriptorium and copyroom. The incident was eleven years old. The preposterous whisperings in the novitiate concerning the pilgrim’s identity had long since died away. The novitiate of Brother Francis’ time was not the novitiate of today. The newest of the new crop of youngsters had never heard of the affair.

The affair had cost Brother Francis seven Lenten vigils among the wolves, however, and he never fully trusted the subject as safe. Whenever he mentioned it, he would dream that night of wolves and of Arkos; in the dream, Arkos kept flinging meat to the wolves, and the meat was Francis.

The monk found, however, that he might continue his project without being molested, except by Brother Jeris who continued to tease. Francis began the actual illumination of the lambskin. The intricacies of scrollwork and the excruciating delicacy of the gold-inlay work would, because of the brevity of his spare-project time, make it a labor of many years; but in a dark sea of centuries wherein nothing seemed to flow, a lifetime was only brief eddy, even for the man who lived it. There was a tedium of repeated days and repeated seasons; then there were aches and pains, finally Extreme Unction, and a moment of blackness at the end—or at the beginning, rather. For then the small shivering soul who had endured the tedium, endured it badly or well, would find itself in a place of light, find itself absorbed in the burning gaze of infinitely compassionate eyes as it stood before the Just One. And then the King would say: “Come,” or the King would say: “Go,” and only for that moment had the tedium of years existed. It would be hard to believe differently during such an age as Francis knew.

Brother Sarl finished the fifth page of his mathematical restoration, collapsed over his desk, and died a few hours later. Never mind. His notes were intact. Someone, after a century or two, would come along and find them interesting, would perhaps complete his work. Meanwhile, prayers ascended for the soul of Sarl.

Then there was Brother Fingo and his woodcarving. He had been returned to the carpentry shop a year or two ago and was permitted occasionally to chisel and scrape at his half-finished image of the Martyr. Like Francis, Fingo had only an hour now and then to work at his chosen task; the woodcarving progressed at a rate that was almost imperceptible unless one looked at the carving only after intervals of several months. Francis saw it too frequently to notice the growth. He found himself charmed by Fingo’s easy-going exuberance, even while realizing that Fingo had adopted his affable manner to compensate for his ugliness, and he liked to spend idle minutes, whenever he could find them, watching Fingo work.

The carpentry shop was rich with the odors of pine, cedar, spruce shavings, and human sweat.

Wood was not easy to obtain at the abbey. Except for fig trees and a couple of cottonwoods in the immediate vicinity of the water hole, the region was treeless. It was a three-day ride to the nearest stand of scrub that passed for timber, and the woodgatherers often were gone from the abbey for a week at a time before they came back with a few donkeyloads of branches for making pegs, spokes, and an occasional chair leg. Sometimes they dragged back a log or two for replacing a rotting beam. But with such a limited wood supply, carpenters were necessarily woodcarvers and sculptors as well.

Sometimes, while watching Fingo carve, Francis would sit on a bench in the corner of the workshop and sketch, trying to visualize details of the carving which were, as yet, only roughly hewed in the wood. The vague outlines of the face were there, but still masked by splinters and chisel-marks. With his sketches, Brother Francis tried to anticipate the features before they emerged from the grain. Fingo glanced at his sketches and laughed. But as the work progressed, Francis could not escape the feeling that the face of the carving was smiling a vaguely familiar smile. He sketched it thus, and the feeling of familiarity increased. Still, he could not place the face, or recall who had smiled so wryly.

"Not bad, really Not bad at all," said Fingo of his sketches.

The copyist shrugged. "I can't get over the feeling that I've seen him before."

"Not around here, Brother. Not in my time."

Francis fell ill during Advent, and several months had passed before he visited the workshop again.

"The face is nearly finished, Francisco," said the woodcarver. "How do you like it now?"

"I know him!" Francis gasped, staring at the merry-but-sad wrinkled eyes, the hint of a wry smile at the corners of the mouth—somehow almost too familiar.

"You do? Who is it then?" wondered Fingo.

"It's—well, I'm not sure. I *think* I know him. But—"

Fingo laughed. "You're just recognizing your own sketches," he offered in explanation.

Francis was not so certain. Still, he could not quite place the face.

*Hmm-hnnn!* the wry smile seemed to say.

The abbot found the smile irritating, however. While he allowed the work to be completed, he declared that he would never permit it to be used for the purpose originally planned—as an image to be placed in the church if the canonization of the Beatus were ever accomplished. Many years later, when the whole figure was completed, Arkos caused it to be set up in the corridor of the guesthouse, but later transferred it to his study after it had shocked a visitor from New Rome.

Slowly, painfully, Brother Francis was making the lambskin a blaze of beauty. Word of his project spread beyond the copyroom, and the monks often gathered around his table to watch the work and murmur admiration. "Inspiration," someone whispered. "There's evidence enough. It could have been the Beatus he met out there—"

"I don't see why you don't spend your time on something useful," grumbled Brother Jeris, whose sarcastic wit had been exhausted by several years of patient answers from Brother Francis. The skeptic had been using his own free-project time for making and decorating oilskin shades for the lamps in the church, thereby winning the attention of the abbot, who soon placed him in charge of the perennials. As the account ledgers soon began to testify, Brother Jeris' promotion was justified.

Brother Horner, the old master copyist, fell ill. Within weeks, it became apparent that the well-loved monk was on his deathbed. A Mass of Burial was chanted early in Advent. The remains of the saintly old master-copyist were committed to the earth of their origin. While the community expressed its grief in prayer, Arkos quietly appointed Brother Jeris as master of the copyroom.

On the day after his appointment, Brother Jeris informed Brother Francis that he considered it appropriate for him to put away the things of a child and start doing a man's work. Obediently, the monk wrapped his precious project in parchment, protected it with heavy boards, shelved it, and began making oilskin lampshades in his spare time. He murmured no protest, but contented himself with realizing that someday the soul of dear Brother Jeris would depart by the same road as the soul of Brother Horner, to begin that life for which this world was but a staging ground—might begin it at a rather early age, judging by the extent to which he fretted, fumed, and drove himself; and afterward, God willing, Francis might be



allowed to complete his beloved document.

Providence, however, took an earlier hand in the matter, without summoning the soul of Brother Jeris to its Maker. During the summer which followed his appointment as master, a prothonotary apostolic and his retinue of clerks came by way of a donkey train to the abbey from New Rome; he introduced himself as Monsignor Malfreddo Aguerra, the postulator for the Beatus Leibowitz in the canonization procedure. With him were several Dominicans. He had come to observe the reopening of the shelter and the exploration of "Sealed Environment." Also, to investigate such evidence as the abbey could produce that might have a bearing on the case, including—to the abbot's dismay—reports of an alleged apparition of the Beatus which had, so travelers said, come to one Francis Gerard of Utah, AOL.

The Saint's advocate was warmly greeted by the monks, was quartered in the rooms reserved for visiting prelates, was lavishly served by six young novices instructed to be responsive to his every whim, although, as it turned out., Monsignor Aguerra was a man of few whims, to the disappointment of would-be caterers. The finest wines were opened; Aguerra sipped them politely but preferred milk. Brother Huntsman snared plump quail and chaparral cocks for the guest's table; but after inquiring about the feeding habits of the chaparral cocks ("Corn fed, Brother?"—"No, snake-fed, Messér"), Monsignor Aguerra seemed to prefer monks-gruel in the refectory. If only he had inquired about the anonymous bits of meat in the stews, he might have preferred the truly succulent chaparral cocks. Malfreddo Aguerra insisted that life go on as usual at the abbey. But, nevertheless, the advocate was entertained each evening at recreation by fiddlers and a troupe of clowns until he began to believe that "life as usual" at the abbey must be extraordinarily lively, as lives of monastic communities go.

On the third day of Aguerra's visit, the abbot summoned Brother Francis. The relationship between the monk and his ruler, while not close, had been formally friendly, since the time the abbot permitted the novice to profess his vows, and Brother Francis was not even trembling when he knocked at the study door and asked: "You sent for me, Reverend Father?"

"Yes, I did," Arkos said, then asked evenly: "Tell me, have you ever thought about death?"

"Frequently, m'Lord Abbot."

"You pray to Saint Joseph that your death will not be an unhappy one?"

"Umm—often, Reverend Father."

"Then I suppose you'd not care to be suddenly stricken? To have someone use your guts to string a fiddle? To be fed to the hogs? To have your bones be buried in unconsecrated ground? Eh?"

"Nnn-noo, Magister meus."

"I thought not, so be very careful about what you say to Monsignor Aguerra."

"I—?"

"You." Arkos rubbed his chin and seemed lost in unhappy speculation. "I can see it too clearly. The Leibowitz cause is shelved. Poor Brother is struck down by a falling brick. There he lies, moaning for absolution. In the very midst of us, mind you. And there we stand, looking down in pity—clergy among us—watching him croak his last, without even a last blessing on the lad. Hellbound. Unblessed. Unshrived. Under our very noses. A pity, eh?"

"M'Lord?" Francis squawked.

"Oh, don't blame me. I'll be too busy trying to keep your brothers from carrying out their impulse to kick you to death."

"When?"

"Why not at all, we hope. Because you are going to be careful, aren't you?—about what you say to the monsignor. Otherwise I may *let* them kick you to death."

"Yes, but—"

"The postulator wants to see you at once. Please stifle your imagination, and be certain about what you say. Please try not to think."

"Well, I think I can."

"Out, son, out."

Francis felt fright when he first tapped at Aguerra's door, but he saw quickly that the fright was unfounded. The prothonotary was a suave and diplomatic elder who seemed keenly interested in the

small monk's life.

After several minutes of preliminary amenities, he approached the slippery subject: "Now, about your encounter with the person who may have been the Blessed Founder of—"

"Oh, but I never said he was our Blessed Leibo..."

"Of course you didn't, my son. Of course you didn't. Now I have here an account of the incident—gathered purely from hearsay sources, of course—and I'd like for you to read it, and then either confirm it or correct it." He paused to draw a scroll from his case; he handed it to Brother Francis.

"This version is based on traveler's stories," he added. "Only *you* can describe what happened—first hand—so I want you to edit it *most* scrupulously."

"Certainly, Messér. But what happened was really very simple—"

"Read, read! Then we'll talk about it, eh?"

The fatness of the scroll made it apparent that the hearsay account was not "really very simple." Brother Francis read with mounting apprehension. The apprehension soon grew to the proportions of horror.

"You look white, son," said the postulator. "Is something troubling you?"

"Messér, *this*—it wasn't like this *at all*!"

"No? But indirectly at least, you must have been the author of it. How could it have been otherwise? Weren't you the only witness?"

Brother Francis closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. He had told the simple truth to fellow novices. Fellow novices had whispered among themselves. Novices had told the story to travelers. Travelers had repeated it to travelers. Until finally—*this*! Small wonder that Abbot Arkos had enjoined discussion. If only he had never mentioned the pilgrim at all!

"He only spoke a few words to me. I saw him just that once. He chased me with a stick, asked me the way to the abbey, and made marks on the rock where I found the crypt. Then I never saw him again."

"No halo?"

"No, Messér."

"No heavenly choir?"

"*No!*"

"What about the carpet of roses that grew up where he walked?"

"No, no! Nothing like that, Messér," the monk gasped.

"He didn't write his name on the rock?"

"As God is my judge, Messér, he only made those two marks. I didn't know what they meant."

"Ah, well," sighed the postulator. "Travelers' stories are always exaggerated. But I wonder how it all got started. Now suppose you tell me how it really happened."

Brother Francis told him quite briefly. Aguerra seemed saddened. After a thoughtful silence, he took the fat scroll, gave it a parting pat, and dropped it into the waste-bin.

"There goes miracle number seven," he grunted.

Francis hastened to apologize.

The advocate brushed it aside. "Don't give it a second thought. We really have enough evidence. There are several spontaneous cures—several cases of instantaneous recovery from illness caused by the intercession of the Beatus. They're simple, matter of fact, and well documented. They're what cases for canonization are built on. Of course they lack the poetry of this story, but I'm almost glad it's unfounded—glad for your sake. The devil's advocate would have crucified you, you know."

"I never said anything like—"

"I understand, I understand! It all started because of the shelter. We reopened it today, by the way."

Francis brightened. "Did—did you find anything more of Saint Leibowitz?"

"*Blessed* Leibowitz, please!" monsignor corrected. "No, not yet. We opened the inner chamber. Had a devil of a time getting it unsealed. Fifteen skeletons inside and many fascinating artifacts. Apparently the woman—it was a woman, by the way—whose remains you found was admitted to the outer

chamber, but the inner chamber was already full. Possibly it would have provided some degree of protection if a falling wall hadn't caused the cave-in. The poor souls inside were trapped by the stones that blocked the entrance. Heaven knows why the door wasn't designed to swing inward."

"The woman in the antechamber, was she Emily Leibowitz?"

Aguerra smiled. "Can we prove it? I don't know yet. I believe she was, yes—I believe—but perhaps I'm letting hope run away with reason. We'll see what we can uncover yet; we'll see. The other side has a witness present. I can't jump to conclusions."

Despite his disappointment at Francis' account of the meeting with the pilgrim, Aguerra remained friendly enough. He spent ten days at the archaeological site before returning to New Rome, and he left two of his assistants behind to supervise further excavation. On the day of his departure, he visited Brother Francis in the scriptorium.

"They tell me you were working on a document to commemorate the relics you found," said the postulator. "Judging by the descriptions I've heard, I think I should very much like to see it."

The monk protested that it was really nothing, but he went immediately to fetch it, with such eagerness that his hands were trembling as he unpacked the lambskin. Joyfully he observed that Brother Jeris was looking on, while wearing a nervous frown.

The monsignor stared for many seconds. "*Beautiful!*" he exploded at last. "What glorious color! It's superb, superb. Finish it—Brother, finish it!"

Brother Francis looked up at Brother Jeris and smiled questioningly.

The master of the copyroom turned quickly away. The back of his neck grew red. On the following day, Francis unpacked his quills, dyes, gold leaf, and resumed his labor on the illuminated diagram.

## 9

# A

few months after the departure of Monsignor Aguerra, there came a second donkey train—with a full complement of clerks and armed guards for defense against highwaymen, mutant maniacs, and rumored dragons—to the abbey from New Rome. This time the expedition was headed by a monsignor with small horns and pointy fangs, who announced that he was charged with the duty of opposing the canonization of the Blessed Leibowitz, and that he had come to investigate—and perhaps fix responsibility for, he hinted—certain incredible and hysterical rumors which had filtered out of the abbey and lamentably reached even the gates of New Rome. He made it evident that he would tolerate no romantic nonsense, as a certain earlier visitor perhaps had done.

The abbot greeted him politely and offered him an iron cot in a cell with a south exposure, after apologizing for the fact that the guest suite had been recently exposed to smallpox. The monsignor was attended by his own staff, and ate mush and herbs with the monks in the refectory—quail and chaparral cocks being unaccountably scarce that season, so the huntsmen reported.

This time, the abbot did not feel it necessary to warn Francis against any too liberal exercise of his imagination. Let him exercise it, if he dared. There was small danger of the *advocatus diaboli* giving immediate credence even to the truth, without first giving it a thorough thrashing and thrusting his fingers into its wounds.

"I understand you are prone to fainting spells," said Monsignor Flaught when he had Brother Francis alone and had fixed him with what Francis decided was a malign glare.

"Tell me, is there any epilepsy in your family? Madness? Mutant neural patterns?"

"None, Excellency."

"I'm not an 'Excellency,'" snapped the priest. "Now, we're going to get the *truth* out of you." A *little simple straight-forward surgery should be adequate*, his tone seemed to imply, *with only a minor amputation being required*.

"Are you aware that documents can be artificially aged?" he demanded.

Brother Francis was not so aware.

"Do you realize that the name, Emily, did not appear among the papers you found?"

"Oh, but it—" He paused, suddenly uncertain.

"The name which appeared was Em, was it not?—which *might* be a diminutive for Emily."

"I—I believe that is correct, Messér."

"But it might also be a diminutive for *Emma*, might it not? And the name Emma DID appear in the box!"

Francis was silent.

"Well?"

"What was the question, Messér?"

"Never mind! I just thought I'd tell you that the evidence suggests that 'Em' was for Emma, and 'Emma' was not a diminutive of Emily. What do you say to that?"

"I had no previous opinion, on the subject, Messér, but—"

"But what?"

"Aren't husband and wife often careless about what they call each other?"

"ABE YOU BEING FLIPPANT WITH ME?"

"No, messér."

"Now, tell the truth! How did you happen to discover that shelter, and what is this fantastic twaddle about an apparition?"

Brother Francis attempted to explain. The *advocatus diaboli* interrupted with periodic snorts and sarcastic queries, and when he was finished, the advocate raked at his story with semantic tooth and nail until Francis himself wondered if he had really seen the old man or had imagined the incident.

The cross-examining technique was ruthless, but Francis found the experience less frightening than an interview with the abbot. The devil's advocate could do no worse than tear him limb from limb this one time, and the knowledge that the operation would soon be over helped the amputee to bear the pain. When facing the abbot, however, Francis was always aware that a blunder could be punished again and again, Arkos being his ruler for a lifetime and the perpetual Inquisitor of his soul.

And Monsignor Flaught seemed to find the monk's story too distressingly simple-minded to warrant full-scale attack, after observing Brother Francis' reaction to the initial onslaught.

"Well, Brother, if that's your story and you stick to it, I don't think we'll be bothered with you at all. Even if it's true—which I don't admit—it's so trivial it's silly. Do you realize that?"

"That's what I always thought, Messér," sighed Brother Francis, who had for many years tried to detach the importance which others had attached to the pilgrim.

"Well, it's high time you said so!" Flaught snapped.

"I always said that I *thought* he was *probably* just an old man."

Monsignor Flaught covered his eyes with his hand and sighed heavily. His experience with uncertain witnesses led him to say no more.

Before leaving the abbey, the *advocatus diaboli*, like the Saint's advocate before him, stopped at the scriptorium and asked to see the illuminated commemoration of the Leibowitz blueprint ("that dreadful incomprehensibility" as Flaught called it). This time the monk's hands trembled not with eagerness but with fear, for once again he might be forced to abandon the project. Monsignor Flaught gazed at the lambskin in silence. He swallowed thrice. At last he forced himself to nod.

"Your imagery is vivid," he admitted, "but we all knew that, didn't we?" He paused. "You've been working on it how long now?"

"Six years, Messér—intermittently."

"Yes, well, it would seem that you have at least as many years to go."

Monsignor Flaught's horns immediately shortened by an inch, and his fangs disappeared entirely.

He departed the same evening for New Rome.

The years flowed smoothly by, seaming the faces of the young and adding gray to their temples. The perpetual labor of the monastery continued, daily storming heaven with the ever-recurring hymn of the Divine Office, daily supplying the world with a slow trickle of copied and recopied manuscript, occasionally renting clerks and scribes to the episcopate, to ecclesiastical tribunals, and to such few secular powers as would hire them. Brother Jeris developed ambitions of building a printing press, but Arkos quashed the plan when he heard of it. There was neither sufficient paper nor proper ink available, nor any demand for inexpensive books in a world smug in its illiteracy. The copyroom continued with pot and quill.

On the Feast of the Five Holy Fools, a Vatican messenger arrived with glad tidings for the Order. Monsignor Flaught had withdrawn all objections and was doing penance before an ikon of the Beatus Leibowitz. Monsignor Aguerre's case was proved; the Pope had directed that a decree be issued recommending canonization. The date for the formal proclamation was set for the coming Holy Year, and was to coincide with the calling of a General Council of the Church for the purpose of making a careful restatement of doctrine concerning the limitation of the *magisterium* to matters of faith and morals; it was a question which had been settled many times in history, but it seemed to re-arise in new forms in every century, especially in those dark periods when man's "knowledge" of wind, stars, and rain was really only belief. During the time of the council, the founder of the Albertian Order would be enrolled in the Calendar of Saints.

The announcement was followed by a period of rejoicing at the abbey. Dom Arkos, now withered by age and close to dotage, summoned Brother Francis into his presence and wheezed:

"His Holiness invites us to New Rome for the canonization. Prepare to leave."

"I, m'Lord?"

"You alone. Brother Pharmacist forbids me to travel, and it would not be well for Father Prior to leave while I am ill.

"Now don't faint on me again," Dom Arkos added querulously. "You're probably getting more credit than you deserve for the fact that the court accepted the death date of Emily Leibowitz as conclusively proved. But His Holiness invited you anyway. I suggest you thank God and claim no credit."

Brother Francis tottered. "His Holiness . . . ?"

"Yes. Now, we're sending the original Leibowitz blueprint to the Vatican. What do you think about taking along your illuminated commemoration as a personal gift to the Holy Father?"

"Uh," said Francis.

The abbot revived him, blessed him, called him a good simpleton, and sent him to pack his bindlestiff.

## 10

# T

he trip to New Rome would require at least three months, perhaps longer, the time depending to some extent on the distance which Francis could cover before the inevitable band of robbers relieved him of his ass. He would be traveling alone and unarmed, carrying only his bindlestiff and begging bowl in addition to the relic and its illuminated replica. He prayed that ignorant robbers would have no use for the latter; for, indeed, among the bandits of the wayside were sometimes kindly thieves who took only what was of value to them, and permitted their victim to retain his life, carcass, and personal effects. Others were less

considerate.

As a precaution, Brother Francis wore a black patch over his right eye. The peasants were a superstitious lot and could often be routed by even a hint of the evil eye. Thus armed and equipped, he set out to obey the summons of the *Sacerdos Magnus*, that Most Holy Lord and Ruler, Leo Pappas XXI.

Nearly two months after leaving the abbey, the monk met his robber on a heavily wooded mountain trail, far from any human settlement except the Valley of the Misborn, which lay a few miles beyond a peak to the west, where, leperlike, a colony of the genetically monstrous lived in seclusion from the world. There were some such colonies which were supervised by hospitalers of Holy Church, but the Valley of the Misborn was not among them. Sports who had escaped death at the hands of the forest tribes had congregated there several centuries ago. Their ranks were continually replenished by warped and crawling things that sought refuge from the world, but some among them were fertile and gave birth. Often such children inherited the monstrosity of the parent stock. Often they were born dead or never reached maturity. But occasionally the monstrous trait was recessive, and an apparently normal child resulted from the union of sports. Sometimes, however, the superficially "normal" offspring were blighted by some invisible deformity of heart or mind that bereft them, seemingly, of the essence of humanity while leaving them its appearances. Even within the Church, some had dared espouse the view that such creatures truly had been deprived of the *Dei imago* from conception, that their souls were but animal souls, that they might with impunity under the Natural Law be destroyed as animal and not Man, that God had visited animal issue upon the species as a punishment for the sins that had nearly destroyed humankind. Few theologians whose belief in Hell had never failed them would deprive their God of recourse to any form of temporal punishment, but for men to take it upon themselves to judge any creature born of woman to be lacking in the divine image was to usurp the privilege of Heaven. Even the idiot which seems less gifted than a dog, or a pig, or a goat, shall, if born of woman, be called an immortal soul. thundered the *magisterium*, and thundered it again and again. After several such pronouncements, aimed at curbing infanticide, had issued from New Rome, the luckless misborn had come to be called the "Pope's nephews," or the "Pope's children," by some.

"Let that which is born alive of human parents be suffered to live," the previous Leo had said, "in accordance with both the Natural Law and the Divine Law of Love; let it be cherished as Child and nurtured, whatever its form and demeanor, for it is a fact available to natural reason alone, unaided by Divine Revelation, that among the Natural Rights of Man the right to parental assistance in an attempt to survive is precedent to all other rights, and may not be modified legitimately by Society or State except insofar as Princes are empowered to implement that right. Not even the beasts of the Earth act otherwise."

The robber that accosted Brother Francis was not in any obvious way one of the malformed, but that he came from the Valley of the Misborn was made evident when two hooded figures arose from behind a tangle of brush on the slope that overlooked the trail and hooted mockingly at the monk from ambush, while aiming at him with drawn bows. From such a distance, Francis was not certain of his first impression that one hand grasped a bow with six fingers or an extra thumb; but there was no doubt at all that one of the robed figures was wearing a robe with two hoods, although he could make out no faces, nor could he determine whether the extra hood contained an extra head or not.

The robber himself stood in the trail directly ahead. He was a short man, but heavy as a bull, with a glazed knob of a pate and a jaw like a block of granite. He stood in the trail with his legs spread wide and his massive arms folded across his chest while he watched the approach of the small figure astride the ass. The robber, as best Brother Francis could see, was armed only with his own brawn and a knife which he did not bother to remove from his belt-thong. He beckoned Francis forward. When the monk stopped fifty yards away, one of the Pope's children unleashed an arrow; the missile whipped into the trail just behind the donkey, causing the animal to spurt ahead.

"Get off," the robber ordered.

The ass stopped in the path. Brother Francis tossed back his hood to reveal the eye patch and raised a trembling finger to touch it. He began lifting the patch slowly from his eye.

The robber tossed back his head and laughed a laugh that might have sprung, Francis thought, from the throat of Satan; the monk muttered an exorcism, but the robber appeared untouched.

"You black-sacked jeebers wore that one out years ago," he said. "Now get off."

Brother Francis smiled, shrugged, and dismounted without further protest. The robber inspected the donkey, patting its flanks, examining teeth and hooves.

"Eat? Eat?" cried one of the robed creatures on the hillside.

"Not this time," barked the robber. "Too scrawny."

Brother Francis was not entirely convinced that they were talking about the donkey.

"Good day to you, sir," the monk said pleasantly. "You may take the ass. Walking will improve my health, I think." He smiled again and started away.

An arrow slashed into the trail at his feet.

"Stop that!" howled the robber, then to Francis: "Now strip. And let's see what's in that roll and in the package."

Brother Francis touched his begging bowl and made a gesture of helplessness, which brought only another scornful laugh from the robber.

"I've seen that alms-pot trick before too," he said. "The last man with a bowl had half a heklo of gold hidden in his boot. Now strip."

Brother Francis, who was not wearing boots, hopefully displayed his sandals, but the robber gestured impatiently. The monk untied his bindlestiff, spread its contents for display, and began to undress. The robber searched his clothing, found nothing, and tossed the clothing back to its owner, who breathed his gratitude; he had been expecting to be left naked on the trail.

"Now let's see inside that other package."

"It contains only documents, sir," the monk protested. "Of value to no one except the owner."

"Open it."

Silently Brother Francis untied the package and unwrapped the original blueprint and the illuminated commemoration thereof. The gold-leaf inlay and the colorful design flashed brilliantly in the sunlight that filtered through the foliage. The robber's craggy jaw dropped an inch. He whistled softly.

"What a pretty! Now wouldn't the woman like *that* to hang on the cabin wall!"

Francis went sick inside.

"*Gold!*" the robber shouted to his robed accomplices on the hill.

"Eat? Eat?" came the gurgling and chortling reply.

"We'll eat, never fear!" called the robber, then explained conversationally to Francis: "They get hungry after a couple of days just sitting there. Business is bad. Traffic's light these days."

Francis nodded. The robber resumed his admiration of the illuminated replica.

Lord, if Thou hast sent him to test me, then help me to die like a man, that he may take it only over the dead body of Thy servant. Holy Leibowitz, see this deed and pray for me—

"What is it?" the robber asked. "A charm?" He studied the two documents together for a time.

"Oh! One is a ghost of the other. What magic is this?" He stared at Brother Francis with suspicious gray eyes. "What is it called?"

"Uh—Transistorized Control System for Unit Six-B," the monk stammered.

The robber, who had been looking at the documents upside down, could nevertheless see that one diagram involved a figure-background reversal of the other—an effect which seemed to intrigue him as much as the gold leaf. He traced out the similarities in design with a short and dirty forefinger, leaving a faint smudge on the illuminated lambskin. Francis held back tears.

"Please!" the monk gasped. "The gold is so thin, it's worth nothing to speak of. Weigh it in your hand. The whole thing weighs no more than the paper itself. It's of no use to you. Please, sir, take my clothing instead. Take the donkey, take my bindlestiff. Take whatever you will, but leave me these. They mean nothing to you."

The robber's gray gaze was meditative. He watched the monk's agitation and rubbed his jaw. "I'll let you keep your clothes and your donkey and everything except this," he offered. "I'll just take the charms, then."

"For the love of God, sir, then kill me too!" Brother Francis wailed.

The robber snickered. "We'll see. Tell me what they're for."

"Nothing. One is a memento of a man long dead. An ancient. The other is only a copy."

"What good are they to you?"

Francis closed his eyes for a moment and tried to think of a way to explain. "You know the forest tribes? How they venerate their ancestors?"

The gray eyes of the robber flashed angrily for a moment.

"*We despise* our ancestors," he barked. "Cursed be they who gave us birth!"

"*Cursed, cursed!*" echoed one of the shrouded archers on the hillside.

"You know who we are? Where we are from?"

Francis nodded. "I meant no offense. The ancient whose relic this is—he is not our ancestor. He was our teacher of old. We venerate his memory. This is only like a keepsake, no more."

"What about the copy?"

"I made it myself. Please, sir, it took me fifteen years. It's nothing to you. Please—you wouldn't take fifteen years of a man's life—for no reason?"

"*Fifteen years?*" The robber threw back his head and howled with laughter. "You spent fifteen years making that?"

"Oh, but—" Francis was suddenly silent. His eyes swung toward the robber's stubby forefinger. The finger was tapping the original blueprint.

"That took you fifteen years? And it's almost ugly beside the other." He slapped his paunch and between guffaws kept pointing at the relic. "Ha! Fifteen years! So that's what you do way out there! Why? What is the dark ghost-image good for? Fifteen years to make that! Ho ho! What a woman's work!"

Brother Francis watched him in stunned silence. That the robber should mistake the sacred relic itself for the copy of the relic left him too shocked to reply.

Still laughing, the robber took both documents in his hands and prepared to rip them both in half.

"*Jesus, Mary, Joseph!*" the monk screamed and went to his knees in the trail. "For the love of God, sir!"

The robber tossed the papers on the ground. "I'll wrestle you for them!" he offered sportingly. "Those against my blade."

"Done," said Francis impulsively, thinking that a contest would at least afford Heaven a chance to intervene in an unobtrusive way. *O God, Thou who strengthened Jacob so that he overcame the angel on the rock...*

They squared off. Brother Francis crossed himself. The robber took his knife from his belt-thong and tossed it after the papers. They circled.

Three seconds later, the monk lay groaning on the flat of his back under a short mountain of muscle. A sharp rock seemed to be severing his spine.

"Heh-heh," said the robber, and arose to reclaim his knife and roll up the documents.

Hands folded as if in prayer, Brother Francis crept after him on his knees, begging at the top of his lungs. "Please, then, take only one, *not both!* Please!"

"You've got to buy it back now," the robber chortled. "I won them fair enough."

"I have nothing, I am *poor!*"

"That's all right if you want them that bad, you'll get gold. Two heklos of gold, that's the ransom. Bring it here any time. I'll tuck your things in my shanty. You want them back, just bring the gold."

"Listen, they're important to other people, not to me. I was taking them to the Pope. Maybe they'll pay you for the important one. But let me have the other one just to show them. It's of no importance at all."

The robber laughed over his shoulder. "I believe you'd kiss a boot to get it back."

Brother Francis caught up with him and fervently kissed his boot.

This proved too much for even such a fellow as the robber. He shoved the monk away with his foot, separated the two papers, and flung one of them in Francis' face with a curse. He climbed aboard



the monk's donkey and started riding it up the slope toward the ambush. Brother Francis snatched up the precious document and hiked along beside the robber, thanking him profusely and blessing him repeatedly while the robber guided the ass toward the shrouded archers.

"*Fifteen years!*" the robber snorted, and again shoved Francis away with his foot. "Begone!" He waved the illuminated splendor aloft in the sunlight. "Remember—two heklos of gold'll ransom your keepsake. And tell your Pope I won it fair."

Francis stopped climbing. He sent a glowing cross of benediction after the departing bandit and quietly praised God for the existence of such selfless robbers, who could make such an ignorant mistake. He fondled the original blueprint lovingly as he hiked away down the trail. The robber was proudly displaying the beautiful commemoration to his mutant companions on the hill.

"*Eat! Eat!*" said one of them, petting the donkey.

"Ride, ride," corrected the robber. "*Eat later.*"

But when Brother Francis had left them far behind, a great sadness gradually engulfed him. The taunting voice still rang in his ears. *Fifteen years! So that's what you do over there! Fifteen years! What a woman's work! Ho ho ho ho . . .*

The robber had made a mistake. But the fifteen years were gone anyhow, and with it all the love and torment that had gone into the commemoration.

Cloistered as he had been, Francis had become unaccustomed to the ways of the outside world, to its harsh habits and curt attitudes. He found his heart deeply troubled by the robber's mockery. He thought of Brother Jeris' gentler mockery of earlier years. Maybe Brother Jeris had been right.

His head hung low in his hood as he traveled slowly on.

At least there was the original relic. At least.

## 11

# T

he hour had come. Brother Francis, in his simple monk's habit, had never felt less important than at that moment, as he knelt in the majestic basilica before the beginning of the ceremony. The stately movements, the vivid swirls of color, the sounds which accompanied the ceremonious preparations for ceremony, already seemed liturgical in spirit, making it difficult to bear in mind that nothing of importance was happening yet. Bishops, monsignori, cardinals, priests, and various lay-functionaries in elegant, antiquated dress moved to and fro in the great church, but their comings and goings were graceful clockwork which never paused, stumbled, or changed its mind to rush in the other direction. A *sampetrius* entered the basilica; so grandly was he attired that Francis at first mistook the cathedral workman for a prelate. The *sampetrius* carried a footstool. He carried it with such casual pomp that the monk, if he had not been kneeling, might have genuflected as the object drifted by. The *sampetrius* dropped to one knee before the high altar, then crossed to the papal throne where he substituted the new footstool for one which seemed to have a loose leg; thereupon, he departed by the same route as he had come. Brother Francis marveled at the studied elegance of movement that accompanied even the trivial. No one hurried. No one minced or fumbled. No motion occurred which did not quietly contribute to the dignity and overpowering beauty of this ancient place, even as the motionless statues and paintings contributed to it. Even the whisper of one's breathing seemed to echo faintly from distant apses.

*Terribilis est locus iste: hic domus Dei est, et porta caeli;* terrible indeed, House of God, Gate of Heaven!

Some of the statues were alive, he observed after a time. A suit of armor stood against the wall a few yards to his left. Its mailed fist held the staff of a gleaming battle-ax. Not even the plume of its helmet had stirred during the time Brother Francis had been kneeling there. A dozen identical suits of armor stood at intervals along the walls. Only after seeing a horsefly crawl through the visor of the "statue" on

his left did he suspect that the warlike husk contained an occupant. His eye could detect no motion, but the armor emitted a few metallic creaks while it harbored the horsefly. These, then, must be the papal guard, so renowned in knightly battle: the small private army of God's First Vicar.

A captain of the guard was making a stately tour of his men. For the first time, the statue moved. It lifted its visor in salute. The captain thoughtfully paused and used his kerchief to brush the horsefly from the forehead of the expressionless face inside the helmet before passing on. The statue lowered its visor and resumed its immobility.

The stately decor of the basilica was briefly marred by the entrance of pilgrim throngs. The throngs were well organized and efficiently ushered, but they were patently strangers to this place. Most of them seemed to tread on tiptoe to their stations, cautious to create no sound and as little movement as possible, unlike the *sampetriti* and New Roman clergy who made sound and motion eloquent. Here and there among the pilgrims someone stifled a cough or stumbled.

Suddenly the basilica became warlike, as the guard was strengthened. A new troop of mailed statues tramped into the sanctuary itself, dropped to one knee, and tilted their pike-staffs, saluting the altar before taking their posts. Two of them stood flanking the papal throne. A third fell to his knees at the throne's right hand; he remained kneeling there with the sword of Peter lying across his upraised palms. The tableau became motionless again, except for occasional dancing of flame among the altar candles.

Upon the hallowed silence burst a sudden peal of trumpets.

The sound's intensity mounted until the throbbing *Ta-ra Ta-ra-raa* could be felt upon one's face and grew painful to the ears. The voice of the trumpets was not musical but annunciatory. The first notes began in mid-scale, then climbed slowly in pitch, intensity, and urgency, until the monk's scalp crawled, and there seemed to be nothing at all in the basilica but the explosion of the tubas.

Then, dead silence—followed by the cry of a tenor:

FIRST CANTOR:	<i>"Appropinquat agnis pastor et ovibus pascendis."</i>
SECOND CANTOR:	<i>"Genua nunc flectantur omnia."</i>
FIRST CANTOR:	<i>"Jussit olim Jesus Petrum pascere gregem Domini."</i>
SECOND CANTOR:	<i>"Ecce Petrus Pontifex Maximus."</i>
FIRST CANTOR:	<i>"Gaudeat igitur populus Christi, et gratias agat Domino."</i>
SECOND CANTOR:	<i>"Nam docebimur a Spiritu sancto."</i>
CHOIR:	<i>"Alleluia, alleluia—"</i>

The crowd arose and then knelt in a slow wave that followed the movement of the chair containing the frail old man in white who gestured his blessings to the people as the gold, black, purple, and red procession moved him slowly toward the throne. Breath kept choking up in the throat of the small monk from a distant abbey in a distant desert. It was impossible to see everything that was happening, so overwhelming was the tide of music and motion, drowning one's senses and sweeping the mind along willy-nilly toward that which was soon to come.

The ceremony was brief. Its intensity would have become unendurable had it been longer. A monsignor—Malfreddo Aguerra, the Saint's advocate himself, Brother Francis observed—approached the throne and knelt. After a brief silence, he voiced his plea in plain chant.

*"Sancte pater, ab Sapientia summa petimus ut ille Beatus Leibowitz cujus miracula mirati sunt multi . . ."*

The request called upon Leo to enlighten his people by solemn definition concerning the pious belief that the Beatus Leibowitz was indeed a saint, worthy of the *dulia* of the Church as well as the veneration of the faithful.

*"Gratissima Nobis causa, fili,"* the voice of the old man in white sang in response, explaining that

his own heart's desire was to announce by solemn proclamation that the blessed Martyr was among the saints, but also that it was by divine guidance alone, *sub ducatu sancti Spiritus*, that he might comply with Aguerra's request. He asked all to pray for that guidance.

Again the thunder of the choir filled the basilica with the Litany of the Saints: "Father-of-Heaven, God, have mercy on us. Son, Repurchaser-of-the-World, God, have mercy on us. Ghost-Most-Holy, God, have mercy on us. O Sacred Three-foldhood, God-One-and-Only, *miserere nobis!* Holy Mary, pray for us. *Sancta Dei Genitrix, ora pro nobis. Sancta Virgo virginum, ora pro nobis . . .*" The thunder of the litany continued. Francis looked up at a painting of the Blessed Leibowitz, newly unveiled. The fresco was of heroic proportions. It portrayed the trial of the Beatus before the mob, but the face was not wryly smiling as it smiled in Fingo's work. It was, however, majestic, Francis thought, and in keeping with the rest of the basilica.

*"Omnes sancti Martyres, orate pro nobis . . ."*

When the litany was finished, again Monsignor Malfreddo Aguerra made his plea to the Pope, asking that the name of Isaac Edward Leibowitz be formally enrolled in the Calendar of Saints. Again the guiding Spirit was invoked, as the Pope chanted the *Veni, Creator Spiritus*.

And yet a third time Malfreddo Aguerra pleaded for the proclamation.

*"Surgat ergo Petros ipse. . . ."*

At last it came. The twenty-first Leo intoned the decision of the Church, rendered under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, proclaiming the existing fact that an ancient and rather obscure technician named Leibowitz was truly a saint in Heaven, whose powerful intercession might, and of right ought to be, reverently implored. A feast day was named for a Mass in his honor.

"Holy Leibowitz, intercede for us," Brother Francis breathed with the others.

After a brief prayer, the choir burst into the *Te Deum*. After a Mass honoring the new saint, it was finished.

Escorted by two scarlet-liveried *sedarii* of the outer palace, the small party of pilgrims passed though a seemingly endless sequence of corridors and antechambers, halting occasionally before the ornate table of some new official who examined credentials and goose-quilled his signature on a *licet adire* for a *sedarius* to hand to the next official, whose title grew progressively longer and less pronounceable as the party proceeded. Brother Francis was shivering. Among his fellow pilgrims were two bishops, a man wearing ermine and gold, a clan chief of the forest people, converted but still wearing the panther skin tunic and panther headgear of his tribal totem, a leather-clad simpleton carrying a hooded peregrine falcon on one wrist—evidently as a gift to the Holy Father—and several women, all of whom seemed to be wives or concubines—as best Francis could judge by their actions—of the "converted" clan chief of the panther people; or perhaps they were ex-concubines put away by canon but not by tribal custom.

After climbing the *scala caelestis*, the pilgrims were welcomed by the somberly clad *cameralis gestor* and ushered into the small anteroom of the vast consistorial hall.

"The Holy Father will receive them here," the high-ranking lackey softly informed the *sedarius* who carried the credentials. He glanced over the pilgrims, rather disapprovingly, Francis thought. He whispered briefly to the *sedarius*. The *sedarius* reddened and whispered to the clan chief. The clan chief glowered and removed his fanged and snarling headdress, letting the panther head dangle over his shoulder. There was a brief conference about positions, while His Supreme Unctuousness, the leading lackey, in tones so soft as to seem reproving, stationed his visiting chess pieces about the room in accordance with some arcane protocol which only the *sedarii* seemed to understand.

The Pope was not long in arriving. The little man in the white cassock, surrounded by his retinue, strode briskly into the audience room. Brother Francis experienced a sudden dizzy spell. He remembered that Dom Arkos had threatened to flay him alive if he fainted during the audience, and he steeled himself against it.

The line of pilgrims knelt. The old man in white gently bade them arise. Brother Francis finally found the courage to focus his eyes. In the basilica, the Pope had been only a radiant spot of white in a sea of color. Gradually, here in the audience room, Brother Francis perceived at closer range that the Pope

was *not*, like the fabled nomads, nine feet tall. To the monk's surprise, the frail old man, Father of Princes and Kings, Bridge-Builder of the World, and Vicar on Earth of Christ, appeared much less ferocious than Dom Arkos, *Abbas*.

The Pope moved slowly along the line of pilgrims greeting each, embracing one of the bishops, conversing with each in his own dialect or through an interpreter, laughing at the expression of the monsignor to whom he transferred the task of carrying the falconer's bird, and addressing the clan leader of the forest people with a peculiar hand gesture and a grunted word of forest dialect which caused that panther-clad chieftain to glow with a sudden grin of delight. The Pope noticed the dangling panther headgear and paused to replace it on the tribesman's head. The latter's chest bulged with pride; he glared about the room, apparently to catch the eye of His Supreme Unctuousness, the leading lackey, but that official seemed to have vanished into the woodwork.

The Pope drew nearer to Brother Francis.

*Ecce Petrus Pontifex*.... Behold Peter, the high priest. Leo XXI, himself: "Whom alone, God did appoint Prince over all countries and kingdoms, to root up, pull down, waste, destroy, plant, and build, that he might preserve a faithful people—" And yet in the face of Leo, the monk saw a kindly meekness which hinted that he was worthy of that title, loftier than any bestowed upon princes and kings, whereby he was called "the slave of the slaves of God."

Francis knelt quickly to kiss the Fisherman's ring. As he arose, he found himself clutching the relic of the Saint behind him as if ashamed to display it. The Pontiff's amber eyes compelled him gently. Leo spoke softly in the curial manner: an affectation which he seemed to dislike as burdensome, but which he practiced for custom's sake in speaking to visitors less savage than the panther chief.

"Our heart was deeply grieved when we heard of your misfortune, dear son. An account of your journey reached our ears. At our own request you traveled here, but while on your way, you were set upon by robbers. Is that not true?"

"Yes, Holy Father. But it is really of no importance. I mean—It *was* important, except—" Francis stammered.

The white old man smiled gently. "We know that you brought us a gift, and that it was stolen from you along the way. Be not troubled for that. Your presence is gift enough to us. Long have we cherished the hope of greeting in person the discoverer of Emily Leibowitz' remains. We know, too, of your labors at the abbey. For the Brothers of Saint Leibowitz, we have always felt a most fervent affection. Without your work, the world's amnesia might well be total. As the Church, *Mysticum Christi Corpus*, is a Body, so has your Order served as an organ of memory in that Body. We owe much to your holy Patron and Founder. Future ages may owe him even more. May we hear more of your journey, dear son?"

Brother Francis produced the blueprint. "The highwayman was kind enough to leave this in my keeping, Holy Father. He—he mistook it for a copy of the illumination which I was bringing as a gift."

"You did not correct his mistake?"

Brother Francis blushed. "I'm ashamed to admit, Holy Father—"

"This, then, is the original relic you found in the crypt?"

"Yes—"

The Pope's smile became wry. "So, then—the bandit thought your work was the treasure itself? Ah—even a robber can have a keen eye for art, yes? Monsignor Aguerra told us of the beauty of your commemoration. What a pity that it was stolen."

"It was nothing, Holy Father. I only regret that I wasted fifteen years."

"*Wasted*? How 'wasted'? If the robber had not been misled by the beauty of your commemoration, he might have taken *this*, might he not?"

Brother Francis admitted the possibility.

The twenty-first Leo took the ancient blueprint in his withered hands and carefully unrolled it. He studied its design for a time in silence, than: "Tell us, do you understand the symbols used by Leibowitz? The meaning of the, uh, thing represented?"

"No, Holy Father, my ignorance is complete."

The Pope leaned toward him to whisper: "So is ours." He chuckled, pressed his lips to the relic as

if kissing an altar stone, then rerolled it and handed it to an attendant. "We thank you from the bottom of our heart for those fifteen years, beloved son," he added to Brother Francis. "These years were spent to preserve this original. Never think of them as wasted. Offer them to God. Someday the meaning of the original may be discovered, and may prove important." The old man blinked—or was it a wink? Francis was almost convinced that the Pope had winked at him. "We'll have you to thank for that."

The wink, or the blink, seemed to bring the room into clearer focus for the monk. For the first time, he noticed a moth-hole in the Pope's cassock. The cassock itself was almost threadbare. The carpet in the audience room was worn through in spots. Plaster had fallen from the ceiling in several places. But dignity had overshadowed poverty. Only for a moment after the wink did Brother Francis notice hints of poverty at all. The distraction was transient.

"By you, we wish to send our warmest regards to all members of your community and to your abbot," Leo was saying.

"To them, as to you, we wish to extend our apostolic benediction. We shall give you a letter to them announcing the benediction." He paused, then blinked, or winked, again.

"Quite incidentally, the letter will be safeguarded. We shall affix to it the *Noli molestare*, excommunicating anyone who waylays the bearer."

Brother Francis murmured his thanks for such insurance against highwaymanship; he did not deem it fitting to add that the robber would be unable to read the warning or understand the penalty. "I shall do my best to deliver it, Holy Father."

Again, Leo leaned close to whisper: "And to you, we shall give a special token of our affection. Before you leave, see Monsignor Aguerra. We would prefer to give it to you by our own hand, but this is not the proper moment. The monsignor will present it for us. Do with it what you will."

"Thank you very much indeed, Holy Father."

"And now good-bye, beloved son."

The Pontiff moved on, speaking to each pilgrim in the line, and when it was over: the solemn benediction. The audience had ended.

Monsignor Aguerra touched Brother Francis' arm as the pilgrim group passed out the portals. He embraced the monk warmly. The postulator of the Saint's cause had aged so greatly that Francis recognized him only with difficulty at close range. But Francis, too, was gray at the temples, and had grown wrinkled about the eyes from squinting over the copy-table. The monsignor handed him a package and a letter as they descended the *scala caelestis*.

Francis glanced at the letter's address and nodded. His own name was written on the package, which bore a diplomatic seal. "For me, Messér?"

"Yes, a personal token from the Holy Father. Better not open it here. Now, can I do anything for you before you leave New Rome? I'd be glad to show you anything you've missed."

Brother Francis thought briefly. There had already been an exhaustive tour. "I *would* like to see the basilica just once again, Messér," he said at last.

"Why, of course. But is that all?"

Brother Francis paused again. They had fallen behind the other departing pilgrims. "I would like to confess," he added softly.

"Nothing easier than that," said Aguerra, adding with a chuckle: "You're in the right town, you know. Here, you can get anything absolved that you're worried about. Is it something deadly enough to require the attention of the Pope?"

Francis reddened and shook his head.

"How about the Grand Penitentiary, then? He'll not only absolve you if you're repentant, he'll even hit you over the head with a rod in the bargain."

"I meant—I was asking you, Messér," the monk stammered.

"*Me?* Why me? I'm nobody fancy. Here you are in a whole town full of red hats, and you want to confess to Malfreddo Aguerra."

"Because—because you were our Patron's advocate," the monk explained.

"Oh, I see. Why of course I'll hear your confession. But I can't absolve you in the name of your

Patron, you know. It'll have to be the Holy Trinity as usual. Will that do?"

Francis had little to confess, but his heart had long been troubled—at the prompting of Dom Arkos—by the fear that his discovery of the shelter might have hindered the case for the Saint. Leibowitz' postulator heard him counseled him, and absolved him in the basilica, then led him around that ancient church. During the ceremony of canonization and the Mass that followed, Brother Francis had noticed only the majestic splendor of the building. Now the aged monsignor pointed to crumbling masonry, places in need of repair, and the shameful condition of some of the older frescoes. Again he caught a glimpse of a poverty which dignity veiled. The Church was not wealthy in this age.

At last, Francis was free to open the package. The package contained a purse. In the purse were two heklos of gold. He glanced at Malfreddo Aguerra. The monsignor smiled.

"You *did* say that the robber *won* the commemoration from you in a wrestling match, didn't you?" Aguerra asked.

"Yes, Messér."

"Well then, even if you were forced into it, you made the choice to wrestle him for it yourself, didn't you? You accepted his challenge?"

The monk nodded.

"Then I don't think you'd be condoning the wrong if you bought it back." He clapped the monk's shoulder and blessed him. Then it was time to go.

The small keeper of the flame of knowledge trudged back toward his abbey on foot. There were days and weeks on the trail, but his heart was singing as he approached the robber's outpost. *Do with it what you will*, Pope Leo had said of the gold. Not only that, the monk had now, in addition to the purse, an answer to the robber's scornful question. He thought of the books in the audience room, waiting there for a reawakening.

The robber, however, was not waiting at his outpost as Francis had hoped. There were recent footprints in the trail at that place, but the prints led cross-trail and there was no sign of the robber. The sun filtered through the trees to cover the ground with leafy shadows. The forest was not dense, but it offered shade. He sat down beside the trail to wait.

An owl hooted at midday from the relative darkness in the depths of some distant arroyo. Buzzards circled in a patch of blue beyond the treetops. It seemed peaceful in the forest that day. As he listened sleepily to the sparrows fluttering in nearby brush, he found himself not greatly concerned about whether the robber came today or tomorrow. So long was his journey, that he would not be unhappy to enjoy a day of rest while waiting. He sat watching the buzzards. Occasionally he glanced down the trail that led toward his distant home in the desert. The robber had chosen an excellent location for his lair. From this place, one could observe more than a mile of trail in either direction while remaining unobserved in the thatch of forest.

Something moved on the trail in the distance.

Brother Francis shielded his eyes and studied the distant movement. There was a sunny area down the road where a brush fire had cleared several acres of land around the trail that led southwest. The trail shimmered under a mirror of heat in the sunswept region. He could not see clearly because of the shiny reflections, but there was motion in the midst of the heat. There was a wriggling black iota. At times it seemed to wear a head. At times it was completely obscured in the heat glaze, but nevertheless he could determine that it was gradually approaching. Once, when the edge of a cloud brushed at the sun, the heat shimmer subsided for a few seconds; his tired and myopic eyes determined then that the wriggling iota was really a man, but at too great a distance for recognition. He shivered. Something about the iota was too familiar.

But no, it couldn't possibly be the same.

The monk crossed himself and began telling his rosary beads while his eyes remained intent on the distant thing in the heat shimmer.

While he had been waiting there for the robber, a debate had been in progress, higher on the side of the hill. The debate had been conducted in whispered monosyllables, and had lasted for nearly an hour. Now the debate was ended. Two-Hoods had conceded to One-Hood. Together, the Pope's

children stole quietly from behind their brush table and crept down the side of the hill.

They advanced to within ten yards of Francis before a pebble rattled. The monk was murmuring the third Ave of the Fourth Glorious Mystery of the rosary when he happened to look around.

The arrow hit him squarely between the eyes.

*"Eat! Eat! Eat!"* the Pope's child cried.

On the trail to the southwest the old wanderer sat down on a log and closed his eyes to rest them against the sun. He fanned himself with a tattered basket hat and munched his spice-leaf quid. He had been wandering for a long time. The search seemed endless, but there was always the promise of finding what he sought across the next rise or beyond the bend in the trail. When he had finished fanning himself, he clapped the hat back on his head and scratched at his brushy beard while blinking around at the landscape. There was a patch of unburned forest on the hillside just ahead. It offered welcome shade, but still the wanderer sat there in the sunlight and watched the curious buzzards. They had congregated, and they were swooping rather low over the wooded patch. One bird made bold to descend among the trees, but it quickly flapped into view again, flew under power until it found a rising column of air, then went into gliding ascent. The dark host of scavengers seemed to be expending more than a usual amount of energy at flapping their wings. Usually they soared, conserving strength. Now they thrashed the air above the hillside as if impatient to land.

As long as the buzzards remained interested but reluctant, the wanderer remained the same. There were cougars in these hills. Beyond the peak were things even worse than cougars, and sometimes they prowled afar.

The wanderer waited. Finally the buzzards descended among the trees. The wanderer waited five minutes more. At last he arose and limped ahead toward the forested patch, dividing his weight between his game leg and his staff.

After a while he entered the forested area. The buzzards were busy at the remains of a man. The wanderer chased the birds away with his cudgel and inspected the human remnants. Significant portions were missing. There was an arrow through the skull, protruding at the back of the neck. The old man looked nervously around at the brush. There was no one in sight, but there were plenty of footprints in the vicinity of the trail. It was not safe to stay.

Safe or not, the job had to be done. The old wanderer found a place where the earth was soft enough for digging with hands and stick. While he dug, the angry buzzards circled low over the treetops. Sometimes darting earthward but then flapping their way skyward again. For an hour, then two, they fluttered anxiously over the wooded hillside.

One bird finally landed. It strutted indignantly about a mound of fresh earth with a rock marker at one end. Disappointed, it took wing again. The flock of dark scavengers abandoned the site and soared high on the rising currents of air while they hungrily watched the land.

There was a dead hog beyond the Valley of the Misborn. The buzzards observed it gaily and glided down for a feast. Later, in a far mountain pass, a cougar licked her chops and left her kill. The buzzards seemed thankful for the chance to finish her meal.

The buzzards laid their eggs in season and lovingly fed their young: a dead snake, and bits of a feral dog.

The younger generation waxed strong, soared high and far on black wings, waiting for the fruitful Earth to yield up her bountiful carrion. Sometimes dinner was only a toad. Once it was a messenger from New Rome.

Their flight carried them over the midwestern plains. They were delighted with the bounty of good things which the nomads left lying on the land during their ride-over toward the south.

The buzzards laid their eggs in season and lovingly fed their young. Earth had nourished them bountifully for centuries. She would nourish them for centuries more...

Pickings were good for a while in the region of the Red River; but then out of the carnage, a city-state arose. For rising city-states, the buzzards had no fondness, although they approved of their eventual fall. They shied away from Texarkana and ranged far over the plain to the west. After the

manner of all living things, they replenished the Earth many times with their kind.  
Eventually it was the Year of Our Lord 3174.  
There were rumors of war.

## Fiat Lux

### 12

# M

arcus Apollo became certain of war's imminence the moment he overheard Hannegan's third wife tell a serving maid that her favorite courtier had returned with his skin intact from a mission to the tents of Mad Bear's clan. The fact that he had come back alive from the nomad encampment meant that a war was brewing. Purportedly, the emissary's mission had been to tell the Plains tribes that the civilized states had entered into the Agreement of the Holy Scourge concerning the disputed lands, and would hereafter wreak stern vengeance on the nomadic peoples and bandit groups for any further raiding activities. But no man carried such news to Mad Bear and came back alive. Therefore, Apollo concluded the ultimatum had not been delivered, and Hannegan's emissary had gone out to the Plains with an ulterior purpose,. And the purpose was all too clear.

Apollo picked his way politely through the small throng of guests, his sharp eyes searching out Brother Claret and trying to attract his glance. Apollo's tall figure in severe black cassock with a small flash of color at the waist to denote his rank stood out sharply in contrast to the kaleidoscope-whirl of color worn by others in the banquet hall, and he was not long in catching his clerk's eye and nodding him toward the table of refreshments which was now reduced to a litter of scraps, greasy cups, and a few roast squabs that looked overcooked. Apollo dragged at the dregs of the punch bowl with the ladle, observed a dead roach floating among the spices, and thoughtfully handed the first cup to Brother Claret as the clerk approached.

"Thank you, Messér," said Claret, not noticing the roach. "You wanted to see me?"

"As soon as the reception's over. In my quarters. Sarkal came back alive."

"Oh."

"I've never heard a more ominous 'oh.' I take it you understand the interesting implications?"

"Certainly, Messér. It means the Agreement was a fraud on Hannegan's part, and he intends to use it against—"

"Shhh. Later." Apollo's eyes signaled the approach of an audience, and the clerk turned to refill his cup from the punch bowl. His interest became suddenly absorbed there, and he did not look at the lean figure in watered-silk who strode toward them from the entrance. Apollo smiled formally and bowed to the man. Their hand-clasp was brief and noticeably chilly.

"Well, Thon Taddeo," said the priest, "your presence surprises me. I thought you shunned such festive gatherings. What could be so special about this one to attract such a distinguished scholar?" He lifted his brows in mock perplexity.

"You're the attraction, of course," said the newcomer, matching Apollo's sarcasm, "and my only reason for attending."

"I?" He feigned surprise, but the assertion was probably true. The wedding reception of a half-sister was not the sort of thing that would impel Thon Taddeo to bedeck himself in formal finery and leave the cloistered halls of the collegium.



"As a matter of fact, I've been looking for you all day. They told me you'd be here. Otherwise—" He looked around the banquet hall and snorted irritably.

The snort cut whatever thread of fascination was tying Brother Claret's gaze to the punch bowl, and he turned to bow to the *thon*. "Care for punch, *thon* Taddeo?" he asked, offering a full cup.

The scholar accepted it with a nod and drained it. "I wanted to ask you a little more about the Leibowitzian documents we discussed," he said to Marcus Apollo. "I had a letter from a fellow named Kornhoer at the abbey. He assured me they have writings that date back to the last years of the European-American civilization."

If the fact that he himself had assured the scholar of the same thing several months ago was irritating to Apollo, his expression gave no hint of it. "Yes," he said. "They're quite authentic, I'm told."

"If so, it strikes me as very mysterious that nobody's heard—but never mind that. Kornhoer listed a number of documents and texts they claim to have and described them. If they exist at all, I've got to see them."

"Oh?"

"Yes. If it's a hoax, it should be found out, and if it isn't, the data might well be priceless."

The monsignor frowned. "I assure you there is no hoax," he said stiffly.

"The letter contained an invitation to visit the abbey and study the documents. They've evidently heard of me.

"Not necessarily," said Apollo, unable to resist the opportunity. "They aren't particular about who reads their books, as long as he washes his hands and doesn't deface their property."

The scholar glowered. The suggestion that there might exist literate persons who had never heard his name did not please him.

"But there, then!" Apollo went on affably. "You have no problem. Accept their invitation, go to the abbey, study their relics. They'll make you welcome."

The scholar huffed irritably at the suggestion. "And travel through the Plains at a time when Mad Bear's clan is—" *Thon* Taddeo broke off abruptly.

"You were saying?" Apollo prompted, his face showing an special alertness, although a vein in his temple began to throb as he stared expectantly at *Thon* Taddeo.

"Only that it's a long dangerous trip, and I can't spare six months' absence from the collegium. I wanted to discuss the possibility of sending a well-armed party of the Mayor's guardsmen to fetch the documents here for study."

Apollo choked. He felt a childish impulse to kick the scholar in the shins. "I'm afraid," he said politely, "that would be quite impossible. But in any case, the matter is outside my sphere, and I'm afraid I can't be of any help to you."

"Why not?" *Thon* Taddeo demanded. "Aren't you the Vatican's nuncio to the Court of Hannegan?"

"Precisely. I represent New Rome, not the monastic Orders. The government of an abbey is in the hands of its abbot."

"But with a little pressure from New Rome . . ."

The impulse to kick shins surged swiftly. "We'd better discuss it later," Monsignor Apollo said curtly. "This evening in my study, if you like." He half turned, and looked back inquiringly as if to say *Well?*

"I'll be there," the scholar said sharply, and marched away.

"Why didn't you tell him flatly no, then and there?" Claret fumed when they were alone in the embassy suite an hour later. "Transport priceless relics through bandit country in these times?" It's unthinkable, *Messér.*

"Certainly."

"Then why—"

"Two reasons. First, *Thon* Taddeo is Hannegan's kinsman, and influential too. We have to be courteous to Caesar and his kin whether we like him or not. Second, he started to say something about the Mad Bear clan, and then broke off. I think he knows what's going to happen. I'm not going to

engage in espionage, but if he volunteers any information, there's nothing to prevent our including it in the report you're about to deliver personally to New Rome."

"I!" The clerk looked shocked. "To New Rome—?" But what—"

"Not so loud," said the nuncio, glancing at the door.

"I'm going to have to send my estimate of this situation to His Holiness, and quickly. But it's the kind of thing that one doesn't dare put in writing. If Hannegan's people intercepted such a dispatch, you and I would probably be found floating face down in the Red River. If Hannegan's enemies get hold of it, Hannegan would probably feel justified in hanging us publicly as spies. Martyrdom is all very well, but we have a job to do first."

"And I'm to deliver the report orally at the Vatican?" Brother Claret muttered, apparently not relishing the prospect of crossing hostile country.

"It has to be that way. Thon Taddeo may, just possibly may, give us an excuse for your leaving abruptly for Saint Leibowitz abbey, or New Rome, or both. In case there are any suspicions around the Court. I'll try to steer it."

"And the substance of the report I'm to deliver, Messér?"

"That Hannegan's ambition to unite the continent under one dynasty isn't so wild a dream as we thought. That the Agreement of the Holy Scourge is probably a fraud by Hannegan, and that he means to use it to get both the empire of Denver and Laredan Nation into conflict with the Plains nomads. If Laredan forces are tied up in a running battle with Mad Bear, it wouldn't take much encouragement for the State of Chihuahua to attack Laredo from the south. After all, there's an old enmity there. Hannegan, of course, can then march victoriously to Rio Laredo. With Laredo under his thumb, he can look forward to tackling both Denver and the Mississippi Republic without worrying about a stab in the back from the south."

"Do you think Hannegan can do it, Messér?"

Marcus Apollo started to answer, then closed his mouth slowly. He walked to the window and stared out at the sunlit city, a sprawling disorderly city built mostly of rubble from another age. A city without orderly patterns of streets. It had grown slowly over an ancient ruin, as perhaps someday another city would grow over the ruin of this one.

"I don't know," he answered softly. "In these times, it's hard to condemn any man for wanting to unite this butchered continent. Even by such means as—but no, I don't mean that." He sighed heavily. "In any case, our interests are not the interests of politics. We must forewarn New Rome of what may be coming, because the Church will be affected by it, whatever happens. And forewarned, we may be able to keep out of the squabble."

"You really think so?"

"Of course not!" the priest said gently.

Thon Taddeo Pfardentrott arrived at Marcus Apollo's study as early in the day as could be construed as evening, and his manner had noticeably changed since the reception. He managed a cordial smile, and there was nervous eagerness in the way he spoke. This fellow, thought Marcus, is after something he wants rather badly, and he's even willing to be polite in order to get it. Perhaps the list of ancient writings supplied by the monks at the Leibowitzian abbey had impressed the Thon more than he wanted to admit. The nuncio had been prepared for a fencing match, but the scholar's evident excitement made him too easy a victim, and Apollo relaxed his readiness for verbal dueling.

"This afternoon there was a meeting of the faculty of the collegium," said Thon Taddeo as soon as they were seated. "We talked about Brother Kornhoer's letter, and the list of documents." He paused as if uncertain of an approach. The gray dusklight from the large arched window on his left made his face seem blanched and intense, and his wide gray eyes searched at the priest as if measuring him and making estimates.

"I take it there was skepticism?"

The gray eyes fell momentarily, and lifted quickly. "Shall I be polite?"

"Don't bother," Apollo chuckled.

"There was skepticism. 'Incredulity' is more nearly the word. My own feeling is that if such papers

exist, they are probably forgeries dating back several centuries. I doubt if the present monks at the abbey are trying to perpetrate a hoax. Naturally, they would believe the documents valid.”

“Kind of you to absolve them,” Apollo said sourly.

“I offered to be polite. Shall I?”

“No. Go on.”

The thon slid out of his chair and went to sit in the window. He gazed at the fading yellow patches of cloud in the west and pounded softly on the sill while he spoke.

“The papers. No matter what we may believe of them, the idea that such documents may still exist intact—that there’s even a slightest chance of their existing—is, well, so arousing a thought that we must investigate them immediately.”

“Very well,” said Apollo, a little amused. “They invited you. But tell me: what do you find so arousing about the documents?”

The scholar shot him a quick glance. “Are you acquainted with my work?”

The monsignor hesitated. He was acquainted with it, but admitting the acquaintance might force him to admit to an awareness that Thon Taddeo’s name was being spoken in the same breath with names of natural philosophers dead a thousand years and more, while the thon was scarcely in his thirties. The priest was not eager to admit knowing that this young scientist showed promise of becoming one of those rare outcroppings of human genius that appear only a time or two every century to revolutionize an entire field of thought in one vast sweep. He coughed apologetically.

“I must admit that I haven’t read a good deal of—”

“Never mind.” Pfardentrott waved off the apology. “Most of it is highly abstract, and tedious to the layman. Theories of electrical essence. Planetary motion. Attracting bodies. Matters of that sort. New Kornhoer’s list mentions such names as Laplace, Maxwell, and Einstein—do they mean anything to you?”

“Not much. History mentions them as natural philosophers, doesn’t it? From before the collapse of the last civilization? And I think they’re named in one of the pagan hagiologies, aren’t they?”

The scholar nodded. “And that’s all anyone knows about them, or what they did. Physicists, according to our not-so-reliable historians. Responsible for the rapid rise of the European-American culture, they say. Historians list nothing but trivia. I had nearly forgotten them. But Kornhoer’s descriptions of the old documents they say they have are descriptions of papers that might well be taken from physical science texts of some kind. It’s just impossible!”

“But you have to make certain?”

“We have to make certain. Now that it’s come up, I wish I had never heard of it.”

“Why?”

Thon Taddeo was peering at something in the street below. He beckoned to the priest. “Come here a moment. I’ll show you why.”

Apollo slipped from behind the desk and looked down at the muddy rutted street beyond the wall that encircled the palace and barracks and buildings of the collegium cutting off the mayoral sanctuary from the seething plebeian city. The scholar was pointing at the shadowy figure of a peasant leading a donkey homeward at twilight. The man’s feet were wrapped in sackcloth, and the mud had caked about them so that he seemed scarcely able to lift them. But he trudged ahead in one slogging steep after another, resting half a second between footfalls. He seemed too weary to scrape off the mud.

“He doesn’t ride the donkey,” Than Taddeo stated, “because this morning the donkey was loaded down with corn. It doesn’t occur to him that the packs are empty now. What is good enough for the morning is also good enough for the afternoon.”

“You know him?”

“He passes under my window too. Every morning and evening. Hadn’t you noticed him?”

“A thousand like him.”

“Look. Can you bring yourself to believe that that brute is the lineal descendant of men who supposedly invented machines that flew, who traveled to the moon, harnessed the forces of Nature, built machines that could talk and seemed to think? Can you believe there were such men?”

Apollo was silent.

"Look at him!" the scholar persisted. "No, but it's too dark now. You can't see the syphilis outbreak on his neck, the way the bridge of his nose is being eaten away. Paresis. But he was undoubtedly a moron to begin with. Illiterate superstitious, murderous. He diseases his children. For a few coins he would kill them. He will sell them anyway, when they are old enough to be useful. Look at him, and tell me if you see the progeny of a once-mighty civilization? What do you see?"

"The image of Christ," grated the monsignor, surprised at his own sudden anger. "What did you expect me to see?"

The scholar huffed impatiently. "The incongruity. Men as you can observe them through any window, and men as historians would have us believe men once were. I can't accept it. How can a great and wise civilization have destroyed itself so completely?"

"Perhaps," said Apollo, "by being materially great and materially wise, and nothing else." He went to light a tallow lamp, for the twilight was rapidly fading into night. He struck steel and flint until the spark caught and he blew gently at it in the tinder.

"Perhaps," said Thon Taddeo, "but I doubt it."

"You reject all history, then, as myth?" A flame edged out from the spark.

"Not 'reject.' But it must be questioned. Who wrote your histories?"

"The monastic Orders, of course. During the darkest centuries, there was no one else to record them." He transferred flame to wick.

"There! You have it. And during the time of the antipopes, how many schismatic Orders were fabricating their own versions of things, and passing off their versions as the work of earlier men? You can't know, you can't *really* know. That there was on this continent a more advanced civilization than we have now—that can't be denied. You can look at the rubble and the rotted metal and know it. You can dig under a strip of blown sand and find their broken roadways. But where is there evidence of the kind of machines your historians tell us they had in those days? Where are the remains of self-moving carts, of flying machines?"

"Beaten into plowshares and hoes."

"*If* they existed."

"If you doubt it, why bother studying the Leibowitzian documents?"

"Because a doubt is not a denial. Doubt is a powerful tool, and it should be applied to history."

The nuncio smiled tightly. "And what do you want me to do about it, learned Thon?"

The scholar leaned forward earnestly. "Write to the abbot of this place. Assure him that the documents will be treated with utmost care, and will be returned after we have completely examined them for authenticity and studied their content."

"Whose assurance do you want me to give him—yours or mine?"

"Hannegan's, yours, and mine."

"I can give him only yours and Hannegan's. I have no troops of my own."

The scholar reddened.

"Tell me," the nuncio added hastily, "why—besides bandits—do you insist you must see them here, instead of going to the abbey?"

"The best reason you can give the abbot is that if the documents are authentic, *if* we have to examine them at the abbey, a confirmation wouldn't mean much to other secular scholars."

"You mean your colleagues might think the monks had tricked you into something?"

"Ummm, that might be inferred. But also important, if they're brought here, they can be examined by everyone in the collegium who's qualified to form an opinion. And any visiting thons from other principalities can have a look at them too. But we can't move the entire collegium to the southwest desert for six months."

"I see your point."

"Will you send the request to the abbey?"

"Yes."

Thon Taddeo appeared surprised.

"But it will be your request, not mine. And it's only fair to tell you that I don't think Dom Paulo, the

abbot, will say yes.”

The thon, however, appeared to be satisfied. When he had gone, the nuncio summoned his clerk.

“You’ll be leaving for New Rome tomorrow,” he told him.

“By way of Leibowitz Abbey?”

“Come back by way of it. The report to New Rome is urgent.”

“Yes, Messér.”

“At the abbey, tell Dom Paulo that Sheba expects Solomon to come to her. Bearing gifts. Then you better cover your ears. When he finishes exploding, hurry back so I can tell Thon Taddeo no.”

## 13

# T

ime seeps slowly on the desert and there is little change to mark its passage. Two seasons had passed since Dom Paulo had refused the request from across the Plains, but the matter had been settled only a few weeks ago. Or had it been settled at all? Texarkana was obviously unhappy with the results.

The abbot paced along the abbey walls at sundown, his jaw thrust ahead like a whiskery old crag against possible breakers out of the sea of events. His thinning hair fluttered in white pennants on the desert wind, and the wind wrapped his habit bandage-tight about his stooped body, making him look like an emaciated Ezekiel with a strangely round little paunch. He thrust his gnarled hands into his sleeves and glowered occasionally across the desert toward the village of Sanly Bowitts in the distance. The red sunlight threw his pacing shadow across the courtyard, and the monks who encountered it in crossing the grounds glanced up wonderingly at the old man. Their ruler had seemed moody of late, and given to strange forebodings. It was whispered that the time soon was coming when a new abbot would be appointed ruler over the Brothers of Saint Leibowitz. It was whispered that the old man was not well, not well at all. It was whispered that if the abbot heard the whispers, the whisperers should speedily climb over the wall. The abbot had heard, but it pleased him for once not to take note of it. He well knew that the whispers were true.

“Read it to me again,” he said abruptly to the monk who stood motionless near at hand.

The monk’s hood jogged slightly in the abbot’s direction.

“Which one, Domne?” he asked.

“You know which one.”

“Yes, m’Lord.” The monk fumbled in one sleeve. It seemed weighted down with half a bushel of documents and correspondence, but after a moment he found the right one. Affixed to the scroll was the label:

SUB IMMUNITATE APOSTOLICA HOC SUPPOSITUM EST.

QUISQUIS NUNTIIUM MOLESTARE AUDEAT,

IPSO FACTO EXCOMMUNICETUR.

DET: R’ dissimo Domno Paulo de Pecos, AOL, Abbati

(Monastery of the Leibowitzian Brethren,

Environs of Sanly Bowitts Village

Southwest Desert, Empire of Denver)

CUI SALUTEM DICIT: *Marcus Apollo*

Papatiae Apocrisarius Texarkanae

“All right, that’s the one. So read it,” the abbot said impatiently.

“*Accedite ad eum...*” The monk crossed himself and murmured the customary Blessing of Texts, said before reading or writing almost as punctiliously as the blessing at meals. For the preservation of

literacy and learning throughout a black millennium had been the task of the Brothers of Leibowitz, and such small rituals helped keep that task in focus.

Having finished the blessing he held the scroll high against the sunset so that it became a transparency. “*Iterum oportet apponere tibi crucem ferendam, amice...*”

His voice was faintly singsong as his eyes plucked the words out of a forest of superfluous pen-flourishings. The abbot leaned against the parapet to listen while he watched the buzzards circling over the mesa of Last Resort.

“Again it is necessary to set before you a cross to be borne, old friend and shepherd of myopic bookworms,” droned the voice of the reader, “but perhaps the bearing of the cross will smack of triumph. It appears that Sheba is coming to Solomon after all, though probably to denounce him as a charlatan.

“This is to notify you that Thon Taddeo Pfardentrott, D.N.Sc., Sage of Sages, Scholar of Scholars, Fair-Haired Son-out-of-Wedlock of a certain Prince, and God’s Gift to an “Awakening Generation,” has finally made up his mind to pay you a visit, having exhausted all hope of transporting your Memorabilia to this fair realm. He will be arriving about the Feast of the Assumption, if he manages to evade “bandit” groups along the way. He will bring his misgivings and a small party of armed cavalry, courtesy of Hannegan II, whose corpulent person is even now hovering over me as I write, grunting and scowling at these lines, which His Supremacy commanded me to write, and in which His Supremacy expects me to acclaim his cousin, the thon, in the hope that you’ll honor him fittingly. But since His Supremacy’s secretary is in bed with the gout, I shall be no less than candid here:

“So first, let me caution you about this person, Thon Taddeo. Treat him with your customary charity, but trust him not. He is a brilliant scholar, but a secular scholar, and a political captive of the State. Here, Hannegan is the State. Furthermore, the thon is rather anti-clerical I think—or perhaps solely anti-monastic. After his embarrassing birth, he was spirited away to a Benedictine monastery, and—but no, ask the courier about that...”

The monk glanced up from his reading. The abbot was still watching the buzzards over Last Resort.

“You’ve heard about his childhood, Brother?” Dom Paulo asked.

The monk nodded.

“Read on.”

The reading continued, but the abbot ceased to listen. He knew the letter nearly by heart, but still he felt that there was something Marcus Apollo had been trying to say between the lines that he, Dom Paulo, had not yet managed to understand. Marcus was trying to warn him—but of what? The tone of the letter was mildly flippant, but it seemed full of ominous incongruities which might have been designed to add up to some single dark congruity, if only he could add them right. What danger could there be in letting the secular scholar study at the abbey?

Thon Taddeo himself, according to the courier who had brought the letter, had been educated in the Benedictine monastery where he had been taken as a child to avoid embarrassment to his father’s wife. The thon’s father was Hannegan’s uncle, but his mother was a serving maid. The duchess, legitimate wife of the duke, had never protested the duke’s philandering until this common servant girl bore him the son he had always wanted; then she cried unfair. She had borne him only daughters, and to be bested by a commoner aroused her wrath. She sent the child away, flogged and dismissed the servant, and renewed her grip on the duke. She herself meant to have a manchild out of him to re-establish her honor; she gave him three more girls. The duke waited patiently for fifteen years; when she died in miscarriage (of another girl), he promptly went to the Benedictines to reclaim the boy and make him his heir.

But the young Taddeo of Hannegan-Pfardentrott had become a bitter child. He had grown from infancy to adolescence within sight of the city and the palace where his first cousin was being prepared for the throne; if his family had entirely ignored him, however, he might have matured without coming to resent his status as an outcast. But both his father and the servant girl whose womb had borne him came to visit him with just enough frequency to keep him reminded that he was begotten of human flesh and not of stones, and thus to make him vaguely aware that he was deprived of love to which he was entitled.

And then too, Prince Hannegan had come to the same monastery for one year of schooling, had lorded it over his bastard cousin, and had excelled him in all things but keenness of mind. The young Taddeo had hated the prince with a quiet fury, and had set out to outdistance him as far as possible in learning at least. The race had proved a sham, however; the prince left the monastic school the following year, as unlettered as he had come, nor was any further thought given to his education. Meanwhile, his exiled cousin continued the race alone and won high honors; but his victory was hollow, for Hannegan did not care. Thon Taddeo had come to despise the whole Court of Texarkana but, with youthful inconsistency, he had returned willingly to that Court to be legitimized as the father's son at last, appearing to forgive everyone except the dead duchess who had exiled him and the monks who had cared for him in that exile.

Perhaps he thinks of our cloister as a place of durance vile, thought the abbot. There would be bitter memories, half-memories, and maybe a few imagined memories.

“... seeds of controversy in the bed of the New Literacy,” the reader continued. “So take heed, and watch for the symptoms.

“But, on the other hand, not only His Supremacy, but the dictates of charity and justice as well, insist that I recommend him to you as a well-meaning man, or at least as an unmalicious child, like most of these educated and gentlemanly pagans (and pagans they will make of themselves, in spite of all). He will behave if you are firm, but be careful, my friend. He has a mind like a loaded musket, and it can go off in any direction. I trust, however, that coping with him for a while will not be too taxing a problem for your ingenuity and hospitality.

“*Quidam mihi calix nuper expletur, Paule. Precamini ergo Deum facere me fortiozem. Metuo ut hic pereat. Spero te et fratres saepius oraturos esse pro tremescente Marco Apolline. Valete in Christo, amici.*

“*‘Texarkanae datum est Octava Ss Petri et Pauli, Anno Domini termillesimo . . .’* “

“Let's see that seal again,” said the abbot.

The monk handed him the scroll. Dom Paulo held it close to his face to peer at blurred lettering impressed at the bottom of the parchment by a badly inked wooden stamp:

OKAYED BY HANNEGAN II, BY GRACE OF GOD MAYOR,  
RULER OF TEXARKANA, DEFENDER OF THE FAITH,  
AND VAQUERO SUPREME OF THE PLAINS.  
HIS MARK: X

“I wonder if His Supremacy had someone read the letter to him later?” worried the abbot.

“If so, m'Lord, would the letter have been sent?”

“I suppose not. But frivolity under Hannegan's nose just to spite the Mayor's illiteracy is not like Marcus Apollo, unless he was trying to tell me something between the lines—but couldn't quite think of a safe way to say it. That last part—about a certain chalice that he's afraid won't pass away. It's clear he's worried about something, but what? It isn't like Marcus; it isn't like him at all.”

Several weeks had passed since the arrival of the letter; during those weeks Dom Paulo had slept badly, had suffered a recurrence of the old gastric trouble, had brooded overmuch on the past as if looking for something that might have been done differently in order to avert the future. What future? he demanded of himself. There seemed no logical reason to expect trouble. The controversy between monks and villagers had all but died. No signs of turmoil came from the herdsman tribes to the north and east. Imperial Denver was not pressing its attempt to levy taxes upon monastic congregations. There were no troops in the vicinity. The oasis was still furnishing water. There seemed no current threat of plague among animals or men. The corn was doing well this year in the irrigated fields. There were signs of progress in the world, and the village of Sanly Bowitts had achieved the fantastic literacy rate of eight per cent—for which the villagers might, but did not, thank the monks of the Leibowitzian Order.

And yet he felt forebodings. Some nameless threat lurked just around the corner of the world for the sun to rise again. The feeling had been gnawing at him, as annoying as a swarm of hungry insects that buzzed about one's face in the desert sun. There was the sense of the imminent, the remorseless, the mindless; it coiled like a heat-maddened rattler, ready to strike at rolling tumbleweed.

It was a devil with which he was trying to come to grips, the abbot decided, but the devil was quite evasive. The abbot's devil was rather small, as devils go: only knee-high, but he weighed ten tons and had the strength of five hundred oxen. He was not driven by maliciousness as Dom Paulo imagined him, not nearly as much as he was driven by frenzied compulsion, somewhat after the fashion of a rabid dog. He bit through meat and bone and nail simply because he had damned himself, and damnation created a damnably insatiable appetite. And he was evil merely because he had made a denial of Good, and the denial had become a part of his essence, or a hole therein. Somewhere, Dom Paulo thought, he's wading through a sea of men and leaving a wake of the maimed.

What nonsense, old man! he chided himself. When you tire of living, change itself seems evil, does it not? for then any change at all disturbs the deathlike peace of the life-weary. Oh there's the devil, all right, but let's not credit him with more than his damnable due. Are you that life-weary, old fossil?

But the foreboding lingered.

"Do you suppose the buzzards have eaten old Eleazar yet?" asked a quiet voice at his elbow.

Dom Paulo glanced around with a start in the twilight. The voice belonged to Father Gault, his prior and probable successor. He stood fingering a rose and looking embarrassed for having disturbed the old man's solitude.

"Eleazar? You mean Benjamin? Why, have you heard something about him lately?"

"Well, no, Father Abbot." He laughed uneasily. "But you seemed to be looking toward the mesa, and I thought you were wondering about the Old Jew." He glanced toward the anvil-shaped mountain, silhouetted against the gray patch of sky in the west. "There's a wisp of smoke up there, so I guess he's still alive."

"We shouldn't have to *guess*," Dom Paulo said abruptly. "I'm going to ride over there and pay him a visit."

"You sound like you're leaving tonight." Gault chuckled.

"In a day or two."

"Better be careful. They say he throws rocks at climbers."

"I haven't seen him for five years," the abbot confessed. "And I'm ashamed that I haven't. He's lonely. I'll go."

"If he's lonely, why does he insist on living like a hermit?"

"To escape loneliness—in a young world."

The young priest laughed. "That perhaps makes *his* kind of sense, Domne, but I don't quite see it."

"You will, when you're my age, or his."

"I don't expect to get that old. He lays claim to several thousand years."

The abbot smiled reminiscently. "And you know, I can't dispute him either. I met him when I was just a novice, fifty-odd years ago, and I'd swear he looked just as old then as he does now. He must be well over a hundred."

"Three thousand two hundred and nine, so he says. Sometimes even older. I think he believes it, too. An interesting madness,"

"I'm not so sure he's mad, Father. Just devious in his sanity. What did you want to see me about?"

"Three small matters. First, how do we get the Poet out of the royal guest rooms—before Thon Taddeo arrives? He's due here in a few days, and the Poet's taken root."

"I'll handle the Poet-sirrah. What else?"

"Vespers. Will you be in the church?"

"Not until Compline. You take over. What else?"

"Controversy in the basement—over Brother Kornhoer's experiment."

"Who and how?"

"Well, the silly gist of it seems to be that Brother Armbruster has the attitude of *vespero mundi*



*expectando*, while with Brother Kornhoer, it's the matins of the millennium. Kornhoer moves something to make room for a piece of equipment. Armbruster yells *Perdition!* Brother Kornhoer yells *Progress!* and they have at each other again. Then they come fuming to me to settle it. I scold them for losing their tempers. They get sheepish and fawn on each other for ten minutes. Six hours later, the floor shivers from Brother Armbruster's bellowing *Perdition!* down in the library. I can settle the blowups, but there seems to be a Basic Issue."

"A basic breach of conduct, I'd say. What do you want me to do about it? Exclude them from the table?"

"Not yet, but you might warn them."

"All right, I'll track it down. Is that all?"

"That's all, Domne." He started away, but paused: "Oh, by the way-do you think Brother Kornhoer's contraption is going to work'?"

"I hope not!" the abbot snorted.

Father Gault appeared surprised. "But, then why let him—"

"Because I was curious at first. The work has caused so much commotion by now, though, that I'm sorry I let him start it."

"Then why not stop him?"

"Because I'm hoping that he will reduce himself to absurdity without any help from me. If the thing fails, it'll fail just in time for Thon Taddeo's arrival; That would be just the proper form of mortification for Brother Kornhoer—to remind him of his vocation, before he begins thinking that he was called to Religion mainly for the purpose of building a generator of electrical essences in the monastery basement."

"But, Father Abbot, you'll have to admit that it would be quite an achievement, if successful."

"I don't *have* to admit it," Dom Paulo told him curtly.

When Gault was gone, the abbot, after a brief debate with himself, decided to handle the problem of the Poet-sirrah! before the problem of perdition-versus-progress. The simplest solution to the problem of the Poet was for the Poet to get out of the royal suite, and preferably out of the abbey, out of the vicinity of the abbey, out of sight, hearing, and mind. But no one could expect a "simplest solution" to get rid of the Poet-sirrah!

The abbot left the wall and crossed the courtyard toward the guesthouse. He moved by feel, for the buildings were monoliths of shadow under the stars, and only a few windows glowed with candlelight. The windows of the royal suite were dark; but the Poet kept odd hours and might well be in.

Inside the building, he groped for the right door, found it, and knocked. There was no immediate answer, but only a faint bleating sound which might or might not have issued from within the suite. He knocked again, then tried the door. It opened.

Faint red light from a charcoal burner softened the darkness; the room reeked of stale food.

"Poet?"

Again the faint bleating, but closer now. He went to the burner, raked up an incandescent coal, and lit a splinter of kindling. He glanced around and shuddered at the litter of the room. It was empty. He transferred the flame to an oil lamp and went to explore the rest of the suite. It would have to be thoroughly scrubbed and fumigated (also, perhaps, exorcised) before Thon Taddeo moved in. He hoped to make the Poet-sirrah! do the scrubbing, but knew the chance was remote.

In the second room, Dom Paulo suddenly felt as if someone were watching him. He paused and looked slowly around.

A single eyeball peered at him from a vase of water on the shelf. The abbot nodded at it familiarly and went on.

In the third room, he met the goat. It was their first meeting.

The goat was standing atop a tall cabinet, munching turnip greens. It looked like a small breed of mountain goat, but it had a bald head that appeared bright blue by lamplight. Undoubtedly a freak by birth.

"Poet?" he inquired, softly, looking straight at the goat and touching his pectoral cross.

"In *here*," came a sleepy voice from the fourth room.

Dom Paulo sighed with relief. The goat went on munching greens. Now *that* had been a hideous thought, indeed.

The Poet lay sprawled across the bed with a bottle of wine within easy reach; he blinked irritably at the light with his one good eye. "I was asleep," he complained, adjusting his black eyepatch and reaching for the bottle.

"Then wake up. You're moving out of here immediately. Tonight. Dump your possessions in the hall to let the suite air out. Sleep in the stable boy's cell downstairs if you must. Then come back in the morning and scrub this place out."

The Poet looked like a bruised lily for a moment, then made a grab for something under the blankets. He brought out a fist and stared at it thoughtfully. "Who used these quarters last?" he asked.

"Monsignor Longi. Why?"

"I wondered who brought the bedbugs." The Poet opened his fist, pinched something out of his palm, cracked it between his nails, and flipped it away. "Thon Taddeo can have them. I don't want them. I've been eaten up alive ever since I moved in. I was planning on leaving, but now that you've offered me my old cell back, I'll be happy—"

"I didn't mean—"

"—to accept your kind hospitality a little longer. Only until my book is finished, of course."

"*What* book? But never mind. Just get your things out of here."

"Now?"

"Now."

"Good. I don't think I could stand these bugs another night." The Poet rolled out of bed, but paused for a drink.

"Give me the wine," the abbot ordered.

"Sure. Have some. It's a pleasant vintage."

"Thank you, since you stole it from our cellars. It happens to be sacramental wine. Did that occur to you?"

"It hasn't been consecrated."

"I'm surprised you thought of that." Dom Paulo took the bottle.

"I didn't steal it anyway. I—"

"Never mind the wine. Where did you steal the goat?"

"I didn't *steal* it," the Poet complained.

"It just—materialized?"

"It was a gift, Reverendissime."

"From whom?"

"A dear friend, Domnissime."

"Whose dear friend?"

"Mine, Sire."

"Now there's a paradox. Where, now, did you—"

"Benjamin, Sire."

A flicker of surprise crossed Dom Paulo's face. "You stole it from old Benjamin?"

The Poet winced at the word. "Please, not stole."

"Then what?"

"Benjamin insisted that I take it as a gift after I had composed a sonnet in his honor."

"*The truth!*"

The Poet-sirrah! swallowed sheepishly. "I won it from him at mumbly-peg."

"I see."

"It's true! The old wretch nearly cleaned me out, and then refused to allow me credit. I had to stake my glass eye against the goat. But I won everything back."

"Get the goat out of the abbey."

"But it's a marvelous species of goat. The milk is of an unearthly odor and contains essences. In fact it's responsible for the Old Jew's longevity."

"How much of it?"

"All fifty-four hundred and eight years of it."

"I thought he was only thirty-two hundred and—" Dom Paulo broke off disdainfully. "What were you doing up on Last Resort?"

"Playing mumbly-peg with old Benjamin."

"I mean—" The abbot steeled himself. "Never mind. Just get yourself moved out. And tomorrow get the goat back to Benjamin."

"But I won it fairly."

"We'll not discuss it. Take the goat to the stable, then. I'll have it returned to him myself."

"Why?"

"We have no use for a goat. Neither have you."

"Ho, ho," the Poet said archly.

"What did that mean, pray?"

"Thon Taddeo is coming. There'll be need of a goat before it's finished. You can be sure of that." He chuckled smugly to himself.

The abbot turned away in irritation. "Just get out," he added superfluously, and then went to wrestle with contention in the basement, where the Memorabilia now reposed.

## 14

# T

he vaulted basement had been dug during the centuries of nomadic infiltration from the north, when the Bayring Horde had overrun most of the Plains and desert, looting and vandalizing all villages that lay in their path. The Memorabilia, the abbey's small patrimony of knowledge out of the past, had been walled up in underground vaults to protect the priceless writings from both nomads and *soi-disant* crusaders of the schismatic Orders, founded to fight the hordes, but turned to random pillaging and sectarian strife. Neither the nomads nor the Military Order of San Pancratz would have valued the abbey's books, but the nomads would have destroyed them for the joy of destruction and the military knights-friars would have burned many of them as "heretical" according to the theology of Vissarion, their Antipope.

Now a Dark Age seemed to be passing. For twelve centuries, a small flame of knowledge had been kept smoldering in the monasteries; only now were their minds ready to be kindled. Long ago, during the last age of reason, certain proud thinkers had claimed that valid knowledge was indestructible—that ideas were deathless and truth immortal. But that was true only in the subtlest sense, the abbot thought, and not superficially true at all. There was objective meaning in the world, to be sure: the nonmoral *logos* or design of the Creator; but such meanings were God's and not Man's, until they found an imperfect incarnation, a dark reflection, within the mind and speech and culture of a given human society, which might ascribe values to the meanings so that they became valid in a human sense within the culture. For Man was a culture-bearer as well as a soul-bearer, but his cultures were not immortal and they could die with a race or an age, and then human reflections of meaning and human portrayals of truth receded, and truth and meaning resided, unseen, only in the objective *logos* of Nature and the ineffable *Logos* of God. Truth could be crucified; but soon, perhaps, a resurrection.

The Memorabilia was full of ancient words, ancient formulae, ancient reflections of meaning, detached from minds that had died long ago, when a different sort of society had passed into oblivion. There was little of it that could still be understood. Certain papers seemed as meaningless as a Breviary would seem to a shaman of the nomad tribes. Others retained a certain ornamental beauty or an

orderliness that hinted of meaning, as a rosary might suggest a necklace to a nomad. The earliest brothers of the Leibowitzian Order had tried to press a sort of Veronica's Veil to the face of a crucified civilization; it had come away marked with an image of the face of ancient grandeur, but the image was faintly printed, incomplete, and hard to understand. The monks had preserved the image, and now it still survived for the world to inspect and try to interpret if the world wanted to do so. The Memorabilia could not, of itself, generate a revival of ancient science or high civilization, however, for cultures were begotten by the tribes of Man, not by musty tomes; but the books could help, Dom Paulo hoped—the books could point out directions and offer hints to a newly evolving science. It had happened once before, so the Venerable Boedullus had asserted in his *De Vestigiis Antecesserum Civitatum*.

And this time, thought Dom Paulo, we'll keep them reminded of who kept the spark burning while the world slept. He paused to look back; for a moment he had imagined that he had heard a frightened bleat from the Poet's goat.

The clamor from the basement soon blanketed his hearing as he descended the underground stairs toward the source of the turmoil. Someone was hammering steel pins into stone. Sweat mingled with the odor of old books. A feverish bustle of unscholarly activity filled the library. Novices hurried past with tools. Novices stood in groups and studied floor plans. Novices shifted desks and tables and heaved a makeshift machinery, rocking it into place. Confusion by lamplight. Brother Armbruster, the librarian and Rector of the Memorabilia, stood watching it from a remote alcove in the shelves, his arms tightly folded and his face grim. Dom Paulo avoided his accusing gaze.

Brother Kornhoer approached his ruler with a lingering grin of enthusiasms. "Well, Father Abbot, we'll soon have a light such as no man alive has ever seen."

"This is not without a certain vanity, Farther," Paulo replied.

"Vanity, Domne? To put to good use what we've learned?"

"I had in mind our haste to put it to use in time to impress a certain visiting scholar. But never mind. Let's see this engineer's wizardry."

They walked toward the makeshift machine. It reminded the abbot of nothing useful, unless one considered engines for torturing prisoners useful. An axle, serving as the shaft, was connected by pulleys and belts to a waist-high turnstile. Four wagon wheels were mounted on the axle a few inches apart. Their thick iron tires were scored with grooves, and the grooves supported countless birds'-nests of copper wire, drawn from coinage at the local smithy in Sanly Bowitts. The wheels were apparently free to spin in mid-air, Dom Paulo noticed, for their tires touched no surface. However, stationary blocks of iron faced the tires, like brakes, with out quite touching them. The blocks too had been wound with innumerable turns of wire—"field coils" as Kornhoer called them. Dom Paulo solemnly shook his head.

"It'll be the greatest physical improvement at the abbey since we got the printing press a hundred years ago," Kornhoer ventured proudly.

"Will it work?" Dom Paulo wondered.

"I'll stake a month's extra chores on it, m'Lord."

*You're staking more than that*, thought the priest, but suppressed utterance. "Where does the light come out?" he asked, peering at the odd contraption again.

The monk laughed. "Oh, we have a special lamp for that. What you see here is only the 'dynamo.' It produces the electrical essence which the lamp will burn."

Ruefully, Dom Paulo contemplated the amount of space the dynamo was occupying. "This essence," he murmured, "—can't it be extracted from mutton fat, perhaps?"

"No, no—The electrical essence is, well—Do you want me to explain?"

"Better not. Natural science is not my bent. I'll leave it to you younger heads." He stepped back quickly to avoid being brained by a timber carried past by a pair of hurrying carpenters. "Tell me," he said, "if by studying writings from the Leibowitzian age you can learn how to construct this thing, why do you suppose none of our predecessors saw fit to construct it?"

The monk was silent for a moment. "It's not easy to explain," he said at last. "Actually, in the writings that survive, there's no direct information about the construction of a dynamo. Rather, you might say that the information is implicit in a whole collections of fragmentary writings. *Partially* implicit. And it

has to be got out by deduction. But to get it, you also need some theories to work from—theoretical information our predecessors didn't have."

"But we do?"

"Well, yes—now that there have been a few men like—" his tone became deeply respectful and he paused before pronouncing the name "—like Thon Taddeo—"

"Was that a complete sentence?" the abbot asked rather sourly.

"Well, until recently, few philosophers have concerned themselves with new theories in physics. Actually, it was the work of, of Thon Taddeo—" the respectful tone again, Dom Paulo noted, "—that gave us the necessary working axioms. His work of the Mobility of Electrical Essences, for example, and his Conservation Theorem—"

"He should be pleased, then, to see his work applied. But where is the lamp itself, may I ask? I hope it's no larger than the dynamo."

"This is it, Domne," said the monk, picking up a small object from the table. It seemed to be only a bracket for holding a pair of black rods and a thumbscrew for adjusting their spacing. "These are carbons," Kornhoer explained.

"The ancients would have called it an 'arc lamp.' There was another kind, but we don't have the materials to make it."

"Amazing. Where does the light come from?"

"Here." The monk pointed to the gap between the carbons. "It must be a very tiny flame," said the abbot.

"Oh, but bright! Brighter, I expect, than a hundred candles."

"No!"

"You find that impressive?"

"I find it preposterous—" noticing Brother Kornhoer's sudden hurt expression, the abbot hastily added: "—to think how we've been limping along on beeswax and mutton fat."

"I have been wondering," the monk shyly confided, "if the ancients used them on their altars instead of candles."

"No," said the abbot. "Definitely, *no*. I can tell you that. Please dismiss that idea as quickly as possible, and don't even think of it again."

"Yes, Father Abbot."

"Now, where are you going to hang that thing?"

"Well—" Brother Kornhoer paused to stare speculatively around the gloomy basement. "I hadn't given it any thought. I suppose it should go over the desk where, Thon Taddeo—" (Why does he pause like that whenever he says it, Dom Paulo wondered irritably.) "—will be working."

"We'd better ask Brother Armbruster about that," the abbot decided, and then noticing the monk's sudden discomfort: "What's the matter? Have you and Brother Armbruster been—"

Kornhoer's face twisted apologetically. "Really, Father Abbot, I haven't lost my temper with him even once. Oh, we've had words, but—" He shrugged. "He doesn't want anything moved. He keeps mumbling about witchcraft and the like. It's not easy to reason with him. His eyes are half-blind now from reading by dim light—and yet he says it's Devil's work we're up to. I don't know what to say."

Dom Paulo frowned slightly as they crossed the room toward the alcove where Brother Armbruster still stood glowering upon the proceedings.

"Well, you've got your way now," the librarian said to Kornhoer as they approached. "When'll you be putting in a mechanical librarian, Brother?"

"We find hints, Brother, that once there were such things," the inventor growled. "In descriptions of the *Machina analytica*, you'll find references to—"

"Enough, enough," the abbot interposed; then to the librarian: "Thon Taddeo will need a place to work. What do you suggest?"

Armbruster jerked one thumb toward the Natural Science alcove. "Let him read at the lectern in there like anyone else."

"What about setting up a study for him here on the open floor, Father Abbot?" Kornhoer suggested

in hasty counter-proposal.

"Besides a desk, he'll need an abacus, a wall slate, and a drawing board. We could partition it off with temporary screens."

"I thought he was going to need our Leibowitzian references and earliest writings?" the librarian said suspiciously.

"He will."

"Then he'll have to walk back and forth a lot if you put him in the middle. The rare volumes are chained, and the chains won't reach that far."

"That's no problem," said the inventor. "Take off the chains. They look silly anyway. The schismatic cults have all died out or become regional. Nobody's heard of the Pancratzian Military Order in a hundred years."

Armbruster reddened angrily. "Oh no you don't," he snapped. "The chains stay on."

"But why?"

"It's not the book burners now. It's the villagers we have to worry about. The chains stay on."

Kornhoer turned to the abbot and spread his hands. "See, m'Lord?,"

"He's right," said Dom Paulo. "There's too much agitation in the village. The town council expropriated our school, don't forget. Now they've got a village library, and they want us to fill its shelves. Preferably with rare volumes, of course. Not only that, we had trouble with thieves last year. Brother Armbruster's right. The rare volumes stay chained."

"All right," Kornhoer sighed. "So he'll have to work in the alcove."

"Now, where do we hang your wondrous lamp?"

The monks glanced toward the cubicle. It was one of fourteen identical stalls, sectioned according to subject matter, which faced the central floor. Each alcove had its archway, and from an iron hook imbedded in the keystone of each arch hung a heavy crucifix.

"Well, if he's going to work in the alcove," said Kornhoer, "we'll just have to take the crucifix down and hang it there, temporarily. There's no other--"

"Heathen!" hissed the librarian. "Pagan! Desecrator!" Armbruster raised trembling hands heavenward. "God help me, lest I tear him apart with these hands! Where will he stop? Take him away, away!" He turned his back on them, his hands still trembling aloft.

Dom Paulo himself had winced slightly at the inventor's suggestion, but now he frowned sharply at the back of Brother Armbruster's habit. He had never expected him to feign a meekness that was alien to Armbruster's nature, but the aged monk's querulous disposition had grown definitely worse.

"Brother Armbruster, turn around, please."

The librarian turned.

"Now drop your hands, and speak more calmly when you--"

"But, Father Abbot, you heard what he--"

"Brother Armbruster, you will please get the shelf-ladder and remove that crucifix."

The color left the librarian's face. He stared speechless at Dom Paulo.

"This is not a church," said the abbot. "The placement of images is optional. For the present, you will please take down the crucifix. It's the only suitable place for the lamp, it seems. Later we may change it. Now I realize this whole thing has disturbed your library, and perhaps your digestion, but we hope it's in the interests of progress. If it isn't, then--"

"You'd make Our Lord move over to make room for prog--"

"Brother Armbruster!"

"Why don't you just hang the witch-light around His neck?"

The abbot's face went frigid. "I do not *force* your obedience, Brother. See me in my study after Compline."

The librarian wilted. "I'll get the ladder, Father Abbot," he whispered, and shuffled unsteadily away.

Dom Paulo glanced up at the Christ of the rood in the archway. Do You mind? he wondered.

There was a knot in his stomach. He knew the knot would exact its price of him later. He left the

basement before anyone could notice his discomfort. It was not good to let the community see how such trivial unpleasantness could overcome him these days.

The installation was completed the following day, but Dom Paulo remained in his study during the test. Twice he had been forced to warn Brother Armbruster privately, and then to rebuke him publicly during Chapter. And yet he felt more sympathy for the librarian's stand than he did for Kornhoer's. He sat slumped at his desk and waited for the news from the basement, feeling small concern for the test's success or failure. He kept one hand tucked into the front of his habit. He patted his stomach as though trying to calm a hysterical child.

Internal cramping again. It seemed to come whenever unpleasantness threatened, and sometimes went away again when unpleasantness exploded into the open where he could wrestle with it. But now it was not going away.

He was being warned, and he knew it. Whether the warning came from an angel, from a demon, or from his own conscience, it told him to beware of himself and of some reality not yet faced.

What now? he wondered, permitting himself a silent belch and a silent *Beg pardon* toward the statue of Saint Leibowitz in the shrinelike niche in the corner of his study.

A fly was crawling along Saint Leibowitz' nose. The eyes of the saint seemed to be looking crosseyed at the fly, urging the abbot to brush it away. The abbot had grown fond of the twenty-sixth century wood carving; its face wore a curious smile of a sort that made it rather unusual as a sacramental image. The smile was turned down at one corner; the eyebrows were pulled low in a faintly dubious frown, although there were laugh-wrinkles at the corners of the eyes. Because of the hangman's rope over one shoulder, the saint's expression often seemed puzzling. Possibly it resulted from slight irregularities in the grain of the wood, such irregularities dictating to the carver's hand as that hand sought to bring out finer details than were possible with such wood. Dom Paulo was not certain whether the image had been growth-sculptured as a living tree before carving or not; sometimes the patient master-carvers of that period had begun with an oak or cedar sapling, and—by spending tedious years at pruning, barking, twisting, and tying living branches into desired positions—had tormented the growing wood into a striking dryad shape, arms folded or raised aloft, before cutting the mature tree for curing and carving. The resulting statue was unusually resistant to splitting or breaking, since most of the lines of the work followed the natural grain.

Dom Paulo often marveled that the wooden Leibowitz had also proved resistant to several centuries of his predecessors—marveled, because of the saint's most peculiar smile. That little grin will ruin you someday, he warned the image...Surely, the saints must laugh in Heaven; the Psalmist says that God Himself shall chortle, but Abbot Malmeddy must have disapproved—God rest his soul. That solemn ass. How did you get by *him*, I wonder? You're not sanctimonious enough for some. That smile—Who do I know that grins that way? I like it, *but*...Someday, another grim dog will sit in this chair. *Cave canem*. He'll replace you with a plaster Leibowitz. Long-suffering. One who doesn't look crosseyed at flies. Then you'll be eaten by termites down in the storage room. To survive the Church's slow sifting of the arts, you have to have a surface that can please a righteous simpleton; and yet you need a depth beneath that surface to please a discerning sage. The sifting is slow, but it gets a turn of the sifter-handle now and then—when some new prelate inspects his episcopal chambers and mutters, "Some of this garbage has got to go." The sifter was usually full of dulcet pap. When the old pap was ground out, fresh pap was added. But what was *not* ground out was gold, and it lasted. If a church endured five centuries of priestly bad taste, occasional good taste had, by then, usually stripped away most of the transient tripe, had made it a place of majesty that overawed the would-be prettifiers.

The abbot fanned himself with a fan of buzzard feathers, but the breeze was not cooling. The air from the window was like an oven's breath off the scorched desert, adding to the discomfort caused him by whatever devil or ruthless angel was fiddling around with his belly. It was the kind of heat that hints of lurking danger from sun-crazed rattlers and brooding thunderstorms over the mountains, or rabid dogs and tempers made vicious by the scorch. It made the cramping worse.

"Please?" he murmured aloud to the saint, meaning a nonverbal prayer for cooler weather, sharper wits, and more insight into his vague sense of something wrong. Maybe it's that cheese that does it, he

thought. Gummy stuff this season, and green. *I could* dispense myself—and take a more digestible diet.

But no, there we go again. Face it, Paulo: it's not the food for the belly that does it; it's the food for the brain. Something up there is not digesting.

"But what?"

The wooden saint gave him no ready answer. Pap. Sifting out chaff. Sometimes his mind worked in snatches. It was better to let it work that way when the cramps came and the world weighed heavily upon him. What did the world weigh? It weighs, but is not weighed. Sometimes its scales are crooked. It weighs life and labor in the balance against silver and gold. That'll *never* balance. But fast and ruthless, it keeps on weighing. It spills a lot of life that way, and some times a little gold. And blindfolded, a king comes riding across the desert, with a set of crooked scales, a pair of loaded dice. And upon the flags emblazoned—*Vexilla regis* . . .

"No!" the abbot grunted, suppressing the vision.

*But of course!* the saint's wooden smile seemed to insist.

Dom Paulo averted his eyes from the image with a slight shudder. Sometimes he felt that the saint was laughing at him. Do they laugh at us in Heaven? he wondered. Saint Maisie of York herself—remember her, old man—she died of a laughing fit. That's different. She died laughing at herself.

No, that's at s not so different either. *Ulp!* The silent belch again. Tuesday's Saint Maisie's feast day, forsooth. Choir laughs reverently at the *Alleluia* of her Mass. "*Alleluia* ha ha! *Alleluia* ho ho!"

*"Sancta Maisie, interride pro me."*

And the king was coming to weigh books in the basement with his pair of crooked scales. How "crooked," Paulo? And what makes you think the Memorabilia is completely free of pap? Even the gifted and Venerable Boedullus once remarked scornfully that about half of it should be called the Inscrutabilia. Treasured fragments of a dead civilization there were indeed—but how much of it has been reduced to gibberish, embellished with olive leaves and cherubims, by forty generations of us monastic ignoramuses, children of dark centuries, many, entrusted by adults with an incomprehensible message, to be memorized and delivered to other adults.

I made him travel all the way from Texarkana through dangerous country, thought Paulo. Now I'm just worrying that what we've got may prove worthless to him, that's all.

But no, that wasn't all. He glanced at the smiling saint again. And again: *Vexilla regis inferni prodeunt*... Forth come the banners of the King of Hell, whispered a memory of that perverted line from an ancient *commedia*. It nagged like an unwanted tune in his thought.

The fist clenched tighter. He dropped the fan and breathed through his teeth. He avoided looking at the saint again. The ruthless angel ambushed him with a hot burst at his corporeal core. He leaned over the desk. That one had felt like a hot wire breaking. His hard breathing swept a clean spot in the film of desert dust on the desktop. The smell of the dust was choking. The room went pink, swarmed with black gnats. I don't dare belch, might shake something loose—but Holy Saint and Patron I've got to. Pain is. *Ergo sum*. Lord Christ God accept this token.

He belched, tasted salt, let his head fall onto the desk.

Does the chalice have to be now right this very minute Lord or can I wait awhile? But crucifixion is always now. Now ever since before Abraham even is always now. Before Pfardentrott even, now. Always for everybody anyhow is to get nailed on it and then to hang on it and if you drop off they beat you to death with a shovel so do it with dignity old man. If you can belch with dignity you may get to Heaven if you re sorry enough about messing up the rug...He felt very apologetic.

He waited a long time. Some of the gnats died and the room lost its blush but went hazy and gray.

*Well*, Paulo, are we going to hemorrhage now, or are we just going to fool around about it?

He probed the haze and found the face of the saint again. It was such a small grin—sad, understanding and, something else. Laughing at the hangman? No, laughing for the hangman. Laughing at the *Stultus Maximus*, at Satan himself. It was the first time he had seen it dearly. In the last chalice, there could be a chuckle of triumph. *Haec commixtio* . . .

He was suddenly very sleepy; the saint's face grayed over, but the abbot continued to grin weakly in response.



Prior Gault found him slumped over the desk shortly before None. Blood showed between his teeth. The young priest quickly felt for a pulse. Dom Paulo awakened at once, straightened in his chair, and, as if still in a dream, he pontificated imperiously: "I tell you, it's all supremely ridiculous. It's absolutely idiotic. Nothing could be more *absurd*,"

"What's absurd, Domne?"

The abbot shook his head, blinked several times. "*What?*"

"I'll get Brother Andrew at once."

"Oh? That's absurd. Come back here. What did you want?"

"Nothing, Father Abbot. I'll be back as soon as I get Brother—"

"Oh, bother the medic! You didn't come in here for nothing. My door was closed. Close it again, sit down, say what you wanted."

"The test was successful. Brother Kornhoer's lamp, I mean."

"All right, let's hear about it. Sit down, start talking, tell me all *!!!* about it." He straightened his habit and blotted his mouth with a bit of linen. He was still dizzy, but the fist in his belly had come unclenched. He could not have cared less about the prior's account of the test, but he tried his best to appear attentive. Got to keep him here until I'm awake enough to think. Can't let him go for the medic—not yet; the news would get out: *The old man is finished*. Got to decide whether it's a safe time to be finished or not.

## 15

# H

Hongan Os was essentially a just and kindly man. When he saw a party of his warriors making sport of the Laredan captives, he paused to watch; but when they tied three Laredans by their ankles between horses and whipped the horses into frenzied flight, Hongan Os decided to intervene. He ordered that the warriors be flogged on the spot, for Hongan Os—Mad Bear—was known to be a merciful chieftain. He had never mistreated a horse.

"Killing captives is woman's work," he growled scornfully at the whipped culprits. "Cleanse yourselves lest you be squawmarked, and withdraw from camp until the New Moon, for you are banished twelve days." And, answering their moans of protest: "Suppose the horses had dragged one of them through camp? The grass-eater chiefings are our guests, and it is known that they are easily frightened by blood. Especially the blood of their own kind. Take heed."

"But *these* are grass-eaters from the South," a warrior objected, gesturing toward the mutilated captives. "Our guests are grass-eaters from the East. Is there not a pact between us real people and the East to make war upon the South?"

"If you speak of it again, your tongue shall be cut out and fed to the dogs!" Mad Bear warned. "Forget that you heard such things."

"Will the herb-men be among us for many days, O Son of the Mighty?"

"Who can know what the farmer-things plan?" Mad Bear asked crossly. "Their thought is not as our thought. They say that some of their numbers will depart from here to pass on across the Dry Lands—to a place of the grass-eater priests, a place of the dark-robed ones. The others will stay here to talk—but that is not for your ears. Now go, and be ashamed twelve days."

He turned his back that they might slink away without feeling his gaze pour upon them. Discipline was becoming lax of late. The clans were restless. It had become known among the people of the Plains that he, Hongan Os, had clasped arms across a treaty-fire with a messenger from Texarkana, and that a

shaman had clipped hair and fingernails from each of them to make a good-faith doll as a defense against treachery by either party. It was known that an agreement had been made, and any agreement between people and grass-eaters was regarded by the tribes as a cause for shame. Mad Bear had felt the veiled scorn of the younger warriors, but there was no explaining to them until the right time came.

Mad Bear himself was willing to listen to good thought, even if it came from a dog. The thought of grass-eaters was seldom good, but he had been impressed by the messages of the grass-eater king in the east, who had expounded the value of secrecy and deplored the idle boast. If the Laredans learned that the tribes were being armed by Hannegan, the plan would surely fail. Mad Bear had brooded on this thought; it repelled him—for certainly it was more satisfying and more manly to tell an enemy what one intended to do to him before doing it; and yet, the more he brooded on it, the more he saw its wisdom. Either the grass-eater king was a craven coward, or else he was almost as wise as a man: Mad Bear had not decided which—but he judged the thought itself as wise. Secrecy was essential even if it seemed womanly for a time. If Mad Bear's own people knew that the arms which came to them were gifts from Hannegan, and not really the spoils of border raids, then there would arise the possibility of Laredo's learning of the scheme from captives caught on raids. It was therefore necessary to let the tribes grumble about the shame of talking peace with the farmers of the east.

But the talk was not of peace. The talk was good, and it promised loot.

A few weeks ago, Mad Bear himself had led a "war party" to the east and had returned with a hundred head of horses, four dozen long rifles, several kegs of black powder, ample shot, and one prisoner. But not even the warriors who had accompanied him knew that the cache of arms had been planted there for him by Hannegan's men, or that the prisoner was in reality a Texarkanan cavalry officer who would in the future advise Mad Bear about probable Laredan tactics during the fighting to come. All grass-eater thought was shameless, but the officer's thought could probe that of the grass-eaters to the south. It could not probe that of Hongan Os.

Mad Bear was justifiably proud of himself as a bargainer. He had pledged nothing but to refrain from making war upon Texarkana and to stop stealing cattle from the eastern borders, but only as long as Hannegan furnished him with arms and supplies. The agreement to war against Laredo was an unspoken pledge of the fire, but it fitted Mad Bear's natural inclinations and there was no need for a formal pact. Alliance with one of his enemies would permit him to deal with one foe at a time, and eventually he might regain the grazing lands that had been encroached upon and settled by the farmer-people during the previous century.

Night had fallen by the time the clans chief rode into camp, and a chill had come over the Plains. His guests from the east sat huddled in their blankets around the council fire with three of the old people while the usual ring of curious children gaped from surrounding shadows and peeped under tent skirts at the strangers. There were twelve strangers in all, but they separated themselves into two distinct parties which had traveled together but apparently cared little for each other's company. The leader of one party was obviously a madman. While Mad Bear did not object to insanity (indeed, it was prized by his shamans as the most intense of supernatural visitations), he had not known that the farmers likewise regarded madness as a virtue in a leader. But this one spent half of his time digging in the earth down by the dry riverbed and the other half jotting mysteriously in a small book. Obviously a witch, and probably not to be trusted.

Mad Bear stopped only long enough to don his ceremonial wolf robes and have a shaman paint the totem mark on his forehead before he joined the group at the fire.

"*Be afraid!*" an old warrior ceremonially wailed as the clans chief stepped into the firelight. "Be afraid, for the Mighty One walks among his children. Grovel, O clans, for his name is *Mad Bear*—a name well won, for as a youth he did overcome without weapons a bear run mad, with his naked hands did he strangle her, verily in the Northlands..."

Hongan Os ignored the eulogies and accepted a cup of blood from the old woman who served the council fire. It was fresh from a butchered steer and still warm. He drained it before turning to nod at the Easterners who watched the brief wassail with apparent disquiet..

"Aaaah!" said the clans chief.

"Aaaah!" replied the three old people, together with one grass-eater who dared to chime in. The people stared at the grass-eater for a moment in disgust.

The insane one tried to cover his companion's blunder.

"Tell me," said the madman when the chieftain was seated. "How is it that your people drink no water? Do your gods object?"

"Who knows what the gods drink?" rumbled Mad Bear. "It is said that water is for cattle and farmers, that milk is for children and blood for men. Should it be otherwise?"

The insane one was not insulted. He studied the chief for a moment with searching gray eyes, then nodded at one of his fellows. "That 'water for the cattle' explains it," he said. "The everlasting drought out here. A herdsman people would conserve what little water there is for the animals. I was wondering if they backed it by a religious taboo."

His companion grimaced and spoke in the Texarkanan tongue. "Water! Ye gods, why can't *we* drink water, Thon Taddeo? There's such a thing as too much conformity!" He spat dryly. "Blood! Blah! It sticks in the throat. Why can't we have one little sip of—"

"Not until we leave"

"But, Thon—"

"No," snapped the scholar; then, noticing that the clans people were glowering at them, he spoke to Mad Bear in tongue of the Plains again. "My comrade here was speaking of the manliness and health of your people," he said. "Perhaps your diet is responsible."

"Ha!" barked the chief, but then called almost cheerfully to the old woman: "Give that outlander a cup of red."

Thon Taddeo's companion shuddered, but made no protest.

"I have, O Chief, a request to make of your greatness," said the scholar. "Tomorrow we shall continue our journey to the west. If some of your warriors could accompany our party, we would be honored."

"Why?"

Thon Taddeo paused. "Why—as guides . . ." He stopped, and suddenly smiled. "No, I'll be quite truthful. Some of your people disapprove of our presence here. While your hospitality has been—"

Hongan Os threw back his head and roared with laughter. "They are afraid of the lesser clans," he said to the old ones. "They fear being ambushed as soon as they leave my tents. They eat grass and are afraid of a fight."

The scholar flushed slightly.

"Fear nothing, outlander!" chortled the clans chief. "Real men shall accompany you."

Thon Taddeo inclined his head in mock gratitude.

"Tell us," said Mad Bear, "what is it you go to seek in the western Dry Land? New places for planting fields? I can tell you there are none. Except near a few water holes, nothing grows that even cattle will eat."

"We seek no new land," the visitor answered. "We are not all of us farmers, you know. We are going to look for—" He paused. In the nomad speech, there was no way to explain the purpose of the journey to the Abbey of St. Leibowitz "—for the skills of an ancient sorcery."

One of the old ones, a shaman, seemed to prick up his ears. "An ancient sorcery in the west? I know of no magicians there. Unless you mean the dark-robed ones?"

"They are the ones."

"Ha! What magic do they have that's worth looking after? Their messengers can be captured so easily that it is no real sport—although they do endure torture well. What sorcery can you learn from them?"

"Well, for my part, I agree with you," said Thon Taddeo. "But it is said that writings, uh, *incantations* of great power are hoarded at one of their abodes. If it is true, then obviously the dark-robed ones don't know how to use them, but we hope to master them for ourselves."

"Will the dark-robos permit you to observe their secrets?"

Thon Taddeo smiled. "I think so. They don't dare hide them any longer. We could take them, if we

had to.”

“A brave saying,” scoffed Mad Bear. “Evidently the farmers are braver among their own kind—although they are meek enough among *real* people.”

The scholar, who had stomachached his fill of the nomad’s insults, chose to retire early.

The soldiers remained at the council fire to discuss with Hongan Os the war that was certain to come; but the war, after all, was none of Thon Taddeo’s affair. The political aspirations of his ignorant cousin were far from his own interest in a revival of learning in a dark world, except when that monarch’s patronage proved useful, as it already had upon several occasions.

## 16

T

he old hermit stood at the edge of the mesa and watched the approach of the dust speck across the desert. The hermit munched, muttered words and chuckled silently into the wind. His withered hide was burned the color of old leather by the sun, and his brushy beard was stained yellow about the chin. He wore a basket hat and a loincloth of rough homespun that resembled burlap—his only clothing except for sandals and a goat-skin water bag.

He watched the dust speck until it passed through the village of Sanly Bowitts and departed again by way of the road leading past the mesa.

“Ah!” snorted the hermit, his eyes beginning to burn.

“*His* empire shall be multiplied, and there shall be no end of his peace: *he* shall sit upon *his* kingdom.”

Suddenly he went down the arroyo like a cat with three legs, using his staff, bounding from stone to stone and sliding most of the way. The dust from his rapid descent plumed high on the wind and wandered away.

At the foot of the mesa he vanished into the mesquite and settled down to wait. Soon he heard the rider approaching at a lazy trot, and he began slinking toward the road to peer out through the brush. The pony appeared from around the bend, wrapped in a thin dust shroud. The hermit darted into the trail and threw up his arms.

“*Olla allay!*” he shouted; and as the rider halted, he darted forward to seize the reins and frown anxiously up at the man in the saddle.

His eyes blazed for a moment. “For a Child is born to us, and a Son is given us . . .” But then the anxious frown melted away into sadness. “It’s not *Him!*” he grumbled irritably at the sky.

The rider had thrown back his hood and was laughing. The hermit blinked angrily at him for a moment. Recognition dawned.

“Oh,” he grunted. “You! I thought you’d be dead by now. What are you doing out here?”

“I brought back your prodigal, Benjamin,” said Dom Paulo. He tugged at a leash and the blue-headed goat trotted up from behind the pony. It bleated and strained at the rope upon seeing the hermit. “And . . . I thought I’d pay you a visit.”

“The animal is the Poet’s,” the hermit grunted. “He won it *fairly* in a game of chance—although he *cheated* miserably. Take it back to him, and let me counsel you against meddling in worldly swindles that don’t concern you. Good day.” He turned toward the arroyo.

“Wait, Benjamin. Take your goat, or I’ll give it to a peasant. I won’t have it wandering around the abbey and bleating into the church.”

“It’s not a goat,” the hermit said crossly. “It’s the beast which your prophet saw, and it was made

for a woman to ride. I suggest you curse it and drive it into the desert. You notice, however, that it divideth the hoof and cheweth the cud.” He started away again.

The abbot’s smile faded. “Benjamin, are you really going back up that hill without even a ‘hello’ for an old friend?”

“Hello,” the Old Jew called back, and marched indignantly on. After a few steps he stopped to glance over his shoulder. “You needn’t look so hurt,” he said. “It’s been five years since you’ve troubled to come this way, ‘old friend.’ Hah!”

“So that’s it!” muttered the abbot. He dismounted and hurried after the Old Jew. “Benjamin, Benjamin, I would have come—I have not been free.”

The hermit stopped. “Well, Paulo, since you’re here . . .”

Suddenly they laughed and embraced.

“It’s good, you old grump,” said the hermit.

“I a grump?”

“Well, *I’m* getting cranky too, I guess. The last century has been a trying one for me.”

“I hear you’ve been throwing rocks at the novices who come hereabouts for their Lenten fast in the desert. Can this be true?” He eyed the hermit with mock reproof.

“Only pebbles.”

“Miserable old pretzel!”

“Now, now, Paulo. One of them once mistook me for a distant relative of mine—name of Leibowitz. He thought I had been sent to deliver him a message—or some of your other scalawags thought so. I don’t want it to happen again, so I throw pebbles at them sometimes. Hah! I’ll not be mistaken for that kinsman again, for he stopped being any kin of mine.”

The priest looked puzzled. “Mistook you for whom? Saint Leibowitz? Now, Benjamin! You’re going too far.”

Benjamin repeated it in a mocking singsong: “Mistook me for a distant relative of mine—name of Leibowitz, so I throw pebbles at them.”

Dom Paulo looked thoroughly perplexed. “Saint Leibowitz has been dead a dozen centuries. How could—” He broke off and peered warily at the old hermit. “Now, Benjamin, let’s don’t start that tale wagging again. You haven’t lived twelve cent—”

“Nonsense!” interrupted the Old Jew. “I didn’t say it happened twelve centuries ago. It was only six centuries ago. Long after your Saint was dead; that’s why it was so preposterous. Of course, your novices were more devout in those days, and more credulous. I think Francis was that one’s name. Poor fellow. I buried him later. Told them in New Rome where to dig for him. That’s how you got his carcass back.”

The abbot gaped at the old man as they walked through the mesquite toward the water hole, leading the horse and the goat. *Francis?* he wondered. Francis. That could be the Venerable Francis Gerard of Utah, perhaps?—to whom a pilgrim had once revealed the location of the old shelter in the village, so that story went—but that was before the village was there. And about six centuries ago, yes, and—now this old gaffer was claiming to have been that pilgrim? He sometimes wondered where Benjamin had picked up enough knowledge of the abbey’s history to invent such tales. From the Poet, perhaps.

“That was during my earlier career, of course,” the Old Jew went on, “and perhaps such a mistake was understandable.”

“Earlier career?”

“Wanderer.”

“How do you expect me to believe such nonsense?”

“Hmm-hnnn! The Poet believes me.”

“Undoubtedly! The Poet certainly would never believe that the Venerable Francis met a saint. *That* would be superstition. The Poet would rather believe he met *you*—six centuries ago. A purely natural explanation, eh?”

Benjamin chuckled wryly. Paulo watched him lower a leaky bark cup into the well, empty it into his

water skin, and lower it again for more. The water was cloudy and alive with creeping uncertainties as was the Old Jew's stream of memory. Or was his memory uncertain? Playing games with us all? wondered the priest. Except for his delusion of being older than Methuselah, old Benjamin Eleazar seemed sane enough, in his own wry way.

"Drink?" the hermit offered, extending the cup.

The abbot suppressed a shudder, but accepted the cup so as not to offend; he drained the murky liquid at a gulp.

"Not very particular, are you?" said Benjamin, watching him critically. "Wouldn't touch it myself." He patted the water skin. "For the animals."

The abbot gagged slightly.

"You've changed," said Benjamin, still watching him.

"You've grown pale as cheese and *wasted*."

"I've been ill."

"You *look* ill. Come up in my shack, if the climb won't tire you out."

"I'll be all right. I had a little trouble the other day, and our physician told me to rest. Fah! If an important guest weren't coming soon, I'd pay no attention. But he's coming, so I'm resting. It's quite tiresome."

Benjamin glanced back at him with a grin as they climbed the arroyo. He wagged his grizzly head. "Riding ten miles across the desert is resting?"

"For me it's rest. And, I've been wanting to see you, Benjamin."

"What will the villagers say?" the Old Jew asked mockingly.

"They'll think we've become reconciled, and that will spoil both our reputations."

"Our reputations never have amounted to much in the market place, have they?"

"True," he admitted but added cryptically: "for the present."

"Still waiting, Old Jew?"

"Certainly!" the hermit snapped.

The abbot found the climb tiring. Twice they stopped to rest. By the time they reached the tableland, he had become dizzy and was leaning on the spindly hermit for support. A dull fire burned in his chest, warning against further exertion, but there was none of the angry clenching that had come before.

A flock of the blue-headed goat-mutants scattered at the approach of a stranger and fled into straggly mesquite. Oddly, the mesa seemed more verdant than the surrounding desert, although there was no visible supply of moisture.

"This way, Paulo. To my mansion."

The Old Jew's hovel proved to be a single room, windowless and stone-walled, its rocks stacked loosely as a fence, with wide chinks through which the wind could blow. The roof was a flimsy patchwork of poles, most of them crooked, covered by a heap of brush, thatch, and goatskins. On a large flat rock, set on a short pillar beside the door, was a sign painted in Hebrew:

The size of the sign, and its apparent attempt to advertise, led Abbot Paulo to grin and ask: "What does it say, Benjamin? Does it attract much trade up here?"

"Hah—what should it say? It says: Tents Mended Here."

The priest snorted his disbelief.

"All right, doubt me. But if you don't believe what's written there, you can't be expected to believe what's written on the *other* side of the sign."

"Facing the wall?"

"Obviously facing the wall."

The pillar was set close to the threshold, so that only a few inches of clearance existed between the flat rock and the wall of the hovel. Paulo stooped low and squinted into the narrow space. It took him a while to make it out, but sure enough there was something written on the back of the rock, in smaller letters:

“Do you ever turn the rock around?”

“Turn it *around*? You think I’m *crazy*? In times like *these*?”

“What does it say back there?”

“Hmmm-hnnnn!” the hermit singsonged, refusing to answer. “But come on in, you who can’t read from the backside.”

“There’s a wall slightly in the way.”

“There always was, wasn’t there?”

The priest sighed. “All right, Benjamin, I know what it was that you were commanded to write “in the entry and on the door” of your house. But only *you* would think of turning it face down.”

“Face *inward*,” corrected *the* hermit. “As long as there are tents to be mended in Israel—but let’s not begin teasing each other until you’ve rested. I’ll get you some milk, and you tell me about this visitor that’s worrying you.

“There’s wine in my bag if you’d like some,” said the abbot, falling with relief onto a mound of skins. “But I’d rather not talk about Thon Taddeo.”

“Oh? *That* one.”

“You’ve heard of Thon Taddeo? Tell me, how is it you’ve always managed to know everything and everybody without stirring from this hill?”

“One hears, one sees,” the hermit said cryptically.

“Tell me, what do you think of him?”

“I haven’t see him. But I suppose he will be a pain. A birth-pain, perhaps, but a pain.”

“Birth-pain? You really believe we’re going to have a new Renaissance, as some say?”

“Hmmm-hnnnn.”

“Stop smirking mysteriously, Old Jew, and tell me your opinion. You’re bound to have one. You always do. Why is your confidence so hard to get? Aren’t we friends?”

“On some grounds, on some grounds. But we have our differences, you and I.”

“What have our differences got to do with Thon Taddeo and a Renaissance we’d both like to see? Thon Taddeo is a secular scholar, and rather remote from our differences.”

Benjamin shrugged eloquently. “Difference, secular scholars,” he echoed, tossing out the words like discarded apple pits. “I have been called a ‘secular scholar’ at various times by certain people, and sometimes I’ve been staked, stoned, and burned for it.”

“Why, you never—” The priest stopped, frowning sharply. That madness again. Benjamin was peering at him suspiciously, and his smile had gone cold. Now, thought the abbot, he’s looking at me as if I were one of Them—whatever formless “Them” it was that drove him here to solitude. Staked, stoned, and burned? Or did his “I” mean “We” as in “I, my people”?

“Benjamin—I am Paulo. Torquemada is dead. I was born seventy-odd years ago, and pretty soon I’ll die. I have loved you, old man, and when you look at me, I wish you would see Paulo of Pecos and no other.”

Benjamin wavered for a moment. His eyes became moist.

“I sometimes—forget—”

“And sometimes you forget that Benjamin is only Benjamin and not all of Israel.”

“Never!” snapped the hermit, eyes blazing again. “For thirty-two centuries, I—” He stopped and closed his mouth tightly.

“Why?” the abbot whispered almost in awe. “Why do you take the burden of a people and its past upon yourself alone?”

The hermit’s eyes flared a brief warning, but he swallowed a throaty sound and lowered his face into his hands. “You fish in dark waters.”

“Forgive me.”

“The burden—it was pressed upon me by others.” He looked up slowly. “Should I refuse to take it?”

The priest sucked in his breath. For a time there was no sound in the shanty but the sound of the wind. There was a touch of divinity in this madness! Dom Paulo thought. The Jewish community was thinly scattered in these times. Benjamin had perhaps outlived his children, or somehow become an outcast. Such an old Israelite might wander for years without encountering others of his people. Perhaps in his loneliness he had acquired the silent conviction that he was the last, the one, the only. And, being the last, he ceased to be Benjamin, becoming Israel. And upon his heart had settled the history of five thousand years, no longer remote, but become as the history of his own lifetime. His "I" was the converse of the imperial "We."

But I, too, am a member of a oneness, thought Dom Paulo, a part of a congregation and a continuity. Mine, too, have been despised by the world. Yet for me the distinction between self and nation is clear. For you, old friend, it has somehow become obscure. A burden pressed upon you by others? And you accepted it? What must it weigh? What would it weigh for me? He set his shoulders under it and tried to heave, testing the bulk of it: I am a Christian monk and priest, and I am, therefore, accountable before God for the actions and deeds of every monk and priest who has breathed and walked the earth since Christ, as well as for the acts of my own.

He shuddered and began shaking his head.

No, no. It crushed the spine, this burden. It was too much for any man to bear, save Christ alone. To be cursed for a faith was burden enough. To bear the curses was possible, but then—to accept the illogic behind the curses, the illogic which called one to task not only for himself but also for every member of his race or faith, for their actions as well as one's own? To accept that too?—as Benjamin was trying to do?

No, no.

And yet, Dom Paulo's own Faith told him that the burden was there, had been there since Adam's time—and the burden imposed by a fiend crying in mockery, "*Man!*" at man.

"*Man!*"—calling each to account for the deeds of all since the beginning; a burden impressed upon every generation before the opening of the womb, the burden of the guilt of original sin. Let the fool dispute it. The same fool with great delight accepted the *other* inheritance—the inheritance of ancestral glory, virtue, triumph, and dignity which rendered him "courageous and noble by reason of birthright," without protesting that he personally had done nothing to earn that inheritance beyond being born of the race of Man. The protest was reserved for the inherited burden which rendered him "guilty and outcast by reason of birthright," and against that verdict he strained to close his ears. The burden, indeed, was hard. His own Faith told him, too, that the burden had been lifted from him by the One whose image hung from a cross above the altars, although the burden's imprint still was there. The imprint was an easier yoke, compared to the full weight of the original curse. He could not bring himself to say it to the old man, since the old man already knew he believed it. Benjamin was looking for Another. And the last old Hebrew sat alone on a mountain and did penance for Israel and waited for a Messiah, and waited, and waited, and—

"God bless you for a brave fool. Even a wise fool."

"Hmmm-hnnn! Wise fool!" mimicked the hermit. "But you always did specialize in paradox and mystery, didn't you, Paulo? If a thing can't be in contradiction to itself, then it doesn't even interest you, does it? You have to find Threeness in Unity, life in death, wisdom in folly. Otherwise it might make too much common sense."

"To sense the responsibility is wisdom, Benjamin. To think you can carry it alone is folly."

"Not madness?"

"A little, perhaps. But a brave madness."

"Then I'll tell you a small secret. I've known all along that I can't carry it, ever since He called me forth again. But are we talking about the same thing?"

The priest shrugged. "You would call it the burden of being Chosen. I would call it the burden of Original Guilt. In either case, the implied responsibility is the same, although we might tell different versions of it, and disagree violently in words about what we mean *in* words by something that isn't really meant in words at all—since it's something that's meant in the dead silence of a heart."



Benjamin chuckled. "Well, I'm glad to hear you admit it, finally, even if all you say is that you've never really said anything."

"Stop cackling, you reprobate."

"But you've always used words so wordily in crafty defense of your Trinity, although He never needed such defense before you got Him from me as a Unity. Eh?"

The priest reddened but said nothing.

"*There!*" Benjamin yelled, bouncing up and down. "I made you want to argue for once. Ha! But never mind. I use quite a few words myself, but I'm never quite sure He and I mean the same thing either. I suppose you can't be blamed; it must be more confusing with Three than with One."

"Blasphemous old cactus! I really wanted your opinion of Thon Taddeo and whatever's brewing."

"Why seek the opinion of a poor old anchorite?"

"Because, Benjamin Eleazar bar Joshua, if all these years of waiting for One-Who-Isn't-Coming haven't taught you wisdom, at least they've made you shrewd."

The Old Jew closed his eyes, lifted his face ceilingward, and smiled cunningly. "Insult me," he said in mocking tones, "rail at me, bait me, persecute me—but do you know what I'll say?"

"You'll say, 'Hmmm-*hnnn!*' "

"No! I'll say He's already here. I caught a glimpse of Him once."

"What? Who are you talking about? Thon Taddeo?"

"*No!* Moreover, I do not care to prophesy, unless you tell me what's really bothering you, Paulo."

"Well, it all started with Brother Kornhoer's lamp."

"Lamp? Oh, yes, the Poet mentioned it. *He* prophesied it wouldn't work."

"The Poet was wrong, as usual. So they tell me. I didn't watch the trial."

"It worked then? Splendid. And that started what?"

"Me wondering. How close are we to the brink of something? Or how close to a shore? Electrical essences in the basement. Do you realize how much things have changed in the past two centuries?"

Soon, the priest spoke at length of his fears, while the hermit, mender of tents, listened patiently until the sun had begun to leak through the chinks in the west wall to paint glowing shafts in the dusty air.

"Since the death of the last civilization, the Memorabilia has been our special province, Benjamin. And we've kept it. But now? I sense the predicament of the shoemaker who tries to sell shoes in a village of shoemakers."

The hermit smiled. "It could be done, if he manufactures a special and superior type of shoe."

"I'm afraid the secular scholars are already beginning to lay claim to such a method."

"Then go out of the shoemaking business, before you are ruined."

"A possibility," the abbot admitted. "It's unpleasant to think of it however. For twelve centuries, we've been one little island in a very dark ocean. Keeping the Memorabilia has been a thankless task, but a hallowed one, we think. It's only our *worldly* job, but we've always been bookleggers and memorizers, and it's hard to think that the job's soon to be finished—soon to become unnecessary. I can't believe that somehow."

"So you try to best the other 'shoemakers' by building strange contraptions in your basement?"

"I must admit, it looks that way—"

"What will you do next to keep ahead of the seculars? Build a flying machine? Or revive the *Machina analytica*? Or perhaps step over their heads and resort to metaphysics?"

"You shame me, Old Jew. You know we are monks of Christ first, and such things are for others to do."

"I wasn't shaming you. I see nothing inconsistent in monks of Christ building a flying machine, although it would be more like them to build a praying machine."

"Wretch! I do my Order a disservice by sharing a confidence with you!"

Benjamin smirked. "I have no sympathy for you. The books you stored away may be hoary with age, but they were written by children of the world, and they'll be taken from you by children of the world, and you had no business meddling with them in the first place."

“Ah, *now* you care to prophesy!”

“Not at all. ‘Soon the sun will set’—is that prophecy? No, it’s merely an assertion of faith in the consistency of events. The children of the world are consistent too—so I say they will soak up everything you can offer, take your job away from you, and then denounce you as a decrepit wreck. Finally, they’ll ignore you entirely. It’s your own fault. The Book I gave you should have been enough for you. Now you’ll just have to take the consequences for your meddling.”

He had spoken flippantly, but his prediction seemed uncomfortably close to Dom Paulo’s fears. The priest’s countenance saddened.

“Pay me no mind,” said the hermit. “I’ll not venture to soothsay before I’ve seen this contraption of yours, or taken a look at this Thon Taddeo—who begins to interest me, by the way. Wait until I’ve examined the entrails of the new era in better detail, if you expect advice from me.”

“Well, you won’t see the lamp because you never come to the abbey.”

“It’s your abominable cooking I object to.”

“And you won’t see Thon Taddeo because he comes from the other direction. If you wait to examine the entrails of an era until after it’s born, it’s too late to prophesy its birth.”

“Nonsense. Probing the womb of the future is bad for the child. I shall wait—and then I shall prophesy that it was born and that it *wasn’t* what I’m waiting for.”

“What a cheerful outlook! So what *are* you looking for?”

“Someone who shouted at me once.”

“Shouted?”

“‘Come forth!’ “

“What rot!”

“Hmmm-*hnnn!* To tell you the truth, I don’t much expect Him to come, but I was told to wait, and—” he shrugged “—I wait.” After a moment his twinkling eyes narrowed to slits, and he leaned forward with sudden eagerness. “Paulo, bring this Thon Taddeo past the foot of the mesa.”

The abbot recoiled in mock horror. “Accoster of pilgrims! Molester of novices! I shall send you the Poet-sirrah!—and may he descend upon you and rest forever. Bring the thon past your lair! What an outrage.”

Benjamin shrugged again. “Very well. Forget that I asked it. But let’s hope this thon will be on our side, and not with the others this time.”

“Others, Benjamin?”

“Manasses, Cyrus, Nebuchadnezzar, Pharaoh, Caesar, Hannegan the Second—need I go on? Samuel warned us against them, then gave us one. When they have a few wise men shackled nearby to counsel them, they become more dangerous than ever. That’s all the advice I’ll give you.”

“Well, Benjamin, I’ve had enough of you now to last me another five years, so—”

“Insult me, rail at me, bait me—”

“Stop it. I’m leaving, old man. It’s late.”

“So? And how is the ecclesiastical belly fixed for the ride?”

“My stomach—?” Dom Paulo paused to explore, found himself more comfortable than at any time in recent weeks.

“It’s a mess, of course,” he complained. “How else would it be after listening to you?”

“True-*El Shaddai* is merciful, but He is also just.”

“Godspeed, old man. After Brother Kornhoer reinvents the flying machine, I’ll send up some novices to drop rocks on you.”

They embraced affectionately. The Old Jew led him to the edge of the mesa. Benjamin stood wrapped in a prayer shawl, its fine fabric contrasting oddly with the rough burlap of his loincloth, while the abbot climbed down to the trail and rode back toward the abbey. Dom Paulo could still see him standing there at sundown, his spindly figure silhouetted against the twilight sky as he bowed and munched a prayer over the desert.

“*Memento, Domine Gominum famulorum tuorum,*” the abbot whispered in response, adding: “And may he finally win the Poet’s eyeball at mumbly-peg. Amen.”

I

can tell you definitely: There *will* be war,” said the messenger from New Rome. “All Laredo’s forces are committed to the Plains. Mad Bear has broken camp. There’s a running cavalry battle, nomad style, all over the Plains. But the State of Chihuahua is threatening Laredo from the south. So Hannegan is getting ready to send Texarkana forces to the Rio Grande—to help ‘defend’ the frontier. With the Laredans’ full approval, of course.”

“King Goraldi is a doddering fool!” said Dom Paulo. “Wasn’t he warned against Hannegan’s treachery?”

The messenger smiled. “The Vatican diplomatic service always respects state secrets if we happen to learn them. Lest we be accused of espionage, we are always careful about—”

“Was he warned?” the abbot demanded again.

“Of course. Goraldi said the papal legate was lying to him; he accused the Church of fomenting dissension among the allies of the Holy Scourge, in an attempt to promote the Pope’s temporal power. The idiot even told Hannegan about the legate’s warning.”

Dom Paulo winced and whistled. “So Hannegan did what?”

The messenger hesitated. “I suppose I can tell you: Monsignor Apollo is under arrest. Hannegan ordered his diplomatic files seized. There’s talk in New Rome of placing the whole realm of Texarkana under interdict. Of course, Hannegan has already incurred *ipso facto* excommunication, but that doesn’t seem to bother many Texarkanans. As you surely know, the population is about eighty per cent cultist anyhow, and the Catholicism of the ruling class has always been a thin veneer.”

“So now Marcus,” the abbot murmured sadly. “And what of Thon Taddeo?”

“I don’t quite see how he expects to get across the Plains without picking up a few musket-ball holes just now. It seems clear why he hadn’t wanted to make the trip. But I know nothing about his progress, Father Abbot.”

Dom Paulo’s frown was pained. “If our refusal to send the material to his university leads to his being killed—”

“Don’t trouble your conscience about that, Father Abbot. Hannegan looks out for his own. I don’t know how, but I’m sure the Thon will get here.”

“The world could ill afford to lose him, I hear. Well—But tell me, why were you sent to report Hannegan’s plans to us? We’re in the empire of Denver, and I can’t see how this region is affected.”

“Ah, but I’ve told you only the beginning. Hannegan hopes to unite the continent eventually. After Laredo’s firmly leashed, he will have broken the encirclement that’s kept him in check. Then the next move will be against Denver.”

“But wouldn’t that involve supply lines across nomad country? It seems impossible.”

“It’s extremely difficult, and that’s what makes the next move certain. The Plains form a natural geographical barrier. If they were depopulated, Hannegan might regard his western frontier as secure as it stands. But the nomads have made it necessary for all states adjoining the Plains to tie up permanent military forces around the nomad territory for containment. The only way to subdue the Plains is to control both fertile strips, to the east and to the west.”

“But even so,” the abbot wondered, “the nomads—”

“Hannegan’s plan for them is devilish. Mad Bear’s warriors can easily cope with Laredo’s cavalry, but what they can’t cope with is a cattle plague. The Plains tribes don’t know it yet, but when Laredo set

out to punish the nomads for border raiding, the Laredans drove several hundred head of diseased cattle ahead to mingle with the nomads' herds. It was Hannegan's idea. The result will be famine, and then it will be easy to set tribe against tribe. We don't, of course, know all the details, but the goal is a nomad legion under a puppet chieftain, armed by Texarkana, loyal to Hannegan, ready to sweep west to the mountains. If it comes to pass, this region will get the first breakers."

"But *why*? Surely Hannegan doesn't expect the barbarians to be dependable troops, or capable of holding an empire once they finish mutilating it!"

"No, m'Lord. But the nomad tribes will be disrupted, Denver will be shattered. Then Hannegan can pick up the pieces,"

"To do what with them? It couldn't be a very rich empire."

"No, but secure on all flanks. He might then be in a better position to strike east or northeast. Of course, before it comes to that, his plans may collapse. But whether they collapse or not, this region may well be in danger of being overrun in the not-too-distant future. Steps should be taken to secure the abbey within the next few months. I have instructions to discuss with you the problem of keeping the Memorabilia safe."

Dom Paulo felt the blackness beginning to gather. After twelve centuries, a little hope had come into the world—and then came an illiterate prince to ride roughshod over it with a barbarian horde and . . .

His fist exploded onto the desktop. "We kept them outside our walls for a thousand years," he growled, "and we can keep them out for another thousand. This abbey was under siege three times during the Bayring influx, and once again during the Vissarionist schism. We'll keep the books safe. We've kept them that way for quite some time."

"But there is an added hazard these days, m'Lord."

"What may that be?"

"A bountiful supply of gunpowder and grapeshot."

The Feast of the Assumption had come and gone, but still there was no word of the party from Texarkana. Private votive masses for pilgrims and travelers were beginning to be offered by the abbey's priests. Dom Paulo had ceased taking even a light breakfast, and it was whispered that he was doing penance for having invited the scholar at all, in view of the present danger on the Plains.

The watchtowers remained constantly manned. The abbot himself frequently climbed the wall to peer eastward.

Shortly before Vespers on the Feast of Saint Bernard, a novice reported seeing a thin and distant dust trail, but darkness was coming on, and no one else had been able to make it out. Soon, *Compline* and the *Salve Regina* were sung, but still no one appeared at the gates.

"It might have been their advance scout," suggested Prior Gault.

"It might have been Brother Watchman's imagination," countered Dom Paulo.

"But if they've camped just ten miles or so down the way—"

"We'd see their fire from the tower. It's a clear night."

"Still, Domne, after the moon rises, we could send a rider—"

"Oh, no. That's a good way to get shot by mistake. If it's really them, they've probably kept their fingers on their triggers for the whole trip, especially at night. It can wait until dawn."

It was late the following morning when the expected party of horsemen appeared out of the east. From the top of the wall Dom Paulo blinked and squinted across the hot and dry terrain, trying to focus myopic eyes on the distance. Dust from the horses' hooves was drifting away to the north. The party had stopped for a parley.

"I seem to be seeing twenty or thirty of them," the abbot complained, rubbing his eyes in annoyance. "Are there really so many?"

"Approximately," said Gault.

"How will we ever take care of them all?"

"I don't think we'll be taking care of the ones with the wolfskins, m'Lord Abbot," the younger priest said stiffly.

“Wolfskins?”

“Nomads, m’Lord.”

“Man the walls! Close the gates! Let down the shield! Break out the—”

“Wait, they’re not all nomads, Domne.”

“Oh?” Dom Paulo turned to peer again.

The parley was being ended. Men waved; the group split in two. The larger party galloped back toward the east. The remaining horsemen watched briefly, then reined around and trotted toward the abbey.

“Six or seven of them—some in uniform,” the abbot murmured as they drew closer.

“The thon and his party, I’m sure.”

“But with nomads? It’s a good thing I didn’t let you send a rider out last night. What were they doing with nomads?”

“It appeared that they came as guides,” Father Gault said darkly.

“How neighborly of the lion to lie down with the lamb!”

The riders approached the gates. Dom Paulo swallowed dryness. “Well, we’d better go welcome them, Father,” he sighed.

By the time the priests had descended from the wall, the travelers had reined up just outside the courtyard. A horseman detached himself from the others, trotted forward, dismounted, and presented his papers.

“Dom Paulo of Pecos, Abbas?”

The abbot bowed. “*Tibi adsum*. Welcome in the name of Saint Leibowitz, Thon Taddeo. Welcome in the name of his abbey, in the name of forty generations who’ve waited for you to come. Be at home. We serve you.” The words were heart-felt; the words had been saved for many years while awaiting this moment. Hearing a muttered monosyllable in reply, Dom Paulo looked up slowly.

For a moment his glance locked with the scholar’s. He felt the warmth quickly fade. Those icy eyes-cold and searching gray. Skeptical, hungry, and proud. They studied him as one might study a lifeless curio.

That this moment might be as a bridge across a gulf of twelve centuries, Paulo had fervently prayed—prayed too that through him the last martyred scientist of that earlier age would clasp hands with tomorrow. There was indeed a gulf; that much was plain. The abbot felt suddenly that he belonged not to this age at all, that he had been left stranded somewhere on a sandbar in Time’s river, and that there wasn’t really ever a bridge at all.

“Come,” he said gently. “Brother Visclair will attend to your horses.”

When he had seen the guests installed in their lodgings and had retired to the privacy of his study, the smile on the face of the wooden saint reminded him unaccountably of the smirk of old Benjamin Eleazar, saying, “The children of this world are consistent too.”

## 18

““

N

ow even as in the time of Job,’ ” Brother Reader began from the refectory lectern:

“When the sons of God came to stand before the Lord, Satan also was present among them.

“And the Lord said to him: ‘Whence comest thou, Satan?’

“And Satan answering said, as of old: ‘I have gone round about the earth, and have walked through it.’

“And the Lord said to him: ‘Hast thou considered that simple and upright prince, my servant *Name*, hating evil and loving peace?’”

“And Satan answering said: ‘Doth *Name* fear God in vain?

For hast Thou not blessed his land with great wealth and made him mighty among nations? But stretch forth

Thy hand a little and decrease what he hath, and let his enemy be strengthened; then see if he blasphemeth Thee not to Thy face.'

"And the Lord said to Satan: "Behold what he hath, and lessen it. See thou to it.'

"And Satan went forth from the presence of God and returned into the world.

"Now the Prince *Name* was not as Holy Job, for when his land was afflicted with trouble and his people less rich than before, when he saw his enemy become mightier, he grew fearful and ceased to trust in God thinking unto himself: I must strike before the enemy overwhelmeth me without taking his sword in hand.

" 'And so it was in those days,' " said Brother Reader:

"that the princes of Earth had hardened their hearts against the Law of the Lord, and of their pride there was no end.

And each of them thought within himself that it was better for all to be destroyed than for the will of other princes to prevail over his. For the mighty of the Earth did contend among themselves for supreme power over all; by stealth, treachery, and deceit they did seek to rule, and of war they feared greatly and did tremble; for the Lord God had suffered the wise men of those times to learn the means by which the world itself might be destroyed, and into their hands was given the sword of the Archangel wherewith Lucifer had been cast down, that men and princes might fear God and humble themselves before the Most High. But they were not humbled.

"And Satan spoke unto a certain prince, saying: 'Fear not to use the sword, for the wise men have deceived you in saying that the world would be destroyed thereby. Listen not to the counsel of weaklings, for they fear you exceedingly, and they serve your enemies by staying your hand against them. Strike, and know that you shall be king over all.'

"And the prince did heed the word of Satan, and he summoned all of the wise men of that realm and called upon them to give him counsel as to the ways in which the enemy might be destroyed without bringing down the wrath upon his own kingdom. But most of the wise men said, 'Lord, it is not possible, for your enemies also have the sword which we have given you, and the fieriness of it is as the flame of Hell and as the fury of the sun-star from whence it was kindled.'

" 'Then thou shalt make me yet another which is yet seven times hotter than Hell itself,' commanded the prince, whose arrogance had come to surpass that of Pharaoh.

"And many of them said: 'Nay, Lord, ask not this thing of us; for even the smoke of such a fire, if we were to kindle it for thee, would cause many to perish.'

"Now the prince was angry because of their answer, and he suspected them of betraying him, and he sent his spies among them to tempt them and to challenge them; whereupon the wise men became afraid. Some among them changed their answers, that his wrath be not invoked against them. Three times he asked them, and three times they answered: 'Nay, Lord, even your own people will perish if you do this thing.' But one of the magi was like unto Judas Iscariot, and his testimony was crafty, and having betrayed his brothers, he lied to all the people, advising them not to fear the demon Fallout. The prince heeded this false wise man, whose name was Backeneth, and he caused spies to accuse many of the magi before the people. Being afraid, the less wise among the magi counseled the prince according to his pleasure, saying: 'The weapons may be used, only do not exceed such-and-such a limit, or all will surely perish.'

"And the prince smote the cities of his enemies with the new fire, and for three days and nights did his great catapults and metal birds rain wrath upon them. Over each city a sun appeared and was brighter than the sun of heaven, and immediately that city withered and melted as wax under the torch, and the people thereof did stop in the streets and their skins smoked and they became as fagots thrown on the coals. And when the fury of the sun had faded, the city was in flames; and a great thunder came out of the sky, like the great battering-ram *PIK-A-DON*, to crush it utterly. Poisonous fumes fell over all the land, and the land was aglow by night with the afterfire and the curse of the afterfire which caused a scurf on the skin and made the hair to fall and the blood to die in the veins.

"And a great stink went up from Earth even unto Heaven. Like unto Sodom and Gomorrah was the Earth and the ruins thereof, ever in the land of that certain prince, for his enemies did not withhold their vengeance, sending fire in turn to engulf his cities as their own. The stink of the carnage was exceedingly offensive to the Lord, Who spoke unto the prince, *Name*, saying: 'WHAT BURNT OFFERING IS THIS THAT YOU HAVE PREPARED BEFORE ME? WHAT IS THIS SAVOR THAT ARISES FROM THE PLACE OF HOLOCAUST? HAVE YOU MADE ME A HOLOCAUST OF SHEEP OR GOATS, OR OFFERED A CALF UNTO GOD?'

"But the prince answered him not, and God said: 'YOU HAVE MADE ME A HOLOCAUST OF MY SONS.'

"And the Lord slew him together with Blackeneth, the betrayer, and there was pestilence in the Earth, and madness was upon mankind, who stoned the wise together with the powerful, those who remained.

"But there was in that time a man whose name was Leibowitz, who, in his youth like the holy Augustine, had loved the wisdom of the world more than the wisdom of God. But now seeing that great knowledge, while good, had not saved the world, he turned in penance to the Lord, crying:"

The abbot rapped sharply on the table and the monk who had been reading the ancient account was immediately silent.

"And that is your only account of it?" asked Thon Taddeo, smiling tightly at the abbot across the

study.

“Oh, there are several versions. They differ in minor details. No one is certain which nation launched the first attack—not that it matters any more. The text Brother Reader was just reading was written a few decades after the death of Saint Leibowitz—probably one of the first accounts—after it became safe to write again. The author was a young monk who had not lived through the destruction himself; he got it second hand from Saint Leibowitz’ followers, the original memorizers and bookleggers, and he had a liking for scriptural mimicry. I doubt if a single *completely* accurate account of the Flame Deluge exists anywhere. Once it started, it was apparently too immense for any one person to see the whole picture.”

“In what land was this prince called Name, and this man Blackeneth?”

Abbot Paulo shook his head. “Not even the author of that account was certain. We’ve pieced enough together since that was written to know that even some of the *lesser* rulers of that time had got their hands on such weapons before the holocaust came. The situation he described prevailed in more than one nation. Name and Blackeneth were probably Legion.”

“Of course I’ve heard similar legends. It’s obvious that something rather hideous came to pass,” the *thon* stated; and then abruptly: “But when may I begin to examine—what do you call it?”

“The Memorabilia.”

“Of course.” He sighed and smiled absently at the image of the saint in the corner. “Would tomorrow be too soon?”

“You may begin at once, if you like,” said the abbot. “Feel free to come and go as you please.”

The vaults were dimly filled with candlelight, and only a few dark-robed scholar-monks moved about in the stalls. Brother Armbruster pored gloomily over his records in a puddle of lamplight in his cubbyhole at the foot of the stone stairway, and one lamp burned in the Moral Theology alcove where a robed figure huddled over ancient manuscript. It was after Prime, when most of the community labored at their duties about the abbey, in kitchen, classroom, garden, stable, and office, leaving the library nearly empty until late afternoon and time for *lectio divina*. This morning, however, the vaults were comparatively crowded.

Three monks stood lounging in the shadows behind the new machine. They kept their hands tucked in their sleeves and watched a fourth monk who stood at the foot of the stairs. The fourth monk gazed patiently up toward a fifth monk who stood on the landing and watched the entrance to the stairway.

Brother Kornhoer had brooded over his apparatus like an anxious parent, but when he could no longer find wires to wiggle and adjustments to make and remake, he retired to the Natural Theology alcove to read and wait. To speak a summary of last-minute instructions to his crew would be permissible, but he chose to maintain the hush, and if any thought of the coming moment as a personal climax crossed his mind as he waited, the monastic inventor’s expression gave no hint of it. Since the abbot himself had not bothered to watch a demonstration of the machine, Brother Kornhoer betrayed no symptoms of expecting applause from any quarter, and he had even overcome his tendency to glance reproachfully at Dom Paulo.

A low hiss from the stairway alerted the basement again, although there had been several earlier false alarms. Clearly no one had informed the illustrious *thon* that a marvelous invention awaited his inspection in the basement. Clearly, if it had been mentioned to him at all, its importance had been minimized. Obviously, Father Abbot was seeing to it that they all cooled their heels. These were the wordless significances exchanged by glances among them as they waited.

This time the warning hiss had not been in vain. The monk who watched from the head of the stairs turned solemnly and bowed toward the fifth monk on the landing below.

“*In principio Deus,*” he said softly.

The fifth monk turned and bowed toward the fourth monk at the foot of the stairs. “*Caelum et terram creavit,*” he murmured in turn.

The fourth monk turned toward the three who lounged behind the machine. “*Vacuuus autem erat mundus,*” he announced.

“*Cure tenebris in superficie profundorum,*” chorused the group.

"*Ortus est Dei Spiritus supra aquas,*" called Brother Forbore, returning his book to its shelf with a rattling of chains.

"*Gratias Creatori Spiritui,*" responded his entire team.

"*Dixitque Deus: 'FIAT LUX,'*" said the inventor in a tone of command.

The vigil on the stairs descended to take their posts. Four monks manned the treadmill. The fifth monk hovered over the dynamo. The sixth monk climbed the shelf-ladder and took his seat on the top rung, his head bumping the top of the archway. He pulled a mask of smoke-blackened oily parchment over his face to protect his eyes, then felt for the lamp fixture and its thumbscrew, while Brother Kornhoer watched him nervously from below.

"*Et lux ergo facta est,*" he said when he had found the screw.

"*Lucem esse bonam Deus vidit,*" the inventor called to the fifth monk.

The fifth monk bent over the dynamo with a candle for one last look at the brush contacts. "*Et secrevit lucem a tenebris,*" he said at last, continuing the lesson.

"*Lucem appellavit 'diem,'*" chorused the treadmill team, "*et tenebras 'noctes,'*" "Whereupon they set their shoulders to the turnstile beams.

Axles creaked and groaned. The wagon-wheel dynamo began to spin, its low whirl becoming a moan and then a whine as the monks strained and grunted at the drive-mill. The guardian of the dynamo watched anxiously as the spokes blurred with speed and became a film. "*Vespere occaso,*" he began, then paused to lick two fingers and touch them to the contacts. A spark snapped.

"*Lucifer!*" he yelped, leaping back, then finished lamely: "*ortus est et primo die.*"

"CONTACT!" said Brother Kornhoer, as Dom Paulo, Thon Taddeo and his clerk descended the stairs.

The monk on the ladder struck the arc. A sharp spffft!—and blinding light flooded the vaults with a brilliance that had not been seen in twelve centuries.

The group stopped on the stairs. Thon Taddeo gasped an oath in his native tongue. He retreated a step. The abbot, who had neither witnessed the testing of the device nor credited extravagant claims, blanched and stopped speech in mid-sentence. The clerk froze momentarily in panic and suddenly fled, screaming "Fire!"

The abbot made the sign of the cross. "I had not known!" he whispered.

The scholar, having survived the first shock of the flare, probed the basement with his gaze, noticing the drive-mill, the monks who strained at its beams. His eyes traveled along the wrapped wires, noticed the monk on the ladder, measured the meaning of the wagon-wheel dynamo and the monk who stood waiting, with downcast eyes, at the foot of the stairs.

"Incredible!" he breathed.

The monk at the foot of the stairs bowed in acknowledgment and depreciation. The blue-white glare cast knife-edge shadows in the room, and the candle flames became blurred wisps in the tide of light.

"Bright as a thousand torches," breathed the scholar. "It must be an ancient-but no! Unthinkable!"

He moved on down the stairs like a man in a trance. He stopped beside Brother Kornhoer and gazed at him curiously for a moment, then stepped onto the basement floor. Touching nothing, asking nothing, peering at everything, he wandered about the machinery, inspecting the dynamo, the wiring, the lamp itself.

"It just doesn't seem possible, but—"

The abbot recovered his senses and descended the stairs.

"You're dispensed from silence!" he whispered at Brother Kornhoer. "Talk to him. I'm—a little dazed."

The monk brightened. "You like it, m'Lord Abbot?"

"Ghastly," wheezed Dom Paulo.

The inventor's countenance sagged.

"It's a shocking way to treat a guest! It frightened the thon's assistant out of his wits. I'm mortified!"



"Well, it *is* rather bright."

"Hellish! Go talk to him while I think of a way to apologize."

But the scholar had apparently made a judgment on the basis of his observations, for he stalked toward them swiftly. His face seemed strained, and his manner crisp.

"A lamp of electricity," he said. "How have you managed to keep it hidden for all these centuries! After all these years of trying to arrive at a theory of—" He choked slightly, and seemed to be fighting for self-control, as if he had been the victim of a monstrous practical joke. "*Why* have you hidden it? Is there some religious significance—And what—" Complete confusion stopped him. He shook his head and looking around as if for an escape.

"You misunderstand," the abbot said weakly, catching at Bother Kornhoer's arm. "For the love of God, Brother, *explain!*"

But there was no balm to soothe an affront to professional pride—then or in any other age.

## 19

# A

fter the unfortunate incident in the basement, the abbot sought by every conceivable means to make amends for that unhappy moment. Thon Taddeo gave no outward sign of rancor, and even offered his hosts an apology for his spontaneous judgment of the incident, after the inventor of the device had given the scholar a detailed account of its recent design and manufacture. But the apology succeeded only in convincing the abbot further that the blunder had been serious. It put the thon in the position of a mountaineer who has scaled an "unconquered" height only to find a rival's initials carved in the summit rock—and the rival hadn't told him in advance. It must have been shattering for him, Dom Paulo thought, because of the way it was handled.

If the thon had not insisted (with a firmness perhaps born of embarrassment) that its light was of a superior quality, sufficiently bright even for close scrutiny of brittle and age-worn documents which tended to be indecipherable by candlelight, Dom Paulo would have removed the lamp from the basement immediately. But Thon Taddeo had insisted that he liked it—only to discover, then, that it was necessary to keep at least four novices or postulants continuously employed at cranking the dynamo and adjusting the arc-gap; thereupon, he begged that the lamp be removed—but then it was Paulo's turn to become insistent that it remain in place.

So it was that the scholar began his researches at the abbey, continuously aware of the three novices who toiled at the drive-mill and the fourth novice who invited glare-blindness atop the ladder to keep the lamp burning and adjusted—a situation which caused the Poet to versify mercilessly concerning the demon Embarrassment and the outrages he perpetrated in the name of penitence or appeasement.

For several days the thon and his assistant studied the library itself, the files, the monastery's records apart from the Memorabilia—as if by determining the validity of the oyster, they might establish the possibility of the pearl. Brother Kornhoer discovered the thon's assistant on his knees in the entrance of the refectory, and for a moment he entertained the impression that the fellow was performing some special devotion before the image of Mary above the door, but a rattle of tools put an end to the illusion. The assistant laid a carpenter's level across the entranceway and measured the concave depression worn in the floor stones by centuries of monastic sandals.

"We're looking for ways of determining dates," he told Kornhoer when questioned. "This seemed like a good place to establish a standard for rate of wear, since the traffic's easy to estimate. Three meals per man per day since the stones were laid."

Kornhoer could not help being impressed by their thoroughness; the activity mystified him. "The abbey's architectural records are complete," he said. "They can tell you exactly when each building and wing was added. Why not save your time?"

The man glanced up innocently. "My master has a saying: 'Nayol is without speech, and therefore never lies.' "

"Nayol?"

"One of the Nature gods of the Red River people. He means it figuratively, of course. Objective evidence is the ultimate authority. Records may lie, but Nature is incapable of it." He noticed the monk's expression and added hastily:

"No canard is implied. It is simply a doctrine of the thon's that everything must be cross-referenced to the objective."

"A fascinating notion," murmured Kornhoer, and bent down to examine the man's sketch of a cross-section of the floor's concavity. "Why, it's shaped like what Brother Majek calls a normal distribution curve. How strange."

"Not strange. The probability of a footstep deviating from the center-line would tend to follow the normal error function."

Kornhoer was enthralled. "I'll call Brother Majek," he said.

The abbot's interest in his guests' inspection of the premises was less esoteric. "Why," he demanded of Gault, "are they making detailed drawings of our fortifications?"

The prior looked surprised. "I hadn't heard of it. You mean Thon Taddeo—"

"No. The officers that came with him. They're going about it quite systematically."

"How did you find out?"

"The Poet told me."

"The Poet! Hah!"

"Unfortunately, he was telling the truth this time. He pick-pocketed one of their sketches."

"You have it?"

"No, I made him return it. But I don't like it. It's ominous."

"I suppose the Poet asked a price for the information?"

"Oddly enough, he didn't. He took an instant dislike to the thon. He's gone around muttering to himself ever since they came."

"The Poet has always muttered."

"But not in a serious vein."

"Why do you suppose they're making the drawings?"

Paulo made a grim month. "Unless we find out otherwise, we'll assume their interest is recondite and professional. As a walled citadel, the abbey has been a success. It's never been taken by siege or assault, and perhaps their professional admiration is aroused."

Father Gault gazed speculatively across the desert toward the east. "Come to think of it; if an army meant to strike west across the plains, they'd probably have to establish a garrison somewhere in this region before marching on Denver." He thought for a few moments and began to look alarmed. "And here they'd have a fortress ready-made!"

"I'm afraid that's occurred to them."

"You think they were sent as spies?"

"No, no! I doubt if Hannegan himself has ever heard of us. But they are here, and they are officers, and they can't help looking around and getting ideas. And now very likely Hannegan is *going* to hear about us."

"What do you intend doing?"

"I don't know yet."

"Why not talk to Thon Taddeo about it?"

"The officers aren't his servants. They were only sent as an escort to protect him. What can he do?"

"He's Hannegan's kinsman, and he has influence."

The abbot nodded. "I'll try to think of a way to approach him on the matter. We'll watch what's going on for a while first, though."

In the days that followed, Thon Taddeo completed his study of the oyster and, apparently satisfied that it was not a disguised clam, focused his attention on the pearl. The task was not simple.

Quantities of facsimile copy were scrutinized. Chains rattled and clanked as the more precious books came down from their shelves. In the case of partially damaged or deteriorated originals, it seemed unwise to trust the facsimile-maker's interpretation and eyesight. The actual manuscripts dating back to Leibowitzian times which had been sealed in airtight casks and locked in special storage vaults for indefinitely long preservation were then brought out.

The thon's assistant assembled several pounds of notes. After the fifth day of it, Thon Taddeo's pace quickened, and his manner reflected the eagerness of a hungry hound catching scent of tasty game.

"Magnificent!" He vacillated between jubilation and amused incredulity. "Fragments from a twentieth century physicist! The equations are even consistent."

Kornhoer peered over his shoulder. "I've seen that," he said breathlessly. "I could never make heads or tails of it. Is the subject matter important?"

"I'm not sure yet. The mathematics is beautiful, *beautiful!* Look here—this expression—notice the extremely contracted term. This thing under the radical sign—it looks like the product of two derivatives, but it really represents a whole set of derivatives."

"How?"

"The indices permute into an expanded expression; otherwise, it couldn't possibly represent a line integral, as the author says it is. It's lovely. And see here—this simple-looking expression. The simplicity is deceptive. It obviously represents not one, but a whole system of equations, in a very contracted form. It took me a couple of days to realize that the author was thinking of the relationships—not just of quantities to quantities—but of whole systems to other systems. I don't yet know all the physical quantities involved, but the sophistication of the mathematics is just—just quietly superb! If it's a hoax, it's inspired! If it's authentic, we may be in unbelievable luck. In either case, it's magnificent. I must see the earliest possible copy of it."

Brother Librarian groaned as yet another lead-sealed cask was rolled out of storage for unsealing. Armbruster was not impressed by the fact that the secular scholar, in two days, had unraveled a bit of a puzzle that had been lying around, a complete enigma, for a dozen centuries. To the custodian of the Memorabilia, each unsealing represented another decrease in the probable lifetime of the contents of the cask, and he made no attempt to conceal his disapproval of the entire proceeding. To Brother Librarian, whose task in life was the preservation of books, the principal reason for the existence of books was that they might be preserved perpetually. Usage was secondary, and to be avoided if it threatened longevity.

Thon Taddeo's enthusiasm for his task waxed stronger as the days passed, and the abbot breathed easier as he watched the thon's earlier skepticism melt away with each new perusal of some fragmentary pre-Deluge science text. The scholar had not made any clear assertions about the intended scope of his investigation; perhaps, at first, his aim had been vague, but now he went about his work with the crisp precision of a man following a plan. Sensing the dawn of something, Dom Paulo decided to offer the cock a perch for crowing, in case the bird felt an impulse to announce a coming daybreak.

"The community has been curious about your labors," he told the scholar. "We'd like to hear about it, if you don't mind discussing it. Of course we've all heard of your theoretical work at your own collegium, but it's too technical for most of us to understand. Would it be possible for you to tell us something about it in—oh, general terms that non-specialists might understand? The community has been grumping at me because I hadn't invited you to lecture; but I thought you might prefer to get the feel of the place first. Of course if you'd rather not—"

The thon's gaze seemed to clamp calipers on the abbot's cranium and measure it six ways. He smiled doubtfully.

"You'd like me to explain our work in the simplest possible language?"

"Something like that, if it's possible."

"That's just it." He laughed. "The untrained man reads a paper on natural science and thinks; 'Now why couldn't he explain this in simple language.' He can't seem to realize that what he tried to read was the simplest possible language—for that subject matter. In fact, a great deal of natural philosophy is simply a process of linguistic simplification—an effort to invent languages in which half a page of equations can express an idea which could not be stated in less than a thousand pages of so-called 'simple' language. Do I make myself clear?"

"I think so. Since you do make yourself clear, perhaps you could tell us about that aspect of it, then. Unless the suggestion is premature—as far as your work with the Memorabilia is concerned."

"Well, no. We now have a fairly clear idea of where we're going and what we have to work with here. It will still take considerable time to finish of course. The pieces have to be fitted together, and they don't all belong to the same puzzle. We can't yet predict what we *can* glean from it, but we're fairly sure of what we *can't*. I'm happy to say it looks hopeful. I have no objection to explaining the general scope, but—" He repeated the doubtful shrug.

"What bothers you?"

The thon seemed mildly embarrassed. "Only an uncertainty about my audience. I would not wish to offend anyone's religious beliefs."

"But how could you? Isn't it a matter of natural philosophy? Of physical science?"

"Of course. But many people's ideas about the world have become colored with religious—well, what I mean is—"

"But if your subject matter is the physical world, how could you possibly offend? Especially this community. We've been waiting for a long time to see the world start taking an interest in itself again. At the risk of seeming boastful, I might point out that we have a few rather clever amateurs in natural science right here in the monastery. There's Brother Majek, and there's Brother Kornhoer—"

"Kornhoer!" The thon glanced up warily at the arc lamp and looked away blinking. "I can't understand it!"

"The *lamp*? But surely you—"

"No, no, not the lamp. The lamp's simple enough, once you got over the shock of seeing it really work. It *should* work. It would work on paper, assuming various undeterminables and guessing at some unavailable data. But the clean impetuous leap from the vague hypothesis to a working model—" The thon coughed nervously. "It's Kornhoer himself I don't understand. That gadget—" he wagged a forefinger at the dynamo "—is a standing broad-jump across about twenty years of preliminary experimentation, starting with an understanding of the principles. Kornhoer just dispensed with the preliminaries. You believe in miraculous interventions? I don't, but there you have a *real* case of it. Wagon wheels!" He laughed. "What could he do if he had a machine shop? I can't understand what a man like that is doing cooped up in a monastery."

"Perhaps Brother Kornhoer should explain *that* to you," said Dom Paulo, laying to keep an edge of stiffness out of his tone.

"Yes, well—" Thon Taddeo's visual calipers began measuring the old priest again. "If you really feel that no one would take offense at hearing non-traditional ideas, I would be glad to discuss our work. But some of it may conflict with established preju—uh—established opinion."

"Good! Then it should be fascinating."

A time was agreed upon, and Dom Paulo felt relief. The esoteric gulf between Christian monk and secular investigator of Nature would surely be narrowed by a free exchange of ideas, he felt. Kornhoer had already narrowed it slightly, had he not? More communication, not less, was probably the best therapy for easing any tension. And the cloudy veil of doubt and mistrusting hesitancy would be parted, would it not? as soon as the thon saw that his hosts were not quite such unreasonable intellectual reactionaries as the scholar seemed to suspect. Paulo felt some shame for his earlier misgivings. Patience, Lord, with a well-meaning fool, he prayed.

"But you can't ignore the officers and their sketchbooks," Gault reminded him.

F

rom the lectern in the refectory, the reader was intoning the announcements. Candlelight blanched the faces of the robed, legions who stood motionless behind their stools and waited for the beginning of the evening meal. The reader's voice echoed hollowly in the high vaulted dining room whose ceiling was lost in brooding shadows above the pools of candle-glow that spotted the wooden tables.

"The Reverend Father Abbot has commanded me to announce," called the reader, "that the rule of abstinence for today is dispensed at tonight's meal. We shall have guests, as you may have heard. All religious may partake of tonight's banquet in honor of Thon Taddeo and his group; you may eat meat. Conversation—if you'll keep it quiet—will be permitted during the meal."

Suppressed vocal noises, not unlike strangled cheers, came from the ranks of the novices. The tables were set. Food had not yet made an appearance, but large dining trays replaced the usual mush bowls, kindling appetites with hints of a feast. The familiar milk mugs stayed in the pantry, their places taken for tonight by the best wine cups. Roses were scattered along the boards.

The abbot stopped in the corridor to wait for the reader to finish reading. He glanced at the table set for himself, Father Gault, the honored guest, and his party. Bad arithmetic again in the kitchen, he thought. Eight places had been set. Three officers, the thon and his assistant, and the two priests made seven—unless, in some unlikely case, Father Gault had asked Brother Kornhoer to sit with them. The reader concluded the announcements, and Dom Paulo entered the hall.

*"Flectamus genua,"* intoned the reader.

The robed legions genuflected with military precision as the abbot blessed his flock.

*"Levate."*

The legions arose. Dom Paulo took his place at the special table and glanced back toward the entrance. Gault should be bringing the others. Previously their meals had been served in the guesthouse rather than the refectory, to avoid subjecting them to the austerity of the monks' own frugal fare.

When the guests came, he looked around for Brother Kornhoer, but the monk was not with them.

"Why the eighth place setting?" he murmured to Father Gault when they had taken their places.

Gault looked blank and shrugged.

The scholar filled the place on the abbot's right and the others fell in toward the foot of the table, leaving the place on his left empty. He turned to beckon Kornhoer to join them, but the reader began intoning the preface before he could catch the monk's eye.

*"Oremus,"* answered the abbot, and the legions bowed.

During the blessing, someone sipped quietly into the seat on the abbot's left. The abbot frowned but did not look up to identify the culprit during the prayer.

•.. *et Spiritus Sancti, Amen.*

*"Sedete,"* called the reader, and the ranks began seating themselves.

The abbot glanced sharply at the figure on his left.

"Poet!"

The bruised lily bowed extravagantly and smiled. "Good evening, Sires, learned Thon, distinguished hosts," he orated.

"What are we having tonight? Roast fish and honeycombs in honor of the temporal resurrection that's upon us? Or have you, m'Lord Abbot, finally cooked the goose of the mayor of the village?"

"I would like to cook—"

"Ha!" quoth the Poet, and turned affably toward the scholar. "Such culinary excellence one enjoys

in this place, Thon Taddeo! You should join us more often. I suppose they are feeding you nothing but roast pheasant and unimaginative beef in the guesthouse. A shame! Here one fares better. I do hope Brother Chef has his usual gusto tonight, his inward flame, his enchanted touch. Ah . . .” The Poet rubbed his hands and smirked hungrily. “Perhaps we shall have his inspired Mock Pork with Maize a la Friar John, eh?”

“It sounds interesting,” said the scholar. “What is it?”

“Greasy armadillo with parched corn, boiled in donkey milk. A regular Sunday special.”

“Poet!” snapped the abbot; then to the thon: “I apologize for his presence. He wasn’t invited.”

The scholar surveyed the Poet with detached amusement.

“M’Lord Hannegan too, keeps several court fools,” he told Paulo. “I’m familiar with the species. You needn’t apologize for him.”

The Poet sprang up from his stool and bowed deeply before the thon. “Allow me instead to apologize for the abbot, Sire!” he cried with feeling.

He held the bow for a moment. They waited for him to finish his foolishness. Instead, he shrugged suddenly, sat down, and speared a smoking fowl from the platter deposited before them by a postulant. He tore off a leg and bit into it with gusto. They watched him with puzzlement.

“I suppose you’re right in not accepting my apology for him,” he said to the thon at last.

The scholar reddened slightly.

“Before I throw you out, worm,” said Gault, “let’s probe the depths of this iniquity.”

The Poet waggled his head and munched thoughtfully.

“It’s pretty deep, all right,” he admitted.

Someday Gault is going to strangle himself on that foot of his, thought Dom Paulo.

But the younger priest was visibly annoyed, and sought to draw the incident out *ad absurdum* in order to find grounds for quashing the fool. “Apologize at length for your host, Poet,” he commanded. “And explain yourself as you go.”

“Drop it, Father, drop it,” Paulo said hastily.

The Poet smiled graciously at the abbot. “That’s all right, m’Lord,” he said. “I don’t mind apologizing for you in the least. You apologize for me, I apologize for you, and isn’t that a fitting maneuver in charity and good will? Nobody need apologize for himself—which is always so humiliating. Using my system, however, everyone gets apologized for, and nobody has to do his own apologizing.”

Only the officers seemed to find the Poet’s remarks amusing. Apparently the expectation of humor was enough to produce the illusion of humor, and the comedian could elicit laughter with gesture and expression, regardless of what he said. Thon Taddeo wore a dry smirk, but it was the kind of look a man might give a clumsy performance by a trained animal.

“And so,” the Poet was continuing, “if you would but allow me to serve as your humble helper, m’Lord, you would never have to eat your own crow. As your Apologetic Advocate, for example, I might be delegated by you to offer contrition to important guests for the existence of bedbugs. And to bedbugs for the abrupt change of fare.”

The abbot glowered and resisted an impulse to grind the Poet’s bare toe with the heel of his sandal. He kicked the fellow’s ankle, but the fool persisted.

“I would assume all the blame for you, of course,” he said, noisily chewing white meat. “It’s a fine system, one which I was prepared to make available to you too, Most Eminent Scholar. I’m sure you would have found it convenient. I have been given to understand that systems of logic and methodology must be devised and perfected before science advances. And my system of negotiable and transferable apologetics would have been of particular value to you, Thon Taddeo.”

“Would have?”

“Yes. It’s a pity. Somebody stole my blue-headed goat.”

“Blue-headed goat?”

“He had a head as bald as Hannegan’s, Your Brilliance, and blue as the tip of Brother Armbruster’s nose. I meant to make you a present of the animal but some dastard filched him before you came”

The abbot clenched his teeth and held his heel poised over the Poet's toe. Thon Taddeo was frowning slightly, but he seemed determined to untangle the Poet's obscure skein of meaning.

"Do we need a blue-headed goat?" he asked his clerk.

"I can see no pressing urgency about it, sir," said the clerk.

"But the need is obvious!" said the Poet. "They say you are writing equations that will one day remake the world. They say a new light is dawning. If there's to be light, then somebody will have to be blamed for the darkness that's past."

"Ah, thence the goat." Thon Taddeo glanced at the abbot. "A sickly jest. Is it the best he can do?"

"You'll notice he's unemployed. But let us talk of something sensible—"

"No, no, no, *no!*" objected the poet. "You mistake my meaning, Your Brilliance. The goat is to be enshrined and honored, not blamed! Crown him with the crown Saint Leibowitz sent you, and thank him for the light that's rising. Then blame Leibowitz, and drive *him* into the desert. That way you won't have to wear the second crown. The one with thorns. Responsibility, it's called."

The Poet's hostility had broken out into the open, and he was no longer trying to seem humorous. The abbot gazed at him icily. The abbot's heel wavered again over the Poet's toe, and again had reluctant mercy on it.

"And when," said the Poet, "your patron's army comes to seize this abbey, the goat can be placed in the courtyard and taught to bleat "There's been nobody here but me, nobody here but me" whenever a stranger comes by."

One of the officers started up from his stool with an angry grunt, his hand reaching reflexively for his saber. He broke the hilt dear of the scabbard, and six inches of steel glistened a warning at the Poet. The abbot seized his wrist and tried to force the blade back in the sheath, but it was like tugging at the arm of a marble statue.

"Ah! A swordsman as well as a draftsman!" taunted the Poet, apparently unafraid of dying. "Your sketches of the abbey's defenses show such promise of artistic—"

The officer barked an oath and the blade leaped clean of the scabbard. His comrades seized him, however, before he could lunge. An astonished rumble came from the congregation as the startled monks came to their feet. The Poet was still smiling blandly.

"—artistic growth," he continued. "I predict that one day your drawing of the underwall tunnels will be hung in a museum of fine—"

A dull *chunk!* came from under the table. The Poet paused in mid-bite, lowered the wishbone from his mouth, and turned slowly white. He munched, swallowed, and continued to lose color. He gazed abstractly upward.

"You're grinding it off," he muttered out of the side of his mouth.

"Through talking?" the abbot asked, and continued to grind.

"I think I have a bone in my throat," the Poet admitted.

"You wish to be excused?"

"I am afraid I must."

"A pity. We shall miss you." Paulo gave the toe one last grind for good measure. "You may go then."

The Poet exhaled gustily, blotted his mouth, and arose. He drained his wine cup and inverted it in the center of the tray. Something in his manner compelled them to watch him. He pulled down his eyelid with one thumb, bent his head over his cupped palm and pressed. The eyeball popped out into his palm, bringing a choking sound from the Texarkans who were apparently unaware of the Poet's artificial orb.

"Watch him carefully," said the Poet to the glass eye, and then deposited it on the upturned base of his wine cup where it stared balefully at Thon Taddeo. "Good evening, m'Lords," he said cheerfully to the group, and marched away.

The angry officer muttered a curse and struggled to free himself from the grasp of his comrades.

"Take him back to his quarters and sit on him till he cools off," the abbot told them. "And better see that he doesn't get a chance at that lunatic."

"I'm mortified," he said to the abbot, when the livid guardsman was hauled away. "They aren't my

servants, and I can't give them orders. But I can promise you he will grovel for this. And if he refuses to apologize and leave immediately, he'll have to match that hasty sword against mine before noon tomorrow."

"No bloodshed!" begged the priest. "It was nothing. Let's all forget it." His hands were trembling, his countenance gray.

"He will make apology and go," Thon Taddeo insisted, "or I shall offer to kill him. Don't worry, he doesn't dare fight me because if he won, Hannegan would have him impaled on the public stake while they forced his wife to—but never mind that. He'll grovel and go. Just the same, I'm deeply ashamed that such a thing could have come about."

"I should have had the Poet thrown out as soon as he showed up. He provoked the whole thing, and I failed to stop it. The provocation was dear."

"Provocation? By the fanciful lie of a vagrant fool? Josard reacted as if the Poet's charges were true."

"Then you don't know that they *are* preparing a comprehensive report on the military value of our abbey as a fortress?"

The scholar's jaw fell. He stared from one priest to the other in apparent unbelief.

"Can this be true?" he asked after a long silence.

The abbot nodded.

"And you've permitted us to stay."

"We keep no secrets. Your companions are welcome to make such a study if they wish. I would not presume to ask *why* they want the information. The Poet's assumption, of course, was merest fantasy."

"Of course," the thon said weakly, not looking at his host.

"Surely your prince has no aggressive ambitions in this region, as the Poet hinted."

"Surely not."

"And even if he did, I'm sure he would have the wisdom at least the wise counselors to lead him—to understand that our abbey's value as a storehouse of ancient wisdom is many times greater than its value as a citadel."

The thon caught the note of pleading, the undercurrent of supplication for help, in the priest's voice, and he seemed to brood on it, picking lightly at his food and saying nothing for a time.

"We'll speak of this matter again before I return to the collegium," he promised quietly.

A pall had fallen on the banquet, but it began to lift during the group singing in the courtyard after the meal, and it vanished entirely when the time came for the scholar's lecture in the Great Hall. Embarrassment seemed at an end, and the group had resumed a surface cordiality.

Dom Paulo led the thon to the lectern; Gault and the don's clerk followed, joining them on the platform. Applause rang out heartily following the abbot's introduction of the thon; the hush that followed suggested the silence of a courtroom awaiting a verdict. The scholar was no gifted orator, but the verdict proved satisfying to the monastic throng.

"I have been amazed at what we've found here," he told them. "A few weeks ago I would not have believed, *did not* believe, that records such as you have in your Memorabilia could still be surviving from the fall of the last mighty civilization. It is still hard to believe, but evidence forces us to adopt the hypothesis that the documents are authentic. Their survival here is incredible enough; but even more fantastic, *to me*, is the fact that they have gone unnoticed during *this* century, until now. Lately there have been men capable of appreciating their potential value—and not only myself. What Thon Kaschler might have done with them while he was alive!—even seventy years ago."

The sea of monks' faces was alight with smiles upon hearing so favorable a reaction to the Memorabilia from one so gifted as the thon. Paulo wondered why they failed to sense the faint undercurrent of resentment—or was it suspicion?—in the speaker's tone. "Had I known of these sources ten years ago," he was saying, "much of my work in optics would have been unnecessary." *Ahha!* thought the abbot, *so that's* it. Or at least part of it. He's finding out that some of his discoveries are only rediscoveries, and it leaves a bitter taste. But surely he must know that never during his lifetime can he be



more than a recoverer of lost works; however brilliant, he can only do what others before him had done. And so it would be, inevitably, until the world became as highly developed as it had been before the Flame Deluge.

Nevertheless, it was apparent that Thon Taddeo was impressed.

"My time here is limited," he went on, "From what I have seen, I suspect that it will take twenty specialists several decades to finish milking the Memorabilia for understandable information. Physical science normally proceeds by inductive reasoning tested by experiment; but here the task is deductive. From a few broken bits of general principles, we must attempt to grasp particulars. In some cases, it may prove impossible. For example—" He paused for a moment to produce a packet of notes and thumbed through them briefly. "Here is a quotation which I found buried downstairs. It's from a four-page fragment of a book which may have been an advanced physics text. A few of you may have seen it."

"—and if the space terms predominate in the expression for the interval between event-points, the interval is said to be space-like, since it is then possible to select a co-ordinate system—belonging to an observer with an admissible velocity—in which the events appear simultaneous, and therefore separated only spatially. If, however, the interval is timelike the events cannot be simultaneous in any co-ordinate system, but there exists a co-ordinate system in which the space terms will vanish entirely, so that the separation between events will be purely temporal, *id est*, occurring at the same place, but at different times. Now upon examining the extremals of the real interval—" "

He looked up with a whimsical smile. "Has anyone here looked at that reference lately?"

The sea of faces remained blank.

"Anyone ever remember seeing it?"

Kornhoer and two others cautiously lifted their hands.

"Anyone know what it means?"

The hands quickly went down.

The thon chuckled. "It's followed by a page and a half of mathematics which I won't try to read, but it treats some of our fundamental concepts as if they weren't basic at all, but evanescent appearances that change according to one's point of view. It ends with the word '*therefore*' but the rest of the page is burned, and the conclusion with it. The reasoning is impeccable, however, and the mathematics quite elegant, so that I can write the conclusion myself. It seems the conclusion of a madman. It began with assumptions, however, which appeared equally mad. Is it a hoax? If it isn't, what is its place in the whole scheme of the science of the ancients? What precedes it as prerequisite to understanding? What follows, and how can it be tested? Questions I can't answer. This is only one example of the many enigmas posed by these papers you've kept so long. Reasoning which touches experiential reality nowhere is the business of angelologists and theologians, not of physical scientists. And yet such papers as these describe systems which touch our experience nowhere. Were they within the experimental reach of the ancients? Certain references tend to indicate it. One paper refers to elemental transmutation—which we just recently established as theoretically impossible—and then it says 'experiment proves.' But *how*?"

"It may take generations to evaluate and understand some of these things. It is unfortunate that they must remain here in this inaccessible place, for it will take a concentrated effort by numerous scholars to make meaning of them. I am sure you realize that your present facilities are inadequate—not to mention 'inaccessible' to the rest of the world."

Seated on the platform behind the speaker, the abbot began to glower, waiting for the worst. Thon Taddeo chose, however, to offer no proposals. But his remarks continued to make clear his feeling that such relics belonged in more competent hands than those of the monks of the Albertian Order of Saint Leibowitz, and that the situation as it prevailed was absurd. Perhaps sensing the growing uneasiness in the room, he soon turned to the subject of his immediate studies, which involved a more thorough investigation into the nature of light than had been made previously. Several of the abbey's treasures were proving to be of much help, and he hoped to devise soon an experimental means for testing his theories. After some discussion of the phenomenon of refraction, he paused, then said apologetically: "I hope none of this offends anybody's religious beliefs," and looked around quizzically. Seeing that their faces remained curious and bland, he continued for a time, then invited questions from the congregation.

"Do you mind a question from the platform?" asked the abbot.

"Not at all," said the scholar, looking a bit doubtful, as if thinking *et tu, Brute*.

"I was wondering what there is about the refrangible property of light that you thought might be offensive to religion?"

"Well—" The then paused uncomfortably. "Monsignor Apollo, whom you know, grew quite heated on the subject. He said that light could not possibly have been refrangible before the Flood, because the rainbow was supposedly—"

The room burst into roaring laughter, drowning the rest of the remark. By the time the abbot had waved them to silence, Thon Taddeo was beet red, and Dom Paulo had some difficulty in maintaining his own solemn visage.

"Monsignor Apollo is a good man, a good priest, but all men are apt to be incredible asses at times, especially outside their domains. I'm sorry I asked the question."

"The answer relieves me," said the scholar. "I seek no quarrels."

There were no further questions and the then proceeded to his second topic: the growth and the present activities of his collegium. The picture as he painted it seemed encouraging. The collegium was flooded with applicants who wanted to study at the institute. The collegium was assuming an educational function as well as an investigative one. Interest in natural philosophy and science was on the increase among the literate laity. The institute was being liberally endowed. Symptoms of revival and renaissance.

"I might mention a few of the current researches and investigations being conducted by our people," he went on.

"Following Bret's work on the behavior of gases, Thon Viche Mortoin is investigating the possibilities for the artificial production of ice. Thon Friider Halb is seeking a practical means for transmitting messages by electrical variations along a wire—" The list was long, and the monks appeared Impressed. Studios in many fields—medicine, astronomy, geology, mathematics, mechanics—were being undertaken. A few seemed impractical and ill-considered, but most seemed to promise rich rewards in knowledge and practical application. From Jejene's search for the Universal Nostrum to Bodalk's reckless assault on orthodox geometries, the collegium's activities exhibited a healthy hankering to pry open Nature's private files, locked since mankind had burned its institutional memories and condemned itself to cultural amnesia more than a millennium ago.

"In addition to these studies, Thon Maho Mahh is heading a project which seeks further information about the origin of the human species. Since this is primarily an archeological task, he asked me to search your library for any suggestive material on the subject, after I complete my own study here. However, perhaps I'd better not dwell on this at any length, since it's tending to cause controversy with the theologicans. But if there are any questions—"

A young monk who was studying for the priesthood stood up and was recognized by the then.

"Sir, I was wondering if you were acquainted with the suggestions of Saint Augustine on the subject?"

"I am not."

"A fourth century bishop and philosopher. He suggested that in the beginning, God created all things in their germinal causes, including the physiology of man, and that the germinal causes inseminate, as it were, the formless matter—which then gradually *evolved* into the more complex shapes, and eventually Man. Has this hypothesis been considered?"

The then's smile was condescending, although he did not openly brand the proposal childish. "I'm afraid it has not, but I shall look it up," he said, in a tone that indicated he would not.

"Thank you," said the monk, and sat down meekly.

"Perhaps the most daring research of all, however," continued the sage, "is being conducted by my friend Thon Esser Shon. It is an attempt to synthesize living matter. Then Esser hopes to create living protoplasm, using only six basic ingredients. This work could lead to—yes? You have a question?"

A monk in the third row had risen and was bowing toward the speaker. The abbot leaned forward to peer at him and recognized, with horror, that it was Brother Armbruster, the librarian.

"If you would do an old man the kindness," croaked the monk, dragging out his words in a plodding monotone. "This Thon Esser Shon—who limits himself to only six basic ingredients—is very interesting. I was wondering—are they permitting him to use both hands?"

"Why, I—" The then paused and frowned.

"And may I also inquire," Armbruster's dry voice dragged on, "whether this remarkable feat is to be performed from the sitting, standing, or prone position? Or perhaps on horseback while playing two trumpets?"

The novices snickered audibly. The abbot came quickly to his feet.

"Brother Armbruster, you have been warned. You are excommunicated from the common table until you make satisfaction. You may wait in the Lady Chapel."

The librarian bowed again and stole quietly out of the hall, his carriage humble, but his eyes triumphant. The abbot murmured apologetically to the scholar, but the thon's glance was suddenly chilly.

"In conclusion," he said, "a brief outline of what the world can expect, in my opinion, from the intellectual revolution that's just beginning." Eyes burning, he looked around at them, and his voice changed from casual to fervent rhythms.

"Ignorance has been our king. Since the death of empire, he sits unchallenged on the throne of Man. His dynasty is age-old. His right to rule is now considered legitimate. Past sages have affirmed it. They did nothing to unseat him.

"Tomorrow, a new prince shall rule. Men of understanding, men of science shall stand behind his throne, and the universe will come to know his might. His name is Truth. His empire shall encompass the Earth. And the mastery of Man over the Earth shall be renewed. A century from now, men will fly through the air in mechanical birds. Metal carriages will race along roads of man-made stone. There will be buildings of thirty stories, ships that go under the sea, machines to perform all works.

"And how will this come to pass?" He paused and lowered his voice. "In the same way all change comes to pass, I fear. And I am sorry it is so. It will come to pass by violence and upheaval, by flame and by fury, for no change comes calmly over the world."

He glanced around, for a soft murmur arose from the community.

"It will *be* so. We do not *will* it so.

"But *why*?"

"Ignorance is king. Many would not profit by his abdication. Many enrich themselves by means of his dark monarchy. They are his Court, and in his name they defraud and govern, enrich themselves and perpetuate their power. Even literacy they fear, for the written word is another channel of communication that might cause their enemies to become united. Their weapons are keen-honed, and they use them with skill. They will press the battle upon the world when their interests are threatened, and the violence which follows will last until the structure of society as it now exists is leveled to rubble, and a new society emerges. I am sorry: But that is how I see it."

The words brought a new pall over the room. Dom Paulo's hopes sank, for the prophecy gave form to the scholar's probable outlook. Thon Taddeo knew the military ambitions of his monarch. He had a choice: to approve of them, to disapprove of them, or to regard them as impersonal phenomena beyond his control like a flood, famine, or whirlwind.

Evidently, then, he accepted them as inevitable—to avoid having to make a moral judgment. *Let there be blood, iron and weeping...*

How could such a man thus evade his own conscience and disavow his responsibility—and so easily! the abbot stormed to himself.

But then the words came back to him. *For in those days, the Lord God had suffered the wise men to know the means by which the world itself might be destroyed...*

He also suffered them to know how it might be saved, and, as always, let them choose for themselves. And perhaps they had chosen as Thon Taddeo chooses. To wash their hands before the multitude. Look you to it. Lest they themselves be crucified.

And they had been crucified anyhow. Without dignity. Always for anybody anyhow is to get nailed on it and hang on it and if you drop off they beat...

There was sudden silence. The scholar had stopped talking.

The abbot blinked around the hall. Half the community was staring toward the entrance. At first his eyes could make out nothing.

“What is it?” he whispered to Gault.

“An old man with a beard and shawl,” hissed Gault. “It looks like—No, he wouldn’t—”

Dom Paulo arose and moved to the front of the dais to stare at the faintly defined shape in the shadows. Then he called out to it softly.

“Benjamin?”

The figure stirred. It drew its shawl tighter about spindly shoulders and hobbled slowly into the light. It stopped again, muttering to itself as it looked around the room; then its eyes found the scholar at the lectern.

Leaning on a crooked staff, the old apparition hobbled slowly toward the lectern, never taking its eyes from the man who stood behind it. Thon Taddeo looked humorously perplexed at first, but when no one stirred or spoke, he seemed to lose color as the decrepit vision came near him. The face of the bearded antiquity blazed with hopeful ferocity of some compelling passion that burned more furiously in him than the life principle long since due to depart.

He came close to the lectern, paused. His eyes twitched over the startled speaker. His mouth quivered. He smiled. He reached out one trembling hand toward the scholar. The thon drew back with a snort of revulsion.

The hermit was agile. He vaulted to the dais, dodged the lectern, and seized the scholar’s arm.

“What madness—”

Benjamin kneaded the arm while he stared hopefully into the scholar’s eyes.

His face clouded. The glow died. He dropped the arm. A great keening sigh came from the dry old lungs as hope vanished. The eternally knowing smirk of the Old Jew of the Mountain returned to his face. He turned to the community, spread his hands, shrugged eloquently.

“It’s still not Him,” he told them sourly, then hobbled away.

Afterwards, there was little formality.

## 21

# I

It was during the tenth week of Thon Taddeo’s visit that the messenger brought the black news. The head of the ruling dynasty of Laredo had demanded that Texarkanan troops be evacuated forthwith from the realm. The King died of poison that night, and a state of war was proclaimed between the states of Laredo and Texarkana. The war would be short-lived. It could with assurance be assumed that the war had ended the day after it had begun, and that Hannegan now controlled all lands and peoples from the Red River to the Rio Grande.

That much had been expected, but not the accompanying news.

Hannegan II, by Grace of God Mayor, Viceroy of Texarkana, Defender of the Faith, and Vaquero Supreme of the Plains, had, after finding Monsignor Marcus Apollo to be guilty of “treason” and espionage, caused the papal nuncio to be hanged, and then, while still alive to be cut down, drawn, quartered, and flayed, as an example to anyone else who might try to undermine the Mayor’s state. In pieces, the priest’s carcass had been thrown to the dogs.

The messenger hardly needed to add that Texarkana was under absolute interdict by a papal decree which contained certain vague but ominous allusions to *Regnans in Excelsis*, a sixteenth century bull ordering a monarch deposed. There was no news of Hannegan’s countermeasures, as yet.

On the Plains, the Laredan forces would now have to fight their way back home through the nomad tribes, only to lay down their arms at their own borders, for their nation and their kin were hostage.

"A tragic affair!" said Thon Taddeo, with an apparent degree of sincerity. "Because of my nationality, I offer to leave at once."

"Why?" Dom Paulo asked. "You don't approve of Hannegan's actions, do you?"

The scholar hesitated, then shook his head. He looked around to make certain no one overheard them. "Personally, I condemn them. But in public—" He shrugged. "There is the collegium to think of. If it were only a question of my *own* neck, well—"

"I understand."

"May I venture an opinion in confidence?"

"Of course."

"Then someone ought to warn New Rome against making idle threats. Hannegan's not above crucifying several dozen Marcus Apollos."

"Then some new martyrs will attain Heaven; New Rome doesn't make idle threats."

The thon sighed. "I supposed that you'd look at it that way, but I renew my offer to leave."

"Nonsense. Whatever your nationality, your common humanity makes you welcome."

But a rift had appeared. The scholar kept his own company afterward, seldom conversing with the monks. His relationship with Brother Kornhoer became noticeably formal, although the inventor spent an hour or two each day in servicing and inspecting the dynamo and the lamp, and keeping himself informed concerning the progress of the thon's work, which was now proceeding with unusual haste. The officers seldom ventured outside the guesthouse.

There were hints of an exodus from the region. Disturbing rumors kept coming from the Plains. In the village of Sanly Bowitts, people began discovering reasons to depart suddenly on pilgrimages or to visit in other lands. Even the beggars and vagrants were getting out of town. As always, the merchants and artisans were faced with the unpleasant choice of abandoning their property to burglars and looters or staying with it to see it looted.

A citizens' committee headed by the mayor of the village visited the abbey to request sanctuary for the townspeople in the event of invasion. "My final offer," said the abbot, after several hours of argument, "is this: we will take in all the women, children, invalids, and aged, without question. But as for men capable of bearing arms, we'll consider each case individually, and we may turn some of them away."

"Why?" the mayor demanded.

"What should be obvious, even to you!" Dom Paulo said sharply. "We may come under attack ourselves, but unless we're directly attacked, we're going to stay out of it. I'll not let this place be used by anybody as a garrison from which to launch a counterattack if the only attack is on the village itself. So in case of males able to bear arms, we'll have to insist on a pledge—to defend the abbey under our orders. And we'll decide in individual cases whether a pledge is trustworthy or not."

"It's unfair!" howled a committeeman. "You'll discriminate—"

"Only against those who can't be trusted. What's the matter? Were you hoping to hide a reserve force here? Well, it won't be allowed. You're not going to plant any part of a town militia out here. That's final."

Under the circumstances, the committee could not refuse any help offered. There was no further argument. Dom Paulo meant to take in anyone, when the time came, but for the present he meant to forestall plans by the village to involve the abbey in military planning. Later there would be officers from Denver with similar requests; they would be less interested in saving life than in saving their political regime. He intended to give them a similar answer. The abbey had been built as a fortress of faith and knowledge, and he meant to preserve it as such.

The desert began to crawl with wanderers out of the east. Traders, trappers, and herdsmen, in moving west, brought news from the Plains. The cattle plague was sweeping like wildfire among the herds of the nomads; famine seemed imminent. Laredo's forces had suffered a mutinous cleavage since the fall of the Laredan dynasty. Part of them were returning to their homeland as ordered, while the others set out under a grim vow to march on Texarkana and not stop until they took the head of Hannegan II or died in trying. Weakened by the split, the Laredans were being wiped out gradually by the hit-and-run assaults from Mad Bear's warriors who were thirsty for vengeance against those who had brought the

plague. It was rumored that Hannegan had generously offered to make Mad Bear's people his protected dependents, if they would swear fealty to "civilized" law, accept his officers into their councils, and embrace the Christian Faith. "Submit or starve" was the choice which fate and Hannegan offered the herdsman peoples. Many would choose to starve before giving allegiance to an agrarian-merchant state. Hongan Os was said to be roaring his defiance southward, eastward, and heavenward; he accomplished the latter by burning one shaman a day to punish the tribal gods for betraying him. He threatened to become a Christian if Christian gods would help slaughter his enemies.

It was during the brief visit of a party of shepherds that the Poet vanished from the abbey. Thon Taddeo was the first to notice the Poet's absence from the guesthouse and to inquire about the versifying vagrant.

Dom Paulo's face wrinkled in surprise. "Are you certain he's moved out?" he asked. "He often spends a few days in the village, or goes over to the mesa for an argument with Benjamin."

"His belongings are missing," said the thon "Everything's gone from his room."

The abbot made a wry mouth. "When the Poet leaves, that's a bad sign. By the way, of he's really missing, then I would advise you to take an immediate inventory of your own belongings."

The thon looked thoughtful "So that's where my boots—"

"No doubt."

"I set them out to be polished. They weren't returned. That was the same day he tried to batter down my door."

"Batter down—who the *Poet*?"

Thon Taddeo chuckled. "I'm afraid I've been having a little sport with him. I have his glass eye. You remember the night he left it on the refectory table?"

"Yes."

"I picked it up."

The thon opened his pouch, groped in it for a moment, then laid the Poet's eyeball on the abbot's desk. "He knew I had it, but I kept denying it. But we've had sport with him ever since, even to creating rumors that it was really the long-lost eyeball of the Bayring idol and ought to be returned to the museum. He became quite frantic after a time. Of course I had meant to return it before we go home. Do you suppose he'll return after we leave?"

"I doubt it," said the abbot, shuddering slightly as he glanced at the orb. "But I'll keep it for him, if you like. Although it's just as probable that he'd turn up in Texarkana looking for it there. He claims it's a potent talisman."

"How so?"

Dom Paulo smiled. "He says he can see much better when he's wearing it."

"What nonsense!" The thon paused; ever ready, apparently, to give any sort of outlandish premise at least a moment's consideration, he added: "Isn't it nonsense—unless filling the empty socket somehow affects the muscles of *both* sockets. Is that what he claims?"

"He just swears he can't see as well without it. He claims he has to have it for the perception of 'true meanings'—although it gives him blinding headaches when he wears it. But one never knows whether the Poet is speaking fact, fancy, or allegory. If fancy is clever enough, I doubt that the Poet would admit a difference between fancy and fact."

The thon smiled quizzically. "Outside my door the other day, he yelled that I needed it more than he did. That seems to suggest that he thinks of it as being, in itself, a potent fetish—good for anyone. I wonder why."

"He said you needed it? Oh ho!"

"What amuses you?"

"I'm sorry. He probably meant it as an insult. I'd better not try to explain the Poet's insult; it might make me seem a party to them."

"Not at all. I'm curious."

The abbot glanced at the image of Saint Leibowitz in the corner of the room. "The Poet used the eyeball as a running joke," he explained. "When he wanted to make a decision, or to think something

over, or to debate a point, he'd put the glass eye in the socket. He'd take it out again when he saw something that displeased him, when he was pretending to overlook something, or when he wanted to play stupid. When he wore it, his manner changed. The brothers began calling it 'the Poet's conscience,' and he went along with the joke. He gave little lectures and demonstrations on the advantages of a removable conscience. He'd pretend some frantic compulsion possessed him—something trivial, usually—like a compulsion aimed at a bottle of wine.

"Wearing his eye, he'd stroke the wine bottle, lick his lips, pant and moan, then jerk his hand away. Finally it would possess him again. He'd grab the bottle, pour about a thimbleful in a cup and gloat over it for a second. But then conscience would fight back, and he'd throw the cup across the room. Soon he'd be leering at the wine bottle again, and start to moan and slobber, but fighting the compulsion anyhow—" the abbot chuckled in spite of himself "—hideous to watch. Finally, when he became exhausted, he'd pluck out his glass eye. Once the eye was out, he'd suddenly relax. The compulsion stopped being compulsive. Cool and arrogant then, he'd pick up the bottle, look around and laugh. "I'm going to do it anyhow," he'd say. Then, while everyone was expecting him to drink it, he'd put on a beatific smile and pour the whole bottle over his own head. The advantage of a removable conscience, you see."

"So he thinks I need it more than he does."

Dom Paulo shrugged. "He's only the Poet-sirrah!"

The scholar puffed a breath of amusement. He prodded at the vitreous spheroid and rolled it across the table with his thumb. Suddenly he laughed. "I rather like that. I think I know who does need it more than the Poet. Perhaps I'll keep it after all." He picked it up, tossed it, caught it, and glanced doubtfully at the abbot.

Paulo merely shrugged again.

Thon Taddeo dropped the eye back in his pouch. "He can have it if he ever comes to claim it. But by the way, I meant to tell you: my work is nearly finished here. We'll be leaving in a very few days."

"Aren't you worried about the fighting on the Plains?"

Thon Taddeo frowned at the wall. "We're to camp at a butte, about a week's ride to the east from here. A group of, uh—Our escort will meet us there."

"I do hope," said the abbot, relishing the polite bit of savagery, "that your escort-group hasn't reversed its political allegiance since you made the arrangements. It's getting harder to tell foes from allies these days."

The thon reddened. "Especially if they come from Texarkana, you mean?"

"I didn't say that."

"Let's be frank with each other, Father. I can't fight the prince who makes my work possible—no matter what I think of his policies or his politics. I appear to support him, superficially, or at least to overlook him—for the sake of the collegium. If he extends his lands, the collegium may incidentally profit. If the collegium prospers, mankind will profit from our work."

"The ones who survive, perhaps."

"True—but that's always true in any event."

"No, no—Twelve centuries ago, not even the survivors profited. Must we start down that road again?"

Thon Taddeo shrugged. "What can I do about it?" he asked crossly. "Hannegan is prince, not I."

"But you promise to begin restoring Man's control over Nature. But who will govern the use of the power to control natural forces? Who will use it? To what end? How will you hold him in check? Such decisions can still be made. But if you and your group don't make them now, others will soon make them for you. Mankind will profit, you say. By whose sufferance? The sufferance of a prince who signs his letters X? Or do you really believe that your collegium can stay aloof from his ambitions when he begins to find out that you're valuable to him?"

Dom Paulo had not expected to convince him. But it was with a heavy heart that the abbot noticed the plodding patience with which the thon heard him through; it was the patience of a man listening to an argument which he had long ago refuted to his own satisfaction.

"What you really suggest," said the scholar, "is that we wait a little while. That we dissolve the

collegium, or move it to the desert, and somehow—with no gold and silver of our own—revive an experimental and theoretical science in some slow hard way, and tell nobody. That we save it all up for the day when Man is good and pure and holy and wise.”

“That is not what I meant—”

“That is not what you meant to say, but it is what your *saying* means. Keep science cloistered, don’t try to apply it, don’t try to do anything about it until men are holy. Well, it won’t work. You’ve been doing it here in this abbey for generations.”

“We haven’t withheld anything.”

“You haven’t withheld it; but you sat on it so quietly, nobody knew it was here, and you did nothing with it.”

Brief anger flared in the old priest’s eyes. “It’s time you met our founder, I think,” he growled, pointing to the wood-carving in the corner. “He was a scientist like yourself before the world went mad and he ran for sanctuary. He founded this Order to save what could be saved of the records of the last civilization. “Saved” from what, and for what? Look where he’s standing—see the kindling? the books? That’s how little the world wanted your science then, and for centuries afterward. So he died for our sake. When they drenched him with fuel oil, legend says he asked them for a cup of it. They thought he mistook it for water, so they laughed and gave him a cup. He blessed it and—some say the oil changed to wine when he blessed it—and then: “*Hic est enim calix Sanguinis Mei*,” and he drank it before they hung him and set him on fire. Shall I read you a list of our martyrs? Shall I name all the battles we have fought to keep these records intact? All the monks blinded in the copyroom? for your sake? Yet you say we did nothing with it, withheld it by silence.”

“Not intentionally,” the scholar said, “but in effect you did—and for the very motives you imply should be mine. If you try to save wisdom until the world is wise, Father, the world will never have it.”

“I can see the misunderstanding is basic!” the abbot said gruffly. “To serve God first, or to serve Hannegan first—that’s your choice.”

“I have little choice, then,” answered the thon. “Would you have me work for the Church?” The scorn in his voice was unmistakable.

## 22

# I

It was Thursday within the Octave of All Saints. In preparation for departure, the thon and his party sorted their notes and records in the basement. He had attracted a small monastic audience, and a spirit of friendliness prevailed as the time to leave drew near. Overhead, the arc lamp still sputtered and glared, filling the ancient library with blue-white harshness while the team of novices pumped wearily at the hand-powered dynamo. The inexperience of the novice who sat atop the ladder to keep the arc gap adjusted caused the light to flicker erratically; he had replaced the previous skilled operator who was at present confined to the infirmary with wet dressings over his eyes.

Thon Taddeo had been answering questions about his work with less reticence than usual, no longer worried, apparently, about such controversial subjects as the refrangible property of light, or the ambitious of Thon Esser Shon.

“Now unless this hypothesis is meaningless,” he was saying, “it must be possible to confirm it in some way by observation. I set up the hypothesis with the help of some new—or rather, some very old-mathematical forms suggested by our study of your Memorabilia. The hypothesis seems to offer a simpler explanation of optical phenomena, but frankly, I could think of no way to test it at first. That’s



where your Brother Kornhoer proved a help.” He nodded toward the inventor with a smile and displayed a sketch of a proposed testing device.

“What is it?” someone asked after a brief interval of mystification.

“Well—this is a pile of glass plates. A beam of sunlight striking the pile at this angle will be partially reflected, and partially transmitted. The reflected part will be polarized. Now we adjust the pile to reflect the beam through this thing, which is Brother Kornhoer’s idea, and let the light fall on this second pile of glass plates. The second pile is set at just the right angle to reflect almost all of the polarized beam, and transmit nearly none of it. Looking through the glass, we’d scarcely see the light. All this has been tried. But now if my hypothesis is correct, closing this switch on Brother Kornhoer’s field coil here should cause a sudden brightening of the transmitted light. If it doesn’t—” he shrugged “—then we threw out the hypothesis.”

“You might throw out the coil instead,” Brother Kornhoer suggested modestly. “I’m not sure it’ll produce a strong enough field.”

“I am. You have an instinct for these things. I find it much easier to develop an abstract theory than to construct a practical way to test it. But you have a remarkable gift for seeing everything in terms of screws, wires, and lenses, while I’m still thinking abstract symbols.”

“But the abstractions would never occur to me in the first place, Thon Taddeo.”

“We would make a good team, Brother. I wish you would join us at the collegium, at least for a while. Do you think your abbot would grant you leave?”

“I would not presume to guess,” the inventor murmured, suddenly uncomfortable.

Thon Taddeo turned to the others. “I’ve heard mention of ‘brothers on leave.’ Isn’t it true that some members of your community are employed elsewhere temporarily?”

“Only a very few, Thon Taddeo,” said a young priest.

“Formerly, the Order supplied clerks, scribes, and secretaries to the secular clergy, and to both royal and ecclesiastical courts. But that was during the times of most severe hardship and poverty here at the abbey. Brothers working on leave have kept the rest of us from starving at times. But that’s no longer necessary, and it’s seldom done. Of course, we have a few brothers studying in New Rome now, but—”

“That’s *it!*” said the thon with sudden enthusiasm. “A scholarship at the collegium for you, Brother. I was talking to your abbot, and—”

“Yes?” asked the young priest;

“Well, while we disagree on a few things, I can understand his point of view. I was thinking that an exchange of scholarships might improve relations. There would be a stipend, of course, and I’m sure your abbot could put that to good use.”

Brother Kornhoer inclined his head but said nothing.

“Come now!” The scholar laughed. “You don’t seem pleased by the invitation, Brother.”

“I am flattered, of course. But such matters are not for me to decide.”

“Well, I understand that, of course. But I wouldn’t dream of asking your abbot if the idea displeased you.”

Brother Kornhoer hesitated. “My vocation is to Religion,” he said at last, “that is—to a life of prayer. We think of our work as a kind of prayer too. But that—” he gestured toward his dynamo “—for me seems more like play. However, if Dom Paulo were to send me—”

“You’d reluctantly go,” the scholar finished sourly. “I’m sure I could get the collegium to send your abbot at least a hundred gold hannegans a year while you were with us, too. I—” He paused to look around at their expressions. “Pardon me, did I say something wrong?”

Halfway down the stairs, the abbot paused to survey the group in the basement. Several blank faces were turned toward him. After a few seconds Thon Taddeo noticed the abbot’s presence and nodded pleasantly.

“We were just speaking of you, Father,” he said. “If you heard, perhaps I should explain—”

Dom Paulo shook his head. “That’s not necessary.”

“But I *would* like to discuss—”

“Can it wait? I’m in a hurry this minute.”

“Certainly,” said the scholar.

“I’ll be back shortly.” He climbed the stairs again. Father Gault was waiting for him in the courtyard.

“Have they heard about it yet, Domne?” the prior asked grimly.

“I didn’t ask, but I’m sure they haven’t,” Dom Paulo answered. “They’re just making silly conversation down there. Something about taking Brother K back to Texarkana with them.”

“Then they haven’t heard, that’s certain.”

“Yes. Now where is he?”

“In the guesthouse, Domne. The medic’s with him. He’s delirious.”

“How many of the brothers know he’s here?”

“About four. We were singing None when he came in the gate.”

“Tell those four not to mention it to anyone. Then join our guests in the basement. Just be pleasant, and don’t let them know.”

“But shouldn’t they be told before they leave, Domne?”

“Of course. But let them get ready first. You know it won’t stop them from going back. So to minimize embarrassment, let’s wait until the last minute to tell them. Now, do you have it with you?”

“No, I left it with his papers in the guesthouse.”

“I’ll go see him. Now, warn the brothers, and join our guests.”

“Yes, Dome.”

The abbot hiked toward the guesthouse. As he entered, Brother Pharmacist was just leaving the fugitive’s room.

“Will he live, Brother?”

“I cannot know, Domne. Mistreatment, starvation, exposure, fever—if God wills it—” He shrugged.

“May I speak to him?”

“I’m sure it won’t matter. But he doesn’t make sense.”

The abbot entered the room and softly closed the door behind him.

“Brother Claret?”

“Not again,” gasped the man on the bed. “For the love of God, not again—I’ve told you all I know. I betrayed him. Now just let me—be.”

Dom Paulo looked down with pity on the secretary to late Marcus Apollo. He glanced at the scribe’s hands. There were only festering sores where the fingernails had been.

The abbot shuddered and turned to the small table near the bed. Out of a small collection of papers and personal effects, he quickly found the crudely printed document which the fugitive had brought with him from the east:

HANNEGAN THE MAYOR, by Grace of God: Sovereign of Texarkana, Emperor of Laredo, Defender of the Faith, Doctor of Laws, Clans Chief of the Nomads, and Vaquero Supreme of the Plains, to ALL BISHOPS, PRIESTS, AND PRELATES of the Church throughout Our Rightful Realm, Greetings & TAKE HEED, for it is the LAW, viz & to wit:

(1) Whereas a certain foreign prince, one Benedict XXII, Bishop of New Rome, presuming to assert an authority which is not rightly his over the clergy of this nation, has dared to attempt, first, to place the Texarkanan Church under a sentence of interdict, and, later, to suspend this sentence, thereby creating great confusion and spiritual neglect among all the faithful, We, the only legitimate ruler over the Church in this realm, acting in concord with a council of bishops and clergy, hereby declare to Our loyal people that the aforesaid prince and bishop, Benedict XXII, is a heretic, simoniac, murderer, sodomite, and atheist, unworthy of any recognition by Holy Church in lands of Our kingdom, empire, or protectorate. Who serves him serves not Us.

(2) Be it known, therefore, that both the decree of interdict and the decree suspending it are hereby QUASHED, ANNULLED, DECLARED VOID AND OF NO CONSEQUENCE, for they were of no original validity...

Dom Paulo glanced at the rest of it only briefly. There was no need to read further. The mayoral

*TAKE HEED* ordered the licensing of the Texarkanan clergy, made the administration of the Sacraments by unlicensed persons a crime under the law, and made an oath of supreme allegiance to the Mayoralty a condition for licensing and recognition. It was signed not only with the Mayor's mark, but also by several "bishops" whose names were unfamiliar to the abbot.

He tossed the document back on the table and sat down beside the bed. The fugitive's eyes were open, but he only stared at the ceiling and panted.

"Brother Claret?" he asked gently. "Brother..."

In the basement, the scholar's eyes had come alight with the brash exuberance of one specialist invading the field of another specialist for the sake of straightening out the whole region of confusion. "As a matter of fact, *yes!*" he said in response to a novice's question. "I *did* locate one source here that should, I think, be of interest to Thon Maho. Of course, I'm no historian, but--"

"Thon Maho? Is he the one who's, uh, trying to correct Genesis?" Father Gault asked wryly.

"Yes, that's--" the scholar broke off with a startled glance at Gault.

"That's all right," the priest said with a chuckle. "Many of us feel that Genesis is more or less allegorical. What have you found?"

"We located one pre-Diluvian fragment that suggests a very revolutionary concept, as I see it. If I interpret the fragment correctly, Man was not created until shortly before the fall of the last civilization."

"Wh-a-at? Then where did civilization come from?"

"Not from humanity. It was developed by a preceding race which became extinct during the Diluvium Ignis."

"But Holy Scripture goes back thousands of years before the Diluvium!"

Thon Taddeo remained meaningfully silent.

"You are proposing," said Gault, suddenly dismayed, "that *we* are not the descendants of Adam? not related to historical humanity?"

"Wait! I only offer the conjecture that the pre-Deluge race, which called itself Man, succeeded in creating life. Shortly before the fall of their civilization, they successfully created the ancestors of present humanity--'after their own image'--as a servant species."

"But even if you totally reject Revelation, that's a completely unnecessary complication under plain common sense!" Gault complained.

The abbot had come quietly down the stairs. He paused on the lower landing and listened incredulously.

"It might seem so," Thon Taddeo argued, "until you consider how many things it would account for. You know the legends of the Simplification. They all become more meaningful, it seems to me, if one looks at the Simplification as a rebellion by a created servant species against the original creator species, as the fragmentary reference suggests. It would also explain why present-day humanity seems so inferior to the ancients, why our ancestors lapsed into barbarism when their masters were extinct, why--"

"God have mercy on this house!" cried Dom Paulo, striding toward the alcove. "Spare us, Lord--we know not what we did."

"I should have known," the scholar muttered to the world at large.

The old priest advanced like a nemesis on his guest. "So we are but creatures of creatures, then, Sir Philosopher? Made by lesser gods than God, and therefore understandably less than perfect--through no fault of ours, of course."

"It is only conjecture but it would account for much," the then said stiffly, unwilling to retreat.

"And absolve of much, would it not? Man's rebellion against his makers was, no doubt, merely justifiable tyrannicide against the infinitely wicked sons of Adam, then."

"I didn't say--"

"Show me, Sir Philosopher, this amazing reference!"

Thon Taddeo hastily shuffled through his notes. The light kept flickering as the novices at the drive-mill strained to listen. The scholar's small audience had been in a state of shock until the abbot's stormy entrance shattered the numb dismay of the listeners. Monks whispered among themselves;

someone dared to laugh.

"Here it is," Thon Taddeo announced, passing several note pages to Dom Paulo.

The abbot gave him a brief glare and began reading. The silence was awkward. "You found this over in the 'Unclassified' section, I believe?" he asked after a few seconds.

"Yes, but—"

The abbot went on reading.

"Well, I suppose I should finish packing," muttered the scholar, and resumed his sorting of papers. Monks shifted restlessly, as if wishing to slink quietly away. Kornhoer brooded alone.

Satisfied after a few minutes of reading, Dom Paulo handed the notes abruptly to his prior. "*Lege!*" he commanded gruffly.

"But what—?"

"A fragment of a play, or a dialogue, it seems. I've seen it before. It's something about some people creating some artificial people as slaves. And the slaves revolt against their makers. If Thon Taddeo had read the Venerable Boedullus' *De Inanibus*, he would have found that one classified as 'probable fable or allegory.' But perhaps the thon would care little for the evaluations of the Venerable Boedullus, when he can make his own."

"But what sort of—"

"*Lege!*"

Gault moved aside with the notes. Paulo turned toward the scholar again and spoke politely, informatively, emphatically: "To the image of God He created them: male and female He created them."

"My remarks were only conjecture," said Thon Taddeo.

"Freedom to speculate is necessary—"

"And the Lord God took Man, and put him into the paradise of pleasure, to dress it, and to keep it. And—"

"—to the advancement of science. If you would have us hampered by blind adherence, unreasoned dogma, then you would prefer—"

"God commanded him, saying: Of every tree of paradise thou shalt eat; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt—"

"—to leave the world in the same black ignorance and superstition that you say your Order has struggled—"

"—not eat For in what day soever thou shalt eat of it, thou shalt die the death."

"—against. Nor could we ever overcome famine, disease, or misbirth, or make the world one bit better than it has been for—"

"And the serpent said to the woman: God doth know that in what day soever you shall eat thereof, your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as Gods, knowing good and evil."

"—twelve centuries, if every direction of speculation is to be closed off and every new thought denounced—"

"It never *was* any better, it never *will* be any better. It will only be richer or poorer, sadder but not wiser, until the very last day."

The scholar shrugged helplessly. "You see? I knew you would be offended, but you told me—Oh, What's the use? You have your account of it."

"The 'account' that I was quoting, Sir Philosopher, was not an account of the manner of creation, but an account of the manner of the temptation that led to the Fall. Did that escape you? "And the serpent said to the woman—"

"Yes, yes, but the freedom to speculate is essential—"

"No one has tried to deprive you of that. Nor is anyone offended. But to abuse the intellect for reasons of pride, vanity, or escape from responsibility, is the fruit of that same tree."

"You question the honor of my motives?" asked the thon, darkening.

"At times I question my own. I accuse you of nothing. But ask yourself this: Why do you take delight in leaping to such a wild conjecture from so fragile a springboard? Why do you wish to discredit

the past, even to dehumanizing the last civilization? So that you need not learn from their mistakes? Or can it be that you can't bear being only a 'rediscoverer,' and must feel that you are a "creator" as well?"

The thon hissed an oath. "These records should be placed in the hands of competent people," he said angrily. "What irony this is!"

The light sputtered and went out. The failure was not mechanical. The novices at the drive-mill had stopped work.

"Bring candles," called the abbot.

Candles were brought.

"Come down," Dom Paulo said to the novice atop the ladder. "And bring that thing with you. Brother Kornhoer? Brother Korn—"

"He stepped into the storeroom a moment ago, Domne."

"Well, call him." Dom Paulo turned to the scholar again, handing him the documents which had been found among Brother Claret's effects. "Read, if you can make it out by candlelight, Sir Philosopher!"

"A mayoral edict?"

"Read it and rejoice in your cherished freedom."

Brother Kornhoer slipped into the room again. He was carrying the heavy crucifix which had been displaced from the head of the archway to make room for the novel lamp. He handed the cross to Dom Paulo.

"How did you know I wanted this?"

"I just decided it was about time, Domne." He shrugged.

The old man climbed the ladder and replaced the rood on its iron hook. The corpus glittered with gold by candlelight. The abbot turned and called down to his monks.

"Who reads in this alcove henceforth, let him read *ad Lumina Christi!*"

When he descended the ladder, Thon Taddeo was already cramming the last of his papers into a large case for later sorting. He glanced warily at the priest but said nothing.

"You read the edict?"

The scholar nodded.

"If, by some unlikely chance, you would like political asylum here—"

The scholar shook his head.

"Then may I ask you to clarify your remark about placing our records in competent hands?"

Thon Taddeo lowered his gaze. "It was said in the heat of the moment, Father. I retract it."

"But you haven't stopped meaning it. You've meant it all along."

The thon did not deny it.

"Then it would be futile to repeat my plea for your intercession on our behalf—when your officers tell your cousin what a fine military garrison this abbey would make. But for his own sake, tell him that when our altars or the Memorabilia have been threatened, our predecessors did not hesitate to resist with the sword." He paused. "Will you be leaving today or tomorrow?"

"Today I think would be better," Thon Taddeo said softly.

"I'll order provisions made ready." The abbot turned to go, but paused to add gently: "But when you get back, deliver a message to your colleagues."

"Of course. Have you written it?"

"No. Just say that anyone who wishes to study here will be welcome, in spite of the poor lighting. Thon Maho, especially. Or Thon Esser Shon with his six ingredients. Men must fumble awhile with error to separate it from truth, I think—as long as they don't seize the error hungrily because it has a pleasanter taste. Tell them too, my son, that when the time comes, as it will surely come, that not only priests but philosophers are in need of sanctuary—tell them our walls are thick out here."

He nodded a dismissal to the novices, then, and trudged up the stairs to be alone in his study. For the Fury was twisting his insides again, and he knew that torture was coming.

*Nunc dimittis servum tuum, Domine... Quia viderunt oculi mei salutare...*

Maybe it will twist clean loose this time, he thought almost hopefully. He wanted to summon Father

Gault to hear his confession, but decided that it would be better to wait until the guests had gone. He stared at the edict again.

A knock at the door soon interrupted his agony.

"Can you come back later?"

"I'm afraid I won't be here later," answered a muffled voice from the corridor.

"Oh, Thon Taddeo—come in, then." Dom Paulo straightened; he took a firm grip on pain, not trying to dismiss it but only to control it as he would an unruly servant.

The scholar entered and placed a folder of papers on the abbot's desk. "I thought it only proper to leave you these," he said.

"What do we have here?"

"The sketches of your fortifications. The ones the officers made. I suggest you burn them immediately."

"Why have you done this?" Dom Paulo breathed. "After our words downstairs—"

"Don't misunderstand," Thon Taddeo interrupted. "I would have returned them in any event—as a matter of honor, not to let them take advantage of your hospitality for—but never mind. If I had returned the sketches any sooner, the officers would have had plenty of time and opportunity to draw up another set."

The abbot arose slowly and reached for the scholar's hand.

Thon Taddeo hesitated. "I promise no effort on your behalf—"

"I know."

"—because I think what you have here should be open to the world."

"It is, it was, it always will be."

They shook hands gingerly, but Dom Paulo knew that it was no token of any truce but only of mutual respect between foes. Perhaps it would never be more.

But why must it all be acted again?

The answer was near at hand; there was still the serpent whispering: For God doth know that in what day soever you shall eat thereof, your eyes shall be opened: and you shall be as Gods. The old father of lies was clever at telling half-truths: How shall you "know" good and evil, until you shall have sampled a little? Taste and be as Gods. But neither infinite power nor infinite wisdom could bestow godhood upon men. For that there would have to be infinite love as well.

Dom Paulo summoned the younger priest. It was very nearly time to go. And soon it would be a new year.

That was the year of the unprecedented torrent of rain on the desert, causing seed long dry to burst into bloom.

That was the year that a vestige of civilization came to the nomads of the Plains, and even the people of Laredo began to murmur that it was possibly all for the best. Rome did not agree.

In that year a temporary agreement was formalized and broken between the states of Denver and Texarkana. It was the year that the Old Jew returned to his former vocation of Physician and Wanderer, the year that the monks of the Albertian Order of Leibowitz buried an abbot and bowed to a new one. There were bright hopes for tomorrow.

It was the year a king came riding out of the east, to subdue the land and own it. It was a year of Men.

## 23

# I

It was unpleasantly hot beside the sunny that skirted the wooded hillside, and the heat had aggravated the Poet's thirst. After a long time he dizzily lifted his head from the ground and tried to look around. The

melee had ended; things were fairly quiet now, except for the cavalry officer. The buzzards were even gliding down to land.

There were several dead refugees, one dead horse, and the dying cavalry officer who was pinned under the horse. At intervals, the cavalryman awoke and faintly screamed. Now he screamed for Mother, and again he screamed for a priest. At times he awoke to scream for his horse. His screaming quieted the buzzards and further disgruntled the Poet, who was feeling peevish anyhow. He was a very dispirited Poet. He had never expected the world to act in a courteous, seemly, or even sensible manner, and the world had seldom done so; often he had taken heart in the consistency of its rudeness and stupidity. But never before had the world shot the Poet in the abdomen with a musket. This he found not heartening at all.

Even worse, he had not now the stupidity of the world to blame but only his own. The Poet himself had blundered. He had been minding his own business and bothering no one when he noticed the party of refugees galloping toward the hill from the east with a cavalry troop in close pursuit. To avoid the affray, he had hidden himself behind some scrub that grew from the lip of the embankment flanking the trail, a vantage point from which he could have seen the whole spectacle without being seen. It was not the Poet's fight. He cared nothing whatever for the political and religious tastes of either the refugees or the cavalry troop. If slaughter had been fated, fate could have found no less disinterested a witness than the Poet. Whence, then, the blind impulse?

The impulse had sent him leaping from the embankment to tackle the cavalry officer in the saddle and stab the fellow three times with his own belt-knife before the two of them toppled to the ground. He could not understand why he had done it. Nothing had been accomplished. The officer's men had shot him down before he ever climbed to his feet. The slaughter of refugees had continued. They had all ridden away then in pursuit of other fugitives, leaving the dead behind.

He could hear his abdomen growl. The futility, alas, of trying to digest a rifle ball. He had done the useless deed, he decided finally, because of the part with the dull saber. If the officer had merely hacked the woman out of the saddle with one clean stroke, and ridden on, the Poet would have overlooked the deed. But to keep hacking and hacking that way—

He refused to think about it again. He thought of water.

"O God—O God—" the officer kept complaining.

"Next time, sharpen your cutlery," the Poet wheezed.

But there would be no next time.

The Poet could not remember ever fearing death, but he had often suspected Providence of plotting the worst for him as to the manner of his dying when the time came to go. He had expected to rot away, Slowly and not very fragrantly. Some poetic insight had warned him that he would surely die a blubbing leprous lump, cravenly penitential but impenitent. Never had he anticipated anything so blunt and final as a bullet in the stomach, and with not even an audience at hand to hear his dying quips. The last thing they had heard him say when they shot him was: "*Oof!*"—his testament for posterity. *Ooof!*—a memorabile for you, Domnissime.

"Father? Father?" the officer moaned.

After a while the Poet mustered his strength and lifted his head again, blinked dirt out of his eye, and studied the officer for a few seconds. He was certain the officer was the same one he had tackled, even though the fellow by now had turned a chalky shade of green. His bleating for a priest that way began to annoy the Poet. At least three clergymen lay dead among the refugees, and yet the officer was not now being so particular about specifying his denominational persuasions. Maybe I'll do, the Poet thought.

He began dragging himself slowly toward the cavalryman. The officer saw him coming and groped for a pistol. The Poet paused; he had not expected to be recognized. He prepared to roll for cover. The pistol was wavering in his direction. He watched it waver for a moment, then decided to continue his advance. The officer pulled the trigger. The shot went wild by yards, worse luck.

The officer was trying to reload when the Poet took the gun away from him. He seemed delirious, and kept trying to cross himself.

“Go ahead,” the Poet grunted, finding the knife.

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned—”

“*Ego te absolvo*, son,” said the Poet, and plunged the knife into his throat.

Afterward, he found the officer’s canteen and drank a little. The water was hot from the sun, but it seemed delicious. He lay with his head pillowed on the officer’s horse and waited for the shadow of the hill to creep over the road. Jesus, how it hurt! That last bit isn’t going to be as easy to explain, he thought; and me without my eyeball too. If there’s really anything to explain. He looked at the dead cavalryman.

“Hot as hell down there, isn’t it?” he whispered hoarsely.

The cavalrymen was not being informative. The Poet took another drink from the canteen, then another. Suddenly there was a very painful bowel movement. He was quite unhappy about it for a moment or two.

The buzzards strutted, preened, and quarreled over dinner; it was not yet properly cured. They waited a few days for the wolves. There was plenty for all. Finally they ate the Poet.

As always the wild black scavengers of the skies laid their eggs in season and lovingly fed their young. They soared high over prairies and mountains and plains, searching for the fulfillment of that share of life’s destiny which was theirs according to the plan of Nature. Their philosophers demonstrated by unaided reason alone that the Supreme *Cathartes aura regnans* had created the world especially for buzzards. They worshipped him with hearty appetites for many centuries.

Then, after the generations of the darkness came the generations of the light. And they called it the Year of Our Lord 3781—a year of His peace, they prayed.

## Fiat Voluntas Tua

### 24

T

here were spaceships again in that century, and the ships were manned by fuzzy impossibilities that walked on two legs and sprouted tufts of hair in unlikely anatomical regions. They were a garrulous kind. They belonged to a race quite capable of admiring its own image in a mirror, and equally capable of cutting its own throat before the altar of some tribal god, such as the deity of Daily Shaving. It was a species which often considered itself to be, basically, a race of divinely inspired toolmakers; any intelligent entity from Arcturus would instantly have perceived them to be, basically, a race of impassioned after-dinner speech-makers.

It was inevitable, it was manifest destiny, they felt (and not for the first time) that such a race go forth to conquer stars. To conquer them several times, if need be, and certainly to make speeches about the conquest. But, too, it was inevitable that the race succumb again to the old maladies on new worlds, even as on Earth before, in the litany of life and in the special liturgy of Man: Versicles by Adam., Rejoinders by the Crucified.

We are the centuries.

We are the chin-choppers and the golly-woppers,  
and soon we shall discuss the amputation of your head.

We are your singing garbage men, Sir and Madam,  
and we march in cadence behind you, chanting rhymes that some think odd.

Hut two threep foa!



Left!

Left!

He-had-a-good-wife-but-he

Left!

Left!

Left!

Right!

Left!

*Wir*, as they say in the old country, *marschieren weiter wenn alles in Scherben faellt*.

We have your eoliths and your mesoliths and your neoliths. We have your Babylons and your Pompeiis, your Caesars and your chromium-plated (vital-ingredient-impregnated) artifacts.

We have your bloody hatchets and your Hiroshimas. We march in spite of Hell, we do—

Atrophy, Entropy, and *Proteus vulgaris*,

telling bawdy jokes about a farm girl name of Eve

and a traveling salesman called Lucifer.

We bury your dead and their reputations.

We bury you. We are the centuries.

Be born then, gasp wind, screech at the surgeon's slap, seek manhood, taste a little of godhood, feel pain, give birth, struggle a little while, succumb:

(Dying, leave quietly by the rear exit, please.)

Generation, regeneration, again, again, as in a ritual, with blood-stained vestments and nail-torn hands, children of Merlin, chasing a gleam. Children, too, of Eve, forever building Edens—and kicking them apart in berserk fury because somehow it isn't the same. (AGH! AGH! AGH!—an idiot screams his mindless anguish amid the rubble. But quickly! let it be inundated by the choir, chanting Alleluias at ninety decibels.)

Hear then, the last Cantic of the Brethren of the Order of Leibowitz, as sung by the century that swallowed its name:

V: Lucifer is fallen.

R: *Kyrie eleison*.

V: Lucifer is fallen.

R: *Christe eleison*.

V: Lucifer is fallen.

R: *Kyrie eleison, eleison imas!*

*LUCIFER IS FALLEN*; the code words, flashed electrically across the continent, were whispered in conference rooms, were circulated in the form of crisp memoranda stamped *SUPREME SECRETISSIMO*), were prudently withheld from the press. The words rose in a threatening tide behind a dike of official secrecy. There were several holes in the dike, but the holes were fearlessly plugged by bureaucratic Dutch boys whose forefingers became exceedingly swollen while they dodged verbal spitballs fired by the press.

FIRST REPORTER: What is Your Lordship's comment on Sir Rische Thon Berker's statement that the radiation count on the Northwest Coast is ten times the normal level?

DEFENSE MINISTER: I have not read the statement.

FIRST REPORTER: Assuming it to be true, what could be responsible for such an increase?

DEFENSE MINISTER: The question calls for conjecture. Perhaps Sir Rische discovered a rich uranium deposit. No, strike that out. I have no comment.

SECOND REPORTER: Does Your Lordship regard Sir Rische as a competent and responsible scientist?

DEFENSE MINISTER: He has never been employed by my department.

SECOND REPORTS: That is not a responsive answer.

DEFENSE MINISTER: It is quite responsive. Since he has never been employed by my department, I have no way of knowing his competence or responsibility. I am not a scientist.

LADY REPORTER: Is it true that a nuclear explosion occurred recently somewhere across the Pacific?

DEFENSE MINISTER: As Madam well knows, the testing of atomic weapons of any kind is a high crime and an act of war under present international law. We are not at war. Does that answer your question?

LADY REPORTER: No, Your Lordship, it does not. I did not ask if a test had occurred. I asked whether an explosion had occurred.

DEFENSE MINISTER: We set off no such explosion. If they set one off, does Madam suppose that this government would be informed of it by them?

( *Polite laughter.* )

LADY REPORTER: That does not answer my—

FIRST REPORTER: Your Lordship, Delegate Jerulian has charged the Asian Coalition with the assembly of hydrogen weapons in deep space, and he says our Executive Council knows it and does nothing about it. Is that true?

DEFENSE MINISTER: I believe it is true that the Opposition's Tribune made some such ridiculous charge, yes.

FIRST REPORTER: Why is the charge ridiculous? Because they are not making space-to-earth missiles in space? Or because we are doing something about it?

DEFENSE MINISTER: Ridiculous either way. I should like to point out, however, that the manufacture of nuclear weapons has been prohibited by treaty ever since they were redeveloped. Prohibited everywhere—in space or on Earth.

SECOND REPORTER: REPORTER: But there's no treaty to proscribe the orbiting of fissionable materials, is there?

DEFENSE MINISTER: Of course not. The space-to-space vehicles are all nuclear powered. They have to be fueled.

SECOND REPORTER: And there's no treaty to prohibit orbiting of other materials from which nuclear weapons might be manufactured?

DEFENSE MINISTER (*irritably*): To my knowledge, the existence of matter outside our atmosphere has not been outlawed by any treaty or act of parliament. It is my understanding that space is chock-full of things like the moon and the asteroids, which are *not* made of green cheese.

LADY REPORTER: Is Your Lordship suggesting that nuclear weapons could be manufactured without raw materials from Earth?

DEFENSE MINISTER: I was not suggesting that, no. Of course it's theoretically possible. I was saying that no treaty or law prohibits the orbiting of any special raw materials—only nuclear weapons.

LADY REPORTER: If there was a recent test shot in the Orient, which do you think more probable: a subterranean explosion that broke surface, or a space-to-earth missile with a defective warhead?

DEFENSE MINISTER: Madam, your question is so conjectural that you force me to say: "No comment."

LADY REPORTER: I was only echoing Sir Rische and Delegate Jerulian.

DEFENSE MINISTER: They are free to indulge in wild speculation. I am not.

SECOND REPORTER: At the risk of seeming wry—What is Your Lordship's opinion of the weather?

DEFENSE MINISTER: Rather warm in Texarkana, isn't it? I understand they're having some bad dust storms in the Southwest. We may catch some of it hereabouts.

LADY REPORTER: Are you in favor of Motherhood, Lord Ragelle?

DEFENSE MINISTER: I am sternly opposed to it, Madam. It exerts a malign influence on youth, particularly upon young recruits. The military services would have superior soldiers if our fighting men had

not been corrupted by Motherhood.

LADY REPORTER: May we quote you on that?

DEFENSE MINISTER: Certainly, Madam—but only in my obituary, not sooner.

LADY REPORTER: Thank you. I'll prepare it in advance.

Like other abbots before him, the Dom Jethrah Zerchi was by nature not an especially contemplative man, although as spiritual ruler of his community he was vowed to foster the development of certain aspects of the contemplative life in this flock, and, as a monk, to attempt the cultivation of a contemplative disposition in himself. Dom Zerchi was not very good at either of these. His nature impelled him toward action even in thought; his mind refused to sit still and contemplate. There was a quality of restlessness about him which had driven him to the leadership of the flock; it made him a bolder ruler, occasionally even a more successful ruler, than some of his predecessors, but that same restlessness could easily become a liability, or even a vice.

Zerchi was vaguely aware, most of the time, of his own inclination toward hasty or impulsive action when confronted by unslayable dragons. Just now, however, the awareness was not vague but acute. It operated in unfortunate retrospect. The dragon had already bitten St. George.

The dragon was an Abominable Autoscribe, and its malignant enormity, electronic by disposition, filled several cubical units of hollow wall space and a third of the volume of the abbot's desk. As usual, the contraption was on the blink. It miscapitalized, mispunctuated, and interchanged various words. Only a moment ago, it had committed electrical *lese majeste* on the person of the sovereign abbot, who, after calling a computer repairman and waiting three days for him to appear, had decided to repair the stenographic abomination himself. The floor of his study was littered with typed scraps of trial dictation. Typical among these was one which bore the information:

testing tesTing testing? TESTing testing? damNatioN?  
whY the craZY capiTALs# now Is the tiMe foR aLL gooD  
memoriZERS to Gum to tHe aChE of the bookLEGgerS?  
Drat; caN yOu do beTTer in LAtin# now traNsLaTe;  
nECCesse Est epistULam sacri coLLegio mIttendAm esse statim  
dictem? What's wrong WITH tHe blasTED THing#

Zerchi sat on the floor in the midst of the litter and tried to massage the involuntary tremor out of his forearm, which had been recently electrified while exploring the Autoscribe's intestinal regions. The muscular twitching reminded him of the galvanic response of a severed frog's leg. Since he had prudently remembered to disconnect the machine before tampering with it, he could only suppose that the fiend who invented the thing had provided it with facilities for electrocuting customers even without power. While tweaking and tugging at connections in a search for loose wires, he had been assaulted by a high voltage filter capacitor which had taken advantage of an opportunity to discharge itself to ground through the person of the Reverend Father Abbot when Reverend Father's elbow brushed against the chassis. But Zerchi had no way of knowing whether he had fallen victim to a law of Nature for filter capacitors or to a cunningly devised booby trap aimed at discouraging customer-tampering. Anyway, he had fallen. His posture on the floor had come about involuntarily. His only claim to competence at the repair of polylinguistic transcription devices lay in his proud record of once having extracted a dead mouse from the information storage circuitry, thereby correcting a mysterious tendency on the part of the machine to write double syllables (doudoubleble sylsyllablesles). Having discovered no dead mice this time, he could feel for loose wires and hope Heaven had granted him charismata as an electronic healer. But it was apparently not so.

"Brother Patrick!" he called toward the outer office, and climbed wearily to his feet.

"Hey, Brother Pat!" he shouted again.

Presently the door opened and his secretary waddled in, glanced at the open wall cabinets with their stupefying maze of computer circuitry, scanned the cluttered floor, then warily studied his spiritual ruler's expression. "Shall I call the repair service again, Father Abbot?"

"Why bother?" Zerchi grunted. "You've called them three times. They've made three promises. We've waited three days. I need a stenographer. Now! Preferably a Christian. *That* thing—" he waved irritably toward the Abominable Autoscribe—"is a damned infidel or worse. Get rid of it. I want it out of here."

"The APLAC?"

"The APLAC. Sell it to an atheist. No, that wouldn't be kind. Sell it as junk. I'm through with it. Why, for Heaven's sake, did Abbot Boumous—may his soul be blessed—ever buy the silly contraption?"

"Well, Domne, they say your predecessor was fond of gadgets, and it *is* convenient to be able to write letters in languages you yourself can't speak."

"It is? You mean it *would* be. That contraption—listen, Brother, they claim it thinks. I didn't believe it at first. Thought, implying rational principle, implying soul. Can the principle of a 'thinking machine'—man-made—be a rational soul? Bah! It seemed a thoroughly pagan notion at first. But do you know what?"

"Father?"

"Nothing could be that perverse without premeditation! It *must* think! It knows good and evil, I tell you, and it chose the latter. Stop that snickering, will you? It's not funny. The notion isn't even pagan. Man made the contraption, but he didn't make its principle. They speak of the vegetative principle as a soul, don't they? A vegetable soul? And the animal soul? Then the rational human soul, and that's all they list in the way of incarnate vivifying principles, angels being disembodied. But how do we know the list is comprehensive? Vegetative, animative, rational—and then what else? That's what else, right there. That thing. And it *fell*. Get it out of here—But first I've got to get a radiogram off to Rome."

"Shall I get my pad, Reverend Father?"

"Do you speak Alleghenian?"

"No, I don't."

"Neither do I, and Cardinal Hoffstraft doesn't speak SouthWest."

"Why not Latin, then?"

"Which Latin? The Vulgate or Modern? I don't trust my own Anglo-Latin, and if I did, *he'd* probably not trust his." He frowned at the bulk of the robotic stenographer. Brother Patrick frowned with him, then stepped over to the cabinets and began peering into the maze of subminiature circuit components.

"No mouse," the abbot assured him.

"What are all these little knobs?"

"*Don't touch!*" Abbot Zerchi yelped as his secretary curiously fingered one of several dozen sub-chassis dial settings. These sub-chassis controls were mounted in neat square array in a box, the cover of which the abbot had removed, bore the irresistible warning: FACTORY ADJUSTMENTS ONLY.

"You didn't move it, did you?" he demanded, going to Patrick's side.

"I might have wiggled it a little, but I think it's back where it was."

Zerchi showed him the warning on the box's cover. "Oh," said Pat, and both of them stared.

"It's the punctuation, mostly, isn't it, Reverend Father?"

"That and stray capitals, and a few confused words."

They contemplated the squiggles, quiggles, quids, thingumbobs, and doohickii in mystified silence.

"Did you ever hear of the Venerable Francis of Utah?" the abbot asked at last.

"I don't recall the name, Domne. Why?"

"I was just hoping he's in a position to pray for us right now, although I don't believe he was ever canonized. Here, let's try turning this whatsis up a bit."

"Brother Joshua used to be some kind of an engineer. I forget what. But he was in space. They have to know a lot about computers."

"I've already called him He's afraid to touch it. Here, maybe it needs—"

Patrick edged away. "If you would excuse me, m'Lord, I—"

Zerchi glanced up at his wincing scribe. "Oh, ye of little faith!" he said, correcting another

## FACTORY ADJUSTMENT.

"I thought I heard someone outside."

"Before the cock crows thrice—besides, you touched the first knob, didn't you?"

Patrick wilted. "But the cover was off, and . . ."

"*Hinc igitur effuge*. Out, out, before I decide it was your fault."

Alone again, Zerchi inserted the wall plug, sat at his desk, and, after muttering a brief prayer to Saint Leibowitz (who in recent centuries had come into wider popularity as the patron saint of electricians than he had ever won as the founder of the Albertian Order of Saint Leibowitz), flipped the switch. He listened for spitting and hissing noises, but none came. He heard only the faint clicking of delay relays and the familiar purr of timing motors as they came up to full speed. He sniffed. No smoke or ozone to be detected. Finally, he opened his eyes. Even the indicator lights of the desktop control panel were burning as usual. FACTORY ADJUSTMENTS ONLY, indeed!

Somewhat reassured, he switched the format selector to RADIOGRAM, turned the process selector to DICTATE-RECORD, the translator unit to SOUTHWEST IN and ALLEGHENIAN OUT, made certain the transcription switch was on OFF, keyed his microphone button and began dictating:

"Priority Urgent: To His Most Reverend Eminence, Sir Eric Cardinal Hoffstraff, Vicar Apostolic Designate, Provisional Vicariate Extraterrestris, Sacred Congregation of Propaganda, Vatican, New Rome...

"Most Eminent Lord: In view of the recent renewal of world tensions, hints of a new international crisis, and even reports of a clandestine nuclear armaments race, we should be greatly honored if Your Eminence deems it prudent to counsel us concerning the present status of certain plans held in abeyance. I have reference to matters outlined in the *Motu proprio* of Pope Celestine the Eighth, of happy memory, given on the Feast of the Divine Overshadowing of the Holy *Virgin*, Anno Domini 3735, and beginning with the words—" he paused to look through the papers on his desk—" "*Ab hac planeta nativitatis aliquos filios Ecclesiae usque ad planetas solium alienorum iam abisse et numquam redituros esse intelligimus*." Refer also to the confirming document of Anno Domini 3749, *Quo peregrinatur grex, pastor secure*, authorizing the purchase of an island, uh-certain vehicles. Lastly refer to *Cam belli nunc remote*, of the late Pope Paul, Anno Domini 3756, and the correspondence which followed between the Holy Father and my predecessor, culminating with an order transferring to us the task of holding the plan *Quo peregrinatur* in a state of, uh—suspended animation, but only so long as Your Eminence approves. Our state of readiness with respect to *Quo peregrinatur* has been maintained, and should it become desirable to execute the plan, we would need perhaps six weeks' notice..."

While the abbot dictated, the Abominable Autoscribe did no more than record his voice and translate it into a phoneme code on tape. After he had finished speaking he switched the process selector to ANALYZE and pressed a button marked TEXT PROCESSING. The ready-lamp winked off. The machine began processing.

Meanwhile, Zerchi studied the documents before him.

A chime sounded. The ready-lamp winked on. The machine was silent. With only one nervous glance at the FACTORY ADJUSTMENT ONLY box, the abbot dosed his eyes and pressed the WRITE button.

*Clatterty-chat-clatter-spatter-pip popperty-kak-fub-clotter*, the automatic writer chattered away at what he hoped would be the text of the radiogram. He listened hopefully to the rhythm of the keys. That first *clatterty-chat-clatter-spatter-pip* had sounded quite authoritative. He tried to hear the rhythms of Alleghenian speech in the sound of the typing, and after a time he decided that there was indeed a certain Allegheny lilt mixed into the rattle of the keys. He opened his eyes. Across the room, the

robotic stenographer was briskly at work. He left his desk and went to watch it work. With utmost neatness, the Abominable Autoscribe was writing the Alleghenian equivalent of:

“Hey, Brother Pat!”

He turned off the machine in disgust. Holy Leibowitz! Did we labor for this? He could not see that it was any improvement over a carefully trimmed goose-quill and a pot of mulberry ink.

*“Hey, Pat!”*

There was no immediate response from the outer office, but after a few seconds a monk with a red beard opened the door, and, after glancing at the open cabinets, the littered floor, and the abbot’s expression, he had the gall to smile.

“What’s the matter, Magister meus? Don’t you like our modern technology?”

“Not particularly, no!” Zerchi snapped. “Hey, *Pat!*”

“He’s out, m’Lord.”

“Brother Joshua, can’t you fix this thing? Really.”

“Really?—No, I can’t.”

“I’ve got to send a radiogram.”

“That’s too bad, Father Abbot. Can’t do that either. They just took our crystal and padlocked the shack.”

“They?”

“Zone Defense Interior. All private transmitters have been ordered off the air”

Zerchi wandered to his chair and sank into it. “A defense alert. Why?”

Joshua shrugged. “There’s talk about an ultimatum. That’s all I know, except what I hear from the radiation counters.”

“Still rising?”

“Still rising.”

“Call Spokane.”

By midafternoon the dusty wind had come. The wind came over the mesa and over the small city of Sanly Bowitts. It washed over the surrounding countryside, noisily through the tall corn in the irrigated fields, tearing streamers of blowing sand from the sterile ridges. It moaned about the stone walls of the ancient abbey and about the aluminum and glass walls of the modern additions to the abbey. It besmirched the reddening sun with the dirt of the land, and sent dust devils scurrying across the pavement of the six-lane highway that separated the ancient abbey from its modern additions,

On the side road which at one point flanked the highway and led from the monastery by way of a residential suburb into the city, an old beggar clad in burlap paused to listen to the wind. The wind brought the throb of practice rocketry explosively from the south. Ground-to-space interceptor missiles were being fired toward target orbits from a launching range far across the desert. The old man gazed at the faint red disk of the sun while he leaned on his staff and muttered to himself or to the sun, “Omens, omens—”

A group of children were playing in the weed-filled yard of a hovel just across the side road, their games proceeding under the mute but all-seeing auspices of a gnarled black woman who smoked a weed-filled pipe on the porch and offered an occasional word of solace or remonstrance to one or another tearful player who came as plaintiff before the grandmotherly court of her

hovel porch.

One of the children soon noticed the old tramp who stood across the roadway, and presently a shout went up: "Lookit, lookit! It's old Lazar! Auntie say, he be old Lazar, same one 'ut the Lor' Hesus raise up! Lookit! Lazar! Lazar!"

The children thronged to the broken fence. The old tramp regarded them grumpily for a moment, then wandered on along the road. A pebble skipped across the ground at his feet.

"Hey, Lazar...!"

"Auntie say, what the Lor' Hesus raise up, it stay up! Lookit him! Ya! Still huntin' for the Lor' 'ut raise him. Auntie say—"

Another rock skipped after the old man, but he did not look back. The old woman nodded sleepily. The children returned to their games. The dust storm thickened.

Across the highway from the ancient abbey, atop one of the new aluminum and glass buildings, a monk on the roof was sampling the wind. He sampled it with a suction device which ate the dusty air and blew the filtered wind to the intake of an air compressor on the floor below. The monk was no longer a youth, but not yet middle-aged. His short red beard seemed electrically charged, for it gathered pendant webs and streamers of dust; he scratched it irritably from time to time, and once he thrust his chin into the end of the suction hose; the result caused him to mutter explosively, then to cross himself.

The compressor's motor coughed and died. The monk switched off the suction device, disconnected the blower hose and pulled the device across the roof to the elevator and into the cage. Drifts of dust had settled in the corners. He closed the gate and pressed the Down button.

In the laboratory on the uppermost floor, he glanced at the compressor's gauge—it registered MAX NORM—he closed the door, removed his habit, shook the dust out of it, hung it on a peg, and went over it with the section device. Then, going to the deep sheet-steel sink at the end of the laboratory workbench; he turned on the cold water and let it rise to the 200 J. Thrusting his head into the water, he washed the mud from his beard and hair. The effect was pleasantly icy. Dripping and sputtering, he glanced at the door. The likelihood of visitors just now seemed small. He removed his underwear, climbed into the tank, and settled back with a shivery sigh.

UG mark.

Abruptly the door opened. Sister Helene came in with a tray of newly uncrated glassware. Startled, the monk leaped to his feet in the tub.

"Brother Joshua!" the sister shrieked. Half a dozen beakers shattered on the floor.

The monk sat down with a splash that sprayed the room. Sister Helene clucked, sputtered, squeaked, dumped the tray on the workbench, and fled. Joshua vaulted out of the sink and donned his habit without bothering to dry himself or put on his underwear. When he got to the door, Sister Helene was already out of the corridor—probably out of the building and halfway to the sister's chapel just down the side lane. Mortified, he hastened to complete his labors.

He emptied the suction device's contents and collected a sample of the dust in a phial. He took the phial to the workbench, plugged in a pair of headphones, and held the phial at a measured distance from the detector element of a radiation counter while he consulted his watch and listened.

The compressor had a built-in counter. He pressed a stud marked: R

ESET.

The whirling decimal register flipped back to zero and began counting again. He stopped it after one minute and wrote the count on the back of his hand. It was mostly plain air, filtered and compressed; but there was a whiff of something else.

He closed the lab for the afternoon. He went down to the office on the subjacent floor, wrote the count on a wall chart, eyed its perplexing upswing; then sat at his desk and flipped the viewphone switch. He dialed by feel, while gazing at the telltale wallchart. The screen flashed, the phone beeped, and the viewer fluttered into focus on the back of an empty desk chair. After a few seconds a man slid into the chair and peered into the viewer. "Abbot Zerchi here," the abbot grunted. "Oh, Brother Joshua. I was about to call you. Have you been taking a bath?"

"Yes, m'Lord Abbot."

"You might at least blush!"

"I am."

"Well, it doesn't show up on the viewer. Listen. On *this* side of the highway, there's a sign just outside our gates. You've noticed it, of course? It says, 'Women Beware. Enter Not Lest'—and so forth. You've noticed it?"

"Surely, m'Lord."

"Take your baths on *this* side of the sign."

"Certainly."

"Mortify yourself for offending Sister's modesty. I'm aware that you haven't got any. Listen, I suppose you can't even bring yourself to pass the reservoir without jumping in, baby-spanking bald, for a swim."

"Who told you that, m'Lord? I mean—I've only waded—"

"Ye-e-s-s? Well, never mind. Why did you call me?"

"You wanted me to call Spokane."

"Oh, yes. Did you?"

"Yes." The monk gnawed at a bit of dry skin at the corner of his wind-cracked lips and paused uneasily. "I talked to Father Leone. They've noticed it too."

"The increased radiation count?"

"That's not all." He hesitated again. He did not like saying it. To communicate a fact seemed always to lend it fuller existence.

"Well?"

"It's connected with that seismic disturbance a few days ago. It's carried by the upper winds from that direction. All things considered, it looks like fallout from a low altitude burst in the megaton range."

"Heu!" Zerchi sighed and covered his eyes with a hand. *dicis?*

*'Luciferum ruisse mihi*

"Yes, Domne, I'm afraid it was a weapon."

"Not possibly an industrial accident?"

"No."

"But if there were a war on, we'd know. An illicit test? but not that either. If they wanted to test one, they could test it on the far side of the moon, or better, Mars, and not be caught."

Joshua nodded.

"So what does that leave?" the abbot went on. "A display? A threat? A warning shot fired over the bow?"

"That's all I could think of.."

"So that explains the defense alert. Still, there's nothing in the news



except rumors and refusals to comment. And with dead silence from Asia.”

“But the shot *must* have been reported from some of the observation satellites. Unless—I don’t like to suggest this, but—unless somebody has discovered a way to shoot a space-to-earth missile past the satellites, without detection until it’s on the target.”

“Is that possible?”

“There’s been some talk about it, Father Abbot.”

“The government knows. The government *must* know. Several of them know. And yet we hear nothing. We are being protected from hysteria. Isn’t that what they call it? Maniacs! The world’s been in a *habitual* state of crisis for fifty years. *Fifty?*” What am I saying? It’s been in a habitual state of crisis since the beginning—but for half a century now, almost unbearable. And *why*, for the love of God? What is the fundamental irritant, the essence of the tension? Political philosophies? Economics? Population pressure? Disparity of culture and creed? Ask a dozen experts, get a dozen answers. Now Lucifer again. Is the species congenitally insane, Brother? If we’re born mad, where’s the hope of Heaven? Through Faith alone? Or isn’t there any? God forgive me, I don’t mean that. Listen, Joshua—”

“m’Lord?”

“As soon as you close up shop, come back over here...That radiogram—I had to send Brother Pat into town to get it translated and sent by regular wire. I want you around when the answer comes. Do you know what it’s about?”

Brother Joshua shook his head.

“*Quo peregrinatur grex.*”

The monk slowly lost color. “To go into effect, Domne?”

“I’m just trying to learn the status of the plan. Don’t mention it to anybody. Of course, you’ll be affected. See me here when you’re through.”

“Certainly.”

“*Chris’ tecum.*”

“*Cum spiri’ tuo.*”

The circuit opened, the screen faded. The room was warm, but Joshua shivered. He gazed out the window into a premature twilight murky with dust. He could see no farther than the storm fence next to the highway where a passing procession of truck headlights made traveling halos in the dust haze. After a while he became aware of someone standing near the gate where the driveway opened on to the turnpike approach. The figure was dimly visible in silhouette whenever the headlights’ aurorae flashed by in review. Joshua shivered again.

The silhouette was unmistakably that of Mrs. Grales. no one else would have been recognizable in such poor visibility, but the shape of the hooded bundle on her left shoulder; and the way her head tilted toward the right, made her outline uniquely that of Old Ma’am Grales. The monk pulled curtains across the window and turned on the light. He was not repelled by the old woman’s deformity; the world had grown blasé about such genetic mishaps and pranks of the genes. His own left hand still bore a tiny scar where a sixth finger had been removed during his infancy. But the heritage of the *Ignis* was something he preferred to forget for the moment, and Mrs. Grales was one of its more conspicuous heirs.

*Diluvium*

He fingered a globe of the world on his desk. He spun it so that the Pacific Ocean and East Asia drifted past. Where? Precisely where? He twirled the globe faster, slapping it lightly again and again so that the world spun

like a gaming wheel, faster and yet faster until the continents and oceans became a blur. Place your bets, Sir and Madam: Where? He braked the globe abruptly with his thumb. Bank: India pays off. Please collect, Madam. The divination was wild. He spun the globe again until the axial mountings rattled; “days” flitted by as briefest instants—In a reverse sense, he noticed suddenly. If Mother Gaia pirouetted in the same sense, the sun and other passing scenery would rise in the west and set in the east. Reversing time thereby? Said the namesake of my namesake: *Move not, O Sun, toward Gabaon, nor thou, O Moon, toward the valley—a neat trick, forsooth, and useful in these times too. Back up, O Sun, et tu, Luna, recedite in orbitas reversas...* He kept spinning the globe in reverse, as if hoping the simulacrum of Earth possessed the Chronos for unwinding time. A third of a million turns might unwind enough days to carry it back to the *Diluvium Ignis*. Better to use a motor and spin it back to the beginning of Man. He stopped it again with his thumb; once more the divination was wild.

Still he lingered in the office and dreaded going “home” again. “Home” was only across the highway, in the haunted halls of those ancient buildings whose walls still contained stones which had been the rubble concrete of a civilization that had died eighteen centuries ago. Crossing the highway to the old abbey was like crossing an eon. Here in the new aluminum and glass buildings, he was a technician at a workbench where events were only phenomena to be observed with regard for their *How*, not questioning their *Why*. On this side of the road, the falling of Lucifer was only an inference derived by cold arithmetic from the chatter of radiation counters, from the sudden swing of a seismograph pen. But in the old abbey, he ceased to be a technician; over there he was a monk of Christ, a booklegger and memorizer in the community of Leibowitz. Over there, the question would be: “Why, Lord, why?” But the question had already come, and the abbot had said: “See me.”

Joshua reached for his bindlestiff and went to obey the summons of his ruler. To avoid meeting Mrs. Grales, he used the pedestrian underpass; it was no time for pleasant conversations with the bicephalous old tomato woman.

## 25

T

he dike of secrecy had broken. Several dauntless Dutch boys were swept away by the raging tide; the tide swept them right out of Texarkana to their country estates where they became unavailable for comment. Others remained at their posts and staunchly tried to plug new leaks. But the fall of certain isotopes in the wind created a universal byword, spoken on street corners and screamed by banner headlines: *LUCIFER IS FALLEN*.

The Minister of Defense, his uniform immaculate, make-up unsmeared, and his equanimity unruffled, again faced the journalistic fraternity; this time the press conference was televised throughout the Christian Coalition.

LADY REPORTER: Your Lordship appears rather calm, in the face of the facts. Two violations of international law, both defined by treaty as warlike acts, have recently occurred. Doesn't that worry the War Ministry at all?

DEFENSE MINISTER: Madam, as you very well knew, we do not have a War

Ministry here; we have a *Defense* Ministry. And as far as I know, only one violation of international law has occurred. Would you mind acquainting me with the other?

LADY REPORTER: Which one are you *not* acquainted with—the disaster in Itu Wan, or the warning shot over the far South Pacific?

DEFENSE MINISTER(*suddenly stern.*): Surely Madam intends nothing seditious, but your question seems to give comfort, if not credence, to the utterly false Asian charges that the so-called Itu Wan disaster was the result of a weapon test by us and not by them!

LADY REPORTER: If it does, I invite you to throw me in jail. The question was based on a Near East neutralist account, which reported that the Itu Wan disaster was the result of an Asian weapon test, underground, which broke free. The same account said that the Itu Wan test was sighted from our satellites and immediately answered by a space-to-earth warning shot southeast Of New Zealand. But now that you suggest it, was the Itu Wan disaster also the result of a weapon test by us?

DEFENSE MINISTER(*with forced patience*): I recognize the journalistic requirement of objectivity. But to suggest that His Supremacy's government would deliberately violate—

LADY REPORTER: His Supremacy is an eleven-year-old boy, and to call it his government is not only archaic, but a highly dishonorable—even cheap!—attempt to shift the responsibility for a full denial from your own—

MODERATOR: Madam! Please restrain the tenor of your—

DEFENSE MINISTER: Overlook it, overlook it! Madam, you have my full denial if you must dignify the fantastic charges. The so-called Itu Wan disaster was not the result of a weapon test by us. Nor do I have any knowledge of any other recent nuclear detonation.

LADY REPORTER: Thank you.

MODERATOR: I believe the editor of the *Texarkana Star-Insight* has been trying to speak.

EDITOR: Thank you. I should like to ask, Your Lordship: What did happen in Itu Wan?

DEFENSE MINISTER: We have no nationals in that area; we have had no observers there since diplomatic relations were broken during the last world crisis. I can, therefore, only rely upon indirect evidence, and the somewhat conflicting neutralist accounts.

EDITOR: That is to be understood.

DEFENSE MINISTER: Very well, then, I gather there was a sub-surface nuclear detonation—in the megaton range—and it got out of hand. It was rather obviously a test of some sort. Whether it was a weapon or, as some Asia-fringe “neutrals” claim, an attempt to divert an underground river—it was dearly illegal, and adjoining countries are preparing a protest to the World Court.

EDITOR: Is there any risk of war?

DEFENSE MINISTER: I foresee none. But as you know, we have certain detachments of our armed forces which are subject to conscription by the World Court to enforce its decisions, if needed. I foresee no such need, but I cannot speak for the court.

FIRST REPORTER: But the Asian coalition has threatened an immediate all-out strike against our space installations if the court does not take action against us. What if the court is slow in acting?

DEFENSE MINISTER: No ultimatum has been delivered. The threat was for

Asian home consumption, as I see it; to cover their blunder in Itu Wan.

LADY REPORTER: How is your abiding faith in Motherhood today, Lord Ragelle?

DEFENSE MINISTER: I hope Motherhood has at least as much abiding faith in me as I have in Motherhood.

LADY REPORTER: You deserve at least that much, I'm sure.

The news conference, radiated from the relay satellite twenty-two thousand miles from Earth, bathed most of the Western Hemisphere with the flickering VHF signal which carried such intelligence to the panelescent wall screens of the multitudes. One among the multitudes, Abbot Dom Zerchi switched off the set.

He paced for a while, waiting for Joshua, trying not to think. But "not thinking" proved impossible.

Listen, are we helpless? Are we doomed to do it again and again and again? Have we no choice but to play the Phoenix in an unending sequence of rise and fall? Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, Greece, Carthage, Rome, the Empires of Charlemagne and the Turk: Ground to dust and plowed with salt. Spain, France, Britain, America—burned into the oblivion of the centuries. And again and again and again.

*Are we doomed to it, Lord, chained to the pendulum of our own mad clockwork, helpless to halt its swing?*

This time, it will swing us clean to oblivion, he thought.

The feeling of desperation passed abruptly when Brother Pat brought him the second telegram. The abbot ripped it open, read it at a glance and chuckled. "Brother Joshua here yet, Brother?"

"Waiting outside, Reverend Father."

"Send him in."

"Ho, Brother, shut the door and turn on the silencer. Then read this."

Joshua glanced at the first telegram. "An answer from New Rome?"

"It came this morning. But turn on that silencer first. We've got things to discuss."

Joshua closed the door and flipped a wall switch. Concealed loudspeakers squealed a brief protest. When the squealing stopped, the room's acoustic properties seemed suddenly changed.

Dom Zerchi waved him toward a chair, and he read the, first telegram in silence.

"... no action whatever to be taken by you in connection with  
*peregrinatur grex,*" he read aloud.

*Quo*

"You'll have to shout with that thing on," said the abbot, indicating the silencer. "What?"

"I was just reading. So the plan is canceled?"

"Don't look so relieved. That came this morning.

*This came this afternoon."*

The abbot tossed him the second telegram:

IGNORE EARLIER MESSAGE OF THIS DATE. "QUO PEREGRINATUR" TO BE REACTIVATED IMMEDIATELY BY BEQUEST OF HOLY FATHER. PREPARE CADRE TO LEAVE WITHIN THREE DAYS. WAIT FOR CONFIRMING WIRE BEFORE DEPARTURE. REPORT ANY VACANCIES IN CADRE ORGANIZATION. BEGIN CONDITIONAL IMPLEMENTATION

OF PLAN. ERIC CARDINAL HOFFSTRAFF, VICAR APOST.  
EXTRATERRPROVINCIAE.

The monk's face lost color. He replaced the telegram on the desk and sat back in his chair, lips tight together.

"You know what *Quo peregrinatur* is?"

"I know *what* it is, Domne, but not in detail."

"Well, it started as a plan to send a few priests along with a colony group heading for Alpha Centauri. But that didn't work out, because it takes bishops to ordain priests, and after the first generation of colonists, more priests would have to be sent, and so on. The question boiled down to an argument about whether the colonies would last, and if so, should provision be made to insure the apostolic succession on colony planets without recourse to Earth? You know what that would mean?"

"Sending at least three bishops, I imagine."

"Yes, and that seemed a little silly. The colony groups have all been rather small. But during the last world crisis, *Quo peregrinatur* became an emergency plan for perpetuating the Church on the colony planets if the worst came to pass on Earth. We have a ship."

"A *starship*?"

"No less. And we have a crew capable of managing it."

"Where?"

"We have the crew right here."

"Here at the abbey? But who—?" Joshua stopped. His face grew even grayer than before. "But, Domne my experience in space has been entirely in orbital vehicles, not in starships! Before Nancy died and I went to the Cisterc—"

"I know all about that. There are others with starship experience. You know who they are. There are even jokes about the number of ex-spacers that seem to feel a vocation to our Order. It's no accident, of course. And you remember when you were a postulant, how you were quizzed about your experience in space?"

Joshua nodded.

"You must also remember being asked about your willingness to go to space again, if the Order asked it of you."

"Yes."

"Then you were not wholly unaware that you were conditionally assigned to *Quo peregrinatur*, if it ever came to pass?"

"I—I guess I was afraid it was so, m'Lord."

"Afraid?"

"*Suspected*, rather. Afraid too, a little, because I've always hoped to spend the rest of my life in the Order."

"As a priest?"

"That—well, I haven't yet decided."

"*Quo peregrinatur* will not involve releasing you from your vows or mean abandoning the Order."

"The Order goes *too*?"

Zerchi smiled. "And the Memorabilia with it."

"The whole kit-and—Oh, you mean on microfilm. Where to?"

"The Centaurus Colony."

"How long would we be gone, Domne?"

"If you go, you'll never come back."

The monk breathed heavily and stared at the second telegram without seeming to see it. He scratched his beard and appeared bemused.

"Three questions," said the abbot. "Don't answer now, but start thinking about them, and think hard. First are you willing to go? Second, do you have a vocation to the priesthood? Third, are you willing to lead the group? And by *willing*, I don't mean 'willing under obedience'; I mean enthusiastic, or willing to get that way. Think it over; you have three days to think—maybe less."

Modern change had made but few incursions upon the buildings and the grounds of the ancient monastery. To protect the old buildings against the encroachment of a more impatient architecture, new additions had been made outside the walls and even across the highway—sometimes at the expense of convenience. The old refectory had been condemned because of a buckling roof, and it was necessary to cross the highway in order to reach the new refectory. The inconvenience was somewhat mitigated by the culvert walk under through which the brothers marched daily to meals.

Centuries old, but recently widened, the highway was the same road used by pagan armies, pilgrims, peasants, donkey carts, nomads, wild horsemen out of the East, artillery, tanks, and ten-ton trucks. Its traffic had gushed or trickled or dripped, according to the age and season. Once before, long ago, there had been six lanes and robot traffic. Then the traffic had stopped, the paving had cracked, and sparse grass grew in the cracks after an occasional rain. Dust had covered it. Desert dwellers had dug up its broken concrete for the building of hovels and barricades. Erosion made it a desert trail, crossing wilderness. But now there were six lanes and robot traffic, as before.

"Traffic's light tonight," the abbot observed as they left the old main gate. "Let's hike across. That tunnel can be suffocating after a dust storm. Or don't you feel like dodging buses?"

"Let's go," Brother Joshua agreed.

Low-slung trucks with feeble headlights (useful only for warning purposes) sped mindlessly past them with whining tires and moaning turbines. With dish antennae they watched the road, and with magnetic feelers they felt at the guiding strips of steel in the roadbed and were given guidance thereby, as they rushed along the pink, fluorescent river of oiled concrete. Economic corpuscles in an artery of Man, the behemoths charged heedlessly past the two monks who dodged them from lane to lane. To be felled by one of them was to be run over by truck after truck until a safety cruiser found the flattened imprint of a man on the pavement and stopped to clean it up. The autopilots' sensing mechanisms were better at detecting masses of metal than masses of flesh and bone.

"This was a mistake," Joshua said as they reached the center island and paused for breath. "Look who's standing over there."

The abbot peered for a moment, then clapped his forehead. "Mrs. Grales! I clean forgot: it's her night to prowl me down. She's sold her tomatoes to the sisters' refectory, and now she's after me again."

"After you? She was there last night, and the night before, too. I thought she was waiting for a ride. What does she want from you?"

"Oh, nothing really. She's finished gypping the sisters on the price of tomatoes, and now she'll donate the surplus profit to me for the poor box. It's a little ritual. I don't mind the ritual. It's what comes afterwards

that's bad. You'll see."

"Shall we go back?"

"And hurt her feelings? Nonsense. She's seen us by now. Come on."

They plunged into the thin stream of trucks again.

The two-headed woman and her six-legged dog waited with an empty vegetable basket by the new gate; the woman crooned softly to the dog. Four of the dog's legs were healthy legs, but an extra pair dangled uselessly at its sides. As for the woman, one head was as useless as the extra legs of the dog. It was a small head, a cherubic head, but it never opened its eyes. It gave no evidence of sharing in her breathing or her understanding. It lolled uselessly on one shoulder, blind, deaf, mute, and only vegetatively alive. Perhaps it lacked a brain, for it showed no sign of independent consciousness or personality. Her other face had aged, grown wrinkled, but the superfluous head retained the features of infancy, although it had been toughened by the gritty wind and darkened by the desert sun.

The old woman curtsied at their approach, and her dog drew back with a snarl. "Evenin', Father Zerchi," she drawled, "a most pleasant evenin' to yer--and to yer, Brother."

"Why, hello, Mrs. Grales--"

The dog barked, bristled, and began a frenzied dance, feinting toward the abbot's ankles with fangs bared for slashing. Mrs. Grales promptly struck her pet with the vegetable basket. The dog's teeth slashed the basket; the dog turned on its mistress. Mrs. Grales kept it away with the basket; and after receiving a few resounding whacks, the dog retired to sit growling in the gateway.

"What a fine mood Priscilla's in" Zerchi observed pleasantly. "Is she going to have pups?"

"Beg shriv'ness, yet honors," said Mrs. Grales, "but's not the pup's motherful condition as makes her so, devil fret her! but 'tis 'at man of mine. He's witched the piteous pup, he has--for love of witchin--and it makes her 'feared of all. I beg yet honors' shriv'ness for her naughties."

"It's all right. Well, good night, Mrs. Grales."

But escape proved not that easy. She caught at the abbot's sleeve and smiled her toothlessly irresistible smile.

"A minute, Father, only a minute for 'n old tumater woman, if ye have it to spare."

"Why, of course! I'd be glad--"

Joshua gave the abbot a sidelong grin and went over to negotiate with the dog concerning right of way. Priscilla eyed him with plain contempt.

"Here, Father, here," Mrs. Grales was saying. "Take a little something for yer box. Here--" Coins rattled while Zerchi protested. "No, here, take of it, take of it," she insisted. "Oh, I know as how ye always say, by fret! but I be not so poor's ye might think on me. And ye do good work. If ye don't take of it, that no-good man of mine'll have it from me, and do him the Devil's work. Here--I sold my tumaters, and I got my price, near, and I bought my feed for the week and even a play-pretty for Rachel. I want ye to have of it. Here."

"It's very kind . . ."

"Grr yumpf!" came an authoritative bark from the gateway. "Grryumpf! Rowf! rowf! RrrrrrOWWFF!"--followed by a rapid sequence of yaps, yelps, and Priscilla's howling in full retreat.

Joshua came wandering back with his hands in his sleeves.

"Are you wounded, man?"

"Grryumpf!" said the monk.

"What on earth did you do to her?"

"Grryumpf!" Brother Joshua repeated. "Rowf! Rowf! RrrrrOWWFF!"—then explained: "Priscilla believes in werewolves. The yelping was hers. We can get past the gate now."

The dog had vanished; but again Mrs. Grales caught at the abbot's sleeve. "Only a minute more of yer, Father, and I'll keep ye no longer. It's little Rachel I wanted to see yer about. There's the baptism and the christenin' to be thought of, and I wished to ask yer if ye'd do the honor of—"

"Mrs. Grales," he put in gently, "go see your own parish priest. He should handle these matters, not I. I have no parish—only the abbey. Talk to Father Selo at Saint Michael's. Our church doesn't even have a font. Women aren't permitted, except in the tribune—"

"The sister's chapel has a font, and women can—"

"It's for Father Selo, not for me. It has to be recorded in your own parish. Only as an emergency could I—"

"Ay, ay, that I know, but I saw Father Selo. I brought Rachel to his church and the fool of a man would not touch her."

"He refused to baptize Rachel?"

"That he did, the fool of a man."

"It's a priest you're talking of, Mrs. Grales, and no fool, for I know him well. He must have his reasons for refusing. If you don't agree with his reasons, then see someone else—but not a monastic priest. Talk to the pastor at Saint Maisie's perhaps."

"Ay, and that too have I done..." She launched into what promised to be a prolonged account of her skirmishings on behalf of the unbaptized Rachel. The monks listened patiently at first, but while Joshua was watching her, he seized the abbot's arm above the elbow; his fingers gradually dug into Zerchi's arm until the abbot winched in pain and tore the fingers away with his free hand.

"What *are* you doing?" he whispered, but then noticed the monk's expression. Joshua's eyes were fixed on the old woman as if she were a cockatrice. Zerchi followed his gaze, but saw nothing stranger than usual; her extra head was half concealed by a sort of veil, but Brother Joshua had certainly seen that often enough.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Grales," Zerchi interrupted as soon as she fell short of breath. "I really must go now. I'll tell you what: I'll call Father Selo for you, but that's all I can do. We'll see you again, I'm sure."

"Thank yer kindly, and beg yer shriv'ness for keeping yer."

"Good night, Mrs. Grales."

They entered the gate and walked toward the refectory. Joshua thumped the heel of his hand against his temple several times as if to jar something back into place.

"Why were you staring at her like that?" the abbot demanded. "I thought it rude"

"Didn't you notice?"

"Notice what?"

"Then you *didn't* notice. Well . . . let it pass. But who is Rachel? Why won't they baptize the child? Is she the woman's daughter?"

The abbot smiled without humor. "That's what Mrs. Grales contends. But



there's some question as to whether Rachel is her daughter, her sister—or merely an excrescence growing out of her shoulder.”

“Rachel!—her other *head*?”

“Don’t shout so. She’ll hear you yet.”

“And she wants it baptized?”

“Rather urgently, wouldn’t you say? It seems to be an obsession.”

Joshua waved his arms. “How do they settle such things?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t want to know. I’m grateful to Heaven that it’s not up to me to figure it out. If it were a simple case of Siamese twins, it would be easy. But it isn’t. The old-timers say Rachel wasn’t there when Mrs. Grales was born.”

“A farmers’ fable!”

“Perhaps. But some are willing to tell it under oath. How many souls has an old lady with an extra head—a head that ‘just grew’? Things like that cause ulcers in high places, my son. Now, what was it you noticed? Why were you staring at her and trying to pinch my arm off like that?”

The monk was slow to answer. “It smiled at me,” he said at last.

“What smiled?”

“Her extra, uh—Rachel. She smiled. I thought she was going to wake up.”

The abbot stopped him in the refectory’s entranceway and peered at him curiously.

“She smiled,” the monk repeated very earnestly.

“You imagined it.”

“Yes, m’Lord.”

“Then *look* like you imagined it.”

Brother Joshua tried. “I can’t,” he admitted.

The abbot dropped the old woman’s coins in the poor box. “Let’s go on inside,” he said.

The new refectory was functional, chromium befixtured, acoustically tailored, and germicidally illuminated. Gone were the smoke-blackened stones, the tallow lamps, the wooden bowls and cellar-ripened cheeses. Except for the cruciform seating arrangement and a rank of images along one wall, the place resembled an industrial lunchroom. Its atmosphere had changed, as had the atmosphere of the entire abbey. After ages of striving to preserve remnants of culture from a civilization long dead, the monks had watched the rise of a new and mightier civilization. The old tasks had been completed; new ones were found. The past was venerated and exhibited in glass cases, but it was no longer the present. The Order conformed to the times, to an age of uranium and steel and flaring rocketry, amid the growl of heavy industry and the high thin whine of star drive converters. The Order conformed—at least in superficial ways.

“*Accedite ad eum*,” the Reader intoned.

The robed legions stood restlessly at their places during the reading. No food had yet appeared. The tables were bare of dishes. Supper had been deferred. The organism, the community whose cells were men, whose life had flowed through seventy generations, seemed tense tonight, seemed to sense a note amiss tonight, seemed aware, through the connaturality of its membership, of what had been told to only a few. The organism lived as a body, worshiped and worked as a body, and at times seemed dimly conscious as a mind that infused its members and whispered to itself and to Another in the *lingua prima*, baby tongue of the species. Perhaps the tension was increased as much

by faint snort-growl of practice rocketry from the distant anti-missile missile range as by the unexpected postponement of the meal. The abbot rapped for silence, then gestured his prior, Father Lehy toward the lectern. The prior looked pained for a moment before speaking.

"We all regret the necessity," he said at last, "of sometimes disturbing the quiet of contemplative life with news from the outside world. But we must remember too that we are here to pray for the world and its salvation, as for our own. Especially now, the world could use some praying for." He paused to glance at Zerchi.

The abbot nodded.

"Lucifer is fallen," said the priest, and stopped. He stood there looking down at the lectern as if suddenly struck dumb.

Zerchi arose. "That is Brother Joshua's inference, by the way," he interposed. "The Regency Council of the Atlantic Confederacy has said nothing to speak of. The dynasty has issued no statements. We know little more than we knew yesterday, except that The World Court is meeting in emergency session, and that the Defense Interior people are moving fast. There is a defense alert, and we'll be affected, but don't be disturbed. Father—?"

"Thank you, *Dome*," said the prior, seeming to regain his voice as Dom Zerchi was seated again. "Now, Reverend Father Abbot asked me to make the following announcements:

"First, for the next three days we shall sing the Little Office of Our Lady before Matins, asking her intercession for peace.

"Second, general instructions for civil defense in the event of a space-strike or missile-attack alert are available on the table by the entrance. Everybody take one. If you've read it, read it again.

"Third, in the event that an attack warning is sounded, the following brothers are to report immediately to Old Abbey courtyard for special instructions. If no attack warning comes, the same brothers will report there anyway day after tomorrow morning right after Matins and Lauds. Names—Brothers Joshua, Christopher, Augustin, James, Samuel—"

The monks listened with quiet tension, betraying no emotion. There were twenty-seven names in all, but no novices were among them. Some were eminent scholars, there were a janitor and a cook as well. At first hearing, one might assume that the names had been drawn from a box. By the time Father Lehy had finished the list, some of the brothers were eying each other curiously.

"And this same group will report to the dispensary for a complete physical examination tomorrow after Prime," the prior finished. He turned to look questioning at Dom Zerchi.

"Domne?"

"Yes, just one thing," said the abbot, approaching the lectern. "Brothers, let us not assume that there is going to be war. Let's remind ourselves that Lucifer has been with us—this time—for nearly two centuries. And was dropped only twice, in sizes smaller than megaton. We all know what *could* happen, if there's war. The genetic festering is still with us from the last time Man tried to eradicate himself. Back then, in the Saint Leibowitz' time, maybe they didn't know what would happen. Or perhaps they did know, but could not quite believe it until they tried it—like a child who knows what a loaded pistol is supposed to do, but who never pulled a trigger before. They had not yet seen a billion corpses. They had not seen the still-born, the monstrous, the dehumanized, the blind. They had not yet seen the madness and the murder

and the blotting out of reason. Then they did it, and then they saw it.

“Now—*now* the princes, the presidents, the praesidiums, now they know—with dead certainty. They can know it by the children they beget and send to asylums for the deformed; They know it, and they’ve kept the peace. Not Christ’s peace, certainly, but peace, until lately—with only two warlike incidents in as many centuries. Now they have the bitter certainty. My sons, they cannot do it again. Only a race of madmen could do it again—”

He stopped speaking. Someone was smiling,. It was only a small smile, but in the midst of a sea of grave faces it stood out like a dead fly in a bowl of cream. Dom Zerchi frowned. The old man kept on smiling wryly. He sat at the “beggar’s table” with three other transient tramps—an old fellow with a brushy beard, stained yellow about the chin. As a jacket, he wore a burlap bag with armholes. He continued to smile at Zerchi. He looked old as a rain-worn crag, and a suitable candidate for a Maundy lavage. Zerchi wondered if he were about to stand up and make an announcement to his hosts—or blow a ramshorn at them, perhaps?—but that was only an illusion generated by the smile. He quickly dismissed the feeling that he had seen the old man before, somewhere. He concluded his remarks.

On his way back to his place, he paused. The beggar nodded pleasantly at his host. Zerchi came nearer.

“Who are you, if I may ask. Have I seen you somewhere before?”

“What?”

“*Latzar shemi*, ” the beggar repeated.

“I don’t quite—”

“Call me Lazarus, then,” said the old one, and chuckled.

Dom Zerchi shook his head and moved on. *Lazarus?* There was, in the region, an old wives’ tale to the effect that—but what a shoddy sort of *myth* that was. Raised up by Christ but still not a Christian, they said. And yet he could not escape the feeling that he had seen the old man somewhere.

“Let the bread be brought for blessing,” he called, and the deferment of supper was at an end.

After the prayers, the abbot glanced toward the beggars’ table again. The old man was merely fanning his soup with a sort of basket hat. Zerchi dismissed it with a shrug, and the meal began in solemn silence.

Compline, the Church’s night prayer, seemed especially profound that night.

But Joshua slept badly afterwards. In a dream he met Mrs. Grales again. There was a surgeon who sharpened a knife, saying, “This deformity must be removed before it becomes malignant.” And the Rachel face opened its eyes and tried to speak to Joshua, but he could hear her only faintly, and understand her not at all.

“Accurate am I the exception,” she seemed to be saying, “I commensurate the deception. Am.”

He could make nothing of it, but he tried to reach through to save her. There seemed to be a rubbery wall of glass in the way. He paused and tried to read her lips. I am the, I am the—

“I am the Immaculate Conception,” came the dream whisper.

He tried to tear his way through the rubbery glass to save her from the knife, but it was too late, and there was a great deal of blood afterwards. He awoke from the blasphemous nightmare with a shudder and prayed for a time; but

as soon as he slept, there was Mrs. Grales again.

It was a troubled night, a night that belonged to Lucifer. It was the night of the Atlantic assault against the Asian space installations.

In swift retaliation, an ancient city died.

## 26

“

T

his is your Emergency Warning Network,” the announcer was saying when Joshua entered the abbot’s study after Matins of the following day, “bringing you the latest bulletin on the pattern of fallout from the enemy missile assault on Texarkana...”

“You sent for me, Domne?”

Zerchi waved him to silence and toward a seat. The priest’s face looked drawn and bloodless, a steel-gray mask of icy self-control. To Joshua, he seemed to have shrunk in size, to have aged since nightfall. They listened gloomily to the voice which waxed and waned at four-second intervals as the broadcasting stations were switched on and off the air as an impediment to enemy direction-finding equipment:

“...but first, an announcement just released by the Supreme Command. The royal family is safe. I repeat: the royal family is known to be safe. The Regency Council is said to have been absent from the city when the enemy struck. Outside of the disaster area, no civil disorders have been reported, and none is expected.

“A cease-fire order has been issued by the World Court of Nations, with a suspended proscription, involving the death sentence, against the responsible heads of government of both nations. Being suspended, the sentence becomes applicable only if the decree is disobeyed. Both governments cabled to the court their immediate acknowledgment of the order, and there is, therefore, a strong probability that the clash is at an end, a few hours after it began as a preventative assault against certain illegal space installations. In a surprise attack, the space forces of the Atlantic Confederacy last night struck at three concealed Asian missile sites located on the far side of the moon, and totally destroyed one enemy space station known to be involved in a guidance system for space-to-earth missiles. It was expected that the enemy would retaliate against our forces in space, but the barbarous assault on our capital city was an act of desperation which no one anticipated.

“*Special bulletin:* Our government has just announced its intention to honor the cease-fire for ten days if the enemy agrees to an immediate meeting of foreign ministers and military commanders on Guam. The enemy is expected to accept.”

“Ten days,” the abbot groaned. “It doesn’t give us enough time.”

“The Asian radio, however, is still insisting that the recent thermonuclear disaster in Itu Wan, causing some eighty thousand casualties, was the work of an errant Atlantic missile, and the destruction of the city of

Texarkana was therefore retaliation in kind..."

The abbot snapped off the set. "Where's the truth?" he asked quietly. "What's to be believed? Or does it matter at all? When mass murders been answered with mass murder, rape with rape, hate with hate, there's no longer much meaning in asking whose ax is the bloodier. Evil, on evil, piled on evil. Was there any justification in our "police action" in space? How can *we know?* Certainly there was no justification for what *they* did—or was there? We only know what that thing says, and that thing is a captive. The Asian radio has to say what will least displease its government; *ours* has to say what will least displease our fine patriotic opinionated rabble, which is what, coincidentally, the government wants it to say anyhow, so where's the difference? Dear God, there must be half a million dead, if they hit Texarkana with the real thing. I feel like saying words I've never even heard. Toad's dung. Hag pus. Gangrene of the soul. Immortal brain-rot. Do you understand me, Brother? And Christ breathed the same carrion air with us; how meek the Majesty of our Almighty God! What an Infinite Sense of Humor—for Him to become one of us!—King of the Universe, nailed on a cross as a Yiddish Schlemiel by the likes of us. They say Lucifer was cast down for refusing to adore the Incarnate Word; the Foul One must totally lack a sense of humor! God of Jacob, God even of *Cain!* Why do they do it all again?

"Forgive me, I'm raving," he added, less to Joshua than to the old woodcarving of Saint Leibowitz that stood in one corner of the study. He had paused in his pacing to glance up at the face of the image. The image was old, very old. Some earlier ruler of the abbey had sent it down to a basement storeroom to stand in dust and gloom while a dry-rot etched the wood, eating away the spring grain and leaving the summer grain so that the face seemed deeply lined. The saint wore a slightly satiric smile. Zerchi had rescued it from oblivion because of the smile.

"Did you see that old beggar in the refectory last night?" he asked irrelevantly, still peering curiously at the statue's smile.

"I didn't notice, Domne. Why?"

"Never mind, I guess I'm just imagining it." He fingered the mound of faggots where the wooden martyr stood. *That's where all of us are standing now*, he thought. On the fat kindling of past sins. And some of them are mine. Mine, Adam's, Herod's, Judas's, Hannegan's, mine. Everybody's. Always culminates in the colossus of the State, somehow, drawing about itself the mantle of godhood, being struck down by wrath of Heaven: Why? We shouted it loudly enough—God's to be obeyed by nations as by men. Caesar's to be God's policeman, not His plenipotentiary successor, nor His heir. To all ages, all peoples—"Whoever exalts a race or a State of a particular form of State or the depositories of power . . . whoever raises these notions above their standard value and divinizes them to an idolatrous level, distorts and perverts an order of the world planned and created by God..." Where had *that* come from? Eleventh Pius, he thought, without certainty—eighteen centuries ago. But when Caesar got the means to destroy the world, wasn't he already divinized? Only by the consent of the people—same rabble that shouted: *"Non habemus regem nisi caesarem,"* when confronted by Him—God Incarnate, mocked and spat upon. Same rabble that martyred Leibowitz...

"Caesar's divinity is showing again."

"Domne?"

"Let it pass. Are the brothers in the courtyard yet?"

“About half of them were when I passed. Shall I go see?”

“Do. Then come back here. I have something to say to you before we join them.”

Before Joshua returned, the abbot had got the *Quo peregrinatur* papers out of the wall safe.

“Read the precis,” he told the monk. “Look at the table of organization, read the procedural outline. You’ll have to study the rest in detail, but later.”

The communicator buzzed loudly while Joshua was reading.

“Reverend Father Jethrah Zerchi, Abbas, please,” droned the voice of a robot operator.

“Speaking.”

“Urgent priority wire from Sir Eric Cardinal Hoffstraff, New Rome. There is no courier service at this hour. Shall I read?”

“Yes, read the text of it. I’ll send someone down later to pick up a copy.”

“The text is as follows: *‘Grex peregrinus erit. Quam primum est factum suscipiendum vobis, jussu Sactae Sedis. Suscipite ergo operis partem ordini vestro propriam . . .’*”

“Can you read that back in Southwest translation?” the abbot asked.

The operator complied, but in neither did the message seem to contain anything unexpected. It was a confirmation of the plan and a request for speed.

“Receipt acknowledged,” he said at last.

“Will there be a reply?”

“Reply as follows: *Eminentissimo Domino Eric Cardinali Hoffstraff obsequitur Jethra Zerchius, A.O.L., Abbas. Ad has res disputandas iam coegi discessuros fratres ut hodie parati dimitti Roman prima aeris nave possint.* End of text.”

“I read back: *‘Eminentissimo . . .’*”

“All right, that’s all. Out.”

Joshua had finished reading the precis. He closed the portfolio and looked up slowly.

“Are you ready to get nailed on it?” Zerchi asked.

“I—I’m not sure I understand.” The monk’s face was pale.

“I asked you three questions yesterday. I need the answers now.”

“I’m willing to go.”

“That leaves two to be answered.”

“I’m not sure about the priesthood, Domne.”

“Look, you’ll have to decide. You have less experience with starships than any of the others. None of the others is ordained. Someone has to be partially released from technical duties for pastoral and administrative duties. I told you this will not mean abandoning the Order. It won’t, but your group will become an independent daughter house of the Order, under a modified rule. The Superior will be elected by secret ballot of the professed, of course—and you are the most obvious candidate, if you have a vocation to the priesthood as well. Have you, or haven’t you? There’s your inquisition, and the time’s now, and a brief now it is too.”

“But Reverend Father, I’m not through studying—”

“That doesn’t matter. Besides the twenty-seven-man crew—all our people—others are going too: six sisters and twenty children from the Saint Joseph school, a couple of scientists, and three bishops, two of them newly consecrated. They can ordain, and since one of the three is a delegate of the

Holy Father, they will even have the power to consecrate bishops. They can ordain you when they feel you're ready. You'll be in space for years, you know. But we want to know whether you have a vocation, and we want to know it now."

Brother Joshua stammered for a moment, then shook his head. "I don't know."

"Would you like half an hour? Would you like a glass of water? You go so gray. I tell you, son, if you're to lead the flock, you'll have to be able to decide things here-and-now. You need to now. Well, can you speak?"

"Domne, I'm not-certain--"

"You can croak anyhow, eh? Are you going to submit to the yoke, son? Or aren't you broken yet? You'll be asked to be the ass He rides into Jerusalem, but it's a heavy load, and it'll break your back, because He's carrying the sins of the world."

"I don't think I'm able."

"Croak and wheeze. But you can growl too, and that's well for the leader of the pack. Listen, none of us has been really able. But we've tried, and we've been tried. It tries you to destruction, but you're here for that. This Order has had abbots of gold, abbots of cold tough steel, abbots of corroded lead, and none of them was able, although some were abler than others, some saints even. The gold got battered, the steel got brittle and broke, and the corroded lead got stamped into ashes by Heaven. Me, I've been lucky enough to be quicksilver; I spatter, but I run back together somehow. I feel another spattering coming on, though, Brother, and I think it's for keeps this time. What are you made of, son? What's to be tried?"

"Puppy dog tails. I'm meat, and I'm scared, Reverend Father."

"Steel screams when it's forged, it gasps when it's quenched. It creaks when it goes under load. I think even steel is scared, son. Take half an hour to think? A drink of water? A drink of wind? Totter off awhile. If it makes you seasick, then prudently vomit. If it makes you terrified, scream. If it makes you anything, *pray*. But come into the church before Mass, and tell us what a monk is made of. The Order is fissioning, and the part of us that goes into space goes forever. Are you called to be its shepherd, or are you not? Go and decide."

"I guess there's no way out."

"Of *course* there is. You have only to say, 'I'm not called to it.' Then somebody else will be elected, that's all. But go, calm down, and then come to us in church with a yes or a no. That's where I'm going now." The abbot arose and nodded a dismissal.

The darkness in the courtyard was nearly total. Only a thin sliver of light leaked from under the church doors. The faint luminosity of starlight was blurred by a dust haze. No hint of dawn had appeared in the east. Brother Joshua wandered in silence. Finally he sat on a curbing that enclosed a bed of rose bushes. He put his chin in his hands and rolled a pebble around with his toe. The buildings of the abbey were dark and sleeping shadows. A faint slice of cantaloupe moon hung low in the south.

The murmur of chanting came from the church: *Excita, Domine, potentiam tuam, et veni, ut salvos*—Stir up thy might indeed, O Lord, and come to save us. That breath of prayer would go on and on, as long as there was breath to breathe it. Even if the brethren thought it futile . . .

But they couldn't know it to be futile. Or could they? If Rome had any hope, why send the starship? Why, if they believed that prayers for peace on earth would ever be answered? Was not the starship an act of despair? . . .

*Retrahe me, Satanus, et discede!* he thought. The starship is an act of hope. Hope for Man elsewhere, peace somewhere, if not here and now, then someplace: Alpha Centauri's planet maybe, Beta Hydri, or one of the sickly straggling colonies on that planet of What's-its-name in Scorpius. Hope, and not futility, is sending the ship, thou foul Seductor. It is a weary and dog-tired hope, maybe, a hope that says: Shake the dust off your sandals and go preach Sodom to Gomorrha. But it is hope, or it wouldn't say *go* at all. It isn't hope for Earth, but hope for the soul and substance of Man somewhere. With Lucifer hanging over, not sending the ship would be an act of presumption, as you, dirtiest one, tempted Our Lord: If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down from the pinnacle. For angels will bear thee up.

Too much hope for Earth had led men to try to make it Eden, and of that they might well despair until the time toward the consumption of the world—

Someone had opened the abbey doors. Monks were leaving quietly for their cells. Only a dim glow spilled from the doorway into the courtyard. The light was dim in the church. Joshua could see only a few candles and the dim red eye of the sanctuary lamp. The twenty-six of his brethren were just visible where they knelt, waiting. Someone closed the doors again, but not quite for through a crack he could still see the red dot of the sanctuary lamp. Fire kindled in worship, burning in praise, burning gently in adoration there in its red receptacle. Fire, loveliest of the four elements of the world, and yet an element too in Hell. While it burned adoringly in the core of the Temple, it had also scorched the life from a city, this night, and spewed its venom over the land. How strange of God to speak from a burning bush, and of Man to make a symbol of Heaven into a symbol of Hell.

He peered up again at the dusty stars of morning. Well, there would be no Edens found out there, they said. Yet there were men out there now, men who looked up to strange suns in stranger skies, gasped strange air, tilled strange earth. On worlds of frozen equatorial tundra, worlds of steaming Arctic jungle, a little like Earth perhaps, enough like Earth so that Man might live somehow, by the same sweat of his brow. They were but a handful, these celestial colonists of *Homo loquax nonnumquam sapiens*, a few harassed colonies of humanity that had had small help from Earth thus far; and now they might expect no help at all, there in their new non-Edens, even less like Paradise than Earth had been. Fortunately for them, perhaps. The closer men came to perfecting for themselves a paradise, the more impatient they seemed to become with it, and with themselves as well. They made a garden of pleasure, and became progressively more miserable with it as it grew in richness and power and beauty; for then, perhaps, it was easier for them to see that something was missing in the garden, some tree or shrub that would not grow. When the world was in darkness and wretchedness, it could believe in perfection and yearn for it. But when the world became bright with reason and riches, it began to sense the narrowness of the needle's eye, and that rankled for a world no longer willing to believe or yearn. Well, they were going to destroy it again, were they—this garden Earth, civilized and knowing, to be torn apart again that Man might hope again in wretched darkness.

And yet the Memorabilia was to go with the ship! Was it a curse? . . .  
*Discede, Seductor informis!* It was no curse, this knowledge, unless perverted by Man, as fire had been, this night...

Why do I have to leave, Lord? he wondered. Must I go? And what am I trying to decide: to go, or to refuse to go? But that was already decided; there had



been a summons to that—long ago. *Egrediamur tellure*, then, for it was commanded by a vow I pledged. So I go. But to lay hands on me and call me a priest, to call me *abbas* even, to set me to watch over the souls of my brethren? Must Reverend Father insist on that? But he isn't insisting on that; he is only insisting on knowing whether God insists on that. But he is in such a terrible hurry. Is he really so sure of me as all that? To drop it on me this way, he must be more certain of me than I am of myself.

Speak up, destiny, speak up! Destiny always seems decades away, but suddenly it's not decades away; it's right *now*. But maybe destiny is always right now, right here, right this very instant, maybe.

Isn't it enough that *he's* sure of me? But no, that is not nearly enough. Got to be sure myself, somehow. In half an hour. Less than half, now. *Audi me, Domine—please*, Lord—It's only one of your vipers of this generation, begging for something, begging to know, begging a sign, a sign, a portent, an omen. I've not enough time to decide.

He started nervously. Something *—slithering?*

He heard it as a quiet rustling in the dry leaves under the rose bushes behind him. It stopped, rustled, and slithered again. Would a sign from Heaven slither? An omen or a portent might. The Psalmist's *negotium perambulans in tenebris* might. A sidewinder might.

A cricket, perhaps. It was only rustling. Brother Hegan had killed a sidewinder in the courtyard once, but...Now it slithered again!—a slow dragging in the leaves. Would it be an appropriate sign if it slithered out and stung him in the backside?

The sound of prayer came from the church again: *Reminiscentur et convertentur all Dominum universi fines terrae. Et adorabunt in conspectu universae familiae gentium. Quoniam Domini est regnum; et ipse dominabitur...* Strange words for tonight: All the ends of the Earth shall remember and turn unto the Lord...

The slithering stopped suddenly. Was it right behind him? Really, Lord, a sign isn't absolutely essential. Really, I...

Something nudged at his wrist. He shot upward with a yelp and leaped away from the rose bushes. He seized a loose rock and threw it into the bushes. The crash was louder than he had expected. He scratched at his beard and felt sheepish. He waited. Nothing emerged from the bushes. Nothing slithered. He tossed a pebble. It too rattled offensively in the darkness. He waited, but nothing stirred in the bushes. Ask for an omen, then stone it when it *comes—de essentia hominum*.

A pink tongue of dawn was beginning to lick the stars from the sky. Soon he would have to go tell the abbot. And tell him what?

Brother Joshua brushed gnats from his beard and started toward the church, because someone had just come to the door and looked out—looking for him?

*Unus panis, et unum corpus multi sumus*, came the murmur from the church, *omnes qui de uno . . .* One bread and one body, though many, are we, and of one bread and one chalice have partaken...

He paused in the doorway to look back toward the rose bushes. It was a trap, wasn't it? he thought. You'd send it, knowing I'd throw stones at it, wouldn't you?

A moment later, he slipped inside and went to kneel with the others. His voice joined theirs in the entreaty; for a time he ceased to think, amid the company of monastic spacegoers assembled there. *Annuntiabitur Domino generatio ventura . . .* And these shall be declared to the Lord a generation to come; and

the heavens shall show forth His justice. To a people that shall be born, which the Lord hath made...

When he became aware again, he saw the abbot motioning to him. Brother Joshua went to kneel next to him.

*"Hoc officium, Fili-tibine imponemus oneri?"* he whispered.

"If they want me," the monk answered softly, *"honorem accipiam."*

The abbot smiled. "You heard me badly. I said "burden," not 'honor.'"

*autem onus si audisti ut honorem, nihilo errasti auribus."*

"Accipiam," the monk repeated.

"You're certain?"

"If they choose me, I shall be certain."

"Well enough."

Thus it was settled. While the sun rose, a shepherd was elected to lead the flock.

Afterward, the conventual Mass was a Mass for Pilgrims and Travelers.

It had not been easy to charter a plane for the flight to New Rome. Even harder was the task of winning clearance for the flight after the plane had been chartered. All civil aircraft had come under the jurisdiction of the military for the duration of the emergency, and a military clearance was required. It had been refused by the local ZDI. If Abbot Zerchi had not been aware of the fact that a certain air marshal and a certain cardinal archbishop happened to be friends, the ostensible pilgrimage to New Rome by twenty-seven bookleggers with bindlestiffs might well have proceeded on shank's mare, for lack of permission to use rapid transport jet. By midafternoon, however, clearance had been granted. Abbot Zerchi boarded the plane briefly before takeoff—for last farewells.

"You are the continuity of the Order," he told them.

"With you goes the Memorabilia. With you also goes the apostolic succession, and, perhaps—the Chair of Peter.

"No, no," he added in response to the murmur of surprise from the monks. "Not His Holiness. I had not told you this before, but if the worst comes on Earth, the College of Cardinals—or what's left of it—will convene. The Centaurus Colony may then be declared a separate patriarchate, with full patriarchal jurisdiction going to the cardinal who will accompany you. If the scourge falls on us here, to him, then, will go the Patrimony of Peter. For though life on Earth may be destroyed—God forbid—as long as Man lives elsewhere, the office of Peter cannot be destroyed. There are many who think that if the curse falls on Earth, the papacy would pass to him by the principle of *Epikieia* if there were no survivors here. But that is not your direct concern, brothers, sons, although you will be subject to your patriarch under special vows as these which bind the Jesuits to the Pope.

"You will be years in space. The ship will be your monastery. After the patriarchal see is established at the Centaurus Colony, you will establish there a mother house of the Visitationist Friars of the Order of Saint Leibowitz of Tycho. But the ship will remain in your hands, and the Memorabilia. If civilization, or a vestige of it, can maintain itself on Centaurus, you will send missions to the other colony worlds, and perhaps eventually to the colonies of their colonies. Wherever Man goes, you and your successors will go. And with you, the records and remembrances of four thousand years and more. Some of you, or those to come after you, will be mendicants and wanderers, teaching the chronicles of Earth and the canticles

*Crucis*

of the Crucified to the peoples and the cultures that may grow out of the colony groups. For some may forget. Some may be lost for a time from the Faith. Teach them, and receive into the Order those among them who are called. Pass on to them the continuity. Be for Man the memory of Earth and Origin. Remember this Earth. Never forget her, but *—never come back.*” Zerchi’s voice went hoarse and low. “If you ever come back, you might meet the Archangel at the east end of Earth, guarding her passes with a sword of flame. I feel it. Space is your home hereafter. It’s a lonelier desert than ours. God bless you, and pray for us.”

He moved slowly down the aisle, pausing at each seat to bless and embrace before he left the plane. The plane taxied onto the runway and roared aloft, He watched until it disappeared from view in the evening sky. Afterward, he drove back to the abbey and to the remainder of his flock. While aboard the plane, he had spoken as if the destiny of Brother Joshua’s group were as clear-cut as the prayers prescribed for tomorrow’s Office; but both he and they knew that he had only been reading the palm of a plan, had been describing a hope and not a certainty. For Brother Joshua’s group had only begun the first short lap of a long and doubtful journey, a new Exodus from Egypt under the auspices of a God who must surely be very weary of the race of Man.

Those who stayed behind had the easier part. Theirs was but to wait for the end and pray that it would not come.

## 27

## “

# T

he area affected by local fallout remains relatively stationary,” said the announcer, “and the danger of further windspread has nearly vanished...”

“Well, at least nothing *worse* has happened yet,” remarked the abbot’s guest. “So far, we’ve been safe from it here. It looks like we’ll stay safe, unless the conference falls apart.”

“Will we now,” Zerchi grunted. “But listen a moment.”

“The latest death toll estimate,” the announcer continued, “on this ninth day after the destruction of the capital, gives two million, eight hundred thousand dead. More than half of this figure is from the population of the city proper. The rest is an estimate based on the percentage of the population in the fringe and fallout areas known to have received critical doses of radiation. Experts predict that the estimate will rise as more radiation cases are reported.

“This station is required by law to broadcast the following announcement twice daily for the duration of the emergency: ‘The provisions of Public Law 10-WR-3E in no way empower private citizens to administer euthanasia to victims of radiation poisoning. Victims who have been exposed, or who think they have been exposed, to radiation far in excess of the critical dosage must report to the nearest Green Star Relief Station, where a magistrate is empowered to issue a writ of *Mori Vult* to anyone properly certified as a hopeless

case, if the sufferer desires euthanasia. Any victim of radiation who takes his own life in any manner other than that prescribed by law will be considered a suicide, and will jeopardize the sight of his heirs and dependents to claim insurance and other radiation relief benefits under the law. Moreover, any citizen who assists such a suicide may be prosecuted for murder. The Radiation Disaster Act authorizes euthanasia *only after due process* of law. Serious cases of radiation sickness must report to a Green Star Relief--”

Abruptly, and with such force that he twisted the dial knob free of its shaft, Zerchi switched off the receiver. He swung himself out of his chair and went to stand at the window and look down on the courtyard where a crowd of refugees were milling around several hastily built wooden tables: The abbey, old and new, was overrun by people of all ages and stations whose homes had been in the blighted regions. The abbot had temporarily readjusted the “cloistered” areas of the abbey to give the refugees access to virtually everything except the monks’ sleeping quarters. The sign outside the old gate had been removed, for there were women and children to be fed, clothed, and given shelter.

He watched two novices carrying a steaming cauldron out of the emergence kitchen. They hoisted it onto a table and began ladling out soup.

The abbot’s visitor cleared his throat and stirred restlessly in his chair. The abbot turned.

“Due process, they call it,” he growled. “Due process of mass, state-sponsored suicide. With all of society’s blessings.”

“Well,” said the visitor, “it’s certainly better than letting them die horribly, by degrees.”

“Is it? Better for whom? The street cleaners? Better to have your living corpses walk to a central disposal station while they can still walk? Less public spectacle? Less horror lying around? Less disorder? A few million corpses lying around might start a rebellion against those responsible. That’s what you and the government mean by better, isn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t know about the government,” said the visitor, with only a trace of stiffness in his voice. “What I meant by better was ‘more merciful.’ I have no intention of arguing your moral theology with you. If you think you have a soul that God would send to Hell if you chose to die painlessly instead of horribly, then go ahead and think so. But you’re in a minority, you know. I disagree, but there’s nothing to argue about.”

“Forgive me,” said Abbot Zerchi. “I wasn’t getting ready to argue moral theology with you. I was speaking only of this spectacle of mass euthanasia in terms of human motivation. The very existence of the Radiation Disaster Act, and like laws in other countries, is the plainest possible evidence that governments were *fully* aware of the consequences of another war, but instead of trying to make the crime impossible, they tried to provide in advance for the consequences of the crime. Are the implications of that fact meaningless to you, Doctor?”

“Of course not, Father. Personally, I am a pacifist. But for the present we’re stuck with the world as it is. And if they couldn’t agree on a way to make an act of war impossible, then it is better to have *some* provisions for coping with the consequences than to have *no* provisions.”

“Yes and no. Yes, if it’s in anticipation of somebody else’s crime. No, if it’s in anticipation of one’s own. And especially no if the provision to

soften the consequences are criminal too.”

The visitor shrugged. “Like euthanasia? I’m sorry, Father, I feel that the laws of society are what makes something a crime or not a crime. I’m aware that you don’t agree. And there can be bad laws, ill-conceived, true. But in this case, I think we have a good law. If I thought I had such a thing as a soul, and that there was an angry God in Heaven, I might agree with you.”

Abbot Zerchi smiled thinly. “You don’t *have* a soul, Doctor. You *are* a soul. You *have* a body, temporarily.”

The visitor laughed politely. “A semantic confusion.”“

“True. But which of us is confused? Are you sure?”

“Let’s not quarrel Father. I’m not with the Mercy Cadre. I work on the Exposure Survey Team. We don’t kill anybody.”

Abbot Zerchi gazed at him in silence for a moment. The visitor was a short muscular man with a pleasant round face and a balding pate that was sunburned and freckled. He wore a green serge uniform, and a cap with the Green Star insignia lay in his lap.

Why quarrel, indeed? The man was a medical worker, not an executioner. Some of the Green Star’s relief work was admirable. Occasionally it was even heroic. That in some instances it wrought evil, according to Zerchi’s belief, was no reason to regard its *good* works as tainted. The bulk of society favored it, and its workers were in good faith. The doctor had tried to be friendly. His request had seemed simple enough. He had been neither demanding nor officious about it. Still, the abbot hesitated before saying yes.

“The work you want to do here—will it take long?”

The doctor shook his head. “Two days at most, I think. We have two mobile units. We can bring them into your courtyard, hitch the two trailers together, and start right to work. We’ll take the obvious radiation cases, and the wounded, first. We treat only the most urgent cases. Our job is clinical testing; The sick ones will get treatment at an emergency camp.

“And the sickest ones get something else at a mercy camp?”

The worker frowned. “Only if they want to go. Nobody makes them go.”

“But you write out the permit that lets them go.”

“I’ve given some red tickets, yes. I may have to this time. Here—” He fumbled in his jacket pocket and brought out a red cardboard form, something like a shipping label with a loop of wire for attaching it to a buttonhole or a belt loop. He tossed it on the desk. “A blank ‘crit-dose’ form. There it is. Read it. It tells the man he’s sick, very sick. And here—here’s a green ticket too. It tells him he’s well and has nothing to worry about. Look at the red one carefully! ‘Estimated exposure in radiation units.’ ‘Blood count.’ ‘Urinalysis,’ On one side, it’s just like the green one. On the other side, the green one’s blank, but look at the back of the red one. The fine print—it’s directly quoted from Public Law 10-WR-3E. It has to be there. The law requires it. It has to be read to him. He has to be told his rights. What he does about it is his own affair. Now, if you’d rather we parked the mobile units down the highway, we can—”

“You just read it to him, do you? Nothing else?”

The doctor paused. “It has to be explained to him, if he doesn’t understand it.” He paused again, gathering irritation. “Good Lord, Father, when you tell a man he’s a hopeless case, what are you going to say? Read him a few paragraphs of the law, show him the door, and say: ‘Next, please!’? ‘You’re going to die, so good day’? Of *course* you don’t read him that and

nothing else, not if you have any human feeling at all!”

“I understand that; What I want to know is something else. Do you, as a physician, advise hopeless cases to go to a mercy camp?”

“I—” The medic stopped and closed his eyes. He rested his forehead on his hand. He shuddered slightly. “Of course I do,” he said finally. “If you’d seen what I’ve seen, you would too. Of course I do.”

“You’ll not do it here.”

“Then we’ll—” The doctor quenched an angry outburst. He stood up, started to put on his cap, then paused. He tossed the cap on the chair and walked over to the window. He looked gloomily down at the courtyard, then out at the highway. He pointed. “There’s the roadside park. We can set up shop there. But it’s two miles. Most of them will have to walk.” He glanced at Abbot Zerchi, then looked broodingly down into the courtyard again. “Look at them. They’re sick, hurt, fractured, frightened. The children too. Tired, lame, and miserable. You’d let them be herded off down the highway to sit in the dust and the sun and—”

“I don’t want it to be that way,” said the abbot. “Look—you were just telling me how a man-made law made it mandatory for you to read and explain to a critical radiation case. I offered no objection to that in itself. Render unto Caesar to that extent, since the law demands it of you. Can you not, then, understand that I am subject to another law, and that it forbids me to allow you or anyone else on this property, under my rule, to counsel anyone to do what the Church calls evil?”

*this*

“Oh, I understand well enough.”

“Very well. You need only make me one promise and you may use the courtyard.”

“What promise?”

“Simply that you won’t advise anyone to go to a “mercy camp.” Limit yourself to diagnosis. If you find hopeless radiation cases, tell them what the law forces you to tell them, be as consoling as you wish, but don’t tell them to go kill themselves.”

The doctor hesitated. “I think it would be proper to make such a promise with respect to patients who belong to your Faith.”

Abbot Zerchi lowered his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he said finally, “but that’s not enough.”

“Why? Others are not bound by your principles. If a man is not of your religion, why should you refuse to allow—” He choked off angrily.

“Do you want an explanation?”

“Yes.”

“Because if a man is ignorant of the fact that something is wrong, and acts in ignorance, he incurs no guilt, provided natural reason was not enough to show him that it was wrong. But while ignorance may excuse the man, it does not excuse the act, which is wrong in itself. If I permitted the act simply because the man is ignorant that it is wrong, then I would incur guilt, because I do know it to be wrong. It is really that painfully simple.”

“Listen, Father. They sit there and they look at you. Some scream. Some cry. Some just sit there. All of them say, “Doctor, what can I do?” And what am I supposed to answer? Say nothing? Say, ‘You can die, that’s all.’ What would you say?”

“‘Pray.’”

“Yes, you would, wouldn’t you? Listen, pain is the only evil I know about.

It's the only one I can fight."

"Then God help you."

"Antibiotics help me more."

Abbot Zerchi groped for a sharp reply, found one, but swiftly swallowed it. He searched for a blank piece of paper and a pen and pushed them across the desk. "Just write: 'I will not recommend euthanasia to any patient while at this abbey,' and sign it. Then you can use the courtyard."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I suppose they'll have to drag themselves two miles down the road."

"Of all the merciless—"

"On the contrary. I've offered you an opportunity to do your work as required by the law you recognize, without overstepping the law I recognize. Whether they go down the road or not is up to you."

The doctor stared at the blank page. "What is so magic about putting it in writing?"

"I prefer it that way."

He bent silently over the desk and wrote. He looked at what he had written, then slashed his signature under it and straightened. "All right, there's your promise. Do you think it's worth any more than my spoken word?"

"No. No indeed." The abbot folded the note and tucked it into his coat. "But it's here in my pocket, and you know it's here in my pocket, and I can look at it occasionally, that's all. Do you keep promises, by the way, Doctor Cors?"

The medic stared at him for a moment. "I'll keep it." He grunted, then turned on his heel and stalked out.

"Brother Pat!" Abbot Zerchi called weakly. "Brother Pat, are you there?"

His secretary came to stand in the doorway. "Yes, Reverend Father?"

"You heard?"

"I heard some of it. The door was open, and I couldn't help hearing. You didn't have the silencer —"

"You heard him say it? 'Pain's the only evil I know about.' You heard that?"

The monk nodded solemnly.

"And that society is the only thing which determines whether an act is wrong or not? That too?"

"Yes."

"Dearest God, how did those two heresies get back into the world after all this time? Hell has limited imaginations down there. 'The serpent deceived me, and I did eat.' Brother Pat, you'd better get out of here, or I'll start raving."

"Domne, I—"

"What's keeping you? What's that, a letter? All right, give it here."

The monk handed it to him and went out. Zerchi left it unopened and glanced at the doctor's pledge again. Worthless, perhaps. But still the man was sincere. And dedicated. He'd have to be dedicated to work for the kind of salary the Green Star paid. He had looked underslept and overworked. He'd probably been living on benzedrine and doughnuts since the shot that killed the city. Seeing misery everywhere and detesting it, and sincere in wanting to do something about it. Sincere—that was the hell of it. From a distance, one's adversaries seemed fiends, but with a closer view, one saw the sincerity and it was as great as one's own. Perhaps Satan was the sincerest of the lot.

He opened the letter and read it. The letter informed him that Brother Joshua and the others had departed from New Rome for an unspecified destination in the West. The letter also advised him that information about *pererinatur* had leaked to the ZDI, who had sent investigators to the Vatican to ask questions about the rumored launching of an unauthorized starship...Evidently the starship was not yet in space.

They'd learn soon enough about *Quo peregrinatur*, but with the help of Heaven, they'd find out too late. What then? he wondered.

The legal situation was tangled. The law forbade starship departures without commission approval. Approval was hard to get and slow in coming. Zerchi was certain that the ZDI and the commission would consider the Church was breaking the law. But a State-Church concordat had existed for a century and a half now; it clearly exempted the Church from licensing procedures, and it guaranteed to the Church the right to send missions to "whatever space installations and/or planetary outposts shall not have been declared by the aforesaid Commission to be ecologically critical or closed to unregulated enterprise." Every installation in the solar system was "ecologically critical" and "closed" at the time of the concordat, but the concordat further asserted the Church's right to "own space vessels and travel unrestricted to open installations or outposts." The concordat was very old. It had been signed in the days when the Berkstrun starship drive was only a dream in the wide imagination of some who thought that interstellar travel would open up the universe to an unrestricted, outflow of population.

Things had turned out otherwise. When the first starship was born as an engineering drawing, it became plain that no institution except government had the means or the funds to build them; that no profit was to be derived from transporting colonies to extrasolar planets for purposes of "interstellar mercantilism." Nevertheless, the Asian rulers had sent the first colony ship. Then in the West the cry was heard: "Are we to let the 'inferior' races inherit the stars?" There had been a brief flurry of starship launchings as colonies of black people, brown, white, and yellow people were hurled into the sky toward the Centaur, in the name of racism. Afterwards, geneticists had wryly demonstrated that—since each racial group was so small that unless their descendants intermarried, each would undergo deteriorative genetic drift due to inbreeding on the colony planet—the racists had made cross-breeding necessary to survival.

The only interest the Church had taken in space had been concern for the colonists who were sons of the Church, cut off from the flock by interstellar distances. And yet she had not taken advantage of that provision of the concordat which permitted the sending of missions. Certain contradictions existed between the concordat and the laws of the State which empowered the commission, at least as the latter law might in theory affect the sending of missions. The contradiction had never been adjudicated by the courts, since there had never been cause for litigation. But now, if the ZDI intercepted Brother Joshua's group in the act of launching a starship without a commission permit or charter, there would be cause. Zerchi prayed that the group would get away without a test in the courts, which might take weeks or months. Of course there would be a scandal afterwards. Many would charge not only that the Church had violated Commission rulings but charity too, by sending ecclesiastical dignitaries and a bunch of rascal monks, when she might have used the ship as refuge for poor colonists, hungry for land. The conflict of



Martha and Mary always recurred.

Abbot Zerchi suddenly realized that the tenor of his thinking had changed during the previous day or two. A few days ago, everyone had been waiting for the sky to burst asunder. But nine days had passed since Lucifer had prevailed in space and scorched a city out of existence. Despite the dead, the maimed, and the dying, there had been nine days of silence. Since the wrath had been stayed thus far, perhaps the worst could be averted. He had found himself thinking of things that might happen next week or next month, as if—after all—there might really *be* a next week or a next month. And why not? Examining conscience, he found that he had not altogether abandoned the virtue of hope.

A monk returned from an errand in the city that afternoon and reported that a camp for refugees was being set up at the park two miles down the highway. “I think it’s being sponsored by Green Star, Domne,” he added.

“Good!” the abbot said. “We’re overflowing here, and I’ve had to turn three truckloads of them away.”

The refugees were noisy in the courtyard, and the noise jangled overwrought nerves. The perpetual quiet of the old abbey was shattered by strange sounds: the boisterous laughter of men telling jokes, the cry of a child, the rattle of pots and pans, hysterical sobbing, a Green Star medic shouting: “Hey, Raff, go fetch an enema hose.” Several times the abbot suppressed an urge to go to the window and call to them for silence.

After bearing it as long as he could, he picked up a pair of binoculars, an old book, and a rosary, and went up to one of the old watchtowers where a thick stone wall cut off most of the sounds from the courtyard. The book was a slim volume of verse, really anonymous, but by legend ascribed to a mythical saint, whose “canonization” was accomplished only in fable and the folklore of the Plains, and not by any act of the Holy See. No one, indeed, had ever found evidence that such a person as Saint Poet of the Miraculous Eyeball had ever lived: the fable had probably arisen out of the story that one of the early Hannegans had been given a glass eyeball by a brilliant physical theorist who was his protégé—Zerchi could not remember whether the scientist had been Esser Shon or Pfardentrott—and who told the prince that it had belonged to a poet who had died for the Faith. He had not specified which faith the poet had died for—that of Peter or that of the Texarkanan schismatics—but evidently the Hannegan had valued it, for he had mounted the eyeball in the clutch of a small golden hand which was still worn upon certain state occasions by princes of the Harq- Hannegan dynasty. It was variously called the *Orbis judicans Conscientias* or the *Oculus Poetae Judicis*, and the remnants of the Texarkana Schism still revered it as a relic. Someone a few years back had proposed the rather silly hypothesis that Saint Poet was the same person as the “scurrilous versificator” once mentioned in the Journals of the Venerable Abbot Jerome, but the only substantiating “evidence” for this notion was that Pfardentrott—or was it Esser Shon?—had visited the abbey during the reign of Venerable Jerome at about the same date as the “scurrilous versificator” entry in the Journal, and that the gift of the eyeball to Hannegan had occurred at some date after that visit to the abbey. Zerchi suspected that the thin book of verse had been penned by one of the secular scientists who had visited the abbey to study the Memorabilia at about that time, and that one of them could probably be identified with the “scurrilous versificator” and possibly with the Saint Poet of folklore and fable. The anonymous verses were a bit too daring, Zerchi thought, to have been written by a monk of the Order.

The book was a satirical dialogue in verse between two agnostics who were attempting to establish by natural reason alone that the existence of God could not be established by natural reason alone. They managed only to demonstrate that the mathematical limit of an infinite “doubting the certainty with which something doubted is known to be unknowable when the ‘something doubted’ is still a preceding statement of ‘unknowability’ of something doubted,” that the limit of this process at infinity can only be equivalent to a statement of *absolute certainty*, even though phrased as an infinite series of negations of certainty. The text bore traces of St. Leslie’s theological calculus, and even as a poetic dialogue between an agnostic identified only as “Poet” and another only as “Thon,” it seemed to suggest a proof of the existence of God by an epistemological method, but the versifier had been a satirist; neither poet nor don relinquished his agnostic premises after the conclusion of absolute certainty had been reached, but concluded instead that: *Non cogitamus, ergo nihil sumus.*

Abbot Zerchi soon tired of trying to decide whether the book was high intellectual comedy or more epigrammatic buffoonery. From the tower, he could see the highway and the city as far as the mesa beyond. He focused the binoculars on the mesa end watched the radar installation for a time, but nothing unusual appeared to be happening there. He lowered the glasses slightly to watch the new Green Star encampment down at the roadside park. The area of the park had been roped off. Tents were being pitched. Utility crews worked at tapping the gas and power lines. Several men were engaged in hoisting a sign at the entrance to the park, but they held it edgewise to his gaze and he could not read it. Somehow the boiling activity reminded him of a nomad “carnival” coming to town. There was a big red engine of some sort. It seemed to have a firebox and something like a boiler, but he could not at first guess its purpose. Men in Green Star uniforms were erecting something that looked like a small carousel. At least a dozen trucks were parked on the side road. Some were loaded with lumber, others with tents and collapsible cots. One seemed to be hauling firebricks, and another was burdened with pottery and straw.

Pottery?

He studied the last truck’s cargo carefully. A slight frown gathered on his forehead. It was a load of urns or vases, all alike, and packed together with cushioning wads of straw. Somewhere, he had seen the like of them, but could not remember where.

Still another truck carried nothing but a great “stone” statue—probably made of reinforced plastic—and a square slab upon which the statue was evidently to be mounted. The statue lay on its back, supported by a wooden framework and a nest of packing material. He could see only its legs and one outstretched hand that thrust up through the packing straw. The statue was longer than the bed of the truck; its bare feet projected beyond tailgate. Someone had tied a red flag to one of its great toes. Zerchi puzzled over it. Why waste a truck on a statue, when there was probable need of another truckload of food?

He watched the men who were erecting the sign. At last one of them lowered his end of the board and climbed a ladder to perform some adjustment of the overhead brackets. With one end resting on the ground, the sign tilted, and Zerchi, by craning, managed to read its message:

*MERCY CAMP NUMBER 18  
GREEN STAR  
DISASTER CADRE PROJECT*

Hurriedly, he looked again at the trucks. The pottery!

Recognition came to him. Once he had driven past a crematorium and seen men unloading the same sort of urns from a truck with the same company markings. He swung the binoculars again, searching for the truck loaded with firebrick. The truck had moved. At last he located it, now parked inside the area. The bricks were being unloaded near the great red engine. He inspected the engine again. What had at first glance appeared to be a boiler, now suggested an oven or a furnace. “*Evenit diabolus!*” the abbot growled, and started for the wall stairs.

He found Doctor Cors in the mobile unit in the courtyard.

The doctor was wiring a yellow ticket to the lapel of an old man’s jacket, while telling him that he should go to a rest camp for a while and mind the nurses, but that he’d be all right if he took care of himself.

Zerchi stood with folded arms, munching at the edge of his lips and coldly watching the physician. When the old man was gone, Cors looked up warily.

“Yes?” His eyes took note of the binoculars and reexamined Zerchi’s face. “*Oh,*” he granted. “Well, I have nothing to do with that end of it, nothing at all.”

The abbot gazed at him for a few seconds, then turned and stalked out. He went to his office and had Brother Patrick call the highest Green Star official...

“I want it moved out of our vicinity.”

“I’m afraid the answer is emphatically no.”

“Brother Pat, call the workshop and get Brother Lufter up here.”

“He’s not there, *Domne.*”

“Then have them send me a carpenter and a painter. Anybody will do.”

Minutes later, two monks arrived.

“I want five lightweight signs made at once,” he told them. “I want them with good long handles. They’re to be big enough to be read from a block away, but light enough for a man to carry for several hours without getting dog-tired. Can you do that?”

“Surely, milord. What do you want them to say?”

Abbot Zerchi wrote it for them. “Make it big and make it bright,” he told them. “Make it scream at the eye. That’s all.”

When they were gone, he called Brother Patrick again.

“Brother Pat, go find me five good, young, healthy novices, preferably with martyr complexes. Tell them they may get what Saint Stephen got.”

And I may get even worse, he thought, when New Rome hears about it..

## 28

# C

ompline had been sung, but the abbot stayed on in the church, kneeling alone in the gloom of evening.

*Domine, mundorum omnium Factor, parsurus esto imprimis eis filiis aviantibus ad sideria caeli quorum victus difficilior . . .*

He prayed for Brother Joshua’s group—for the men who had gone to take a starship and climb the heavens into a vaster uncertainty than any uncertainty faced by Man on Earth. They’d want much praying for; none was more susceptible

than the wanderer to the ills that afflict the spirit to torture faith and nag a belief, harrowing the mind with doubts. At home, on Earth, conscience had its overseers and its exterior taskmasters, but abroad the conscience was alone, torn between Lord and Foe. Let them be incorruptible, he prayed, let them hold true to the way of the Order.

Doctor Cors found him in the church at midnight and beckoned him quietly outside. The physician looked haggard and wholly unnerved.

"I just broke my promise!" he stated challengingly.

The abbot was silent. "Proud of it?" he asked at last.

"Not especially."

They walked toward the mobile unit and stopped in the bath of bluish light that spilled out its entrance. The medic's lab-jacket was soaked with sweat, and he dried his forehead on his sleeve. Zerchi watched him with that pity one might feel for the lost.

"We'll leave at once, of course," said Cors. "I thought I'd tell you." He turned to enter the mobile unit.

"Wait a minute," the priest said. "You'll tell me the rest."

"Will I?" The challenging tone once again. "Why? So you can go threaten hell-fire? She's sick enough now, and so's the child. I'll tell you nothing."

"You already have. I know who you mean. The child, too, I suppose?"

Cors hesitated. "Radiation sickness. Flash burns. The woman has a broken hip. The father's dead. The fillings in the woman's teeth are radioactive. The child almost glows in the dark. Vomiting shortly after the blast. Nausea, anemia, rotten follicles. Blind in one eye. The child cries constantly because of the burns. How they survived the shock wave is hard to understand. I can't do anything for them except the Eucrem team."

"I've seen them."

"Then you know why I broke the promise. I have to *live* with myself afterwards, man! I don't want to live as the torturer of that woman and that child."

"Pleasanter to live as their murderer instead?"

"You're beyond reasonable argument."

"What did you tell her?"

"If you love your child, spare her the agony. Go to sleep mercifully as quick as you can.' That's all. We'll leave immediately. We've finished with the radiation eases and the worst of the others. It won't hurt the rest of them to walk a couple of miles. There aren't any more critical-dosage cases.

Zerchi stalked away, then stopped and called back. "Finish," he croaked. "Finish and then get out. If I see you again—I'm afraid of what I'll do."

Cors spat. "I don't like being here any better than you like having me. We'll go now, thanks."

He found the woman lying on a cot with the child in the corridor of the overcrowded guesthouse. They huddled together under a blanket and both were crying. The building smelled of death and antiseptic. She looked up at his vague silhouette against the light.

"Father?" Her voice was frightened.

"Yes."

"We're done for. See? See what they gave me?"

He could see nothing, but he heard her fingers pick at the edge of paper. The red ticket. He could find no voice to speak to her. He came to stand over the cot. He fished in his pocket and brought out a rosary. She heard the

rattle of the beads and groped for it.

"You know what it is?"

"Certainly, Father.

"Then keep it. Use it."

"Thank you."

"Bear it and pray."

"I know what I have to do."

"Don't be an accomplice. For the love of God, child, don't--"

"The doctor said--"

She broke off. He waited for her to finish; she kept silent.

"Don't be an accomplice."

She still said nothing. He blessed them and left as quickly as possible.

The woman had handled the beads with fingers that knew them; there was nothing he could say to her that she didn't already know.

"The conference of foreign ministers on Guam has just ended. No joint policy statement has yet been issued; the ministers are returning to their capitals. The importance of this conference, and the suspense with which the world awaits the results, cause this commentator to believe that the conference is not yet ended, but only recessed so that the foreign ministers may confer with their governments for a few days. An earlier report which alleged that the conference was breaking up amid bitter invective has been denied by the ministries. First Minister Rekol had only one statement for the press: "I'm going back to talk to the Regency Council. But the weather's been pleasant here; I may come back later to fish."

"The ten-day waiting period ends today, but it is generally held that the cease-fire agreement will continue to be observed. Mutual annihilation is the alternative. Two cities have died, but it is to be remembered that neither side answered with a saturation attack. The Asian rulers contend that an eye was taken for an eye. Our government insists that the explosion in Itu Wan was not an Atlantic missile. But for the most part, there is a weird and brooding silence from both capitals. There has been little waving of the bloody shirt, few cries for wholesale vengeance. A kind of dumb fury, because murder has been done, because lunacy reigns, prevails, but neither side wants total war. Defense remains at battle alert. The General Staff has issued an announcement, almost an appeal, to the effect that we will not use the worst if Asia likewise refrains. But the announcement says further: 'If they use dirty fallout, we shall reply in kind, and in such force that no creature will live in Asia for a thousand years.'"

"Strangely, the least hopeful note of all comes not from Guam but from the Vatican at New Rome. After the Guam conference ended, it was reported that Pope Gregory ceased to pray for peace in the world. Two special Masses were sung in the basilica: the *Exsurge quare obdormis*, Mass against the Heathen, and the *Reminiscere*, Mass in Time of War; then, the report says His Holiness retired to the mountains to meditate and pray for justice.

"And now a word from--"

"Turn it off!" Zerchi groaned.

The young priest who was with him snapped off the set and stared wide-eyed at the abbot. "I don't believe it!"

"What? About the Pope? I didn't either. But I heard it earlier, and New Rome has had time to deny it. They haven't said a word."

“What does it mean?”

“Isn’t that obvious? The Vatican diplomatic service is on the job. Evidently they sent in a report on the Guam conference. Evidently it horrified the Holy Father.”

“What a warning! What a gesture!”

“It was more than a gesture, Father. His Holiness isn’t chanting Battle Masses for dramatic effect. Besides, most people will think he means ‘against the heathen’ on the other side of the ocean, and ‘justice’ for our side. Or if they know better, they’ll still mean that themselves.” He buried his face in his hands and rubbed them up and down. “Sleep. What’s sleep, Father Lehy? Do you remember? I haven’t seen a human face in ten days that didn’t have black circles under its eye. I could hardly doze last night for somebody screaming over in the guesthouse.”

“Lucifer’s no sandman, that’s true.”

“What are you staring at out that window?” Zerchi demanded sharply. “That’s another thing. Everybody keeps looking at the sky, staring up and wondering. If it’s coming, you won’t have time to see it until the flash, and then you’d better not be looking. Stop it. It’s unhealthy.”

Father Lehy turned away from the window. “Yes, Reverend Father. I wasn’t watching for that though. I was watching the buzzards.” ..

“Buzzards?”

“There’ve been lots of them, all day. Dozens of buzzards—just circling.”

“Where?”

“Over. the Green Star camp down the highway.”

“That’s no omen, then. That’s just healthy vulture appetite. Agh! I’m going out for some air.”

In the courtyard he met Mrs. Grales. She carried a basket of tomatoes which she lowered to the ground at his approach.

“I brought ye somewhat, Father Zerchi,” she told him.

“I saw yer sign being down, and some poor girl inside the gate, so I reckoned ye’d not mind a visit by yer old tumater woman. I brought ye some tumaters, see?”

“Thank you, Mrs. Grales. The sign’s down because of the refugees, but that’s all right. You’ll have to see Brother Elton about the tomatoes, though. He does the buying for our kitchen.”

“Oh, not for buying, Father. He-he! I brought ‘em to yer for free. Ye’ve got lots to feed, with all the poor things yer putting up. So they’re for free. Where’ll I put ‘em?”

“The emergency kitchen’s in the—but no, leave them there. I’ll get someone to carry them to the guesthouse.”

“Port ‘em myself. I ported them this far.” She hoisted the basket again.

“Thank you, Mrs. Grales.” He turned to go.

“Father, wait!” she called. A minute, yer honor, just a minute of your time—

The abbot suppressed a groan. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Grales, but it’s as I told you—” He stopped, stared at the face of Rachel. For a moment, he had imagined—Had Brother Joshua been right about it? But surely, no. “It ‘s—it’s a matter for your parish and diocese, and there’s nothing I can—”

“No, Father, not that!” she said. “It be somewhat else I wanted to ask of ye.” (There! It *had* smiled! He was certain of it!) “Would ye hear my

confession, Father? Beg shriv'ness for bothering ye, but I'm sad for my naughties, and I would it were you as shrives me."

Zerchi hesitated. "Why not Father Selo?"

"I tell ye truthful, yer honor, it's that the man is an occasion of sin for me. I go meanin' well for the man, but I look once on his face and forget myself. God love him, but I can't."

"If he's offended you, you'll have to forgive him."

"Forgive, that I do, that I do. But at a goodly distance. He's an occasion of sin for me, I'll tell, for I go losing my temper with him on sight."

Zerchi chuckled. "All right, Mrs. Grales I'll hear your confession, but I've got something I have to do first. Meet me in the Lady Chapel in about half an hour. The first booth. Will that be all right?"

"Ay, and bless ye, Father!" She nodded profusely. Abbot Zerchi could have sworn that the Rachel head mirrored the nods, ever so slightly.

He dismissed the thought and walked over to the garage. A postulant brought out the car for him. He climbed in, dialed his destination, and sank back wearily into the cushions while the automatic controls engaged the gears and nosed the car toward the gate. In passing the gate, the abbot saw the girl standing at the roadside. The child was with her. Zerchi jabbed at the CANCEL button. The car stopped. "Waiting," said the robot controls.

The girl wore a cast that enclosed her hips from the waist to left knee. She was leaning on a pair of crutches and panting at the ground. Somehow she had got out of the guesthouse and through the gate, but she was obviously unable to go any farther. The child was holding on to one of her crutches and staring at the traffic on the highway.

Zerchi opened the ear door and climbed out slowly. She looked up at him, but turned her glance quickly away.

"What are you doing out of bed, child?" he breathed. "You're not supposed to be up, not with that hip. Just where did you think you were going?"

She shifted her weight, and her face twisted with pain.

"To town," she said. "I've got to go. It's urgent."

"Not so urgent that somebody couldn't go do it for you. I'll get Brother—"

"No, Father, no! Nobody else can do it for me. I've got to go to town."

She was lying. He felt certain she was lying. "All right, then," he said. "I'll take you to town. I'm driving in anyway."

"No! I'll walk! I'm—" She took a step and gasped. He caught her before she fell.

"Not even with Saint Christopher holding your crutches could you walk to town, child. Come on, now, let's get you back to bed."

"I've got to get to town, I tell you!" she shrieked angrily.

The child, frightenend by its mother's anger, began crying monotonously. She tried to calm its fright, but then wilted: "All right, Father. Will you drive me to town?"

"You shouldn't be going at all."

"I tell you, I've got to go!"

"All right, then. Let's help you in...the baby . . . now you."

The child screamed hysterically when the priest lifted it into the car beside the mother. It clung to her tightly and resumed the monotonous sobbing. Because of the loose moist dressings and the singed hair, the child's sex was difficult to determine at a glance, but Abbot Zerchi guessed it to be a girl.

He dialed again. The car waited for a break in the traffic, then swerved onto the highway and into the mid-speed lane. Two minutes later, as they approached the Green Star encampment, he dialed for the slowest lane.

Five monks paraded in front of the tent area, in a solemn hooded picket line. They walked to and fro in procession beneath the Mercy Camp sign, but they were careful to stay on the public right-of-way. Their freshly painted signs read:

*ABANDON EVERY HOPE  
YE  
WHO ENTER HERE*

Zerchi had intended to stop to talk to them, but with the girl in the car he contented himself with watching as they drifted past. With their habits and their hoods and their slow funereal procession, the novices were indeed creating the desired effect. Whether the Green Star would be sufficiently embarrassed to move the camp away from the monastery was doubtful, especially since a small crowd of hecklers, as it had been reported to the abbey, had appeared earlier in the day to shout insults and throw pebbles at the signs carried by the pickets. There were two police cars parked at the side of the highway, and several officers stood nearby to watch with expressionless faces. Since the crowd of hecklers had appeared quite suddenly, and since the police cars had appeared immediately afterwards, and just in time to witness a heckler trying to seize a picket's sign, and since a Green Star official had thereupon gone huffing off to get a court order, the abbot suspected that the heckling had been as carefully staged as the picketing, to enable the Green Star officer to get his writ. It would probably be granted, but until it was served, Abbot Zerchi meant to leave the novices where they were.

He glanced at the statue which the camp workers had erected near the gate. It caused a wince. He recognized it as one of the composite human images derived from mass psychological testing in which subjects were given sketches and photographs of unknown people and asked such questions as: "Which would you most like to meet?" and "Which do you think would make the best parent?" or "Which would you want to avoid?" Or "Which do you think is the criminal?" From the photographs selected as the "most" or the "least" in terms of the questions, a series of "average faces," each to evoke a first-glance personality judgment had been constructed by computer from the mass test results.

This statue, Zerchi was dismayed to notice, bore a marked similarity to some of the most effeminate images by which mediocre, or worse than mediocre, artists had traditionally misrepresented the personality of Christ. The sweet-sick face, blank eyes, simpering lips, and arms spread wide in a gesture of embrace. The hips were broad as a woman's, and the chest hinted at breasts-unless those were only folds in the cloak. Dear Lord of Golgotha, Abbot Zerchi breathed, is that all the rabble imagine You to be? He could with effort imagine the statue saying: "Suffer the little children to come unto me," but he could not imagine it saying: "Depart from me into everlasting fire, accursed ones," or flogging the money-changers out of the Temple. What question, he wondered, had they asked their subjects that conjured in the rabble-mind this composite face? It was only anonymously a

*christus*. The legend



on the pedestal said: *COMFORT*. But surely the Green Star must have seen the resemblance to the traditional pretty *christus* of poor artists. But they stuck it in the back of a truck with a red flag tied to its great toe, and the intended resemblance would be hard to prove.

The girl had one hand on the door handle; she was eying the car's controls. Zerchi swiftly dialed FAST LANE. The car shot ahead again. She took her hand from the door.

"Lots of buzzards today," he said quietly, glancing at the sky out the window.

The girl sat expressionless. He studied her face for a moment. "Are you in pain, daughter?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Offer it to Heaven, child."

She looked at him coldly. "You think it would please God?"

"If you offer it, yes."

"I cannot understand a God who is pleased by my baby's hurting!"

The priest winced. "No, no! It is not the pain that is pleasing to God, child. It is the soul's endurance in faith and hope and love *in spite of* bodily afflictions that pleases Heaven. Pain is like negative temptation. God is not pleased by temptations that afflict the flesh; He is pleased when the soul rises above the temptation and says, 'Go, Satan.' It's the same with pain, which is often a temptation to despair, anger, loss of faith—"

"Save your breath, Father. I'm not complaining. The baby is. But the baby doesn't understand your sermon. She can hurt, though. She can hurt, but she can't understand."

*What can I say to that?* the priest wondered numbly. Tell her again that Man was given preternatural impassibility once, but threw it away in Eden? That the child was a cell of Adam, and therefore— It was true, but she had a sick baby, and she was sick herself, and she wouldn't listen.

"Don't do it, daughter. Just don't do it."

"I'll think about it," she said coldly.

"I had a cat once, when I was a boy," the abbot murmured slowly. "He was a big gray tomcat with shoulders like a small bulldog and a head and neck to match, and that sort of slouchy insolence that makes some of them look like the Devil's own. He was pure cat. Do you know cats?"

"A little."

"Cat lovers don't know cats. You can't love *all* cats if you know cats, and the ones you can love if you know them are the ones the cat lovers don't even like. Zeke was that kind of cat."

"This has a moral, of course?" She was watching him suspiciously.

"Only that I killed him."

"Stop. Whatever you're about to say, stop."

"A truck hit him, crushed his back legs. He dragged himself under the house. Once in a while he'd make a noise like a cat fight and thrash around a little, but mostly he just lay quietly and waited. 'He ought to be destroyed,' they kept telling me. After a few hours he dragged himself from under the house. Crying for help. 'He ought to be destroyed,' they said. I wouldn't let them do it. They said it was cruel to let him live. So finally I said I'd do it myself, if it had to be done. I got a gun and a shovel and took him out to the edge of the woods. I stretched him out on the ground while I dug a hole. Then I shot him through the head. It was a small-bore rifle. Zeke thrashed a

couple of times, then got up and started dragging himself toward some bushes. I shot him again. It knocked him flat, so I thought he was dead, and put him in the hole. After a couple of shovels of dirt, Zeke got up and pulled himself out of the hole and started for the bushes again. I was crying louder than the cat. I had to kill him with the shovel. I had to put him back in the hole and use the blade of the shovel like a cleaver, and while I was chopping with it, Zeke was still thrashing around. They told me later it was just spinal reflex, but I didn't believe it. I knew that cat. He wanted to get to those bushes and just lie there and wait. I wished to God that I had only let him get to those bushes, and die the way a cat would if you just let it alone—with never felt right about it. Zeke was only a cat, but—”

*dignity. I*

“Shut up!” she whispered.

“—but even the ancient pagans noticed that Nature imposes nothing on you that Nature doesn't prepare you to bear. If that is true even of a cat, then is it not more perfectly true of a creature with rational intellect and will—whatever you may believe of Heaven?”

“Shut up, damn you shut up!” she hissed.

“If I am being a little brutal,” said the priest, “then it is to you, not to the baby. The baby, as you say, can't understand. And you, as you say, are not complaining. Therefore—”

“Therefore you're asking me to let her die slowly and—”

“No! I'm not asking you. As a priest of Christ I am *commanding* you by the authority of Almighty God not to lay hands on your child, not to offer her life in sacrifice to a false god of expedient mercy. I do not advise you, I adjure and command you in the name of Christ the King. Is that clear?”

Dom Zerchi had never spoken with such a voice before, and the ease with which the words came to his lips surprised even the priest. As he continued to look at her, her eyes fell. For an instant he had feared that the girl would laugh in his face. When Holy Church occasionally hinted that she still considered her authority to be supreme over all nations and superior to the authority of states, men in these times tended to snicker. And yet the authenticity of the command could still be sensed by a bitter girl with a dying child. It had been brutal to try to reason with her, and he regretted it. A simple direct command might accomplish what persuasion could not. She needed the voice of authority now, more than she needed persuasion. He could see it by the way she had wilted, although he had spoken the command as gently as his voice could manage.

They drove into the city. Zerchi stopped to post a letter, stopped at Saint Michael's to speak for a few minutes with Father Selo about the refugee problem, stopped again at ZDI for a copy of the latest civil delouse directive. Each time he returned to the car, he half expected the girl to be gone, but she sat quietly holding the baby and absently stared toward infinity.

“Are you going to tell me where you wanted to go, child?” he asked at last.

“Nowhere. I've changed my mind.”

He smiled. “But you were so urgent about getting to town.”

“Forget it, Father. I've changed my mind.”

“Good. Then we'll go back home. Why don't you let the sisters take care of your daughter for a few days?”

“I'll think about it.”

The car sped back along the highway toward the abbey. As they approached the Green Star camp, he could see that something was wrong. The pickets were no longer marching their tour. They had gathered in a group and were talking, or listening, to the officers and a third man that Zerchi could not identify. He switched the car over to the slow lane. One of the novices saw the car, recognized it, and began waving his sign. Dom Zerchi had no intention of stopping while the girl was in the car, but one of the officers stepped out into the slow lane just ahead of them and pointed his traffic baton at the vehicle's obstruction detectors; the autopilot reacted automatically and brought the car to a stop. The officer waved the car off the road. Zerchi could not disobey. The two police officers approached, paused to note license numbers and demand papers. One of them glanced in curiously at the girl and the child, took note of the red tickets. The other waved toward the now-stationary picket line.

"So you're the bejeezis behind all this, are you?" He grunted at the abbot. "Well, the gentleman in the brown tunic over there has a little news for you. I think you'd better listen." He jerked his head toward a chubby courtroom type who came pompously toward them.

The child was crying again. The mother stirred restlessly.

"Officers, this girl and baby aren't well. I'll accept the process, but please let us drive on back to the abbey now. Then I'll come back alone."

The officer looked at the girl again. "Ma'am?"

She stared toward the camp and looked up at the statue towering over the entrance. "I'm getting out here," she told them tonelessly.

"You'll be better off, ma'am," said the officer, eying the red tickets again.

"No!" Dom Zerchi caught her arm. "Child, I forbid you—"

The officer's hand shot out to seize the priest's wrist.

"Let go!" he snapped, then softly: "Ma'am, are you his ward or something?"

"No."

"Where do you get off forbidding the lady to get out?" the officer demanded. "We're just a little impatient with you, *mister*, and it had better be—"

Zerchi ignored him and spoke rapidly to the girl. She shook her head.

"The baby, then. Let me take the baby back to the sisters. I insist—"

"Ma'am, is that your child?" the officer asked. The girl was already out of the car, but Zerchi was holding the child.

The girl nodded. "She's mine."

"Has he been holding you prisoner or something?"

"No."

"What do you want to do, ma'am?"

She paused.

"Get back in the car," Dom Zerchi told her.

"*You cut that tone of voice, mister!*" the officer barked.

"Lady, what about the kid?"

"We're both getting out here," she said.

Zerchi slammed the door and tried to start the car, but the officer's hand flashed in through the window, hit the CANCEL button, and removed the key.

"Attempted kidnapping?" one officer grunted to the other.

"Maybe," said the other, and opened the door. "Now let go of the woman's baby!"

"To let it be murdered here?" the abbot asked. "You'll have to use force."

"Go around to the other side of the car, Fal."

"No!"

"Now, just a little baton under the armpit. That's it, lady—there's your kid. No, I guess you can't, not with those crutches Where's Cors? Hey, Doc!" *pull! All right, Cors?*

Abbot Zerchi caught a glimpse of a familiar face coining through the crowd.

"Lift the kid out while we hold this nut, will you?"

Doctor and priest exchanged a silent glance, and then the baby was lifted from the car. The officers released the abbot's wrists. One of them turned and found himself hemmed in by novices with upraised signs. He interpreted the signs as potential weapons, and his hand dropped to his gun.

"Back up!" he snapped.

Bewildered, the novices moved back.

"Get out."

The abbot climbed out of the car. He found himself facing the chubby court official. The latter tapped him on the arm with a folded paper. "You have just been served with a restraining order, which I am required by the court to read and explain to you. Here is your copy. The officers are witnesses that you have been confronted with it, so you cannot resist service—"

"Oh, give it here."

"That's the right attitude. Now you are directed by the court as follows: 'Whereas the plaintiff alleges that a great public nuisance has been—' "

"Throw the signs in the ash barrel over there," Zerchi instructed his novices, "unless somebody objects. Then climb in the car and wait." He paid no attention to the reading of the order, but approached the officers while the process server trailed behind, reading in monotonous staccato. "Am I under arrest?"

"We're thinking about it."

"—and to appear before this court on the aforesaid date to show cause why an injunction—"

"Any particular charge?"

"We could make four or five charges stick, if you want it that way."

Cors came back through the gate. The woman and her child had been escorted into the camp area. The doctor's expression was grave, if not guilty.

"Listen, Father," he said, "I know how you feel about all this, but—"

Abbot Zerchi's fist shot out at the doctor's face in a straight right jab. It caught Cors off balance, and he sat down hard in the driveway. He looked bewildered. He snuffled a few times. Suddenly his nose leaked blood. The police had the priest's arms pinned behind him.

"—and herein fail not," the process server jabbered on, "'lest a decree pro confesso—"

"Take him over to the car," said one of the officers.

The car toward which the abbot was led was not his own but the police cruiser. "The judge will be a little disappointed in you," the officer told him sourly. "Now stand still right there and be quiet. One move and you go in the locks."

The abbot and the officer waited by the cruiser while the process server, the doctor, and the other officer conferred in the driveway. Cors was pressing a handkerchief to his nose.

They talked for five minutes. Thoroughly ashamed, Zerchi pressed his forehead against the metal of the car and tried to pray. It mattered little to him at the moment what they might decide to do. He could think only of the girl and the child. He was certain she had been ready to change her mind, had needed only the command, *I, a priest of God, adjure thee*, and the grace to hear it—if only they had not forced him to stop where she could witness "God's priest" summarily overruled by "Caesar's traffic cop." Never to him had Christ's Kingship seemed more distant.

"All right, mister. You're a lucky nut, I'll say that."

Zerchi looked up. "What?"

"Doctor Cors refuses to file a complaint. He says he had one coming. Why did you hit him?"

“Ask him.”

“We did. I’m just trying to decide whether we take you in or just give you the summons. The court officer says you’re well known hereabouts. What do you do?”

Zerchi reddened. “Doesn’t this mean anything to you?” He touched his pectoral cross.

“Not when the guy wearing it punches somebody in the nose. What do you do?”

Zerchi swallowed the last trace of his pride. “I am the abbot of the Brothers of Saint Leibowitz at the abbey you see down the road.”

“That gives you a license to commit assault?”

“I’m sorry. If Doctor Cors will hear me, I’ll apologize. If you give me a summons, I promise to appear.”

“Fal?”

“The jail’s full of D.P.s.”

“Listen, if we just forget the whole thing, will you stay away from this place, and keep your gang out there where they belong?”

“Yes.”

“All right. Get moving. But if you so much as drive past here and spit, that’ll be it.”

“Thank you.”

A calliope was playing somewhere in the park as they drove away; and looking back, Zerchi saw that the carousel was turning. One officer mopped his face, clapped the process server on the back, and they all went to their cars and drove away. Even with five novices in the car, Zerchi was alone with his shame.

## 29

## “

# I

believe you’ve been warned about that temper before?” Father Lehy demanded of the penitent.

“Yes, Father.”

“You realize that the intent was relatively murderous?”

“There was no intent to kill.”

“Are you trying to excuse yourself?” the confessor demanded.

“No, Father. The intent was to hurt. I accuse myself of violating the spirit of the Fifth Commandment in thought and deed, and of sinning against charity and justice. And bringing disgrace and scandal upon my office.”

“You realize that you have broken a promise never to resort to violence?”

“Yes, Father. I deeply regret it.”

“And the only mitigating circumstance is that you just saw red and swung. Do you often let yourself abandon reason like that?”

The inquisition continued, with the ruler of the Abbey on his knees, and the prior fitting in judgment over his master.

“All right,” Father Lehy said at last, “now for your penance, promise to say—”

Zerchi was an hour and a half late getting to the chapel, but Mrs. Grales was still waiting. She was kneeling in a pew near the confessional, and she seemed half asleep. Embarrassed within himself, the abbot had hoped that she would not be there. He had his own penance to say before he could hear her. He knelt near the altar and spent twenty minutes finishing the prayers Father Lehy had assigned him as penance for that day, but when he moved back toward the confessional, Mrs. Grales was still there. He

spoke to her twice before she heard him, and when she rose, she stumbled a little. She paused to feel at the Rachel face, exploring its eyelids and lips with withered fingers.

"Is something wrong, daughter?" he asked.

She looked up at the high windows. Her eyes wandered about the vaulted ceiling. "Ay, Father," she whispered. "I feel the Dread One about, I do. The Dread One's close, very close about us here. I feel need of shriv'ness Father—and something else as well."

"Something else, Mrs. Grales?"

She leaned close to whisper behind her hand. "I need be giving shriv'ness to Him, as well."

The priest recoiled slightly. "To whom? I don't understand."

"Shriv'ness—to Him who made me as I am," she whimpered. But then a slow smile spread her mouth. "I—I never forgave Him for it."

"Forgive God? How can you—? He is just. He is Justice, He is Love. How can you say—?"

Her eyes pleaded with him. "Mayn't an old tumater woman forgive Him just a little for His Justice? Afor I be asking His shriv'ness on me?"

Dom Zerchi swallowed a dry place. He glanced down at her bicephalous shadow on the floor. It hinted at a terrible Justice—this shadow shape. He could not bring himself to reprove her for choosing the word *forgive*. In her simple world, it was conceivable to forgive justice as well as to forgive injustice, for Man to pardon God as well as for God in pardon Man. So be it, then, and bear with her, Lord, he thought, adjusting his stole.

She genuflected toward the altar before they entered the confessional, and the priest noticed that when she crossed herself, her hand touched Rachel's forehead as well as her own. He brushed back the heavy curtain, slipped into his half of the booth, and whispered through the grille, "What do you seek, daughter?"

"Blessings, Father, for I have sinned—"

She spoke haltingly. He could not see her through the mesh that covered the grille. There was only the low and rhythmic whimper of a voice of Eve. The same, the same, everlastingly the same, and even a woman with two heads could not contrive new ways of courting evil, but could only pursue a mindless mimicry of the Original. Still feeling the shame of his own behavior with the girl and the officers and Cors, he found it hard to concentrate. Still, his hands shook as he listened. The rhythm of the words came dull and muffled through the grille, like the rhythm of distant hammering. Spikes driven through palms, piercing timber. As *alter Christus* he sensed the weight of each burden for a moment before it passed on to the One who bore them all. There was the business about her mate. There were the murky and secret things, things to be wrapped in dirty newspaper and buried by night. That he could only make sense of a little of it, seemed to make the horror worse.

"If you are trying to say that you are guilty of abortion," he whispered, "I must tell you that the absolution is reserved to the bishop and I can't—"

He paused. There was a distant roaring, and the faint snort-growl of missiles being fired from the range.

"The Dread One! The Dread One!" whined the old woman.

His scalp prickled: a sudden chill of unreasonable alarm.

"Quickly! An act of contrition!" he muttered. "Ten Aves, ten Pater Nosters for your penance. You'll have to repeat the confession again later, but now an Act of Contrition."

He heard her murmuring from the other side of the grille. Swiftly he breathed an absolution: "*Te absolvat Dominus Jesus Christus; ego autem eius auctoritate te absolvo ab omni vinculo...Denique, si absolvi potes, ex peccatis tuis ego te absolve in Nomine Patris . . .*"

Before he had finished, a light was shining through the thick curtain of the confessional door. The light grew brighter and brighter until the booth was full of bright noon. The curtain began to smoke.

"Wait, wait!" he hissed. "Wait till it dies."

"wait wait wait till it dies," echoed a strange soft voice from beyond the grille. It was not the voice of Mrs. Grales.

"Mrs. Grales? Mrs. Grales?"

She answered him in a thick-tongued, sleepy murmur.

"I never meant to . . . I never meant to . . . never love . . . Love . . ." It trailed away. It was not the same voice that had answered him a moment ago.

"Now, quickly, *run!*"

Not waiting to see that she heeded him, he bounded out of the confessional and ran down the aisle toward the altar of reservation. The light had dimmed, but it still roasted the skin with noon sun glare.

*How many seconds remained?* The church was full of smoke.

He vaulted into the sanctuary, stumbled over the first step, called it a genuflection, and went to the altar. With frantic hands, he removed the Christ-filled ciborium from the tabernacle, genuflected again before the Presence, grabbed up the Body of his God and ran for it.

The building fell in on him.

When he awoke, there was nothing but dust. He was pinned to the ground at the waist. He lay on his belly in the dirt and tried to move. One arm was free, but the other was caught under the weight that held him down. His free hand still clutched the ciborium, but he had tipped it in falling, and the top had come off, spilling several of the small Hosts.

The blast had swept him clean out of the church, he decided. He lay in sand, and saw the remains of a rose bush caught in a rockfall. A rose remained attached to a branch of it—one of the Salmon Armenians, he noticed. The petals were singed.

There was a great roaring of engines in the sky, and blue lights kept winking through the dust. He felt no pain at first. He tried to crane his neck so as to get a look at the behemoth that sat on him, but then things started hurting. His eyes filmed. He cried out softly. He would not look back again. Five tons of rock had tucked him in. It held whatever remained of him below the waist.

He began recovering the little Hosts. He moved his free arm gingerly. Cautiously he picked each of them out of the sand. The wind threatened to send the small flakes of Christ wandering. Anyway, Lord, I tried, he thought. Anyone needing the last rites? Viaticum? They'll have to drag themselves to me, if they do. Or is anybody left?

He could hear no voices above the terrible roaring.

A trickle of blood kept seeping into his eyes. He wiped at it with his forearm so as to avoid staining the wafers with gory fingers. Wrong blood, Lord, mine, not Yours. *Dealba me.*

He returned most of the scattered Victim to the vessel, but a few fugitive flakes eluded his reach. He stretched for them, but blacked out again.

"*Jesus Mary Joseph! Help!*"

Faintly he heard an answer, distant and scarcely audible under the howling sky. It was the soft strange voice he had heard in the confessional, and again it echoed his words:

"jesus mary joseph help"

"What?" he cried.

He called out several times, but no further answer came. The dust had begun sprinkling down. He replaced the lid of the ciborium to keep the dust from mingling with the Wafers. He lay still for a time with his eyes closed.

The trouble with being a priest was that you eventually had to take the advice you gave to others. *Nature imposes nothing that Nature hasn't prepared you to bear.* That's what I get for telling her what the Stoic said before I told her what God said, he thought.

There was little pain, but only a ferocious itching that came from the captive part of him. He tried to scratch; his fingers encountered only bare rock. He clawed at it for a moment, shuddered, and took his hand away. The itch was maddening. Bruised nerves flashed foolish demands for scratching. He felt very undignified.

Well, Doctor Cors, how do you know that the itch is not the more basic evil than the pain?

He laughed a little at that one. The laugh caused a sudden blackout. He clawed his way out of the blackness to the accompaniment of someone screaming. Suddenly the priest knew that the screaming was his own. Zerchi was suddenly afraid. The itch had been transmuted into agony, but the screams had been those of raw terror, not of pain. There was agony now even in breathing. The agony persisted, but

he could bear that. The dread had arisen from that last taste of inky blackness. The blackness seemed to brood over him, covet him, await him hungrily—a big black appetite with a yen for souls. Pain he could bear, but not that Awful Dark. Either there was something in it that should not be there, or there was something here that remained to be done. Once he surrendered to that darkness, there would be nothing he could do or undo.

Ashamed of his fright, he tried to pray, but the prayers seemed somehow unprayerful—like apologies, but not petitions—as if the last prayer had already been said, the last canticle already sung. The fear persisted. *Why?* He tried to reason with it. You’ve seen people die, Jeth. Seen many people die. It looks easy. They taper off, and then there’s a little spasm, and it’s over. That inky Dark—gulf between *aham* and *Asti*—blackest Styx, abyss between Lord and Man. Listen, Jeth, you really believe there’s Something on the other side of it, don’t you? Then why are you shaking so?

A verse from the *Dies Irae* drifted into mind, and it nagged at him:

*Quid sum miser tunc dicturus?  
Quem patronum rogaturus,  
Cum vix justus sit securus?*

“What am I, who am wretched, then to say? Whom shall I ask to be my protector, since even the *just* man is scarcely safe?” *Vix securus?* Why “scarcely safe”? Surely He would not damn the just? Then why are you shaking so?

Really, Doctor Cors, the evil to which even you should have referred was not suffering, but the unreasoning fear of suffering. *Metus doloris*. Take it together with its positive equivalent, the craving for worldly security, for Eden, and you might have your “root of evil,” Doctor Cors. To minimize suffering and to maximize security were natural and proper ends of society and Caesar. But then they became the only ends, somehow, and the only basis of law—a perversion. Inevitably, then, in seeking only them, we found only their opposites: maximum suffering and minimum security.

The trouble with the world is me. Try that on yourself, my dear Cors. Thee me Adam Man we. No “worldly evil” except that which is introduced into the world by Man—me thee Adam us—with a little help from the father of lies. Blame anything, blame God even, but oh don’t blame me. Doctor Cors? The only evil in the world now, Doctor, is the fact that the world no longer is. What pain hath wrought?

He laughed weakly again, and it brought the ink.

“Me us Adam, but Christ, Man me; Me us Adam, but Christ, Man me,” he said aloud. “You know what, Pat?—they’d . . . together . . . rather get nailed on it, but not alone . . . when they bleed . . . want company. Because . . . Because why it is. Because why it is the same as Satan wants Man full of Hell. I mean the same as Satan wants Hell full of Man. Because Adam . . . And yet Christ . . . But still me...Listen, Pat—”

This time it took longer to drive the inky Dark away, but he had to make it dear to Pat before he went into it all the way. “Listen, Pat, because . . . why it is I told her the baby had to . . . is why I. I mean. I mean Jesus never asked a man to do a damn thing that Jesus didn’t do. Same as why I. Why I can’t let go. Pat?”

He blinked several times. Pat vanished. The world congealed again and the blackness was gone. Somehow he had discovered what he was afraid of. There was something he had yet to fulfill before that Dark closed over him forever. *Dear God, let me live long enough to fulfill it.* He was afraid to die before he had accepted as much suffering as that which came to the child who could not comprehend it, the child he had tried to save for further suffering—no, not [or it, but in spite of it. He had commanded the mother in the name of Christ. He had not been wrong. But now he was afraid to slide away into that blackness before he had endured as much as God might help him endure.

*Quem patronum rogaturus,  
Cum vix justus sit securus?*



Let it be for the child and her mother, then. What I impose, I must accept. *Fas est*.

The decision seemed to diminish the pain. He lay quietly for a time, then cautiously looked back at the rock heap again. *More* than five tons back there. Eighteen centuries back there. The blast had broken open the crypts, for he noticed a few bones caught between the rocks. He groped with his free hand, encountered something smooth, and finally worked it free. He dropped it in the sand beside the ciborium. The jawbone was missing, but the cranium was intact except for a hole in the forehead from which a sliver of dry and half-rotten wood protruded. It looked like the remains of an arrow. The skull seemed very old.

"Brother," he whispered, for none but a monk of the Order would have been buried in those crypts.

What did you do for them, Bone? Teach them to read and write? Help them rebuild, give them Christ, help restore a culture? Did you remember to warn them that it could never be Eden? Of course you did. Bless you, Bone, he thought, and traced a cross on its forehead with his thumb. For all your pains, they paid you with an arrow between the eyes. Because there's more than five tons and eighteen centuries of rock back there. I suppose there's about two million years of it back there—since the first of *Homo inspiratus*.

He heard the voice again—the soft echo-voice that had answered him a little while ago. This time it came in a kind of childish singsong: "la la la, la-la-la—"

Although it seemed to be the same voice he had heard in the confessional, surely it could not be Mrs. Grales. Mrs. Grales would have forgiven God and run for home, if she had got out of the chapel in time—and please forgive the reversal, Lord. But he was not even sure that it was a reversal. Listen, Old Bone, should I have told that to Cors?

Listen, my dear Cors, why don't you forgive God for allowing pain? If He didn't allow it, human courage, bravery, nobility, and self-sacrifice would all be meaningless things. Besides, you'd be out of a job, Cors.

Maybe that's what we forgot to mention, Bone. Bombs and tantrums, when the world grew bitter because the world fell somehow short of half-remembered Eden. The bitterness was essentially against God. Listen, Man, you have to give up the bitterness—"be granting shriv'ness to God," as she'd say—before anything; before love.

But bombs and tantrums. They didn't forgive.

He slept awhile. It was natural sleep and not that ugly mind-seizing nothingness of the Dark. A rain came, clearing the dust. When he awoke, he was not alone. He lifted his cheek out of the mud and looked at them crossly. Three of them sat on the rubble heap and eyed him with funereal solemnity. He moved. They spread black wings and hissed nervously. He flipped a bit of stone at them. Two of them took wing and climbed to circle, but the third sat there doing a little shuffle-dance and peering at him gravely. A dark and ugly bird, but not like that Other Dark. This one coveted only the body.

"Dinner's not quite ready, brother bird," he told it irritably. "You'll have to wait."

It would not have many meals to look forward to, he noticed, before the bird itself became a meal for another. Its feathers were singed from the flash, and it kept one eye closed. The bird was soggy with rain, and the abbot guessed that the rain itself was full of death.

"la la la, la-la-la wait wait wait till it dies la . . ."

The voice came again. Zerchi had feared that it might have been a hallucination. But the bird was hearing it too. It kept peering at something out of Zerchi's range of vision. At last it hissed raucously and took wing.

"Help!" he shouted weakly.

"help," parroted the strange voice.

And the two-headed woman wandered into sight around a heap of rubble. She stopped and looked down at Zerchi.

"Thank God! Mrs. Grales! See if you can find Father Lehy—"

"thank god mrs. grales see if you can . . ."

He blinked away a film of blood, and studied her closely.

“Rachel,” he breathed.

“rachel,” the creature answered.

She knelt there in front of him and settled back on her heels. She watched him with cool green eyes and smiled innocently. The eyes were alert with wonder, curiosity, and—perhaps something else—but she could apparently not see that he was in pain. There was something about her eyes that caused him to notice nothing else for several seconds. But then he noticed that the head of Mrs. Grales slept soundly on the other shoulder while Rachel smiled. It seemed a young shy smile that hoped for friendship. He tried again.

“Listen, is anyone else alive? Get—”

Melodious and solemn came her answer: “listen is anyone else alive—” She savored the words. She enunciated them distinctly. She smiled over them. Her lips reframed them when her voice was done with them. It was more than reflexive imitation, he decided. She was trying to communicate something. By the repetition, she was trying to convey the idea: *I am somehow like you.*

But she had only just now been born.

*And you’re somehow different, too,* Zerchi noticed with a trace of awe. He remembered that Mrs. Grales had arthritis in both knees, but the body which had belonged to her was now kneeling there and sitting back on its heels in that limber posture of youth. Moreover, the old woman’s wrinkled skin seemed less wrinkled than before, and it seemed to glow a little, as if horny old tissue were being revived. Suddenly he noticed her arm.

“You’re hurt!”

“you’re hurt.”

Zerchi pointed at her arm. Instead of looking where he pointed, she imitated his gesture, looking at his finger and extending her own to touch it—using the wounded arm. There was very little blood, but there were at least a dozen cuts and one looked deep. He tugged at her finger to bring her arm closer. He plucked out five slivers of broken glass. Either she had thrust her arm through a window, or, more likely, had been in the path of an exploding windowpane when the blast had come. Only once when he removed an inch-long lance of glass did a trace of blood appear. When he pulled the others free, they left tiny blue marks, with no bleeding. The effect reminded him of a demonstration of hypnosis he had once witnessed, of something he had dismissed as a hoax. When he looked up at her face again, his awe increased. She was still smiling at him, as if the removal of the glass splinters had caused her no discomfort.

He glanced again at the face of Mrs. Grales. It had grown gray with the impersonal mask of coma. The lips seemed bloodless. Somehow he felt certain it was dying. He could imagine it withering and eventually falling away like a scab or an umbilical cord. Who, then, was Rachel? And what?

There was still a little moisture on the rain-wet rocks. He moistened one fingertip and beckoned for her to lean closer. Whatever she was, she had probably received too much radiation to live very long. He began tracing a cross on her forehead with the moist fingertip.

*“Nisi baptizata es et nisi baptizari nonquis, te baptizo...”*

He got no farther than that. She leaned quickly away from him. Her smile froze and vanished. *No!* her whole countenance seemed to shout. She turned away from him. She wiped the trace of moisture from her forehead, closed her eyes, and let her hands lie limply in her lap. An expression of complete passivity came over her face. With her head bowed that way, her whole attitude seemed suggestive of prayer. Gradually, out of the passivity, a smile was reborn. It grew. When she opened her eyes and looked at him again, it was with the same open warmth as before. But she glanced around as if searching for something.

Her eyes fell on the ciborium. Before he could stop her, she picked it up. “*No!*” he coughed hoarsely, and made a grab for it. She was too quick for him, and the effort cost him a blackout. As he drifted back to consciousness and lifted his head again, he could see only through a blur. She was still kneeling there facing him. Finally he could make out that she was holding the golden cup in her left hand, and in her right, delicately between thumb and forefinger, a single Host. She was offering it to *him*, or was he only imagining it, as he had imagined awhile ago that he was talking to Brother Pat?

He waited for the blur to clear. This time it wasn't going to clear, not completely. "*Domine, non sum dignus . . .*" he whispered, "*sed tantum die verbo . . .*,"

He received the Wafer from her hand. She replaced the lid of the ciborium and set the vessel in a more protected spot under a jutting rock. She used no conventional gestures, but the reverence with which she had handled it convinced him of one thing: *she sensed the Presence under the veils*. She who could not yet use words nor understand them, had done what she had as if by *direct instruction*, in response to his attempt at conditional baptism.

He tried to refocus his eyes to get another look at the face of this being, who by gestures alone had said to him: I do not need your *first* Sacrament, Man, but I am worthy to convey to you *this* Sacrament of Life. Now he knew what she was, and he sobbed faintly when he could not again force his eyes to focus on those cool, green, and untroubled eyes of one born free.

"*Magnificat anima mea Dominum,*" he whispered. "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour; for He hath regarded the lowliness of His handmaid..." He wanted to teach her these words as his last act, for he was certain that she shared something with the Maiden who first had spoken them.

"*Magnificat anima mea Dominum et exultavit spiritus meus in Deo, salutari meo, quia respexit humilitatem . . .*,"

He ran out of breath before he had finished. His vision went foggy; he could no longer see her form. But cool fingertips touched his forehead, and he heard her say one word:

"Live."

Then she was gone. He could hear her voice trailing away in the new ruins. "la la la, la-la-la . . ."

The image of those cool green eyes lingered with him as long as life. He did not ask *why* God would choose to raise up a creature of primal innocence from the shoulder of Mrs. Grales, or why God gave to it the preternatural gifts of Eden—these gifts which Man had been trying to seize by brute force again from Heaven since first he lost them. He had seen primal innocence in those eyes, and a promise of resurrection. One glimpse had been a bounty, and he wept in gratitude. Afterwards he lay with his face in the wet dirt and waited.

Nothing else ever came—nothing that he saw, or felt, or heard.

## 30

# T

hey sang as they lifted the children into the ship. They sang old space chanteys and helped the children up the ladder one at a time and into the hands of the sisters. They sang heartily to dispel the fright of the little ones. When the horizon erupted, the singing stopped. They passed the last child into the ship.

The horizon came alive with flashes as the monks mounted the ladder. The horizons became a red glow. A distant cloudbank was born where no cloud had been. The monks on the ladder looked away from the flashes. When the flashes were gone, they looked back.

The visage of Lucifer mushroomed into hideousness above the cloudbank, rising slowly like some titan climbing to its feet after ages of imprisonment in the Earth.

Someone barked an order. The monks began climbing again. Soon they were all inside the ship.

The last monk, upon entering, paused in the lock. He stood in the open hatchway and took off his sandals. "*Sic transit mundus,*" he murmured, looking back at the glow. He slapped the soles of his sandals together, beating the dirt out of them. The glow was engulfing a third of the heavens. He scratched his beard, took one last look at the ocean, then stepped back and closed the hatch.

There came a blur, a glare of light, a high thin whining sound, and the starship thrust itself heavenward.

The breakers beat monotonously at the shores, casting up driftwood. An abandoned seaplane floated beyond the breakers. After a while the breakers caught the seaplane and threw it on the shore with the driftwood. It tilted and fractured a wing. There were shrimp carousing in the breakers, and the whiting that fed on the shrimp, and the shark that munched the whiting and found them admirable, in the sportive brutality of the sea.

A wind came across the ocean, sweeping with it a pall of fine white ash. The ash fell into the sea and into the breakers. The breakers washed dead shrimp ashore with the driftwood. Then they washed up the whiting. The shark swam out to his deepest waters and brooded in the cold clean currents. He was very hungry that season.

Zoltan Version 1.3

[http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~brians/science\\_fiction/canticle.html](http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~brians/science_fiction/canticle.html)

***Freedom from their conquerors lay in the Martians' grasp if Rolph could show them that the gods they worshipped were guns.!***

THE TRIAL was secret, and the prisoner was held incommunicado. Menshrie, of the *Martian Messenger*, printed the Commission's press releases verbatim. Rewording them would have been in the spirit of *lese majeste*, and Menshrie was a cautious man. His disapproval, if any, of the lurid colors the press officer used to paint a portrait of Captain Jason Kenlan, was not evident in Menshrie's editorial comments. A segment of the population naturally agreed with the reports and therefore hated Kenlan with a bright white hate, which burned fiercely enough to include Jason's sons in its reflected glare. The sons quietly slipped away to the other side of the city and stayed out of sight. One grew a moustache as a hindrance to recognition. Their father was beyond their aid. It was their considered opinion that their mother was lucky to be five years dead.

They hanged Captain Kenlan in the late afternoon. Publicly. Thousands of citizens jammed the Marsville city park, and several hawkers wandered through the crowd selling nuts and candied quoe. There was little ceremony to the execution. The guards led Kenlan past a platoon of space marines who turned their backs on the officer. They dragged him up on the platform where the colonel ripped off his insignia. They gave him no opportunity to speak, but as the executioner fixed the noose in place, Jason cried out, "They *are* human, I tell you!" The lever was tripped before he could say more. The drop was too shallow for the light Martian gravity, and he strangled beneath a bat-flecked violet sky.

There was an atmosphere of festivity in Marsville on the night after the hanging. The city of eighty thousand had reaffirmed its faith in human dignity by executing a man who wanted to share "humanity" with a species of Martian wild life. By eight o'clock, a barfly minstrel had built a ballad around the hanging. The tune was old, but the words were new. Its mournful strains floated out into the night air in front of a space port saloon near the city's outer gate, where two shabbily dressed men loitered against the wall and listened.

*"Kenlan was the son of the colonel;  
Kenlan was the fourth planet's pride.  
Kenlan got lost in the mountains,  
And brought back a hairy brown bride.  
Now the gallows were high and windy;  
The steps were seven and six.*

*Yes, it's thirteen steps to heaven,  
If you're in love with a..."*

"Think it'll make the hit parade, Rolf?" drawled one of the shabby men as he brushed ice crystals out of a bristling brown moustache.

Rolf Kenlan eyed his brother briefly, then glanced back at The gate. A staff car had just pulled away, carrying the old guard, while two fresh sentries entered the hut to spend their four-hour shift. Beyond the gate lay five miles of frigid tundra, and then the foothills, immersed in darkness.

Rolf waited for the guards to get inside, then spoke softly: "Okay, Lennie, let's go. Make like you're drunk."

ARM IN arm, they shuffled along the wall to the gate. Then they sat down in front of the shack and began tipping from a bottle of kwoyo and arguing noisily. When they heard a guard's footsteps on the floor of the hut, Lennie bent forward and made retching noises. The door opened and a gust of warm air fanned Rolf's neck.

"Hey! Not in front of the shack!" the guard bellowed. "You there! Get him away from here." He nudged Rolf's back with the toe of his boot.

"Yeh, yeh, sure," Rolf grunted. He staggered to his feet and began tugging at Lennie's arm. He lost his grip and sat down hard.

The guard came out cursing. "Blind lead blind," he growled as he jerked Lennie roughly erect and dragged him toward the shadows. Lennie was still belching sickeningly.

Rolf dragged himself up and stood swaying dizzily. He glanced through the glass door of the shack at the other guard who was pressing his face against a window to see where his companion had gone.

There was a dull *thuk* from the shadows, then the sound of a body falling. Lennie reappeared with a gun in one hand and a short length of pipe in the other. He tossed the gun to Rolf, who darted up the steps and burst inside, just as the guard turned away from the window with a bewildered expression.

"Turn around," Rolf growled.

The guard glanced at the gun, lifted his hands, and turned. "Y-you're the son of—"

Rolf clubbed him with the gun butt before he finished. The guard slumped across a table and rolled to the floor. Lennie came in dragging the other man.

"Anybody see us?" Rolf grunted. "Couple walked past. Didn't even look around."

"Good! Bust the locker open and get into a night suit. Then get the fur horses out of the stable. I'll pack up whatever we can take with us."

Lennie smashed the lock of a wooden chest with his pipe joint. "Ammo's in here," he grunted as he struggled into a heavy all-covering night suit and pulled the wind mask over his face. Then he went outside.

Rolf broke open a first-aid packet and gave each guard a shot of morphine to insure a lengthy sleep. Then he ripped a blanket from the cot, dumped it full of ammunition, chocolate and vitamin tablets. He rolled it into a pack, donned a night suit, and went outside to join his brother in the darkness.

Lennie was waiting in the shadows with a pair of mutant fur horses, saddled and shod with asbestos-packed shoes. Rolf tied the bundle behind his idle, then mounted the nervous steed. A last glance at the street told Lem that they were still unobserved.

"Let's don't forget that this was your idea," growled Lennie as they trotted through the gate and onto the frozen tundra.

"Go back if you want to," Rolf responded. "Nobody's making you come."

LENNIE grunted resignedly and fell silent for a time. The sky was misted by its usual thin cloud of ice crystals which dulled the ghost light of the twin moons to the faintest glimmer. Faintly, they could see the shadows of the foothills in the distance ahead, while behind them the lights of Marsville made an aura in the dusty sift of falling pin-head sleet. The lights were a threat, and the gathering darkness was a comforting cloak that drew slowly about them. This was the first time that either man had ventured

beyond the walls of the city where they were born. The law confined the populace to Earth's only city on Mars, and it also kept Mars-creatures from entering.

"When'll they find the guards?" asked Lennie, who was younger and needed a certain amount of reassurance.

"Whenever the O. D. makes his tour, if he makes one. If he doesn't, we've got until they mount the next guard." Rolf spoke irritably, and tightened the straps of his wind mask against the icy air.

It was still cold on Mars, but warmer than it had been when man first came. Five centuries had passed since Dawson and Heide had set off the deuterium-helium fusion-cycle in the heavy water icecap, thereby furnishing the fourth planet with a denser atmosphere of oxygen and helium—a breathable atmosphere, and one which could hold heat.

"Lordy, Rolf!" Lennie muttered nervously. "It's hard to believe we're not ever coming back! I don't mind saying I'm scared. Y'reckon we'll ever find that place Dad was talking about—before they arrested him?"

"If we don't, we won't live long. Just shut up and watch over your shoulder. And let's ride a hundred yards apart in case they throw a searchlight out here."

Lennie reined his horse aside obediently. But the mount stumbled, and the rider cursed. He stopped to peer down at the ground. "Wait, Rolf!" he snapped. "Look! A fresh grave!"

Rolf hesitated in the dim moonlight, staring back at the newly frozen mound of earth. "That's what I thought," he grunted bitterly. "You guess whose it is?"

"Yeah," Lennie breathed. "Yeah. The androon gal Dad brought back from the mountains. The dirty so-and-so's said they let her go."

Rolf muttered a quoted phrase from one of the trial's news releases. "In accordance with the Commission's policy of mercy toward alien life forms, the androon female was set free..." He snorted a scornful curse and spurred his mount onward.

In a way, Rolf thought, the androon woman was their foster mother, although they'd never seen her. Jason had taken her to wife in a ceremony before an androon priest, while he was lost for a year in the mountains. He'd brought her back claiming that he'd found proof that her species was really human. So they hanged him under the bio-laws.

THE TWO riders trotted westward among the giant lichen patches. They kept abreast, but separated by shouting distance. Rolf hoped to reach the fringes of the quoie orchards before someone discovered the guards.

If they were caught, there was only one possible penalty: death. Only officers of the patrol could venture beyond the walls. And even patrolmen needed special orders—such as the reconnaissance mission which had first sent Jason into the hills. The only reason the Commission gave for such a harsh quarantine was a single word: "security".

Mars was still nearly unexplored except from the air. Marsville was a ten-mile square, and it was the entire world to its natives, who were five generations removed from Earth. It was an industrial city, mining its own ore, making its own steel. It had become nearly self-sufficient and, as soon as its economic independence was assured, it was to become the toolmaker to a Martian civilization which would expand outward from the Marsville nucleus. It was to become the hub of an empire. But until that time, its attentions were to remain focussed upon its own growth. Rolf's and Lennie's knowledge of the rest of the planet was purely academic. The hills ahead were only a mystery.

"Reckon we'll meet any androons?" Lennie called from the darkness.

"Shut up!" Rolf barked. "They might hear you."

Sound travelled far in the icy air across the frozen flatlands. Rolf stole a glance back at the city, but it was still drowsing peacefully in its glow-aura.

When they were a thousand yards from the quoie orchards, Lennie called out again—this time with fear in his voice: "Rolf! Look! A light! On the wall!"

Rolf reined up and stared back at the city. The pencil beam of a searchlight was stabbing out into the night. Slowly, it swept the area to the north of them, then darted southward. Rolf dismounted with a

curse. "Get your horse down!" he shouted.

Then he tugged his own mount behind a waist-high clump of lichen and tried to force the animal's forelegs into a kneel. The mare remained stubbornly erect. The light was sweeping closer.

Despairingly, Rolf drew the stolen pistol and shot her between the eyes. He stepped back as she crumpled behind the lichen patch, then threw himself down out of sight as the searchlight swept over him.

LENNIE shouted something about his horse, then screamed as a burst of machine-gun fire chattered from the city. Rolf glanced up to see the beam rigidly stationary, attached to the spot where Lennie had dismounted. There was another burst of fire, and bright tracers arced across the tundra. Rolf heard the bullets whipping the earth a hundred to the south, and occasionally spanging off a rock in a whining ricochet. There was no sound from his brother.

"Lennie? You okay?"

There was no answer. The firing ceased, and the light began slowly sweeping the tundra again. Keeping behind the lichen clusters, Rolf crawled southward. Several times the light passed over him, and he flung himself full length on the turf. Then the light stopped once more near Lennie, and Rolf saw the prostrate fur horse with Lennie's legs pinned beneath it.

"Len! Are you all right?"

He heard a faint groan, and crawled closer. Hoofbeats were echoing in the distance. He paused to call again from just beyond the splash of brightness. "Lennie! Are you alive?"

This time he heard a weak answer: "Go on ...before they come....Belly shot. I can't go. Hurry... Rolf."

Rolf hesitated. Without a horse, he couldn't carry Lennie along. And the riders were coming out of the city. Even if he had a horse, he couldn't take care of an abdominal wound with a first-aid kit. Grimly, he realized Lennie would have to be left behind.

"So long, kid!" he called; then, crouching low, he began running toward the orchard, angling away from the road of brightness which the beam carved, leading the patrol riders toward the downed fugitive.

Rolf raced against fear, expecting the searchlight at any moment to shift half a degree and catch him in its beam. But, evidently, the patrolmen were not yet aware that there had been two riders. Soon they would find the extra horse, however, or notice that two were gone from the stables. And from that moment onward, Rolf's life would become an endless flight. The city was a prison and escapees were hunted down by air. The guards had the right to kill them summarily.

Rolf reached the orchard just as the clatter of hooves stopped beside his fallen brother. He darted among the furry-barked quioie trunks, then stopped to look back. The silhouettes of three horsemen were gathered around the wounded man in the searchlight's splash. One of the men pointed at the ground. Rolf strained his eyes for a better look. A gunshot came to his ears faintly, and the rider stopped pointing.

ROLF STIFFENED with horror. There was no question in his mind about Lennie's fate. Slowly he took out the pistol, braced it against the tree-trunk, then realized that there was no hope of hitting the man at such a distance. He pocketed the weapon and stood staring at the scene in frozen hate. Someday he would come back, he swore. Someday that man would die.

Then, as the riders began circling about in the area, he turned and drove deeper into the orchard's blackness. Tomorrow the chase would begin in earnest, and he hoped to be in the foothills before morning.

The first feeble rays of dawn, however, found him still in the orchard. In despair, he realized he had wandered onto a side path and had been plodding south instead of west. Soon the aircraft would rise from the city to begin their search. How could he escape them on foot?

Wearily he sat down on a dry stump to consider his plight and to gnaw at a bit of frozen chocolate from the pack. His stirring about roused a giant wool-bat which had spent the night roosting in one of the parabolic cups which constituted the foliage of the quioie trees. The creature came awake with a flutter, peered over the side of the cup, bared its needle-like fangs at the human, and departed with a series of shrill eee's and a whipping of gigantic wings. Rolf started up in fright, then settled back with a disgusted

grunt to finish his breakfast.

The bats were harmless unless attacked. The sharp teeth were used to tear through the leathery insulating hide that covered the fruit of the quoie trees, and bats were normally vegetarians. The androons used them for food, and rode them for sport. The winged beasts were untrainable and useless for directed transportation, but they could provide a wild sky ride that ended only when the bat became exhausted and settled to earth. Rolf had seen them soaring above the mountains, looping and twisting in an attempt to unseat their androon passengers.

Directed transportation?

Rolf came to his feet suddenly and stared up at the semi-translucent quoie cups, frost-covered in the dawn. The early sun's rays colored them a dull orange, and here and there a dark hulk lay huddled in the heart of a cup. Other bats had nested for the night, but they were beginning to stir as the light grew brighter. What need did he have of a *directed* ride? One thing was certain: no bat would fly back to the city.

Quickly he gathered up the rope that had bound the pack, spotted a tree that contained a bat, and began shinnying up the furry trunk. The tree shook with his weight. The bat grinned at him from over the side, then took wing noisily, arousing several others. Rolf dropped to the ground with a curse. Snaring the creatures would be a job.

He stared blankly at the tree and waited for inspiration. It came. He stretched the rope out in a straight line on the ground, made a noose at one end, then unzipped his suit and removed the canteen from its warm nest next to his ribs. He began soaking a twelve-foot length of the rope, just aft of the noose. The water froze almost immediately. He built up a strong sheath of ice about it, then carried it to the nearest tree which contained a late sleeper. He tied one end about the trunk, then stood on tiptoe to rattle the noose against the lip of the nest. The ice made a stiff rod.

With a startled squeak, the bat awoke with a jerk that rocked the tree. It caught the rope in its teeth with an angry snap. Rolf threw his weight against the frozen pole, and it became suddenly flexible as the ice shattered. With a shriek to awaken the dead, the bat burst skyward and fought frenziedly at the end of the tether. But the loop was securely locked about its lower jaw, and the sharp teeth nailed it in place.

FOR A MOMENT, Rolf thought the beast would either break the rope or uproot the swaying quoie. The beating wings set up a wind that fanned his face and rocked the neighboring trees. Quickly, he began guiding the creature's struggles so that it wrapped the rope several additional times around the trunk. Then he loosened the knot and tied a loop about his waist. He had meant to transfer the snare to the bat's legs, as the androons did, but the monster's furious struggle made it impossible. He would have to chance the jaw sling.

With some misgivings, he began walking about the trunk to unwind the rope. After two turns, he was being dragged around it. Then he found himself spinning upward, crashing against tree trunks, and tearing through tough quoie foliage. He closed his eyes, clung to the rope, and tried to pull himself higher upon it. Then he was rocking and swaying in the icy wind. The bat swooped, soared and looped over the orchard as it tried to shed its unwanted cargo. Suddenly it climbed high, jerked its neck and folded its wings, tossing Rolf upward like a ball on a string.

He caught a glimpse of the bat's taloned feet slashing toward him, and he caught at them with his hands to protect his face. The claws knifed through the heavy padding of his night-suit, and he felt them dig into the muscles of his forearms. Howling with pain, he clutched the hairy ankles and held on. The jaw rope went slack. With horror, he watched the jaw noose loosen as the beast snapped at it, uttering shrill *skreees* of rage. The talons kept clawing at his forearms, but the thickness of the padded sleeves lessened their effect.

They were fluttering a hundred feet above the orchard when the noose fell free, and the rope dangled from Rolf's waist. In mid-air, the bat tried to bend double and slash the man with its fangs, but its jaw



seemed to have come unhinged. As Rolf threw his boots up to kick, the bloody slaver's mouth only beat against them weakly. But the battle was causing them to plummet earthward again.

A deafening *thwoomp* suddenly shocked Rolf's eardrums, and a dark pall of smoke opened up above them. The bat shrieked in wild terror as a fragment of shrapnel ripped a small hole in a membranous wing. The city had a pair of anti-aircraft guns, and the guards had evidently spotted the wild fight above the orchard.

Then Rolf was no longer holding on. The bat's talons tightened instinctively about his wrists as the creature dived like a fighter-rocket for lower altitude. Another burst of flak flared like a black umbrella with a heart of fire. A metallic fragment slashed the fabric of Rolf's suit. The bat pulled out of the dive and began skimming along the tree-tops, darting a zig-zag course for the hills and screaming rage against the black threats that bloomed from nowhere with the stink of cordite. Its talons flared open and shut, trying to rid itself of the unwanted weight, but Rolf had recovered his grip on the ankles.

HE DOUBLED his body into a ball, lest he be dashed to death in the treetops. With his knees, he pulled up enough of the trailing rope to catch it in his mouth. Letting go with one hand, he managed to loop it about one of the bat's ankles, and by shifting his grip, about the other. After a moment, his own fate was securely tied to the bat's.

And the bat was fluttering a hysterical course for the hills. The gunners were finding it difficult to cope with the sudden changes in direction. Rolf breathed premature relief as the beast swooped into a gully and turned out of the city's sight behind a ridge, winging low over the rocks and lichen patches. But the gunners could still lob them over the hill, and they did—but with less accuracy.

He stole a glance backward and saw what he expected to see—aircraft. Three pinpoints in the sky were streaking westward—the city's only jet-planes. Because of their altitude, and their slight off-target heading, he knew they hadn't spotted him yet, but it would certainly be only a matter of minutes. The bat's rust-colored fur offered some camouflage, but they would see the black shadow darting up the hillsides, and dive in for the kill.

The bat drove deeper into the hills, taking a winding course through the valleys and keeping up a *skree skree* that seemed to become weaker by the moment. Rolf noticed that the sleeves of his suit were blood-drenched, and that some of the sticky fluid was not his own. A bit of shrapnel had found a home.

The planes were circling almost directly overhead, and losing altitude. Rolf noticed that his bat was heading for a low cliff of white rock where the mouths of three caverns yawned toward the sun. Several other of the beasts were sunning themselves on a ledge before the caves. Their nests?

One of the jets suddenly wagged its wings and dropped out of formation. It dived toward the other end of the valley, then banked sharply in a 180-degree turn. Rolf knew it had spotted him, and was coming in for a strafing run. The weakened and wounded bat was flapping its wings wearily, and barely managing to keep aloft as it struggled to reach the cliff caves which it apparently regarded as home. Rolf spurred it on with a couple of pistol shots near its breast. It *skreeed* weakly and summoned a last effort.

Like a shrieking arrow, the first jet streaked past, and Rolf pulled himself as close as possible against the bat's belly. A crash of machine-gun fire ripped a hundred-yard-long swath across the ground, and ricocheting tracers darted skyward. The pilot had overshot. But another jet was streaking up the valley.

THE BAT reached the ledge just as the first blast ploughed the earth, and the sound was answered by a growing chorus of shrill *skrees* from the cave. Rolf threw himself flat on the ledge as the caverns began belching forth a flood of frightened bodies with membranous wings. An army of bats streaked out like a herd of stampeding bison. The second jet pulled up sharply to avoid collision. The bats filled the air in a swirling, scurrying, bleating black cloud of confusion. The beast that had carried the fugitive lay dying on the ledge beside him. Rolf cut the rope and waited for the last startled creature to emerge. Then he slid into the mouth of a cave.

The strafing chatter continued intermittently. Evidently they had lost sight of him during the bat stampede. Rolf lay panting in the darkness, completely exhausted from the night of fleeing, emotionally drained by the sight of his brother's and father's death at the hands of the city which had been home.

Home? It had been the world.

Why had they hung Jason Kenlan? Because he had committed miscegenation? Rolf remembered the bewilderment on his father's face when they treated him like the worst sort of criminal, remembered his cry, "But they're human, I tell you!"

Before the commission had closed Jason's cell off from the world and held him incommunicado, Rolf had spent half an hour listening to a disjointed account of his father's year of wandering in the Martian wilderness. But the conversation had been punctuated with anxious expressions of worry about the androon woman, and with irrelevant anecdotes concerning life in the androon caverns, or "mines", as Jason had called them.

Nevertheless, Rolf had managed to hear some of the officer's ideas before the guards chased him away. Jason claimed to have discovered evidence that Mars had once been a satellite of Jupiter, that it had been peopled by a now-extinct race of intelligent non-humans, and that the androons had come from Earth while Cro-Magnon man still prowled the forests of Europe.

And that the androons were, in fact, descended from the Cro-Magnon tribes. He claimed that the "Bolsewi" had raided Earth in prehistoric times, captured a dozen pairs of humans, and rocketed them back to Mars for breeding purposes, using the offspring as slave labor.

Rolf and Lennie had quickly decided that their father was executed to close his mouth, rather than to punish him for violating the bio-laws, which would be void if the androons were proved human. Impulsively, and driven by bitterness, they had decided to escape the city and go in search of proof which would posthumously absolve Jason Kenlan of guilt. Jason claimed to have brought such proof, but he had presented it to the Commission in secret session, rather than announcing it directly to the people of Marsville who now would never see it.

OTHER scientists had proposed that Mars had once been the outer moon of Jupiter, while the king planet was still in a molten, fiery state. According to the theory, Mars had received more light and heat from the mother planet than it got from the sun. It had cooled more rapidly than the giant, and had developed the first life in the solar system. But after the fashion of all moons which revolve about fluid-surfaced planets, it drifted farther and farther away from the waning, cooling king. Some of its orbital energy was lost in the daily work of raising and lowering the Jovian tides. When the tides fell back with the moon's passing, the spring-tension of the mutual attraction diminished by a tiny amount, and Mars slipped another inch away from its master. When it reached the point where Sol's gravity met and exactly opposed that of Jove, Mars wavered, drifted free, then accelerated sunward. Keeping some of Jupiter's orbital velocity, it spiraled inward, dashing through the asteroids to gather up Phobos and Deimos. By missing the sun, of course, it was doomed to wheel forever in its own new orbit.

The scientists who held for such a theory pointed to the eccentricity of Mars' orbit and to the peculiar behavior of her moons, and to the known fact that Earth's own moon was gradually slipping away due to tidal influences. But such scientists were held in political disfavor.

Rolf, having heard what his father had to say, now suspected a political reason for this disfavor. If Mars life had indeed evolved while Mars was a satellite of Jupiter, then Mars' sudden change of orbit would be a disaster of the first magnitude to whatever beings originally inhabited it. The sudden shift in climate might drive them underground, wreck their civilization, and devastate their non-intelligent life-forms and food supply. Such a civilization, after painful rebuilding, might go searching for organisms who could better withstand the changed conditions. And what more likely place to look than upon Mars' new neighbor—Earth? The kidnapped life-forms could be taught to handle the heavier labor, while the natives kept themselves sheltered from the fiercer climate.

If the lost-satellite theory were shown to be true, it might lead to a belief that the androons were human.

But then, Rolf asked himself, why should the Commission care whether the creatures were originally born of Earth or of Mars? The city's tyrannical quarantine had set a barrier about it anyway. Rolf knew no possible answer. Yet he believed that the Commission had killed his father to keep intact the assumption of the androons' inhumanity. And, in a sense, the Commission had killed his mother—by the ruling that

women with children must spend thirty hours a week in factory labor, as well as caring for the family. Overwork had destroyed her health, taken her life. Of the family he had known since birth, Rolf alone remained—Rolf, and hatred.

HE THOUGHT of these things in a hazy way as he lay resting in the mouth of the cave. The jets had stopped strafing the area, but he could still hear their rushing hiss as they circled overhead. Sooner or later, Rolf knew, they would send helicopters to land and search the area for him. Unquestionably, they would search the caves. He must move on—somehow. There could be no rest until he was either safe or dead.

He turned around in the narrow passage-way, then stiffened. For an instant he thought that a bat had breathed in his face, but then, removing his mask, he felt a gentle draft that was warmer than the outer airs. The blackness was impenetrable. Fumbling, he found his flashlight and shone it back into the cave, but the tunnel made a turning fifty feet ahead, and he could not see beyond it.

Toward the bend the tunnel widened, and a pair of young bats blinked at him from a ledge. They slowly folded and unfolded their wings, which were still too feeble to bear them aloft. He crawled past them quickly, let the female return and object to his presence. The little beasts eyed him solemnly with little peep's of curiosity. He grinned and paused to scratch the silky neck of one of them. The bat nuzzled his hand affectionately.

"Your old lady oughta warn you against strangers," he told it. "I might be hungry."

The bat *eeeked* several times, and maneuvered its neck against Rolf's hand again. He chuckled, scratched it lightly, and moved on around the turn in the tunnel. The cavern widened still more and, by stooping slightly, he found that he could stand. But the passageway took a winding downward course that prevented his seeing what lay ahead. He thought grimly that he might be walking into doom; but it was better, at least, than what lay outside.

Instead of being smooth and waterworn, as were the caverns of Earth, the walls about him were rough, yet glazed over, as though the surface film had once been fused by a sudden and intense heat. Their appearance plus the strange relative warmth of the air troubled him with a vague uneasiness. He was perhaps the first human to tread the winding, sloping corridor, for the bulk of Mars was as yet unexplored. The Commission seemingly didn't want it explored. They wanted Marsville to be built up quickly as the central fortress of future empire. The difficulty of space transportation, its present limitations, meant that Marsville must grow without transfusions of men and tools from Earth. Time, equipment and manpower were scarce commodities which could not be wasted upon satisfying Marsological curiosity. Curiosity would have to wait for production.

SO SAID the Commission. But Rolf wondered if perhaps the Commission didn't know more about Mars than it admitted to the city's citizens, who, although being nominally free within its walls, were born within the Commission's jurisdiction, attended Commission-regulated schools, and read whatever news the Commission saw fit to release. News of Earth? Rolf knew vaguely that some sort of major political upheaval was in violent progress on the mother planet, but he knew little of its nature. The Commission kept reminding the citizens of Marsville that they were too far from Earth to bother worrying about it.

As he drove deeper into the cave, he began unzipping the bulky suit. It seemed to be growing steadily warmer, although the temperature was probably still below freezing.

Suddenly he stopped, stood rigidly in his tracks, and listened. A sound from behind him? At first he thought that he'd been mistaken. Then he heard it again—a faint rustling sound, as of someone brushing against the rocks. He doused the flashlight, traded it for his pistol, and pressed himself back against the icy wall, holding his breath and waiting. The sound stopped, then continued, drawing nearer.

It could only be an enemy, he thought. There were no androons this close to the city; at least, none had been observed. Quietly, he knelt in the darkness, meaning to shoot upward in case the prowler tripped over him. Then the rustling noise hurried toward him. His finger tightened on the trigger.

*Eeeek eeeek eeeek .*

A warm little mouth nuzzled his hand in the darkness, and a small wing brushed his leg. He cursed

disgustedly and switched on the light. The bat-pup had followed him, dragging its wings along the floor. Its tiny talons caught in his suit and clung. It squeaked with tired pleasure as it sagged against his chest drowsily.

But it seemed interested in his hands, which were still dirty with dried blood. "Little vampire!" he grunted at it. But it seemed interested only in sniffing the scent. He remembered that some of it was bat blood then, and wondered if the creature which bore him to the caves was the pup's mother.

"Whoever she is, she'll have to come after you, doc," he murmured as he resumed the journey. He pried the pup's talons loose from his clothing, and lifted the furry bundle to his shoulder. It squeaked once, folded its wings, and promptly fell asleep.

It was peculiar, he thought, that they couldn't be domesticated. The young were friendly enough. So was a tiger kitten, however. But who said they couldn't be domesticated? The Commission said so, via the schools. And Rolf was prepared to place his complete mistrust in the Commission. The androons obviously hadn't domesticated the bats, but the androons were still in a stone age. He decided to keep the pup for a while, unless it grew hungry for a morsel of his arm.

Glancing at his watch, he estimated that he had gone at least a mile. But the cave showed no signs of tapering off or ending. Where were his pursuers? Surely they would guess his whereabouts and follow—or else seal the mouth of the cave with rocks. He shuddered as he thought of it, even though he hadn't intended to return. The steady air movement seemed to insist that there was another exit.

AN HOUR later he came to a wide place, and sat down upon a low rock to rest and to gnaw at a brick of bitter chocolate. He crumbled some of the bar and gave it to the pup, telling himself that it was an investment toward the day when he would be hungry enough to eat a bat. The pup seemed suspicious of the food, but devoured it nevertheless.

Rolf rubbed it between the ears. "Mighty big bead you got, doc," he murmured drowsily. "Either a lot of bone or a lot of brain." In ratio of skull-size to body-size, the bat was brainier than most monkeys. Rolf hadn't noticed it before because the creature's wings added to the apparent body size. Maybe, he thought, if Mars had a future, bats would be the up-and-coming species.

The chocolate was making him sleepy. He sat on the rock, willing himself to arise but remaining seated. The cave was soundless, save for the steady whisper of the air drift. He reminded himself that he'd had no sleep in forty hours. If they were coming, they would surely have caught him by this time—at the weary pace he'd been setting. Perhaps, he thought unhappily, they might really know what lay in the caverns and have decided to leave him with it.

He arose and placed his flashlight on a projecting corner of rock, aiming its beam back along the tunnel in the direction whence he had come. If a guard came around the corner and saw the light, Rolf hoped he'd shoot at it before realizing it wasn't in the fugitive's hand. Thus he would be awakened before he was seen. Then he stretched out in the blackest shadows for a nap. The rocks were rough, and the pup refused to be used for a pillow, but sleep demanded possession of him and cared little for comfort.

Sometime later, Doc's squeaking penetrated the sleep shroud and brought him half awake. He grumbled incoherently and tried to close his ears. Then the squeaks choked off. Rolf sighed contentedly.

A stick of dynamite suddenly exploded inside his skull. Bright tracers arced up out of a bright red fireball. Pain was an intermittent blip dancing on the sweep-line of consciousness. He sat up howling and clawing at his head. He caught a glimpse of a hand holding a large jagged rock.

The hand moved up, then down. A second jolt ended the pain.

There was flickering torchlight bathing the rough, moist ground. His head hung four feet high, face down, but there was no body beneath it. His chin was buried in a hairy, heavy-muscled back. Then he realized he was draped over someone's shoulder. The ground jogged up and down, and a pair of legs flashed in and out of view. The thighs were human, but from ankle to knee a thick shaggy pelt, enveloped them. The small horny feet were wrapped in bat-skin sandals.

An androon was carrying him. He heard voices and knew that there were three of them. He watched the ground moving beneath him. A red dot appeared, then receded behind them. Another appeared. Then another. He was fascinated by the rhythm of the red dots. But he soon discovered that his head

was their source.

The blood filled him with slow anger, but he was too weak to fight. His legs were numb, and the bony shoulder shut off circulation in his thighs. With his head hung low, his skull was exploding with pressure.

In petulant rage, he caught a mouthful of the androon's back, sank his teeth in it, and tore. The man-thing set up a slow wailing yell that rose in volume. The androon was afraid to drop him, lest the drop cause Rolf to tear out a patch of his back. He bent his knees, held on gingerly, and howled for help. Rolf bit deeper.

A pair of knuckles jabbed into his cheeks, one on either side. They drilled into his jaws and ground against something tender. He opened his mouth reflexively. The androon put him down. His legs buckled beneath him, and he sat on the hard stone floor.

Someone saved him from being kicked in the face by the androon he had bitten.

THE THREE of them stood over him, murmuring among themselves. Rolf glanced around weakly. They had been carrying him deeper into the cave, for there was some moisture on the rocks. He looked up at his captors—two bushy-bearded males and a girl. The males were lean, furry, and barrel-chested with rose-tinted hides and large pale eyes. The girl was slender and well-shaped with peach-fuzz skin. But below the knees she was as furry as the males. Her boot-pelt was parted down the center of the shin and combed back neatly into a cowlick behind her calves. All three of the creatures were dressed in short bat-skin skirts and jackets. They carried short clubs of hatchet-shaped bone.

One of the warriors nudged him with his toe and grunted, "*Hauka d'lag Saralesara, Erdmad!*"

Rolf glared up at him angrily and told them where to go.

The warriors glanced at each other, then growled a word at the girl. She shook her head doubtfully, paused to summon her thoughts, and spoke to him haltingly.

"Wye you...keel girl Saralesara, Erdman?"

Startled, Rolf made her repeat it. It was Earthtongue, all right, but where had she learned it? There was only one possible answer—his father!

"Who's Saralesara?" he growled. "I didn't kill anybody."

"She go you city. We see Erd-warr'ors take her out walls. Shoot t'roo head wid Erd-weapod. You Erdman, yes?"

Rolf explained that he had had no part in the killing of his father's androon mate, told them of Jason's execution, and related the events involved in his flight from the city. After he'd told it three times, the girl finally seemed to understand what had happened, but she failed to grasp any reason for it.

"Wye they kill for get marry?" she demanded angrily.

Rolf's pain-dazed mind balked at furnishing any lengthy explanations. His throbbing undermind popped a quotation from Kipling at him. "There are nine and sixty ways of constructing tribal lays, fur-legs."

The girl's eyebrows arched high with surprise. "An avery zeengle wan uv tham is right, huh? You son uv Yason Kanlan, hokay! He usta say that!"

Rolf remembered vaguely that his father had been sold on Kipling, and quoted the old balladeer frequently.

The girl turned to the others and began speaking rapidly in the guttural but pleasantly rhythmic androon tongue. Rolf took advantage of the interruption to study them more completely. He had seen androons only in textbook pictures and through binoculars when staring toward the mountains.

They were not more hairy than the Japanese Ainu tribes—above the knee, it least. And they were remarkably well developed for having evolved in Martian gravity—if they had in fact done so. They were tight-muscled and long-limbed, with high foreheads and thin features. With a generous application of the razor, they might easily pass for a polyracial mixture of Scandinavian, American Indian, and Hawaiian.

ONE OF the warriors was holding Doc by the feet. The bat-pup's wings were dragging the ground limply, and its small frightened eyes were darting about in weary terror. The warrior carried the pup like a chicken on its way to the chopping block, and Rolf suspected that the little beast was headed for a cook-pot. He pushed himself toward the warrior and tried to wrest the bat from him. The warrior snatched it back and moved aside with a surly growl. Doc revived enough to squeak plaintively.

Rolf struggled to his feet and demanded the bat. The warrior held it behind his back, and brandished his club at the Earthman. It was a mistake. Doc sank his needle-teeth into the most available portion of androon anatomy. The warrior yelped and released him. Doc fluttered to Rolf's feet, climbed up his clothing, and perched on his shoulder to shriek invective at his former persecutor.

The androons muttered among themselves in surprise. The girl looked at him respectfully. "You blessed by Menbana, god of bat. Is not many who can do this thing."

Rolf nodded solemnly and neglected to mention the bat-blood on his sleeves. "You go," said the girl, pointing a slender arm deeper into the cavern. "We take you to council."

Rolf took a few steps, then leaned against the wall, his head spinning sickeningly. A warrior stepped on either side of him, caught his arms, and helped him along the tunnel. "What's the council?" he muttered to the girl who walked a few paces ahead, carrying a sputtering torch.

She glanced back at him coolly. "Is three priests of Phanton, Erdman. They say somebody got to die for life of Saralesara. They decide if somebody should be you."

Rolf gasped, then raged at her for a time, telling her about how he had traded a life among his own people to come and find the androon tribes. "Why don't you kill your enemies instead of your friends?" he growled.

She shrugged. "You already here. It nice and convenient. But I dunno—if you blessed by Menbana, maybe they pick somebody else."

Rolf resolved to treat Doc with all the affection he could muster.

AS THEY moved ever deeper into the cave, Rolf's dazed senses began to warn him that there was something unusual here, something of which he should take note. After a time, they stopped to let him lean against a steel supporting column to rest. He tried to think about it, but the wounded bulge on his head kept firing volleys of pain through his reasoning organ.

They led him on again, dodging the heavy steel columns that gleamed rustlessly in the torchlight. Stainless steel columns?

"What the hell!" he gasped.

The girl looked back curiously. "You pain, Son of Kenlan?"

He stared at the columns in disbelief. They supported the ceiling under the crushing tons of rock overhead. "Who dug these tunnels?" he barked.

The girl laughed, then spoke to the warriors, who also laughed. Rolf repeated the question.

"Gods build tunnels," she told him promptly. "Our fathers served gods here, but gods go away."

Rolf stumbled on for a moment in silence. So it was true—there had been an earlier race of intelligent beings on Mars.

"Where did your people come from?" he asked.

"Gods make us." She laughed again. "You father, he say we come from Erd. Make priests mad, but we don't believe anyway. Gods make us."

They passed a sudden turn in the tunnel, and the girl whipped the torch against the wall, extinguishing it. Rolf stared ahead in amazement. The ceiling was aglow with pale green light, apparently fluorescing from gamma-radiation originating in troughs that ran high along the walls. The corridor was no longer jagged rock, but had been finished and polished to a high lustre. Doorways led off the main hall, and several androons appeared in them to stare at the captive. A hundred yards ahead, he could see a huge, brightly lighted room with a fountain in the center. A steamy pool surrounded the fountain, and an androon woman came out to dip water.

It reminded Rolf of a million-dollar hen house built by a chicken-fancier with money to burn. Certainly no androons had built it. They apparently lived in it without thinking twice about the wonder of

it. He could hear the distant hum of machinery—wholly automatic, undoubtedly, and running for thousands of years, untended by its users. Certainly they couldn't understand it—or they wouldn't still be carrying clubs and wearing skins. He glanced at his captors in scorn. They had probably lived here for milleniums without wondering what processes gave them light, heat, and water.

BUT THEN his scorn faded. How long had man lived in the forests without understanding what process made a tree bloom in Spring to hand him an apple in the Fall? Without knowing why the rain came to give him water, and the sun to give him warmth? He spoke to the girl again.

"Where does the light come from?"

She watched him with a faint frown. "You are ignorant as you father, Erdman. He too think light God have only one eye. Has one big-eye in sky, many little ones here."

He shrugged and looked around again. There was some lead shielding around the wall troughs. They undoubtedly contained a good gamma-emitter which would last for many ages, while the ceiling was coated with a thick phosphor.

They entered the mighty room and he saw that it was as large as a giant space-freighter hangar. He looked around and instantly knew the nature of the builders. Fiery phosphorescent murals depicted scenes of an ancient Mars. And he also saw the place of the bats in the biology of the fourth planet.

For the builders—the "Bolsewi", as his father had called them—were cousins to the bats. The first joints of their wings ended in short arms with tong, delicate fingers. Their bodies were spindly, and their heads oversized. Their wings were much smaller than those of the bats. But, as he looked at the murals, he knew that Man was to the apes as the Bolsewi were to the bats—cousins out of a common "Father Abraham". He looked around at his captors questioningly.

"Bolsewi," the girl told him, "The gods who made us."

Androons were congregating in the central room to stare. Rolf was being led toward a flight of steps that led to a second-story balcony. It was hard to believe that they were several thousand feet beneath the surface. But then, the fainter gravity would make deeper excavations possible on Mars. The crushing weight of rock would not be so great.

He looked at the murals again. Some of them involved ships of curious design, obviously meant for flight into space. His heart leapt at one of them—a ship lancing toward a blue-green planet with a single moon. Earth! The Bolsewi *had* been to Earth, possibly while Man was little above the ape.

So they had killed his father for telling the truth!

The warriors led him up the steps and made him sit upon a low, wide pedestal facing the deep balcony where three stone *cathedrae* were set against the wall. They were unoccupied. Above the *cathedrae* hung a pair of long, thin objects that reminded Rolf of weapons, although he had seen nothing like them before. They appeared to be a pair of bagpipes with a flame thrower in place of the chanter. He questioned the girl.

"They are the sacred symbols of Manton," she told him. Then she went away, leaving him alone on the platform with the two warrior guards and Doc, who was asleep again on his shoulder.

ROLF WONDERED if he had escaped from the Mars-Commission guards only to be killed in the name of superstition by the guards of the people he had meant to befriend. Toward the rear of the balcony a door opened and three ancient androons shuffled out, followed by the girl. The old men took their places upon the *cathedrae* with appropriate rustling of robes and stroking of beards. Then they bent forward to peer officiously at the prisoner. Their bat-skin togas draped them from shoulder to top, and each wore a metal pendant about his throat. Upon closer examination, Rolf decided that the pendants were stainless steel wing-nuts borrowed from some Bolsewi machine. He snickered. One man's toy was another man's god.

A priest barked a question, and the girl translated: "Why you laugh, Erdman?"

Rolf removed his smile and replied acidly, "I was surprised to see such intelligent-looking gentlemen."

She translated tonelessly and the priests appeared neither pleased nor insulted. They were eyeing the

bat-pup while they spoke to the girl.

"The elders ask—you blessed by Menbana, Erdman? They ask also you name. And why you people kill Saralesara, who is daughter of elder?"

Rolf glanced at them quickly and decided that the elder with the fiery demanding eyes was the father of Jason's bride. He assured them that he had always been chummy with Menbana, told them his story again, and insisted that the angry-eyed elder was his grandfather-in-law. The priests appeared baffled as the girl translated. They went into a huddle and argued noisily among themselves. The girl turned frequently to ask questions about his father, questions apparently designed to confirm the contention that he was Jason's son. Rolf began to get the impression that Jason had won their respect and friendship.

The priests broke off their argument suddenly to gaze at him. Rolf felt the chilly nervousness of a prisoner awaiting judgement. Then the father of Saralesara spoke to him directly, without the girl's translating.

"Jason Kenlan was a guest in my house," he said in slow but well-managed Earthtongue. "We accepted him as one of us, and he took my daughter in marriage. But his heart went back to his own people. He spoke dreamily of a day when Earthmen would be our brothers. He said that they now wish to conquer us and make us slaves as soon as their city has grown enough. But he said that he would tell them that we are also men, and that then they would welcome us. Is it for this cause that they killed him?"

Rolf nodded, then frowned. "He never was able to tell the people. He told the rulers. That was a mistake. The rulers didn't tell the people. They killed him to keep him quiet. If the people knew, then they would want to leave the city—to make homes in the hills—homes where they could be free as they were once free on Earth...."

The priest leaned forward suddenly. "Your father said that the gods did not make us. He said that our patriarchs came from Earth. Do you believe this also?"

ROLF NOTICED the challenging expression on the oldster's face. He saw the eyes flicker toward the murals—and he paused. It was clear that the old man believed the tribal legend. The caverns had obviously been made by the "gods". The caverns were the androons' world. The world was the Bolsewi's and the fulness thereof—including the inhabitants. Why should the priest believe some far-fetched tale of a foreigner? Rolf weighed his words carefully.

"I believe," he said, "that your tribe and my tribe have a common ancestor. Perhaps the Bolsewi planted some men upon this world and left others upon Earth. If you think the Bolsewi created you, don't you suppose that they could have left some of your kin on another world?"

The old man looked startled. He stared at Rolf thoughtfully, then spoke to the others in the androon tongue. The girl was watching him with a faint smile. Then she winked. He started slightly, having no doubt as to where she had learned to wink. Jason, he thought, must have looked over the crop before he picked Saralesara. At fifty, he had certainly not been ready for the rocking chair and flannel muffler. Rolf wondered if the androons were polygamous, and if Jason had brought home only one of his wives. He ignored the wink and watched the old high-priest, who had finished his discussion with the others.

"You are indeed blessed by Menbana, who *is* god of wisdom," the priest said. "We think your explanation is possible. The Bolsewi created our patriarchs and carried some of them to your world."

Rolf saw no reason to contend upon which planet man had originated. If the priest wanted to believe that Earthmen were an offshoot of Martian stock, then he would let them believe it. He was at least one notch righter than before. Rolf kept his mouth tightly shut and thanked the elder with a nod.

"You are an outcast now?" the priest asked.

"As long as the present rulers are in power."

"You wish to live among us?"

"That was my intention."

"Then you may do so upon certain conditions." He gestured toward the ones who had captured Rolf. "These were sent out to capture a victim for sacrifice—in reparation for the death of Saralesara. You must see that we find some Earthman to replace yourself."



"And if I don't?"

"Then you will be hung by the heels and skinned alive," said the priest with a faint smile.

Rolf swallowed a dry place in his throat and thought of the man who had shot his brother. "How much time will you give me?" he grunted.

The priest hesitated. "There is no set time for the sacrifice. But do not wait for Phantom to become impatient. He is *a* thirsty god. You may have time for your head to heal, and a reasonable time to learn our ways."

Rolf nodded, seeing no way to escape the injunction.

"You must also take up some duty—some responsibility—if you wish to join our people. You might bear arms, or take some housekeeping chores, ..." He paused, eyeing the sleeping bat-pup. "It is a high responsibility for an outsider, but ...if you have been blessed by the bat-god..."

ROLF NOTICED that the girl cast a startled glance from one to the other of them. She seemed to shake her head slightly, and her eyes warned him.

"You might join the bat-hunters," said the elder. "But that would also oblige you to become an acolyte of Menbana, and serve his priestesses in the temple. Do you object to this?"

Rolf hesitated thoughtfully. For some reason, the girl was frowning at him and saying "no" with her eyes. But he thought of the possibility of domesticating the bats; if they could be trained from puphood, they should make good mounts, and intelligent. And, as an acolyte in the temple, he might have access to a wealth of information. It was obvious that the androons had attached sacredness to the artifacts of the Bolsewi civilization, and through the minor priesthood he might gain access to some of them.

"Make your choice, Rolf Kenlan," the high-priest told him. "Let me tell you that an acolyte of Menbana must endure a humiliating initiation, and he *is* but a lackey to his priestess. But that is somewhat mitigated by his hunting activities, although few acolytes are really able to enjoy hunting after their initiation."

Rolf was irritated by the girl's warning glances. Did she think he couldn't take a little entrance exam? He had been shot at, exposed to the Martian night, nearly dashed to death by a giant bat, strafed by a Marsville jet, and clubbed in the head with a rock—all in the space of a day. What more could he expect from an initiation? A flogging? Dancing on live coals?

He snorted at the girl and spoke to the priest: "It would please me to serve Menbana," he said.

The girl's glance turned to scorn, but the elder smiled and stood up, indicating that the interview was at an end. The three old men started from the balcony, but the girl called out in the androon tongue, addressing the old one as H'nrin. H'nrin turned to frown, and glanced from the girl to the Earthman.

He answered in Earthtongue, but addressed the girl: "I don't know, Krasala. You seem too new to the Sacred Order to make such a request. Your sisters would resent it."

She reddened, apparently because Rolf was being admitted to the conversation via his own language. But she replied in kind: "What is better, High Sir: He son of Yason. I best maid of you daughter, before she keel. I lead warriors who capture him. Is fair...."

"But it was only five passages of Phobos since you were admitted to the order of Menbana."

"An I got no acolyte yet."

The priest sighed. "Very well, I'll speak to your superior. But you'll have to perform his initiation service. Are you prepared for it?"

The girl bowed slightly. "I have study under Na'Riga."

"All right, Krasala, you may have him. Take these two guards to assist you until the initiation." He paused, then spoke briefly to the warriors in the native tongue. They murmured assent.

THE THREE priests departed from the balcony. Rolf glanced at Krasala in irritation, thinking that she might prove to be a haughty little minx of an overseer. But at least she had known his father, as Saralesara's maid, and she might be more kindly disposed toward him than some other female. And, despite the natural boots of silky brown fur, she was a nice-looking morsel of androon.

They returned by the way they had come—across the massive room with a fountain and toward the

corridor of polished stone. He watched Krasala striding on ahead and he decided petulantly that she wasn't his type. He had always favored the short, pleasingly plump and jolly. While Krasala walked with the too-easy grace of a Commissioner's wife. Her waist was pinched, and her back was straight. She was full-hipped and ample-breasted, but there was nothing softly feminine about her. Or at least nothing *soft*. She was feminine like a female panther, he thought. And he began to feel some misgivings. Maybe he should have volunteered for the soldiery and carried a bone club.

They moved halfway down the corridor, turned left and walked a hundred paces down another. Rolf decided that there must be a network of tunnels beneath the mountains, possibly connecting a group of "community centers" like this one.

Krasala stopped before a large door, unbolted it, and gestured for him to enter. He stepped into a small windowless cell lighted only by a single splotch of phosphor on the ceiling. Its only furnishings were a hammock, a large block of stone for a table, and a small one for a chair. He shook Doc awake and set him on the floor. The bat squeaked resentfully.

"You stay here till 'nishiatiion," she told him curtly.

Rolf stretched out gratefully in the hammock and gingerly felt his scalp wound. Krasala was still watching him from the doorway.

"You wait," she said. "I get water to wash and bring food."

"Thanks," he grunted. "Bring something for my pet, will you."

She nodded and went away. A few minutes later she returned with a bowl of meat, a bottle of water, and a dripping slab of pickled quoe. The bat shared the meat with relish, although Rolf guessed the little beast was eating his own kind. He sat at the table hungrily wolfing the food while Kragala bathed the blood out of his hair.

"Is shame you sucha beeg fool," she told him scornfully.

"What do you mean?"

"Is better you should have been soldier-warrior. You don't like 'nishiatiion."

"I guess I can take it as well as the next guy. What is it, anyway?"

He felt her shrug indifferently. "Is to make you acolyte of Menbana. Is much pain. Oh well, after it over you won't care anymore. You won't care bout mucha anything."

Rolf stiffened uneasily. "What constitutes the initiation?"

"Hah?"

"What're you going to do to me?"

"Is simple. Guards tie you up to wall." She gestured toward a steel ring imbedded in the stone near the ceiling. "Guards go away. Is not permitted to see. I bring little altar, build fire, heat iron to red glow. I say prayer, concentrate you to Menbana. Is simple."

"Consecrate. What do you do with the hot iron?"

"Consecrate you wid it. Menbana don't like his acolytes should fall love wid his priestesses. I fix it so you don't. You don't love anybody after—"

THE HAIR on Rolf's neck turned to wire. He choked on a mouthful of batmeat, spat it across the room and bounded to his feet. "*You do like hell fix it!*" he bellowed six inches from her ear. He grabbed for her with violent intent, but she bounded away like a startled bat. She sailed through the door on overdrive, slammed it in his face and bolted it.

Then she peered back through the peep-hole, white-faced and panting. "Was you idea," she reminded him. He beat against the door and cursed eloquently. Her eyes were wide with bewilderment.

"You want change your mind?"

"You're damned right I do! Why didn't somebody tell me!"

"Is not correct high priest should speak such things. I shake my head, but you don't pay tenshun. You want me to speak to H'nrin for you?"

He choked out an affirmative and a gasping insult.

"I speak, but H'nrin not like." She scurried away as he tried to get at her through the peep-hole.

Rolf paced his cell in rage, and the bat-pup retreated to a far corner, sensing his anger. He cursed

himself for not guessing the nature of the initiation. Primitive religions were full of eunuch-acolytes. And the high priest had dropped a hint of sorts.

He searched through the pockets of his torn clothing. His pistol was either lost or taken from him, but he still had his pocket knife and fifty rounds of ammunition. His captors had not worked out the folding feature of the blade, and the cartridges would be meaningless to them, unrecognizable as weapons. He could never hope to escape alive, but at least they'd have to kill him before perpetrating such an initiation.

Glowering within himself, he waited for Krasala to return. Surely she could make H'nrin realize that he hadn't known what awaited him in the service of the bat-god. This was worse than being sacrificed in vengeance for Saralesara's murder at the hands of the Commission's guards. This was an assault against his dignity as a man. Raw savagery! He stalked about the cell with growing resolve to kill as many as possible before they clubbed him down.

Agas later, Krasala peered at him through the peephole again. They stared at each other in silence for a moment.

"Well?"

"He say he already speak to high priestess. She enter you name. He say you get use to it afta while."

"You'll have to kill me first," Rolf roared. "You're a damn bunch of barbarous beasts. Savages! Whatever made me think you're human!"

She watched him calmly, feeling the safety of the door between them. "Savage? Like you father say, 'Are nine-an-sixty ways uv construction tribal laws, an—"

She bolted away from the door as he reached for the peep-hole with a snarl. Then he heard her footsteps padding away in the corridor.

AFTER MORE floor-pacing, he sat down to damn himself thoroughly. His anger had cost him his only hope. He thought of it belatedly. He might have gotten out of it by making love to the young priestess, much as he disliked the idea. But now his rage had ruined any possibility along those lines. Surely she wouldn't come back—until she brought the small altar and a hot poker.

He sat at the table and began prying slugs out of the cartridges and emptying the powder into the metal-foil wrapper from a candy bar. When he finished, he had what seemed to be half a pound of high explosive. Then he tried to decide the most effective way to use it.

The hinges were on the other side of the door and there was no keyhole. He might try wedging it under the sill, but he was uncertain that the amount of explosive was enough to blast it off. And also uncertain that it was not too much. He could wait until they came and touch it off in their midst, but he needed a tight-walled container to get a decent explosion out of it. And the cell was small enough to insure his own death if he managed to detonate the others. He laid it aside and pushed the problem to the back of his mental stove to simmer while he made a thorough examination of his cell.

There was a ring in the floor directly below the one in the wall. He could feel himself dangling there, lashed by hands and feet while Krasala did hot tricks with the poker. He shuddered and turned away. There were a few sifts of ashes on the floor where the altar had been placed previously. How many men had entered the cell, to leave it again as something less than men? He wondered if Krasala had already participated in any such savageries. But H'nrin had said she hadn't been a priestess for long. And she had tried to warn him. Maybe she was a nice kid—within the limitations of her society.

Surprisingly, she brought his next meal. She entered warily behind a pair of burly guards, deposited the food on the table and tossed a cloth bundle in his hammock. "You ceremony robe. Pud it on," she told him.

He fashioned a curse, but left it unspoken. She started out of the cell.

"Wait a minute," he muttered, fingering the knife in his pocket. "Tell me about this thing. What happens."

"I tell you awready. Pretty soon I show you."

He saw with amazement that she was pouting. Primitive psychology, he grunted to himself. The executioner gets his feelings hurt because the condemned man says an unkind word. The executioner

calls him an ingrate for squirming when the axe falls.

Rolf forced a sweet smile. "Don't go away yet. There's nobody else I can talk to. Can't we discuss this thing logically?"

"Ha!" she snorted. "You think you grab me. Choke me, mebbe. Like you try to do before. Hah-uh!"

SHE SHOOK her head knowingly and her eyes were wary. She glanced at the guards to make certain they were alert by her side.

"I won't touch you," he assured her. "I lost my temper a while ago. But I know you can't help what you have to do. Just sit down and talk a while."

She stood her ground. "What you wanna talk about?"

He winked at her solemnly, remembering that she had done it in the council meeting. "Who knows? I may never enjoy the company of a pretty girl again."

Primitive minds flattered easily, he noticed. She reddened, let a smile flicker, then erased it and looked unhappy. She immediately perched on the corner of the table and said, "We talk."

Conceited little savage, he thought angrily, but kept a wistful smile in place. "The guards," he murmured miserably. "Do they have to stand there staring that way?"

She stiffened suspiciously, watched his bland gaze for a moment, then began to relax. "You promise?"

"I promise."

She snapped an order at the guards, and they moved out into the corridor. "They come kill you if you don't behave," she told him calmly.

He put on a wounded expression which she noted with another smile. She sat dangling furry shins over the edge of the stone table and watching him curiously. He guessed her age at eighteen, an age which could be both cruel and sentimental. He let his eyes wander over her young figure in a casual but interested way.

"The last time," he muttered dolefully. "I guess I won't forget."

He could see her wince, but he knew very well that if he had been looking at some other wench she would have treated the self-pitying statement with merciless sarcasm or icy indifference.

"Tell me," he said, "can you ever marry while in the service of Menbana?"

"Of course not. Menbana is a jealous god."

"It's a pity, but I'm glad. If I'm to be your acolyte, then at least I'll be satisfied that someone else can't... well ...can't have you..."

He paused to let it take a set before he continued. She sniffed unconvincingly and tossed her head, but she appeared disturbed. He felt himself treading the borderline of ridiculousness. Was he laying it on too thick? But it had to be a swift frontal assault before she got her wind.

He continued in a bitter voice: "...but I guess it won't matter, will it? I won't be able to care. You'll just be a piece of furniture, like this table. It's like H'nrin said, the acolytes aren't able to enjoy much of anything...not even looking at such a one as you."

She whirled to stare at him. He weighed her expression and decided that it was born of complete confusion. If he didn't act quickly, she might defend herself against the confusion by waxing suddenly derisive. He leaned forward slowly, keeping his eyes on hers, and making no sudden moves to startle her. Gradually he came to his feet and touched her bare arm with his fingertips. Absorbed in his unexpected display, she swayed lightly against the hand. But he knew that in a moment she would react strongly against her brief weakness. He inched nearer, murmuring half-incomprehensible things to her eyes. In his other hand was the pocketknife. Soon, his face was a breath away from hers, and she was still watching the slow whisper of his lips. He slipped his arms around behind her, aiming the knife for her ribs.

SUDDENLY SHE kissed him, to his surprise and dismay. She stood up, wound her arms around his neck, and did it again. He toyed for an instant with the idea of switching back to a former plan, but decided he couldn't trust her. He'd have to go on with what he had intended.

"Send the guards away," he whispered.

"They can't see inside," she breathed, fawning his mouth with her lips.

He pressed the point of the knife against her back. "Send the guards away," he repeated.

She caught a small breath of surprise and became rigid as a board, staring at him but saying nothing.

"I'm sorry, kid," he whispered again. "You're probably a nice sort, in your own way. But damned if I'll let you butcher me, even if your tribe tells you that it's really all the rage this season, and your gods approve it. Now, send the guards away. I won't hurt you if you behave. If you don't, I'll kill you."

She was still staring at him in bewilderment. He caught her shoulder and moved around behind her. He sat on the table and pulled her back against him with the knife against her kidney. "Tell the guards to take a walk," he hissed, giving her a light jab.

She hesitated, then called out in a calm voice in the androon tongue. There was an unhurried shuffling of feet in the hallway. Then, to Rolf's dismay, the bolt snapped and the guards entered. They stopped in the doorway, staring at the close positioning of the priestess and the prisoner. One of them asked a quick question. She shook her head and answered with a monosyllable. Obviously they were unaware that he had a knife against her back. She began to pull away from him. Rolf saw despairingly that he must either kill her or let her go.

Suddenly she wrenched free, and he concealed the knife quickly. The guards started forward, but she waved them back with a scornful snort. She turned in the doorway, and glanced back coolly.

"Are more than nine and sixty," she said. "Put on the ceremony cloak. I be back soon. You eat now."

They left his cell and the bolt clicked in place. He stared after her for a moment. Why hadn't he killed the treacherous wench? But then, he was no match for two burly guards. He might as well concentrate on working an effective explosive out of the gunpowder. He sat down at the table and unrolled the package.

*Why had she left him the knife?* Why hadn't she warned the guards of what was happening?

He shrugged. What difference did it make? He spread the metal foil out smoothly, then covered it with a thick layer of powder and rolled it into a cylinder. He crimped one end tightly, and twisted the other out into a fuse. A thick yellow suet was congealing atop his cooling dish of meat. He covered the foil cylinder with the grease, then rolled it in a scrap of paper from his pocket. He sliced half a dozen of the soft lead slugs into thin slivers, and stuck them to the cylinder with more suet. After another wrapping of paper, he laid the crude grenade aside to set while he ate some of the meat. It had a peculiar taste, he thought, but blamed it on his nervousness.

WHEN THEY entered the cell, he intended to light the grenade and toss it, then make a dash during the confusion. He wondered if the clumsy contraption would explode at all, and he doubted seriously that it would inflict any grave injuries. But if it even made a bright flare and a hiss, it might divert the guards' attention for an instant.

He yawned suddenly and stretched. It was a helluva time to get sleepy. He stood up and walked around the table, lurching against it slightly. The metallic after-taste of the meat still lingered in his mouth. He was staggering a little as he sat down again.

Drugs! The meat...they were insuring his peaceful behaviour. He fumbled in his pockets, searching for a match. A match...to light the powder. Weren't there footsteps in the hallway...and voices? The pockets were hard to find among all the folds of cloth. He pawed at them, then decided he'd lost his matches. He wobbled dangerously.

They were just outside the door, and the bolt snapped suddenly. What to do with the grenade? They'd have him in the silly ceremonial robe in a few minutes. Pockets were no good. Where?

He crammed the eggsized object in his mouth as they entered, then collapsed across the stone table, thinking, "Maybe she'll light it for me with her poker."

He was hanging by his wrists, and he couldn't let go. He tried to open his eyes, but they wandered and fogged. At last he managed it, but he saw through a mist of sleep. The girl—Krasala—she was standing before a tongue of blue flame that arose from a gleaming brazier. Her arms were outstretched,

and she chanted a polytonal litany to the fire wherein lay a blunt knife of reddening steel.

The pain in his shoulders kept him half awake and he resented it. Why the hell was he dressed in the silly blue nightshirt? Something in his mouth—oh, the grenade! He was supposed to spit it in the brazier. He worked it to between his front teeth, and tried to keep his head straight. The brazier was large enough, and close enough, but he was so unsteady.

The girl lifted the hot iron and turned. She saw his eyes were open, and gazed at him steadily. He summoned energy to spit the explosive, but she spoke to him, stepping closer.

"Scream, Rolf Kenlan," she whispered. "Scream convincingly."

How could he scream with the grenade in his mouth? No, he wouldn't scream. He'd spit death in the pot.

"Scream!" she commanded irritably, and touched his thigh with the hot iron. It sizzled and fried for an instant, and Rolf screamed fervently. The grenade shot toward the altar, missed the brazier, and rolled aside.

"Keep screaming," she told him, folding her arms and stepping back a pace.

He howled with real artistry. He eyed the hot iron and shrieked for mercy. She winked at him and nodded.

"We gotta get the right smell, too," she said, and prodded the iron into what was left of the dish of meat. The cell filled with the odor of burned flesh.

"Hokay, you faint now."

She chanted again briefly, then burned the thongs that bound him to the steel rings. He crumpled weakly to the floor. She tugged at his arm and helped him into the hammock.

"You sleep."

THE CELL door opened. An elderly hag entered with a pair of guards, looked around, and nodded. She spoke briefly to Krasala and seemed satisfied by the answer. They cleaned up the mess, and just before they left, Rolf saw the hag pick up the grenade, look at it curiously, and toss it in the brazier. They started down the corridor.

"Krasala! Wait!" he muttered.

She paused in the doorway while the others moved on ahead.

"Yes? Whatchoo want?"

There was a muffled roar from the hallway, followed by several shrieks.

"Nothing," he murmured. "Never mind."

He rolled over and went to sleep peacefully, after making certain that he was still anatomically intact.

When he awoke, the girl was sitting in his cell watching him with a placid green-eyed gaze.

"You sleep two days," she told him. He rolled over and sat up, shaking the fuzz from his mind.

She narrowed her eyes and gazed at him accusingly. "Firepot blow up and blast off high priestess' hands. Burn off all her hair. She might die. Whatchoo know about?"

He shrugged innocently. "It's too bad. What should I know about it?"

"I dunno. Never happen before. I think you magic."

"Anybody else think so?"

"High priestess does. Council don't believe."

"The will of Menbana," he told her. "Thanks for leaving me in one piece."

She snorted angrily. "You beeg fool. Why you think I ask H'nrin for you in first place? He might give you to somebody who really do it."

Rolf began to see the light. "Do most of them do it or not?"

"Is supposed to. Old ugly ones do. Others don't." She walked to the door and swung it open. "You free to go now, when you feel like. But you supposed to be sick a few days."

Rolf nodded and decided to be properly sick. He wanted no repetition of the initiating procedure.

He lay in his cell for a time, making plans for the future. His father's goal had been to convince the people of Marsville that the androons were human and not unfriendly, that there were no threats lurking in the mountains to prevent a free expansion and colonization. Contrary beliefs held the people imprisoned in the city and under the thumb of the Commission.

Rolf now thought he knew why the Commission imposed the rigid segregation and insisted upon the androons' inhumanity. The colonization of Mars was to be a controlled colonization, not a free one. The people of Marsville, if given their liberty to roam forth, would shed the shackles of the tightly integrated city, and build homes for themselves in the hills and valleys where they would be free to live as their ancestors had done on the last frontiers of Earth. Growing room always gave men freedom, but it also denied the hope for a closely knit industrial civilization, which was Earth's hope for Mars. A man would not work in a crowded factory if he could own a thousand acres of land, rule his family clan, and be free of outside interference. He turned to the specialized bee-hive society of industrial civilization only when the population-density became so high as to void the hope of living free on the land.

ANOTHER FACTOR might be the fact that there were thousands of androons on Mars for every Earthman. Earth culture could easily be swallowed up by sheer weight of numbers, by intermingling and intermarriage—if such intermingling ever occurred. Rolf doubted that it would. The androons stuck close to their caverns, their traditional home. Even since the Dawson-Heide Operation Icecap had made the surface conditions endurable, the androons had kept to their underground habitation, because the caverns had always been their world. Probably, after many more generations, they would gradually seep forth to live upon the surface, but it would be a slow process. And when the Earthlings settled, they would settle on the surface. There would be some intermingling, but not enough to destroy the cultural traditions of the settlers.

Rolf envisioned the consequences of the Commission's probable plan. They would allow Marsville to expand very slowly, keeping the tight industrial organization and the concentrated population, with its consequent regimentation of the citizenry. The smoking industrial monster would spread gradually across the plain until it became the manufacturing belt of a nation, still dependent upon its hydroponic tanks for food, and upon the factories for all of its needs. The Commission, which was Earth-appointed and subject to recall, meant to keep close supervision of the industrial production, the culture, and the very lives of the people, to insure that they remained loyal and useful vassals of Earth.

Rolf asked himself how a Martian civilization could be useful to the mother planet, when space freighting was so difficult that the Commission could not afford to replenish Marsville with the fruits of Earth industry. Marsville had to take care of itself. But then it struck him that space freighting would not be so difficult in reverse. A ship needed less fuel to escape Martian gravity with full load. And the twin moons made good stockpiling points for cargo. Even combustion rockets could run ferry service between Mars and her satellites, where nuclear-powered ships could await conjunction of the planets. A good healthy boot kick would be nearly enough to get a ship off Phobos or Deimos, and even the sun's gravity would aid the flight of the freighter bearing Martian steel earthward. On the return trip, the freighter would be empty—or loaded with chewing gum, maybe.

Was the Commission aiming to make a slave planet out of Mars? A working planet that labored while Earth played?

And how would the androons figure in such a plan? There was only one possible answer. An industrial feudalism in which the androons were at the bottom rung of the ladder. Empires had always kept their colonial slaves happy by letting the slaves have lesser slaves to serve them. Even now there was grumbling talk in the city: "Why don't we go out and round up a bunch of andies to do some of this dirty work?"

And the Commission did nothing to discourage such talk, although they politely refused. Their attitude was, "Wait awhile. Not yet." But some day they would graciously assent. That day would be when Earth started bleeding Mars of her resources.

IN A FEW more generations, the Commission would succeed in culturally conditioning the Marsville

citizenry to such an extent that they would regard themselves as rulers by divine right over Mars, the androons as their natural slaves, and Earth as their rightful king. Then there would be no hope for a free society on Mars. Hope for such had passed on Earth long ago. It passed when the population exceeded three billion or thereabouts. Freedom was inversely proportional to man-density per square mile.

Rolf was not thinking of these things for the first time. Snatches of such ideas had come to him before and, indeed, he had discussed them casually and quietly with other citizens of the city. Such talk was considered unpatriotic, but it was something like griping about dirty politics or congressional stupidity. Nobody bothered to do anything about it.

But now that the Commission had killed his father and his brother, Rolf felt differently toward it. The Commission was his personal enemy now, and he saw Jason and Lennie as sacrifices to its ambitions for empire.. The city was the mother that had nursed him from birth, and he loved the city. But the Commission ruled her cruelly, and he could never see her again unless the Commission's power were destroyed.

So? What could he do about it? He would have a hard time getting much effective aid from the superstitious androons.

On the third day after his initiation, H'nrin and the other two council members came to Rolf's quarters. The oldsters' faces were grim with solemn anger, and they wasted little time for ceremony.

"Perhaps you can tell us," H'nrin said acidly, "why a party from your city entered our caves, killed three bat-hunters, captured four warriors and two women, and carried them away in mechanical bats. Phantom is becoming very thirsty indeed."

Rolf gasped. "When did this happen?"

"This very morning."

"How close did they come to the living quarters here?"

"A thousand paces, perhaps. What difference does it make?"

"A lot, maybe. The city's rulers know you live underground, but they've never explored these places. They probably don't really know what's down here. It might be dangerous for you if they did know."

"Why?"

"There seems to be some valuable machinery here. They might decide to take it off your hands."

H'nrin stiffened visibly. "The creations of the Bolsewi are holy. Some of them are even gods. We will guard them with our lives." He paused, then relaxed slightly. "But surely the captives won't tell."

"They will when the Commission police get through with them. Dad probably told them anyway, come to think of it." He hesitated. "Maybe that's it. Maybe they're afraid I'll teach you how to use the Bolsewi machinery."

H'nrin recoiled at the thought of such sacrilege. "We must not touch the articles of the gods."

"Yeah? Well, they don't know that. I can guess what their plans are if you'll show me everything that Dad saw while he was down here. I want to know how much they learned from him."

H'NRIN DEMURRED at first, then submitted reluctantly when Rolf hinted direly of things that the Commission might do.

"You should see first the temple of Menbana, where you will serve as acolyte. I will have your priestess conduct you there." He paused, eyeing Rolf suspiciously. "I've heard rumors about your initiation ...certain irregularities. And now I think I'm inclined to believe them. You don't seem to be grieving particularly for your lost manhood."

Rolf paled. "I am, I assure you!"

"Baloney—as your father used to say. However, it's not my business. You're now the property of the Order of Menbana, which is autonomous in such matters. If they choose to wink at their own code, I shan't interfere."

"Thank you," said Rolf.

"One thing, however. If the high priestess manages to convince me that you were responsible for the fire-pot's behavior, I'll have you flayed."

Rolf thanked him again. He was sorry that the old hag had gotten her just deserts, but he didn't feel



responsible. The initiation was a crime against sanity and human reason, and if she got her hand blown off while supervising its perpetration, then it was probably the will of some god or other—maybe even Menbana.

Krasala brought him another nightshirt—a white one this time—and briefed him on temple ritual. He was to enter the temple with a dragging pace, just behind Krasala, and his only duty was to keep the tips of her artificial bat-wings from dragging the floor. They would advance to kiss the great toe of the high priestess who sat upon the wing of Menbana.

"The same high priestess?" he asked anxiously.

"No. She's still fighting the devil that entered her arm. They say she'll retire. There's a new one now."

"Good," he grunted as they went out into the corridor. "Say, your Earthtongue is improving."

"It's come back. Long time since I talk it with Saralesara. Now you get in back of me. Is not right for acolyte to walk beside priestess."

They passed across the fountain room and entered one of the many corridors which led away from it. The temple lay at its end, but a draped doorway hid it from view. Krasala left him in the corridor and stepped into an anteroom to vest.

When she came out, smiling faintly and self consciously, he closed his eyes and shook his head. Now he knew why the acolytes were eunuchs. Her vestments consisted of a pair of batwings and a gauze kerchief. His confusion brought back her pout. She tossed her head and flicked the kerchief under his nose. "Follow me, acolyte. Lift my wings."

AT LEAST there was a certain amount of modesty in her noble walk, he thought as he followed her into the House of Menbana, holding the tips of the wings delicately as he had been instructed to do.

The temple was gloomy, pierced by the flickering tongues of yellow fat-burners and hazed by their smoke. The room was gigantic and appeared ceilingless. Rolf peered about him hurriedly trying to digest all that he saw—the stately processions of bat-winged priestesses, followed by their submissive acolytes, the side-altars along the walls. He noticed that many of the acolytes were plump and dull-eyed creatures, while others followed their mistresses with a not-so-humble stride that suggested the continued influence of testosterone. Rolf grinned to himself; there seemed to be a certain correlation between the shapeliness of the priestess and the masculinity of her acolyte.

"Stop crowding me!" Krasala hissed. "Sorry."

For the first time, he searched the room for the focus of activity. It lay directly ahead. The high priestess, a middle-aged but not unshapely androon, sat between a pair of sputtering fat-burners. She wore a bat's head as well as wings. Rolf strained his eyes in the gloomy light. Then he stopped in stunned unbelief, dropping Krasala's wingtips.

Menbana, bat-deity, and god of knowledge, was an ancient, mouldering, stub-winged rocket craft, obviously meant for transatmospheric service. The androons had lovingly given it a bat-skin hide, stitched over it like a jacket, but the landing gear and the jet tubes were still in evidence. He guessed by its design that it had not been used for interplanetary rocketing, but rather perhaps for moon flight.

Krasala was shaking his arm in rage and muttering about blasphemy. Rolf resumed his duty in awed silence. Such grandiose stupidity was awe-inspiring. The man who suggested the experiment with the monkeys in a roomful of typewriters probably hadn't considered the possibility that the anthropoids might start worshipping the machines.

They advanced toward the ship, where the high priestess perched on a wingtip. Krasala knelt to kiss the superior's horny toe, and Rolf felt himself being inspected by the eyes that lay behind the unblinking bat's head. The seeress was bulgy in spots, with a middle-age sag, but she might have been a beauty in her day. She said nothing and they moved to take their place in line but, glancing over his shoulder, Rolf saw the bat's head turn to stare after them.

The lesser priestesses formed a long line facing Menbana, while their acolytes stood silently behind them. They began a monotonous chant, while the high priestess slipped down from her wing tip to begin the sacrifice. She accepted a thurible from a burly acolyte, then leaned close to whisper something to him. His eyes swept along the rank of priestesses; then he hurried away. The high priestess incensed Menbana

with the .thurible. A portable altar was brought forward, and she began a ritual offering of food.

ROLF FELT someone nudging his elbow. He glanced around and saw the burly acolyte who had whispered with the high priestess. The man touched his fingers to his lips for silence. He was accompanied by a short pudgy eunuch who wheezed and looked frightened. The burly man took Krasala's wingtips away from Rolf and gave them to the eunuch. Rolf was pushed roughly aside.

"What's the idea?"

"Shhhh!"

The burly acolyte took his arm and tugged him quickly away. Krasala seemed unaware of the change in her escort. Rolf judged the size of the acolyte and decided to follow peacefully. He was led to a small phosphor-lighted anteroom behind a row of columns.

"You wait. Lalyahe come," grunted the acolyte.

"Who's Lalyahe?"

The acolyte nodded gravely. "You wait. Lalyahe come."

"Your mother was a mangy bat," said Rolf.

The acolyte nodded gravely again. "You wait. Lalyahe come," he repeated, proving the extent of his vocabulary. He left the room, leaving the door ajar.

Rolf sat on a stone pedestal and listened to the chanting in the temple. He was certain that Lalyahe was the high priestess, but the open door suggested that her intentions were not unfriendly.

The temple had evidently been some sort of hangar at one time, and the lack of a visible ceiling suggested that it had opened to the surface in ages past. Or perhaps, far up in the darkness, there were swinging hatchways that opened it to the sky.

He glanced around the anteroom curiously. There was a table altar at one wall, and above the altar were a pair of small doors. He tugged them open and found an array of small tools hung on steel pegs in the cabinet. Some of them were recognizable—a drill with a self-contained power unit of some sort, a group of oddly shaped wrenches, a device that had the appearance of a spray gun. They were fashioned of some rustless metal that gleamed dully in the dim light. He toyed with some of them, but the moving parts were frozen from lack of lubricant.

Glancing around the room again he saw other cabinets set in the walls. Making a complete inspection of them, he found parts bins, racks of bottles, and one of the bagpipe affairs that hung over the *cathedrae* of the council. He examined the last carefully. It consisted of a collapsible plastimetal tank, a long tube or barrel, a hand crank with a vernier slide geared to it, and a heavy steel breech that suggested high pressures. A pair of tiny rings atop the tube and at either end of it suggested gun-sights. He tried to turn the crank but the mechanism was frozen.

SEARCHING among the bottles he found several that still contained fluid. The one that opened most easily was a jellied lubricant. He used it to loosen the caps on some of the others. One liquid smelled vaguely like kerosene. He poured some of it in with the lubricant and stepped back. Nothing terrifying happened. He shook the bottle and the lubricant dissolved to make a thin oil. He used it to soak the breach and movable parts of the "bagpipe" until the crank came unfrozen. He worked at it until it turned freely.

Shaking the mechanism, he heard a sloshing sound in the collapsible tank. It was half full of liquid. He gave the crank a few turns and noticed that the tank began to expand. He kept twisting it until a pair of heavy lines met and became one on the vernier. The tank had grown plump and hard, the size of a basketball. He found a button on the breach, pointed the tube toward the wall, and fingered the button thoughtfully.

Then, as an afterthought, he found a length of heavy wire in a cabinet and prodded it into the barrel. It brought out gobs of fibrous dust. He soaked the barrel in oil and scraped out choking dust wads with the wire. When he had it clear, he again fingered the stud nervously.

Suddenly he was aware that the chanting had ceased in the temple. He glanced up just in time to see the door swing open and the high priestess appear in the entranceway. She froze at the sight, caught at the door jambs for support, and stared down at the blasphemy on the floor.

Rolf sat spraddlelegged in his "night-shirt" ceremonial robe amid a litter of bottles and tools. He returned her stare apprehensively. She ripped off the bat's head, letting a frowsy mop of gray-brown hair burst forth. She turned and shrieked a word into the temple. It could only have been a summons for the guards.

Rolf dived forward, caught her ankle and dragged her inside, kicking and clawing. The bolt was on the inside of the door. He slammed and locked it as a group of acolytes faced toward the anteroom. Then he tried to hold off the snarling fury of the high priestess. She raked at his arms with fingernails while he seized her throat and held her away. He pushed her roughly into a corner, tripped her, then pinned her against the wall with his foot when she fell.

"Be good, baby, or I'll kick you to sleep," he growled.

Gradually she subsided, panting and glaring at him.

"Now, send your flunkies away!" he told her, jerking his thumb at the door where the guards were battering against the bolt. He increased the pressure of his foot to speed her reaction.

She moaned and called out: "*W'nu poyit ya!*"

The battering ceased.

"Okay, what did you want to see me about?" he asked acidly. "Or do you speak Earthtongue?"

"Your father taught it to all our leaders," she replied, staring at the bag-pipe on the floor.

He picked it up. "You know what this is?"

"Holy symbol of Phanton, god of light, king of the gods. It is not to be touched by such as you—under penalty of death."

"Nobody but you has seen me with it. What did you call me here for?"

SHE WAS silent for a time, her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. She moistened her lips nervously, and kept glancing toward the door. She had a small sensual face, touched lightly by age and pleasurable living.

"You have much magic, don't you, Earthman?"

Rolf neglected to disagree with her.

"I called you here because your magic disposed of my rival. I wished to make you my acolyte." Her voice was slow and musing, and she glanced from Rolf to the bagpipe with a calculating expression. "Perhaps none of the others did *see* you with it, at that."

He grinned at her. "That's right. But what do you want with me as an acolyte? And if there's another induction ceremony involved, the answer's no."

She stiffened proudly. "It's not for you to refuse," she snapped. Then snorted scornfully: "You have already been consecrated to Menbana. That is enough. Tell me, are you a eunuch?"

"Why, of course!" he answered nervously.

"You lie! Ha! I have heard how this young wench Krasala is mooning over you. Would she fall in love with a eunuch? Let me tell you. There are two factions among us. One faction believes that it is enough if the acolytes are merely celibates—which is to say, eunuchs in spirit."

"Which party do you belong to?" She gave him a speculative head-to-toe glance which suggested that there might be a third faction which favored an altogether different course.

"Let it suffice to say that you will not need to endure reconsecration. I might manage to forget your blasphemy, if you will serve as my acolyte and teach me your magic."

They watched each other for a moment. Rolf was still fingering the Phanton gun. "Useful Magic will involve blasphemy," he told her. "You'll become a party to it."

She frowned haughtily. "As high priestess, I define what is blasphemy, in the temple of Menbana, at least."

He nodded. This could possibly be a useful alliance, although he suspected Lalyahe of some rather

high and shady ambitions. "Very well," he told her, "I'll serve as your acolyte. But we'll make a trade on this magic business."

"I make no bargains."

"I make no magic."

Her eyes flared haughtily for a moment, but she asked, "What do you want of me?"

"Your help in a rather hopeless cause—that of unseating the rulers of the surface city and breaking down the barriers that surround it."

SHE CAUGHT her breath, then smiled wickedly at him, sat down on the table altar and leaned her elbows on her knees to grin. "Ah! You wish to rule your city; I wish to rule mine. We should work well together, son of Kenlan. You are not the gentle man your father was. Tell me, would you like to be my lover as well as my acolyte?"

Rolf suppressed a shudder and stammered apologetically. She sighed and shrugged. "I thought not. Krasala has caught your eye. Well, your bare shins are rather repulsive anyway. But enough of that. Shall we work together for our purposes?"

"Maybe. I suggest we make some plans." He paused, listening to the mutter of voices beyond the door. "Send that rabble away and then we'll talk."

She hesitated, then nodded. "Get the holy articles out of sight. I'll open the door to reassure them. The sacrifice is over; it's time to clear the temple anyway."

Rolf quickly gathered up the scattered relics and returned them to their cabinets. But he propped the bagpipe in a corner, and stood in front of it for concealment. Lalyahe watched with mingled curiosity and superstitious nervousness. Then she unbolted the door and swung it ajar. The mutter arose to a babble. She barked several curt words, and the babble ceased. Rolf caught a glimpse of Krasala peering over the high priestess' shoulder, and he shivered at the murderous expression on her pretty face. Lalyahe spoke again, and the crowd began dispersing.

She closed the door, leaned against it, and smiled nastily at him. "I think I shall have your Krasala flogged. Did you see the way she glared at me?"

"You do and the deal's off."

"Don't you threaten me, acolyte!" she snapped, advancing to snap her fingers in his face.

Rolf grinned mockingly, but said nothing. He decided that it would be a bad day for the androon tribe if Lalythe ever got the power she desired. "She glared at his grin for a moment, then said, "Well! The priestesses have gone. Show me a demonstration of your magic."

Silently, he recovered the bagpipe and stepped to the door. The temple was empty, save for a pair of guards that flanked the entrance. "Send them away," he told her.

SHE PUSHED her way past him and shouted across the great room in a piercing voice that sent echoes reverberating from high above them. The guards departed silently. Rolf moved outside, carrying the bagpipe and the stiff wire. He removed a fat-burner from its tripod, dragged the tripod near a massive column that supported a balcony, and rested the bagpipe against it, aiming the muzzle toward the vault of darkness overhead. "Keep out of the way," he told her, as he stepped behind the column and straightened the wire into a prod.

"What will happen?" she asked nervously.

"I'm not sure," he grunted uneasily. Then he leaned around the column and pressed the button with the wire.

There was a brief high-pitched shriek and a burst of light. It was followed by a distant ping, a bright violet light that flooded the temple, and a continuous sizzle from above. The gun had fallen from the tripod. Rolf stepped out to recover it, and darted back just in time to escape a white-hot shower of sparks that danced downward and rolled about the main floor. Lalyahe was whimpering insanely. She crouched in the foetal position and hid her head in her arms.

Rolf glanced upward around the edge of the balcony and saw a ball of violet incandescence clinging to the underside of a metal ceiling a thousand feet above them. It burned out suddenly, but the immediate

vicinity lingered at white heat, dripping bits of liquid hell. By its light, he could see that the ceiling was braced with heavy struts that slanted down to the side-walls, where they appeared heavily anchored.

The racket had aroused the androoms in the caverns beyond, and he heard them racing toward the entrance. He kicked Lalyahe lightly in the hams and dragged her to her feet. She was still whimpering and glancing around with wild frightened eyes. He shook her.

"Brace up!" he growled. "It's over. All but the shouting. Now, get this straight. Your crowd is coming back. Tell them that Menbana has spoken, or something." He shook her again. "Listen to me!"

She nodded weakly. "I'm listening. But why should I tell them that?" "You want prestige, don't you? Tell them Menbana has spoken to you personally. And that you'll reveal his prophecy later."

Androoms were pouring into the temple and stopping to stare up at the distant ceiling, which had subsided to cherry red heat. Rolf pushed the high priestess out into the open, then darted back to the anteroom to conceal the weapon. Suddenly Lalyahe's fog-horn contralto was ringing out dramatically in the temple, and Rolf grinned to himself. The grasping witch was shivering in her fur boots, but she did a good job of rabble-rousing. The mob fell silent. She cried out several words of a ritual chant, and after a moment the crowd sang a brief responsory. She was quieting them with in impromptu service honoring Menbana, whose bat-fur jacket was smoldering impressively from the shower of sparks.

WHEN THE chanting was done, she spoke a few sonorous sentences, which were followed by the shuffling of many feet. Lalyahe returned to the anteroom. Some of her arrogant calm had returned, but she gazed at him in a new and fearful light.

"Was that sufficient magic for you?"

She nodded grudgingly. "A few more demonstrations like that and I shall be able to unseat the council, I think. But be careful you don't go too far." She glanced at the weapon in the corner. "This is not your magic. This is the magic of the Bolsewi."

"True. But I control it. Have any of you done that before?"

"No. It's not good to do so. When the Bolsewi went away, they instructed our ancestors to guard their possessions and worship them until the gods returned. It's not good to tamper this way."

Rolf decided her ambitions needed further whetting. "Baloney!" he snapped. "How many other tribes are there besides this one?"

She shook her head. "They are countless. It is said that there is no end to these caverns."

"All right! By controlling this magic, you can rule all the tribes. Why think of stopping with this one?"

She gnawed at her lower lip and stared speculatively at the bagpipe. "Why should you suggest this to me, son of Kenlan?"

"Because you can't do it without my help, and I want you to buy that help by helping me."

"I don't trust you."

"I don't trust you either, but it might be a good idea to start."

"What do you expect from me?" she asked suspiciously.

"Twenty-five bat-hunters who aren't eunuchs: Able-bodied men who will obey orders. And I want access to all the so-called holy articles in your jurisdiction."

"Why? Why do you want the men?"

"We'll need a small fighting force," he explained impatiently. "And twenty-five are few enough to attract little attention."

"Don't worry about that, Kenlan," she said. "Only priestesses and their acolytes may enter Menbana's temple. You won't be observed."

"Will you provide the men? And I'll need a translator, too."

She nodded. "I'll give you the men, but the translator ... none of the acolytes speaks Earthtongue. Krasala night..."

"No!" he snapped, remembering her furious expression outside the anteroom.

"Krasala might prove treacherous," Lalyahe finished haughtily.

"Think of anyone else?"

"My successor... But she couldn't be trusted either."

"Then you'll have to do until I learn your language."

Lalyahe's smile told him that it was exactly what she wanted. Rolf promised himself that he would pick up a working knowledge of the androon tongue as quickly as possible, for until then the high priestess would be in a favorable position for treachery.

"One more thing," he muttered. "I want living quarters in one of these temple anterooms. It might be better if I stay away from the council's jurisdiction as much as possible. They might get wind of something."

"Certainly. As my acolyte, you would arouse no suspicion by living in a special..." She paused and cocked one eyebrow. "You will share my quarters, in fact. That is permissible for eunuchs." She smirked nastily.

"The hell I will!"

"Then you may return to your former cell."

Rolf said nothing but decided to sleep on the floor in the main temple. He had a brief vision of Krasala wielding a bone club in the direction of his skull.

HOURS LATER, he met Lalyahe again in a larger room off the main floor. In compliance with his request, she had chosen the specified number of bat-hunters, and had assembled them outside. He gave her brief instructions before the hunters entered.

"Tell them that Menbana expressed his will at today's manifestation. Tell them he gave you special instructions which must be obeyed."

She eyed him curiously and with faint amusement, seeming to enjoy the intrigue. "What are the instructions that Menbana has given me?"

"That live bats are to be captured for his temple. Two or three dozen of them. Large ones, but not too old. Say Menbana will teach you how to tame them."

She frowned sharply. "Why, Kenlan? What good—"

"Never mind!" He smirked. "And tell them your new acolyte has been chosen to lead them. But swear them to complete secrecy. It'll be both our necks if the council hears of it. Now call the men in and make your speech."

Lalyahe's resentful glance told him that she was unaccustomed to taking orders. But she donned her bat's head, marched to the door, and barked a command. Twenty-five toughs filed silently in and sat spraddle-legged in a ring about the walls. Rolf had seen some of them during the sacrifice service, but now they were wearing bat-skin skirts and jackets in place of the robes, and they carried hunter's snares looped across their shoulders. He noticed with satisfaction that they were heavily muscled men, and fiercely bearded.

Lalyahe began speaking crisply, turning slowly to eye each man, and punctuating her speech with much posturing and arm-waving. While she spoke, Rolf noticed that one man was glaring directly at him and hardly listening to the priestess. The man looked familiar. After a time, he placed the fellow. It was the acolyte who had whispered with Lalyahe during the service, the one who had nudged Rolf out of line and brought the fat eunuch to replace him.

Rolf was startled by the realization that the man must have been Lalythe's acolyte before he had acquired the job. Someone certainly must have been fired to make room for him. Rolf was disturbed; the man might try to make trouble.

When the priestess finished speaking, Rolf murmured a question about the angry-looking hunter. She nodded. "He was my acolyte. Why?"

"We'd better make him an honorary something-or-other. He's got fire in his eye. Tell him Menbana designated him to lead the bat-snaring party. Tell him Menbana has promised him special rewards later. Tell him anything, but make him happy."

LALYAHE called the man aside and spoke to him in low tones. The man stood breathing heavily, swelled with self-righteous indignation, and firing angry glances at the interloper. But suddenly he broke into a wide grin and bowed humbly before Lalythe. When he returned to his place, he was still grinning

vacuously and licking his chops.

"What did you tell him?" Rolf asked suspiciously.

The priestess chuckled. "I told him Menbana had given him a special dispensation to have a mate. To have young Krasala, in fact."

Rolf felt himself going white. He turned away to keep from striking her. It was a deliberate cruelty, an act of sadism. But it could not be easily undone. He fumed in silence until Lalythe dismissed the men for the hunt. Then he turned on her in fury.

"Why did you do that?" he roared.

She inched away, but smiled mockingly. "To assure myself that you have no ambitions here among my tribe."

"It's a damn poor excuse and a lie!" he raged.

"What are you going to do about it?"

He sagged onto a pedestal and kicked angrily at the floor. There was nothing he could do about it. The ex-acolyte would reveal his good fortune to the others. And a god dare not go back on his word. He cursed the high priestess fervently.

"It's what you deserve for refusing to be my lover," she told him blandly.

Rolf vowed to himself that the burly huntsman-acolyte would meet with a serious accident if he tried to claim Krasala. But the settling of such accounts would have to wait. Rolf was uneasy since the Marsville guards raided the outer tunnels and kidnapped the party of androons. Something was afoot.

There was ample evidence here that what his father maintained was true. The tools and weapons of the Bolsewi were part of the evidence, and Rolf was certain that Jason had told the Commission about them. The Commission might have been willing to bide their time, but since they knew that he was taking refuge in the caverns, they would fear the weapons. Androon hands might learn to use them.

He realized gloomily that such fears were for the most part without foundation. There were probably not a dozen men in the whole tribe who were brave enough to touch one of the "symbols of Phantom". Bolsewi equipment among the androons was as mystifying as an electronic calculator would be to a tribe of Australian aborigines. They would need a grasp of basic principles, and an end to magical thinking. That would take generations. The best he could hope for would be to find a few neurotics among the acolytes of Menbana who would take a perverse delight in profaning the sacred.

WHILE THE hunting party was gone toward the cave entrances, he spent his time searching the temple's anterooms for more of the bagpipe guns. Those that appeared serviceable, he cleaned and oiled. But testing them would be disastrous to both the temple and the morale of the tribe. He hoped fervently that they would never be used.

Lalythe brought word that the council was demanding his presence. "Why?" he grunted.

"They didn't witness the Bolsewi magic you released. They don't believe the god has made himself known. They accuse you of trickery."

"Well, stop smirking about it," he snapped. "You're in it too. If they make trouble, you're as hot as I am! I can't see them. You'll have to worm out of it somehow. Think up a good ceremonial reason why I can't leave the temple for a few days."

"I suppose you could be fasting for five days. But if they insist, and I don't release you to them, they'll make trouble."

"What kind of trouble? They can't come in here, can they?"

"No unconsecrated male may enter, but they can send women."

"Stall them the best you can," he told her.

Some of the hunting party began returning with live bats. With their wings, feet, and jaws bound, and with their eyes tightly bandaged, the beasts scarcely struggled. Rolf had them stacked like a cord of wood in a dark corner of the temple.

The huntsmen brought word that a group of men from the city was camped a thousand paces from the mouths of the bat caves, and they reported a larger party was making its way across the plain. Rolf was disturbed. The Commission was striking sooner than he had expected.

He reasoned that the raiding party would consist entirely of officers from the Commission's elite guard—men who could be trusted to remain silent about what they found in the caves. Very probably the Commission would promise them a transfer to Earth when the job was done. Their immediate goals would be to capture him, to inspect the Bolsewi artifacts, and report the findings to the Commission. He had no doubt that the Commission would follow it up with a forced evacuation of the androoms from all caverns on the city-side of the mountains, and a permanent occupation of the caverns by Commission police, for the purpose of studying the Bolsewi civilization in the light of the Commission's master-plan for Mars.

Lalyahe came with more news of the council's suspicions. "They want to know why we collect the live bats. They're tired of hearing about 'the will of Menbana'. They don't believe it, and they say if you don't come out before three more eating times, they'll send in a party to arrest you."

Rolf hesitated. "If it comes to that, I'll parley with them just outside the temple." He grinned. "Accompanied by our two dozen bully-boys. By the way, are they all back from the hunt yet?"

She smiled knowingly. "All but one. P'yan, my former acolyte, lingers with his new mistress. It might interest you to know that she made no protest when I told her. In fact, I think she rather liked the idea. She called you some unpleasant names. Shall I list them for you?"

ROLF CONTROLLED an impulse to kick her, and kept his face expressionless. "Get P'yan in here with the others. We've got to hurry."

"Why? Suppose you explain what all this has to do with overthrowing the council, with making the temple of Menbana the center of authority. I trust you less and less, Kenlan. I'm thinking of letting the council have you."

"Fool!" he growled. "If those Earthmen get in here, there won't be any council to overthrow. They want to drive you out of here. They want your holy articles before you learn to use their magic."

She gathered a slow frown, then left him. He wondered if her tribal loyalty was stronger than her personal ambition. Probably, but he could not be certain.

Another factor bothered him. When the Commission police made their first move, the council would undoubtedly want to solve the problem by releasing him to them. The Commission would certainly demand his extradition before making a show of force. And H'nrin would offer him in the hope of appeasement.

After a brief inspection of the bound bats, Rolf sent a dozen acolytes to gather enough rawhide to make harnesses. He directed Lalyahe to assign several priestesses to the task of sewing weight-bags full of rocks, specifying that each should weigh as much as a heavy man. He put two acolytes to work trimming the tips off the bats' talons. Then, with the help of another, he dragged one quivering beast out of the heap and began fashioning a pair of rawhide leggings to fit tightly about the bat's wooly ankles. With loops laced through the leggings, he bound a two-foot length of bone between the bat's ankles, so that it could stand spraddle-legged but not walk. He slung another just below it for a seat, so that a man could sit on the lower rung and cling to the higher one for support.

His assistant, regarding the whole affair as purposeless sport, chuckled gleefully and chattered incomprehensible jokes in his own tongue. When they were finished with the seat, Rolf began a harness, using a whole bat-hide, with its natural holes for the wings. He laced it tightly under the beast's belly, and sewed a pair of rein-guide rings near the shoulders. Next came a hackamore with an extra loop beneath the lower jaw. Then he instructed the men to outfit the other bats similarly.

While they began work, Rolf tied a sack of rocks to the first bat's feet, tethered it at the end of a hundred-foot braided hide rope, and unbound its jaws and wings. With a shriek, it beat its way upward, reached the end of its tether, and began a mid-air battle with its cargo. The temple, half-full of working, idling, or praying androoms, paused to watch and murmur curiously. "

WHILE THE bat flailed angrily at the air, Rolf went to search the anterooms. He needed a number of light metal rods for use as chin-poles to guide the bat's heads vertically. But as he stepped into a gloomy corridor that paralleled one side of the temple, he saw a shadowy figure flit behind a column. He started



to pass on, then, thinking that H'nrin had perhaps sent an observer to watch the temple, he reached around the column, caught a slender arm, and dragged.

Krasala came lurching against him and snarling. She wore the secular bat-skins, not the wings of the temple. Nor was she carrying the ceremonial kerchief. He frowned at her suspiciously.

"Why are you hiding here?"

"I saw you coming!" she hissed contemptuously.

"Why aren't you in the temple?"

"Your love-one tell *me* to stay out. She say to keep house for P'yan. She say I no good as priestess. Is okay with me. I take P'yan, you take what P'yan leave. Is she old enough for you?"

Rolf shook her roughly. "You're crazy!" he snapped. "There isn't a damn thing between us except politics. Good Lord! And to think I wanted you myself for awhile! Well, I hope you enjoy married life with your P'yan. Me, I'll take an Earthgirl any day!"

He turned to stalk away, then paused. "I still want to know why you're hanging around here!" he growled.

"I woman. Is my right come in temple."

He grunted an oath, then moved on down the corridor and turned in at the first anteroom. After searching through most of the cabinets, shelves, and bins, he found a dozen aluminum tripods, half corroded but still useful. He removed their legs and began drilling holes in both ends of the rods.

A gasp from the doorway startled him. He glanced around to see Krasala again.

"You blasphemy!" she breathed.

He groaned disgustedly and waved her away. He'd heard enough of the word to last for the duration. "Then run get the guards and have them brain me," he growled.

She subsided gradually and watched him work. "Is true what you say?"

"About what?"

"About you and Lalyahe."

"It's true that it's not true. Now beat it. Go find your P'yan and play footsie or something."

"Then why Lalyahe say you her lover?"

"Because she's an evil old hag!" he roared. "Now beat it!"

She stared at the floor and dragged her toe in the dust. "Okay, I go, soon's I tell you why I hide."

"Do tell me," he sighed wearily.

"I hide from P'yan. He not find me yet."

He stiffened reflexively, dropped the rod, and almost grinned.

"I been to see council," she added.

His grin disappeared and he stood up to frown at her. "The council! Why?"

"Protest Lalyahe kick me out of temple. But they ask me questions about you. Say I should watch what goes on, and tell them."

He advanced menacingly. "What have you told them?"

She eyed him anxiously, but stood her ground. "I tell them you boss acolytes around, but they already know that. I don't tell them anything else."

HE PAUSED a moment to think. Lalyahe had cautioned the priestesses and their acolytes to silence, but H'nrin could easily slip some of his aides into their ranks. Nor could H'nrin be blamed for his caution and his suspicion. The old man wanted only to preserve the status quo in his realm, and he suspected that Rolf was disturbing it. The reports of the encampment of Earthmen by the cave's mouth probably helped to increase his anxiety.

"Listen," he said to Krasala. "When you go back to the council, tell them that I'm violating the temple, poking into the holy relics. Tell them that a group of priestesses are plotting to kill me. Will you do that?"

"Why? Is probably true."

"That they're plotting to kill me?" She nodded solemnly.

"Well, tell the council just that and nothing more."

"Why?"

"Because if they think a priestess group is after me, they might keep hands off and hope the job gets done without their help."

She said nothing, and resumed dragging her toe in the dust. He watched her for a moment, then returned to his drilling.

"You like Lalyahe a little maybe?" she asked without transition. "Maybe you learn to like."

He glanced up at her downcast face. Her dark brows were dragging low over her green eyes, and there was a hint of petulance about her mouth. Heavy locks of hair dangled about her cheeks as she toed the floor.

"How many times do I have to tell you?" he grumbled in a not unkindly tone.

She met his eyes suddenly, and after a moment exchanged sheepish grins. "Maybe we get away from here," she suggested. "Maybe we get to cave of another tribe."

"Who's we?" he asked in bewilderment.

"You me. Mebbe you don't want me to be you woman?"

Rolf thoughtfully drilled the last two holes. Then he nodded solemnly. "Sure. I want you. Yeah. I was sort of figuring on it before ...oh, well. Sure, I want you."

She beamed at him, then glanced up and down the corridor. "Then why we wait? Let's go!"

He gathered up the rods in his arms and moved to the door beside her. He couldn't possibly explain the full scope of what lay ahead. He looked down at her for a moment. "I've got a lot of things to do first, baby. It'd take as long to tell you about them as it would to make them happen. Can you just keep quiet and wait?"

"And watch you politix with Lalyahe?"

"Yeah, but not for long."

She wrestled with herself for a moment. "Okay, I trust."

He pushed her out into the corridor. "Go talk to the council now, kid. I'll see you later. And stay away from P'yan."

"You be careful," she warned as he moved away. "Is some would like to kill you all right."

THE BAT had settled to the floor, and crouched panting in exhaustion when he reentered the great room of the temple. Its eyes had remained bandaged during the ordeal. He left the bandage in place, but loosened the tether and prodded the beast's flank with a rod. It squeaked in fright and took wing again wearily, bearing its load of rocks. He watched it ascend in slow circles, avoiding the walls by some extra sense, possibly reflected sound. Soon it disappeared into the overhead darkness, no longer fighting its cargo.

He left it to fly freely while he carried the rods to the circle of workmen who were laboring over the harnesses. Lalyahe met him and frowned at the rods.

"The usual explanation?" she asked.

"Yeah." He glanced around at the harness makers. "They probably won't know where they came from. How many outfits are finished?"

"Three. But it's going faster now. I found some experienced garment-makers."

"Good. Have them rig out the bats and tether them until they're tired, as I did the first one."

He stacked the rods against the wall, sat down amid the scraps of leather to fashion a pair of toe-stirrups. When they were finished, he lashed them to one end of a rod and fitted them with thongs to be bow-knotted about the rider's ankles for easy loosening. The other end of the rod would be tied to the loop under the bat's lower jaw. He showed it to the harness makers and set some of them to work duplicating it.

The first bat was down again, crouched with folded wings and drooping head. Occasionally it shuffled about irritably, trying to clear its feet of the strange rigging. Rolf pitied the animal, but there was no time to waste in either gentle training or comfortable harnessing. He hoped simply that the beasts could be ridden without dashing the huntsmen against the rocks.

While the bat was resting, he slipped the loop about its jaws and had a helper wrestle with the creature's head while he bound the chin-pole to the hackamore. Eight men gripped its struggling wings

while he fitted the reins in place. They eased it up until its feet were off the floor, and another huntsman came in to grasp the legs while Rolf slipped beneath the furry belly and sat on the underslung swing. He pressed his toes into the stirrups while a hunter tied the ankle-thongs.

BUT THE perch was too precarious. He had a strip of belting brought forward and fastened in a loose loop between the bat's ankles, passing it behind his back as a safety-rest. He grinned nervously at the men who gripped the wings. All he needed now, he thought, was a twentieth-century ten-gallon hat. And an embalmer, maybe, if the blind-folded creature became panicky and flew into a wall. It seemed safer with the blind-fold, however; the bat might be less willful about resisting the tug of the reins.

"*Hyo!*" he barked, and waved the holders back. They released the struggling wings and ducked to safety.

Instead of bolting, the bat spread his wings high and sat down, pinning Rolf's legs beneath the feet-spreading bar. Mercifully the leggings were loose enough to prevent slippage, and the fracture of the rider's legs. The base of his spine ached from the jolt, and he cursed fluently as the beast's weight doubled him over. The huntsmen, who had ridden for sport with no gear other than wrist-straps, howled with glee.

Angrily, Rolf caught a double handful of bat-fur and jerked. With a squeak of dismay, the bat crouched lower, then sprang aloft. It immediately began swooping low over the heads of the assembly and fighting at the chin-stick. Rolf let his feet ride free with the beast's head at first, letting it resign itself to the new and unwanted object. Despite the blindfold, the bat banked sharply as it approached each wall, swinging its rider wide, then soaring back across the temple.

Still fighting the stick, it suddenly leaned back on its wings for a landing stall, perhaps meaning to fight it out with the stick on the ground. Rolf lurched dangerously forward. Clutching at the cross-piece, he stiffened his legs and jerked the bat's head down with the chin-stick. The bat shrieked and beat at the air with its giant wings, darting higher to escape the steady downward tug. Rolf kept some of his weight on the stick, and the bat circled higher. The lake of light around the temple receded beneath him.

When the beast flew toward a wall, Rolf kicked upward lightly on the stick and swung its head aside with the reins, thus anticipating its behaviour by a fraction of a second. He encountered a flurry of rage when the relative merits of right and left were in dispute, but after a dozen passes, the bat began to agree more frequently with the reins. The stick, however, remained a center of contention. A downward tug would produce a fight for altitude. An upward kick would bring a stall, but if the stick continued to press upward, the bat winged over, dived shallowly, and soared high again as soon as the sharp maneuver caused Rolf to lose the upward pressure.

After a few tries, he found that a gentle upward pressure, though insufficient to cause the bat to apply brakes, would bring a slow descent.

He was at least five hundred feet above the floor of the temple now, and the vertical shaft was widening considerably. Its shape and its method of bracing were engineering masterpieces, protecting the bottom against cave-ins. Evidently it had once served as a lift-way for huge ships—from the surface to the caverns of the Bolsewi.

SOARING HIGHER, he passed a ledge, visible only as a black up-shadow, encircling the walls. He guided the bat closer to it, and made a slow circle, peering into the gloom. He saw cave entrance, and looped back. No ...not a cave...a large entranceway, like an opening onto a freightdock. Perhaps it was, he thought. A rocket, Lowered into the shaft, would need a clear length of tunnel beneath it for blast-off.

Feeling the draft, or hearing the tunnel's echo-response, the weary bat settled toward it. Rolf started to wrench its head away, then decided to chance it. The entrance was wide enough to keep him from being dashed against the floor. He tugged the bat's head down to keep it from alighting on the ledge. Then, as it soared into the entranceway, he kicked up for a stall. The bat dropped quickly. As he struggled out from under its belly, he promised himself a padded seat for the future.

He caught the reins near the hackamore, then felt around for something to tie them to. After his eyes adjusted, a faint ceiling glow became apparent, a metal door handle ended his search, and he tethered the

winged animal securely. It folded its wings and stretched out on its belly with a blubbering squeak of relief.

Rolf waited, squinting and straining to accustom his eyes to the faint glow.

He was in what had apparently been a warehouse at one time. It was a huge empty vault, or nearly empty. He spied a motionless, shadowy hulk across the floor, and he moved cautiously toward it. It proved to be a heap of lightweight metallic boxes, shipping crates perhaps. He pried one of them open and found that it contained instruments, wrapped in thin plastic and packed in fibrous insulating material.

Another contained similarly protected machine-parts of strange design. He examined them briefly. The production methods that had fashioned them were obviously superior to anything that Marsville could manage. Machined surfaces in the form of hyperbolic paraboloids. A Moebius band whose uni-hedral side still bore faint marks of a cutting tool. Cutting a Moebius band on an earth-lathe would be an impossible feat, as far as Rolf knew.

He opened a third box that lay aside from the others, then drew back with a shudder. A white skull stared at him vacuously from atop a heap of ashes. Its needle-fangs were still intact in the slender jaw. Its tiny face was bat-like, but the braincase was larger than a man's. The remains of a Bolsewi! He sifted the ashes through his fingers. Evidently they cremated their dead, but left the head intact for religious reasons.

The boxes perhaps were part of a shipment which had never been made. But where had the Bolsewi gone? To another sun-system perhaps? Or had they become extinct, contrary to the androon legends?

But he had no time for idle speculations. A fluttering of bat's wings, and the excited shouts of other riders brought him back to the present. Other huntsmen were wrestling with their mounts in the vertical shaft. He moved back to the entrance and watched the darting shadows for a moment. The riders still regarded it as sport. He wondered how they would react when the Earth guards fired upon them.

THE BAT was still dozing by the entrance. He quietly slipped a loop over its body to bind its wings against a premature take-off. Then he struggled under the belly, released the loop, jerked a handful of fur, and burst forth into the shaft once more. He guided the beast downward.

Lalyahe met him as he alighted. Most of the harnesses were finished, and the acolytes had taken the bats aloft. "I have a plan," she said. "Let's lure the council's she-guards into the temple. Then you can swoop down to capture them from above."

"It's a good plan," he murmured diplomatically. "But perhaps we can frighten the council into submission without using force. Go tell them that the temple of Menbana will soon open its mouth to the sky. And clear everyone out of the temple."

She caught her breath and glanced up toward the darkness. "How can—"

"There's no time to explain. If you want to be the ruler of the tribe, you'd better hurry."

She nodded, and moved away. Rolf noticed a eunuch who had been standing near a column watching them impassively. When Lalyahe was gone, the eunuch approached him. He tossed his head toward the shadows beyond the columns and grunted. "Ea Krasala."

"Krasala? Is something wrong?" Rolf asked.

But the eunuch spoke no Earth-tongue. He gestured toward the shadows again and gave Rolf a slight push in that direction. Rolf obeyed nervously.

She was waiting for him behind a column, and her face was tense with worry. "The council! They are in session with the men who returned from your city!"

"You mean with some of my people?"

"No! With the ones your people kidnapped! Your people turn them loose. They bring a message for the council."

"A demand to turn me over to them?" he growled.

She nodded. "They say if you don't come out, they pour something in the caves that make everybody die that smell it."

"Gas! What did the council say?"

"They say you—" Her voice choked off as she stared across his shoulder. "P'yan!" she hissed, and

began backing away.

Rolf pivoted quickly. The thick-limbed bearded huntsman was standing a few feet away with folded arms, glaring at them suspiciously. He grunted, twirled his bone club for effect, and advanced on Krasala with a surly side-glance at Rolf. He growled at her in the androon tongue with a demanding note in his voice. She retreated with a snarl.

ROLF LET the burly acolyte step past him. Then he threw a hard fist to the base of P'yan's skull. The punch numbed his hand and sent thrills of pain up his forearm. The blow should have felled the huskiest rocket-tender. But P'yan only lurched forward slightly. He turned with a growl that arose to an enraged roar.

Rolf ducked as the huge club fanned air past his head. Then he darted in to inflict the greatest possible injury upon the most convenient and unethical regions of the giant's anatomy. His fists battered against hardwood and hairy granite. P'yan scorned defense. He caught the Earthman's shoulder in one hand and threw him sprawling to the floor. He pinned Rolf down with a heavy foot and lifted the club like an axe.

Krasala threw herself into the fray with the fury of a lynx, raking at the giant's eyes with her nails. Before P'yan shook her off, Rolf managed to get out his pocket knife. He sank the blade in P'yan's leg, and ripped a twelve-inch gash down the thigh. The huntsman howled, and sent the club downward in a wild blow. It shattered on the stone floor as Rolf rolled aside. Krasala huddled by a column, holding her face and moaning. P'yan had struck her with a furious back-hand.

In a rage, Rolf darted forward with the knife. But hands suddenly gripped his arms. A sea of shouting women engulfed the fighters; pressing them apart, and seizing Rolf with many hands. He was borne off his feet and rushed out into the temple proper. Squirming frantically, he tried to break free, but a chopping blow to his temple dazed him. They were carrying him toward the entranceway. A delegation sent by the council to capture him!

He cried out to Krasala: "The symbol of Phantom! Get it! Point it at the wall and press the stud!"

A hand was clapped over his mouth. He bit it savagely, and another blow struck his head. Through the tight crowd of bodies, he caught a glimpse of Krasala darting to the anteroom where the bagpipes lay in storage. He prayed that the urgency of the moment would help her overcome superstitious fear. P'yan was pursuing her at a limping trot, but his leg wound left a trail of red across the floor.

A few huntsmen-acolytes who had returned from their bat-flights bore down on the party of fighting women. Lalyahe shrieked orders for counterattack, but the eunuchs and priestesses only parted ranks before the tight phalanx of knife-and-club-armed raiding party. The huntsmen closed in with flailing clubs beating down several of the council's guard {uncertain text begins},.ept a - . {uncertain text ends} ring about their prisoner, and chopped their way steadily toward the entrance. They left a trail of bodies—dead, wounded, or unconscious—behind them, but they drove on without pause, occasionally battering down one of the small party of defenders.

Rolf saw himself being turned over to the Mars Commission guards and summarily shot. He pleaded with his captors. "They'll kill you or drive you out anyway!" he shouted above the roar. "You can't buy them off! Don't you understand? If it would save your hides, I'd give myself up! But it won't—"

The side of a fist bashed his face, and a squat, ugly she-guard growled for silence. He realized that they couldn't understand him.

A weird shriek filled the temple. It was followed by a rising tide of violet light. The raiding party paused a dozen yards from the entrance, muttering fearfully. Struggling to peer through the sea of heads, arms and shoulders, Rolf saw the growing orb of violet incandescence clinging to the stone wall a few feet above the floor toward the rear of the temple.

A WILD cry of fright went up from the crowd. There was a sudden surge toward the entrance. Rolf was released, but felt himself being carried along in the tide of escape. He let himself be borne to the entranceway where the stream of bodies narrowed. Then he tore free and began running along the wall, battering his way through the converging crowd. The fiery orb was blazing with sun-brilliance and spitting

bits of molten slag that rolled like gleaming marbles across the smooth floor. In a few moments, the entire herd of priestesses, acolytes, and raiders were surging in a tight sea about the doorway, leaving the rest of the temple barren, except for several tethered bats, P'yan, Krasala, and Lalyahe.

Glancing up, he saw the bat-riders who were still aloft. Their frightened mounts had retreated upward toward the top of the shaft, and without a doubt their riders were letting them have their way.

He hurried toward Krasala. She lay in a dead faint near the anteroom entrance. The bagpipe gun had fallen beside her. He dragged her to safety from the rolling bits of slag, then called out to Lalyahe, who crouched behind a column. She answered weakly, but refused to move. He caught up the bagpipe, twisted the crank, and aimed a shot at the wall just above the entranceway. The first inferno had burned itself out. But a new one blossomed with a shriek over the entrance. It would keep the raiders from reentering, although he doubted that they needed the warning. It would also keep the bat-flyers aloft, for he feared that if they descended they would flee the temple.

P'yan was moaning on the floor and holding his leg. An occasional bit of slag rolled through the puddle of blood that surrounded him. It hissed, sent up a cloud of steam, and lay darkened. Rolf approached the huntsman warily. The knife had severed an artery, and the giant was bleeding to death.

Rolf motioned for him to lie down. P'yan growled defiance and gestured threateningly. He tapped his chest arrogantly and grunted, "Moe Krasala!" Rolf knelt at a safe distance and indicated by sign that he wanted to apply a tourniquet to the leg.

"Moe Krasala!"

Rolf shook his head vehemently. Then he stabbed a finger at the giant, winked, and grunted, "Lalyahe. You can have Lalyahe. Do you understand? You ...toi...Lalyahe."

The effect was immediate. P'yan's eyes widened thoughtfully. He scratched his beard and glanced toward the pillar where the high priestess now stood watching them, but beyond earshot. Then he grinned and nodded. As a celibate acolyte, he wasn't particular. He just wanted a woman. Rolf crawled forward and fitted a rawhide tourniquet in place. Then he bound the wound with his undershirt. If crude androon medicine had saved the ex-priestess with the blown-off hand, it should be able to mend P'yan's leg, he reasoned.

P'yan butted heads with him in gesture of friendship, then staggered weakly to his feet, and without further ado shuffled determinedly toward Lalyahe, who simply frowned and looked bewildered. Rolf left the giant to his wooing and hurried back to Krasala, who had roused herself to wakefulness and sat shivering in fright caused by her own boldness toward the Bolsewi weapon. He tugged her to her feet, embraced her, and kissed her gratefully. But she was too frightened to respond to the unfamiliar expression of affection.

THERE WAS a sudden howl of anger from the high priestess. Rolf glanced around quickly to see her struggling with the amorous P'yan. Suddenly the frustrated giant raised his hammy hand and brought it down atop her head with what seemed to be only a gentle tap. Lalyahe crumpled limply. The hardy huntsman caught her up, threw her across his shoulder, and staggered toward the entrance. He grinned back at Rolf defiantly.

Rolf fumed impotently. There was no stopping P'yan from lugging off his prize. But he needed the high priestess as a translator. P'yan's libido wouldn't wait. He cautiously approached the entrance where the inferno had subsided to a red glow. Rolf thought of halting him with another shot, but then he would encounter trouble from the giant, unless he killed the man. While he debated with himself, P'yan slipped through the entrance and disappeared. Krasala, watching them go, giggled with perhaps a trace of hysteria.

Rolf took her arm gently. "I need your help now," he told her. "None of the huntsmen speak Earthtongue. Will you come with us?"

She hesitated, frowning.

"Some of us may be killed," he said quietly. "You can leave if you want to. Maybe I can get along with sign language."

She snorted angrily, and stamped her foot. "Of course I come! Is just I don't see how we get out of

here. The council's guards wait for you. Is only one entrance. How..."

"Never mind!" he said, looking up toward a flutter of wings. "Tell those riders to go back up, or another sun will bloom down here."

She faced the center of the temple and called out in a quavering voice. A rider who was stalling his bat for a landing jerked the beast's chin down and shot quickly upward again. Rolf glanced around at the tethered mounts whose riders had run away with the crowd. There were five of them, crouched low and squeaking with fright.

"Collect all the weapons from the storeroom," he told Krasala. "I'll get the bats ready."

"Weapons?" She looked puzzled. Rolf held up the bagpipe. "These things. You shot this one. You shouldn't be afraid of them now." Her face went chalk-white and she moistened her lips.

"Listen, kid," he said impatiently. "If you can't get over your silly fright, you might as well stay here. And if we don't *use* the Bolsewi weapons, we'll probably all die."

She set her jaw defiantly, turned, and marched angrily toward the storeroom. Rolf grinned, gathered up a coil of rawhide rope, and tied four bats together in an aerial mule-train, leaving the fifth for Krasala. He weighted the riderless ones with rock-sacks to prevent an overly frisky flight, and made certain that all blindfolds were adjusted as insurance against willfulness. When he was finished, he began carrying away the few wounded guards who remained, and depositing them in the corridor just outside the temple's entrance. At the other end of the corridor, the crowds stared at him from the huge council room. Someone threw a club which skidded off a wall and missed him by a wide margin.

He started to turn away, then paused. A loud and metallic voice was echoing from the distance, making itself heard above the grumbling voice of the crowd. "We'll give you half an hour to produce Kenlan. Do you understand? Half an hour. Then we turn on the gas. Do you understand 'gas'? You stupid beasts, you understand 'death', don't you? 'Gas' is 'death'. Send Kenlan to us, or we'll..." The voice hesitated, then went conversational: "Hey, Peterson! Somebody's coming up the tunnel. Looks like the chief."

ROLF QUICKLY guessed what was happening. The Commission guards had dragged a public address system halfway down the bat-cave. H'nrin was evidently going to meet them for a parley. But the name 'Peterson' left him startled. Could it be the same Peterson who was a member of the Commission? If so, then the public address announcer must also be a Commissionman; for no one else would dare to call the official by his last name without using the title "Commissioner". It seemed unlikely—yet the rulers might submit themselves to personal danger rather than let too many others see the caverns and understand their significance.

Rolf returned quickly to the temple. Half an hour made a dangerously close deadline. And if his plan failed, several thousand androons would die unpleasantly. He wondered how they planned to force the gas into the caverns when the natural drafts flowed in the opposite direction along the tunnel. They must mean to close off the mouth of the bat-cave as soon as the delegation came out. Or perhaps they had already walled it up, leaving a small escapeway.

Krasala had stacked half a dozen of the Bolsewi bagpipes near the tethered bats, and she stood back from them nervously, her expression shifting from awe to pride to anxiety. He grinned and applauded her bravery. She replied with a cocky smile and a sniff, but her hands were trembling. "The flyers try to come down again," she said. "I send them back up."

"Good girl. Think you can ride one of these flying ponies?"

She eyed the beasts doubtfully, but snapped, "Certainly!"

Rolf packed the Bolsewi weapons beneath a bat, but kept one to strap on his back. He helped Krasala under her mount, released the beast's tether, and slipped off the loop that bound its wings, whose sudden beating sent him sprawling. Krasala yelped as it sprang aloft.

"Jerk its head down!" he bellowed after her.

After a few wild passes across the temple, the bat began ascending. Rolf kept his own mount bound and tethered while he released the others in the four-bat train. They fluttered up to the end of the lead-rope and began tugging against one another amid furious beating of wings. Leading them would not

be simple. He slipped quickly into his seat and set his own bat free.

At first it added its bit to the general chaos, and Rolf clutched the crosspiece fearfully as he felt himself being flung about like a rock at the end of a string. But he managed to exert some control; and since the vector-sum of the forces exerted by the riderless bats was frequently zero, his steady guidance urged the unwilling train steadily upward.

He peered about in the deepening gloom for the other huntsmen, but saw no one. Apparently they had already discovered the high-level storeroom. Once Krasala swooped down past him, howling angrily at her mount. But then she regained control and climbed again.

"Can you handle him yet?" he shouted, causing his own bat to squeak and dart erratically.

"I—I think so!" she called nervously.

"Go up till you see a ledge. There's a big door. Fly inside and wait."

SHE CALLED acknowledgement and soared on above him. Suddenly a riderless bat fluttered past and descended toward the floor far below. Rolf cursed to himself. Whoever had let the beast escape would be marooned in the storeroom. He unstrapped the Bolsewi bagpipe, cranked it, and aimed between his legs at the patch of light beneath him. The weapon's shriek sent the bat bolting upward with an acceleration that nearly unseated him.

A minute later, they were flurrying madly at the top of the shaft, darting dangerously close to the steel-struts that supported the cavern's lid, while the violet light blazed far below them. While he fought to regain control, he caught a glimpse of the stray bat streaking for safety within the storeroom. But he was more interested in keeping the train away from the struts. If they fouled the lead-rope and became entangled, he would be marooned a thousand feet above the floor, with no way to get down.

He jerked savagely on the reins and kicked his bat's chin high as the last beast tried to encircle a strut. There was a flutter of wings against steel, then a series of enraged squeaks. The train tugged at its rope. With a yelp of fright he glanced back. The bat was clinging to the strut with its feet. One of its wingtips dangled, broken from beating against a sharp metal edge. Rolf jabbed his mount with the weapon's muzzle.

The last bat tore free. The train sagged at the end, as the crippled creature fought to stay aloft. But its limping efforts helped to tug them slowly downward. Suddenly his bat saw—or "heard"—the storeroom entrance and began fighting toward it valiantly. A moment later, the train was inside, alighting in the midst of the others.

He climbed wearily to his feet and noticed irritably that none of the mounts was tied. They remained in the storeroom as a sanctuary from the outrages that had been perpetrated upon them in the shaft. But what he was about to do would send them into a panic, and they would have to be properly bound.

He looked around for the riders, and at last saw them huddled as a shadowy patch of collective fright in a far corner.

"Krasala!" he called into the gloom. "Where are you?"

Her slender figure detached itself from the shadow of a bat, and approached him slowly. When she drew near, he could see she was smiling weakly, although she appeared sick from the wild ride.

"Is always be like this, when I your woman?" she muttered wearily.

He chuckled and gave her a rough little hug. "Go tell the men to come tether the bats securely."

SHE NODDED and moved toward the murmuring huddle of frightened huntsmen. He listened as she relayed the order. A voice replied from the group, a protesting voice. She spoke again in a louder tone. The voice grunted a monosyllable. She raged at it in a furious snarl. Several voices answered sulkily. She turned on her heel and marched back to Rolf.

"They won't do anything," she told him. "They say they wait for Menbana to punish you."

"Tell them," he said stiffly, "that if they don't obey, the whole tribe will be killed by the Earthmen from the city. Tell them we're trying to save their people. And...tell them I'll toss any man who disobeys off the ledge."

She went to relay the order, while he stood regretting the latter threat. There was not a man among



them who did not outweigh him by at least twenty pounds. He waited, listening to their heated conversation with Krasala. At last two men arose and advanced toward him. He cranked the sun-weapon and waited tensely. Krasala was hurrying behind them, chattering rapidly.

"Stop!" he barked when they were within five paces. He lifted the gun menacingly. The pair stopped and looked bewildered.

"No, they came to help you!" Krasala explained.

"What about the others?"

She shrugged. "I ask if anybody isn't coward. These two is all that come."

"Have them tie the bats, then. We don't have much time."

Rolf stacked the weapon against the wall, and went to drag the boxes of the Bolsewi shipment toward the entrance. There were six of them—the coffin, the instrument case, the machine-parts, a case of plastic scrolls that might have been books, a box whose contents had been reduced to mouldy dust, and a fat device that looked like a replacement unit for some electronic rig.

When the huntsmen had tied the bats in the pack-train, Rolf unhitched the rock-bags and emptied them. He slipped the electronic unit into one bag, the coffin into another, then began stuffing the third with samples from all the other cases. Krasala was watching him curiously.

"Where you take these god-creatures?" she asked.

He paused thoughtfully, then looked "Tell me, do you believe the gods lie or not?"

She shook her head quickly. "Gods don't die. They go to live above the world."

"In soul, body, or both?"

Her mystified expression told him that she had no concept of soul, at Least not as far as the gods were concerned.

"Another thing: would you recognize a Bolsewi if you saw one?"

"Certainly. The pictures in the council room—"

"That's all I want to know, baby." Quickly he unpacked the coffin and took out the skull. "Come with me," he grunted, and moved toward the group of idle huntsmen.

She walked beside him, staring curiously at the white object in his hands, but evidently not recognizing it. The batsmen were sitting in a tight motionless group, watching him resentfully as he approached. Suddenly he wished that he had brought the weapon. They might react violently to his words. He stopped before them and held up the skull, turning it slowly in the dim light.

"Is this the skull of a bat?" he asked rhetorically.

"*Ce vanina kr'nale subolsewa?*" Krasala translated.

THERE WAS a long silence. Then a man in the center of the group raised his voice to utter a few words. "He says 'no'," Krasala told him. "He says the top part is too big, and jaw too little."

"Is it the skull of a man?" Rolf asked again.

The same huntsman snorted derisively. "What man has needles for teeth and ears on top of his head?" he replied through the translator. Then his expression changed, became startled. A hushed murmur arose from the group. Krasala caught her breath and stared up at the pale and ancient bone.

"I found it here—in this room," Rolf said in a conversational tone. "Since the top of the shaft is closed, it must have come up from below. Have any of you seen something like this wandering through the temple?"

Krasala translated in a weak, halting voice. This time the man replied, with only an uneasy head-shake.

"It was in a box," Rolf continued. "Somebody must have put it in the box, a long time ago. It's very dry and brittle. Would any of you like to handle it?"

An uneasy mutter was the only answer to Krasala's translation. She had backed away from him several steps, and she was swaying weakly. Rolf turned the thing over in his hands and put on a puzzled expression.

"Now, what do you suppose has teeth, jaw, and ears like a bat, but a head that's bigger than a man's?"

He opened the jaw to peer at the teeth—and made a new discovery. "It even has two metal teeth."

"Translate, please," he murmured when Krasala lagged.

She managed to get it said before she started to faint. He leaped toward her, gave her an arm for support, and shook her slightly. She moaned and shied away from the skull. He led her gently back toward the tethered bats while a babble of voices began to grow behind him. He let her sit by the wall to recover while he silently returned the skull to the coffin and the coffin to the bag.

Then he spoke to her again: "Go tell the men that they are about to see that Bolsewi magic can be used by men, without harm to them. Tell them that the temple of Menbana will soon open its mouth to the sky, with much thunder. Tell them to watch closely while I use Bolsewi magic again."

Wordlessly; she went to do his bidding, and he heard the heated argument die when she began to speak. He hurried toward the entrance, hoping that the bagpipes were powerful enough to make good his promise. He sat in the center of the opening and fired a shrieking bolt at the ceiling of the shaft. The violet globe stung the metal, and by its light he inspected the damage wrought by the first shot which had gained him Lalyahe's respect. There was a fused crater in the metal, but the center of the crater had bulged downward, as if pressed by weight from above.

He felt certain that the ceiling was several feet in thickness, and covered with a heavy layer of earth. Burning through it would take too long, and already the half-hour deadline was approaching. He hoped, however, that H'nrin's pleas would manage to stall the Commission for a time.

INSPECTING the roof, he wondered if its sudden collapse would bring a landslide and perhaps cause the store-room to cave in. But he had to chance it. He glanced down over the lip of the ledge to assure himself that none of the tribesmen was brave enough to enter the haunted temple. Then he began firing at a group of struts which supported a section of ceiling on the opposite side of the shaft, hoping thereby to limit the overall effect and confine any rock-slide to the one side. The globes of bright fury attached themselves to the struts and bit angrily into the metal. He ducked back behind the wall to avoid a shower of sparks and to protect his eyes from the sun-glare of four globes burning at once.

A deep-throated grumble began to pervade the shaft. He stole a glance around the corner and saw one of the struts begin to buckle at the point where the charge had heated it to white incandescence. The ceiling section seemed to sag slightly. But the fire-globes had died, and the struts were subsiding to a red heat. The grumble began to die.

Quickly, in the failing light, he fired three more bursts at the same struts. When the sun-orbs bloomed again, the heated shafts crawled rapidly to white luminescence. Rolf backed away from the entrance. Two of the shafts were slipping and twisting like fat lead bars pressed lengthwise in a vise.

The grumble returned, became a rumble, became a growling roar that shivered the solid walls of the storeroom and tore at the eardrums with bursts of sound. He ran twenty paces into the storeroom, then turned and ran toward a far corner where Krasala huddled in fright. Somewhere outside, the piercing cry of shearing steel blended with the monstrous growl of tumbling rock. A hail of stones rained on the ledge, bouncing through the entranceway. A small boulder came with the debris, tearing out a bite of rock from the side of the door. It hurtled through the storeroom like a juggernaut, struck the rear wall, and narrowly missed crushing a bat before it came to rest.

The room became choked with dust as the barrage continued. Faintly, above the uproar, he heard the outcries of the huntsmen. "What are they saying?" he shouted at Krasala, who was clinging to his arm and biting her lip to keep silent.

"They are praying," she called in reply.

"Not a bad idea," he said as he watched the wall toward the shaft begin to crack. The crack grew longer, as though an invisible hand were tracing it in black ink upon the polished stone. The same crack was moving more slowly across the ceiling. In grim fascination, Rolf watched it until it finally crept to a halt.

Then the rumble was coming from far below as the cave-in piled itself upon the floor of the temple. The rain of rocks in the entranceway had stopped. But there was darkness in the shaft. With a cry of dismay he ran toward the entrance. Only blackness above and below, blackness and choking dust. Had

the collapse only sheared off a layer of rock above the metal, leaving the higher stratum hanging by its bootstraps? If so, they would all die rather slowly and unpleasantly—of starvation. For he was certain enough rock had fallen to bury the tops of the temple's doorways, thereby sealing off the merciful death of the Commission's threatened gas attack.

HE SEIZED a bagpipe and fired it upward in the shaft, then waited anxiously for the bloom of brilliance. It failed to come. He laughed with hysterical relief. The lack of daylight was simple. It was nighttime on the surface. In the dayless, nightless caverns, he had lost track of time, having eaten and slept whenever the need arose.

He turned to call the news to Krasala, and was startled to see three burly shadows standing behind him. He lifted the weapon and edged toward the side of the entrance to guard himself against a sudden push. The three figures sidled with him.

"What do you want?" he barked.

One of the men stepped forward and knelt. Then the other two followed suit. A tongue of cold air licked down his back from the open maw of the shaft above. "Krasala," he called weakly. "Come find out what's wrong with these jerks!"

"I'm right here," she said from somewhere in the dusty shadows. Then her shape appeared, and she questioned the men quietly. The one in the center answered without looking up.

Rolf listened to the conversation impatiently. At first it occurred to him that they had taken him for a god, but he dismissed the notion with the thought that primitive peoples often failed to differentiate sharply between powerful natural and supernatural forces. A force could be slightly a god, partially a god, or wholly a god. And he had seen them kneel to their leaders.

"What is it?" he asked impatiently.

"They beg you pardon," she replied. "They want you to be high priest, and teach them."

"Do they speak for all the men?" he grunted.

She repeated the question, and replied, "All but a few. A few too frightened to say."

Rolf breathed relief. "Okay, tell them to get their bats ready and start chasing out of here. Straight up. We'll assemble again on the surface, around the mouth of the shaft. There's no time to waste."

One by one the bats began fluttering out of the opening and soaring up into dusty blackness. Rolf gave the train to another huntsman, to leave himself free for reconnaissance. Eight men refused to go; they remained in their corner, sulking and shivering. He decided to leave them. When the others had gone, he told Krasala to keep them assembled near the mouth of the shaft. Then they mounted their bats, and burst out into the shaft, climbing toward the invisible escapeway. A patch of stars came dimly into view as the dust thinned. Then they were out in the frigid night.

Rolf stalled his mount briefly over the mouth of the shaft, and by the light of the moons he could see that at least eight feet of rock and soil had been deposited over the metal roof. Since the walls of the shaft sloped inward, there would be perhaps twelve feet of debris covering the temple floor, blocking all entrances. The cult of Menbana was doomed.

A FEW RIDERS were still aloft, fighting their bats, who sensed freedom in the open night. But most had landed and tethered their mounts to small boulders. The shaft's entrance lay in a pass between two mountains.

He called a repetition of his order to remain in a group, then let the bat climb high. The lights of Marsville arose above a hilltop. He reined toward it and spurred the beast to angry speed by pulling hairs out of its shaggy belly. The half hour had certainly elapsed, but H'nrin's pleading together with the commotion caused by the cave-in had probably delayed the gassing of the caves.

He kept the bat high until he located the ravine where the bat-caves stared from their low bluff. It was not hard to find; a dim aura of light arose from the encampment of guards. Then, lest they catch a glimpse of him in the moonlight, he swooped low, and darted east at fifty feet altitude. The camp lay about six miles down the slopes from the mountain pass. The icy wind numbed his face and froze his breath about his lips as he goaded the bat to furious speed.

As he drew nearer, he nosed his mount north, away from the moons, so that he would not be silhouetted as he circled at a radius of a thousand yards. From the number of portable huts erected about a monstrous bonfire, he estimated that there were at least a hundred men in the ravine. Bright lights gleamed about the cave entrances, and a group of men were working about the ledge. They had drilled into the rock, and had set a metal door over the mouth of the tunnel leading to the caverns. He murmured thankfully; the door was still open, and two men were peering into the cave. Evidently the delegation was still inside.

A tanker truck had been rolled up near the entrance, and dimly he could see a heavy hose coiled on the ground. The gas equipment. He reasoned that the gas would not be a lingering one, such as lewisite or the more deadly radioactive alphazene, for the Commission would want to reenter the caverns. Chlorine, perhaps, or a radioactive gas with a very short half-life.

Hovering at a distance of five hundred yards, he heard the sputter of an internal combustion engine. Briefly, he wondered why they hadn't brought a portable reactor instead, but then realized that there was no cooling water available in the ravine. He looked for the engine and spotted it on the bed of an open lorry. Undoubtedly driving the generator that furnished light for the encampment.

He twisted the crank of the Bolsewi bagpipe and eased the bat in closer. He could not afford to miss either target. At a hundred and fifty yards, he heard a shout. Someone had spotted him.

He set the bat in a gradual stall and calmly aimed for the generator. A searchlight stabbed out, probing toward him. He ignored it and pressed the stud. Its shriek sent the bat into a hysterical climbing turn. A machine gun chattered, and tracers drew white lines across the landscape beneath him. The ravine became illuminated with bluish light as the orb fired its way into steel. The engine's sputter died. The lights grew dim, then failed. Bullets ploughed upward in his general direction, but the guards had looked toward the sun-glare of the bag-pipe charge, and their aim was poor.

The bat was fighting its way higher and tugging doggedly toward the mountains, while Rolf tried to tug it back and keep it satisfied with a vertical ascent. But soon he was circling a thousand feet above the camp. The smoke of the bonfire seemed to hide him from view, for the barking of small arms ceased, except for an occasional wild shot toward some other bat whose sleep had been disturbed by the commotion.

WHEN HE had control of his mount again, Rolf skidded aside out of the thin smoke-pall and aimed another shot at the tank of gas. It fell wide by several yards and burned its way into the rocky ground. The bat bolted again, but this time he regained control more easily. The animal was weary of fighting.

The guards saw his intentions, and began scurrying wildly about in the area. Some were running toward the huts, while others darted into the mouth of the cave. He gave them a little time to reach cover before he fired again. A few of them appeared wearing gas masks, while those who apparently had no such protection sought refuge in the cave and closed the steel hatch behind them. A hail of bullets began streaking upward as the masked guards resumed their fire. There was a snapping sound as a slug bit through the bat's wing-membrane. The bat squeaked angrily, but evidently there were no somesthetic nerve-endings in the membrane. It seemed to be in no pain.

He aimed carefully and fired again. This time the sun-orb flared on the tank's hull. The small-arms barrage ceased as the guards raced for safety. Rolf gave the bat its head and let it streak toward the mountains. He counted the seconds ... three, four ... the tank was strong.

Then came an ear-numbing *thwang* as a bubble of white-hot steel swelled and burst. It was followed by a gushing roar that ended sharply and echoed off the mountains. He flew onward.

Looking back from a mile's safety, he saw that the bonfire had gone green as the gas swirled about it. Even the lights of Marsville were tinted with an emerald glow as the cloud billowed upward as a tenuous mist. It behaved as a heavy fog, spreading out from the explosion, covering the camp, and rolling slowly downward to fill the ravine. How long before it would disperse and blend with the atmosphere as free gas? The coldness of the windless night should help preserve it for a time as a low-hanging vapor shroud. He needed that time badly.

The sound of a helicopter engine startled him. He looked back to see its shadow flit up from the

camp past the lights of the city. It arose above the vapor and hovered for a moment, the moons glinting on its fusilage. With its landing lights, it probed the night about the camp. Then, having reassured itself that the threat had passed, it darted cityward. Another copter arose to follow it.

Rolf prodded the bat to higher speed. The pilots would bring help from the city. And if the gas was tymbogen, as he suspected, it could be quickly dispersed by jets spraying the ravine with powdered graphite. The gas was his ally, keeping the men trapped in the tunnel.

The huntsmen had built a roaring fire from dry lichen, and they were huddled about it for warmth. It guided him back to the shaft, but upon landing the flaming lichen into the shaft, lest it be spotted by aircraft taking off from the city. Krasala relayed the order as she ran toward him, grinning and scolding. He nestled her small body in his arms for a moment, then pushed her away.

"Find me five men brave enough to carry the Bolsewi weapons," he told her.

She shook her head doubtfully but followed him toward the group of men who were beating out the fire and kicking the flaming lichen into the shaft. She waited until they had finished, then spoke to the huntsmen sharply. Rolf watched the men halt in their tracks and turn to stare uneasily at the leader. No one volunteered.

"Ask them if they have decided about the skull I showed them in the storeroom. Ask them if they think it was man, bat, or Bolsewi."

"I already hear them talk about it," she said. "A few think it was Bolsewi."

"Which ones?"

She spoke sharply to a thin, saturnine batsman who stood nearby. He nodded and grunted. "Bolsewi". Then he stared nervously at his fellows and rubbed his beard contemplatively. Three others echoed the word, but a murmur of dissent arose among the group.

"Tell those four to step forward," he said.

WHEN THEY had approached sheepishly to within a few paces, he began asking Socratic questions about death, gods, immortality, and magic. They answered respectfully but briefly. But when the questioning reached the crucial stage—"Why not touch the weapons, if the Bolsewi were mortals?"—the men fell silent and inched away.

"Tell them that those who are cowards may leave," he barked in despair.

*"Ga yaihi foebolsewi sundra k'raj!"* she snapped scornfully.

One of the men backed away a few paces, then turned and bolted. Two others seemed ready to follow. The saturnine huntsman's shoulders stiffened proudly, however. He tapped his chest, grunted a monosyllable, and caught up a stone from the ground. He spun around and hurled it after the timid runner. There came a frightened yelp from the shadows, and a clatter of loose gravel as the man sprawled to the ground and darted behind a boulder. The thrower turned and grinned smugly at Rolf. His action seemed to deter the others from fleeing. They stood uneasily waiting.

"Get the weapons," he told Krasala.

She nodded and moved silently toward the tethered bat-train. Even the saturnine misfit's grin disappeared as she returned with them.

"Remind them that nothing horrible's happening to you," he told her. "And stop shivering. They'll notice it."

She placed the guns on the ground and translated. There was only a slight quaver in her voice, but she kept her hands clasped behind her shapely back. The men were staring down at the weapons with dismay. They seemed intellectually convinced that the Bolsewi were mortal. They had seen both Rolf and Krasala handle the bagpipes without misfortune. Yet they were afraid. Some kinds of fear were not quite reasonable, he reminded himself.

"Tell the thin one to take a gun," he growled.

Krasala lifted one of the weapons and extended it toward the batsman, calling him S'rij. But S'rij moistened his lips and let his hands dangle by his sides. His face reflected anguish. Suddenly he looked at Rolf and asked a pleading question.

"He wants to know if you will perform a spell to protect him," Krasala told him.

"What kind of a spell?" he asked in dismay.

She shrugged. "He regards you as a priest. Is business of priest to say what kind of spell."

He paused a moment, then shrugged resignedly and took the weapon from her. If they wanted spells, then they would get spells. He turned the bagpipe over in his hands, made gestures at it, blew a jug-note on its muzzle, mumbled gibberish over it, and held it up to the sky like an offering. He grinned at Krasala. "Tell the guy I'm giving it instructions."

THE BATSMAN nodded gravely as she translated. Rolf stepped forward, pressed the fellow's nose with his forefinger, and placed his hand forcefully across the breach of the weapon. "I now pronounce you man and wife," he said solemnly: then, thinking the foolishness was perhaps a good idea, he spoke to Krasala. "Tell him he's now married to the gun, and that if he leaves it or mistreats it, it'll give him a bad time."

No one laughed when she spoke. The hunter stared in awe at the thing in his hands. He turned it over slowly, inspecting its details with cautious interest. Then he nodded slowly at Rolf, and spoke in a low tone.

"He says he will guard it properly, but that he hope for a woman wife."

"Tell him its only a marriage of convenience," Rolf said, suppressing a smile. "He can have a divorce when we're finished. He can trade it in on a priestess."

The huntsman-acolyte had undoubtedly been trudging along behind his strutting bewinged female for too many years as an unthanked lackey. He broke into a beaming grin, nudged his comrades, and promptly fell in love with the bagpipe. Rolf felt his own shoulders relax and his stomach return to its proper position. "Whhh!" he breathed to Krasala. "Now to marry the others. Let's make it a double ceremony."

Having watched their comrade accept the weapon, the other two men agreed nervously but without protest. When he was finished, he asked for more volunteers and got another man. But there were still two extra weapons, not including his own.

"I'll carry it, but I won't marry it," said Krasala, who seemed to be becoming a godless heathen in imitation of her sacrilegious beloved.

"Okay, we'll leave the other. Now, get these guys over to the shaft for instructions."

The four armed batsmen followed him to the gaping mouth of the opening, and watched while he cranked and fired the weapon into the abyss. Its burst gleamed feebly up through the lingering dust from the floor of the wrecked temple far below. Then, he gave each of them individual instructions in aiming, cranking, firing, and had them fire several practice bursts into the shaft, where they could not be observed from the city or from aircraft. He feared that the operation might leave them unnerved, but after a few shots, the batsmen seemed to take heart and grow calmer.

Then he called the entire party to their bats. While he was giving them instructions, the moonlight seemed to grow brighter, bathing the ground in increasing brilliance. The men were puttering among themselves and staring past him toward the plains.

"A star grows brighter!" Krasala gasped beside him.

He looked around, and saw that the light was coming, not from the twin moons, but from a magnesium flare hovering over the ravine to the east. He bellowed for silence and listened to the night. The distant growl of a jet engine came to his ears. They were spraying the ravine to clear it of gas. 'Let's go!' he shouted to the men. "Single file, weapon-men in the lead. Head for the valley, but stay clear of the light!"

SHRILLING his orders to the others, Krasala followed close on his Leek. Soon the weird procession was airborne, winging down the slopes toward the glow of the city. He saw the lash of a jet's wings dart past the dare, and a smoky cloud of fine powder trail out behind it to sift slowly downward. The vaporous tendrils of tymbogen were thinning in the ravine. As the dusty cloud drifted through them, they came alive with a faint green light of their own. When the luminescence faded, the tendril was gone, and the vapor lost its droplet form and blended with the air like vanishing steam. Nevertheless, its

potency would linger in the area for a short time, depending on the faint upcurrents of air along the slopes.

Rolf led the wavering column of bats a mile south of the ravine. A jet thundered past a hundred feet above them, causing the train to break up into a flurrying whirlpool of terrified moths. He bellowed for order, and shouted frantic explanations, but six batsmen bolted for the hills and refused to heed his angry threats. At last he let them go, and shouted at the others to fly toward the orchard and land in a group at its eastern fringes. He accompanied the flight, to assure himself of obedience.

The foliage cups of the quioie orchards gleamed like a long ribbon of buttercups beneath them in the moonlight. It lay a half mile wide between the plain and the foothills. He guided his makeshift warriors to a landing at the edge of the tree line, then called to Krasala without climbing out from under his bat.

"Tell S'rij and one other weapon-man to stay here with the others and wait for us to get back. Tell S'rij to brain any man who tries to slip away. Have them tie the bats under the trees and keep themselves out of sight if a...mechanical bat comes snooping. You and the other weapon-men come with me."

When S'rij proudly assured him that any deserter would be chopped in bits and fed to his bat, Rolf led the four-man task force aloft. Keeping low, they made their way back toward the ravine. He sniffed the night air for the sickening bouquet of tymbogen, the maker of tombs. He smelled nothing, but nervously led the party higher when they approached within a thousand yards. "Get as much altitude as you can," he called. "We'll watch from above."

The dusting-planes had dropped another flare, and by its light Rolf could see several tiny figures moving about beneath the mouth of the cavern. They were still wearing masks, and apparently testing for lingering whiffs of gas. One of the jets had gone back to the city, but the other still circled far overhead.

"No closer!" Rolf warned the others. "If the plane spots us, scatter in all directions and regroup with the others."

They hovered in a slow circle, watching the party of men in the ravine. Rolf reflected that there was little chance of being spotted by the jet from above; the riders were hidden beneath the bodies of their mounts, and enough other disturbed bats were flitting about in the area to make them inconspicuous. The ground-men's eyes were adjusted to the brightness beneath the flare, and although they cast frequent nervous glances skyward, Rolf doubted if they could see much beyond their immediate vicinity.

ONE OF the men suddenly detached himself from the group, hauled a portable radio from the back of a truck, and spoke into the mike. After a brief exchange of words, the sound of the jet took on a different note.

"Watch it!" Rolf warned sharply. "We may be spotted!"

But a moment later, the purring engine receded. Between wing flaps of his mount, he caught a glimpse of its luminous blue tail streaking toward the northeast.

"It's coming back!" Krasala cried suddenly.

"Not so loud! And don't worry, it's making another dusting run."

They watched and fought the reins, while the aircraft roared back up the ravine, scattering another haze of black powder from a greater altitude. It sifted over a wider area, and Rolf felt a few particles striking his skin. Krasala sneezed vigorously. He watched the ground as the dust drifted down, but there were no further signs of luminosity. The gas seemed to be gone.

But he waited until the cloud completely cleared. The masked guard was using the radio again when the haze thinned enough to allow visibility. He spoke for a short time, then replaced the mike and went to join his fellows. Rolf heard the jet turn off and recede toward the city. Its task was done.

He heard Krasala gasp suddenly from behind him. "Lights!" she warned. "Coming out of the city."

Rolf glanced back to see four pairs of headlights file out of the west gate and begin crawling across the plain. Trucks, bringing back the guards who had fled when the tank exploded. Evidently the Commission had cleared a road across the plain since the last time he had seen it. He smiled to himself. If things went right, the road might have a lot of future traffic—peaceful traffic. The trucks failed to worry him. He should be finished before they arrived.

"Move in closer to the caves," he told the others. "But keep silent."

HE LED them lower as they swooped toward the ravine. The flare had fallen and was burning itself out on the ground. One of the men was heaping dry lichens on the dying embers of the bonfire, and stirring them up to a light-giving blaze. There seemed to be only six men in the party. Rolf watched one of them shaking a bottle of liquid, then holding it up to the light—apparently testing for lingering gas. He seemed satisfied, and laid the bottle aside. He cracked his mask slightly, then tore it off, and shouted to the others.

"Okay, men! It's safe! Get that hatch open before the Commissioner has kittens!"

"Wait here!" Rolf hissed to Krasala. "Cover me! Don't fire unless they shoot first."

He goaded his bat to a burst of speed and ducked in close to the ground. The men had stacked their rifles against the bluff. They clambered upon the ledge and began making their way higher toward the cave entrance. He stuck a flaming orb to the ledge just ahead of them. The party bolted back toward safety. He stuck another orb to the ledge, cutting off their retreat. One man leaped off the ledge, but underestimated the drop and the hardness of the ground. He rolled over and sat up howling, with one leg twisted at a crazy angle. The others remained on the ledge, pinned between the two glaring globes.

Three of them produced side-arms and began firing at the flitting shadow of the frightened bat. Rolf retreated a hundred feet, gained altitude, and bellowed down at them: "Pitch your guns over the edge! And be quick, or I'll build a fire right between the other two!"

After a moment's hesitation, the men complied. "You'll get yours, Kenlan," major roared angrily.

Rolf ignored him and called to the others to advance. "Watch that man on the ground!" he warned. "If he lets go of his leg, blast him!" Then he landed in the ravine while the others remained aloft. He tied his bat to the tailgate of a truck, then stood guard while the others brought their harried mounts to the ground. The sun-orbs flickered out, leaving white patches of softened rock.

"You'll get yours, all right," the major repeated.

"Yeah," Rolf growled. "But in the meantime, jump over that hot-spot and come down off the ledge. All of you! Then line up at the base of the cliff, facing it."

The five guards trooped sullenly down and obediently filed along the bottom of the bluff. The major kept glancing back curiously. Finally his professional curiosity got the better of his wrath. "Where did you get those weapons, Kenlan?" he grunted.

"Watch them while I look for rope," Rolf told Krasala.

THE OFFICER was not accustomed to being ignored. He repeated the question irritably.

"Plenty of them in the caverns!" Rolf called as he leaped into the back of the first truck, and began rooting among the boards, tarpaulins, and such for a piece of rope.

"Who made them?" the major asked. "You mean these androons—"

"No, not these humans. They were made by an ancient civilization that borrowed a few pairs of our ancestors from earth."

The major sputtered contemptuously. "What do you take me for, Kenlan?"

"A fool!" Rolf replied calmly as he moved on to the second truck. In it, he found no rope, but stumbled across the assembly of a hydrogen welder which had evidently been used to mount the steel hatch over the cave entrance. He slit the oxygen hose with his pocket knife, tossed the end of it off the truck, and turned the cylinder valve full on. The hose writhed and hissed as the cylinder pressure needle crept slowly down the scale. When he got through with the hatch, they would need a cutting torch to open it; and he preferred that none be immediately available. While the oxygen spewed itself out, he moved on to the third truck.

But before he climbed inside, a loudspeaker voice called from the portable radio: "Major Mulvern, this is Longly, over."

"Better let me answer it, Kenlan," the major called.

Rolf cursed and darted toward the radio. He stuffed a handkerchief over the microphone to simulate the muffling effect of a talkie gas-mask, and grunted, "Go ahead, Longly."

"We've reached the orchard, sir. Shall we come on up the ravine? Uh ...are you still in your mask,



sir?"

"Hold it where you are," Rolf barked. "There's still a little gas in here. Should be clear soon. Half hour, maybe."

Longly called an acknowledgement, but another station interrupted on the frequency. The voice was charged with impatience and carried the crisp ring of authority. "I thought you said the gas was clear, Mulvern. What's going on over there?"

"No trouble, sir. A little gas still lingering in the crevices."

"I'll send more jets, then."

"That won't be necessary, sir."

"Since when do you tell a Commissioner what's necessary!" the voice roared.

Rolf caught his breath. So some of the rulers had remained in the city after all. "Sorry, sir," he said meekly. "It's just that the vapor's already broken up. And the jets can't chase the fumes away."

THE COMMISSIONER broke off the conversation with a growl. Rolf replaced the mike and hurried back to the tracks. Someone was beating on the hatch from the inside of the tunnel, and shouting for news and assistance. He felt certain that the hatch could not be opened from within, since it was meant to imprison the cavern's inhabitants.

There was no rope, but he found a two-foot roll of copper wire, heavy enough for the purpose. He kicked it out of the truck, and carried it to the captives. "You've got seniority here," he told the major. "Lie down on your belly. Get away from the others."

Grumbling insults and threats, the major stretched out on the rocky ground. Rolf trussed him up like an unborn foetus, then turned to the others. "You're next, Captain," he barked.

Soon the prisoners were safely bound and propped in a circle around the bright embers of the bonfire. "You won't freeze," he told them, after glancing at the major's watch. "It'll be dawn in a couple of hours."

Longly was on the radio again, seething with polite impatience. "I've got a dozen men with masks, sir," he called. "Can they take one truck and come on up?"

"No need to," Rolf grunted into the muffled mike. "You can all come in about ten minutes. By the way, do you have a welder with you?"

"Uh, no sir! Why? There's one in truck 35-A. Isn't there?"

Rolf glanced at the truck with the hose dangling over its tail-gate. "35-A" was stencilled on its rear. "Oh, sure. Oxygen pressure's a little low, however. Never mind, it'll hold out."

Longly murmured acknowledgement and signed off.

"I want those men out of that cave in fifteen minutes, Mulvern!" barked the Commissioner's voice.

Rolf laughed into the microphone, and left the set to sputter pompously. "Get your bats aloft," he told Krasala. "Stay high and look for the trucks. They should be down the ravine and just across the quioie orchard. Circle the area, but don't let them see you. Wait until they start through the trees. When they're about halfway through, start firing at the forest behind them. Don't shoot at the trucks, but keep your shots directed at the trees along the road. Don't stop until you've got a fire big enough to cut off retreat. Then fly back and join the others. Set fires as you go. We want to block off this whole area for a while. Got that straight?"

She nodded, and chattered the information to the others. They moved silently to their bats, and he watched them spring aloft.

"Like father, like son, eh, Kenlan?" growled the major, who had been staring at the girl.

"Exactly," he grunted as he stalked to the low end of the ledge, mounted it, and made his way toward the mouth of the caves.

"Not bad looking, even if she is non-human," the major said acidly.

Rolf turned slowly. "You people killed my father when he came to you in good faith, trying to tell the truth. I watched your men shoot my brother while he lay pinned under his horse with a bullet through his middle. After all that, do you think I'd mind kicking your kidneys to a pulp and leaving you here to die?"

THE MAJOR began maintaining a rigid silence. Rolf went to inspect the hatch. It proved to be a door taken from some sort of safety vault, and its frame was set in the face of the cliff with heavy expansion-bolts. A circular hole just large enough to admit the hose had been cut through the door, and the hole was stuffed with rags that had been prodded into it from the inside. Rolf jabbed them out with the muzzle of the bagpipe, and observed that the steel was about four inches thick—probably not so thin as to melt completely through from a bagpipe blast. He turned to leave the ledge, but a muffled voice called through the hole: "Mulvern, this is Commissioner Peterson. Never mind the rags, just open the damned door."

"My name's Kenlan, Peterson!" he growled. "And don't hold your breath till I let you out."

No answer. They stalked along the ledge to the lower end, then moved back up the ravine to stand facing the door. He cranked the bagpipe, then placed three careful shots along each edge of the heavy plate of steel. He waited until the orbs died, making certain that the door was welded fast to the frame. Then he went to get the portable radio.

"Longly, this is Mulvern. You can start in now."

The junior officer responded eagerly. "Immediately, sir. Be with you in a few minutes."

"Take your time, take your time. And watch for signs of gas."

"Yes, sir."

Rolf sighed and sat on the ground to await signs of activity along the edge of the orchard, where Krasala and the two huntsmen should be ready to set the fires. The heart-pulp of the quioie was very moist, but the cup-shaped foliage and the felt covering of the trunks were dry enough to burn nicely, with a little encouragement.

A few seconds later, he heard a distant squeak. It could only be the sound of the Bolsewi weapons. Several others followed it, then a burst of small arms fire, evidently from the trucks. Longly was babbling on the radio. "Sir, we're being attacked! They're starting fires!"

"Well, stop that shooting!" Rolf roared, "and get the trucks on through the orchard, you fool! They'll have you trapped in there!"

A moment later the firing ceased. He saw a tongue of flame lick up above a low hill that hid most of the orchard from view.

"Did you hit any of your attackers?" Rolf asked nervously.

"I think we winged one, sir," the officer said. "But it's like shooting ghosts in a cellar. We don't have a spot-light."

Rolf cursed, to himself. If Krasala ...

"Where are you now?" he asked.

"We're out of the orchard, sir. Starting up the ravine. You should see our headlights in a few moments. By the way, sir—you seem to still be wearing your gas mask. May I ask—"

"Just a minute," Rolf grunted. "Pull the trucks up and park. Just a minute."

THE OFFICER reluctantly acknowledged the order, and reported compliance. Rolf carried the radio to the major, who was shivering in his bonds by the now-blackened campfire. The only light in the ravine came from a few red embers in the ashes.

Rolf took the muffler off the microphone and held it close to Mulvern's mouth. "You can tell the world what your present situation is. Tell Longly to keep his trunks or men where they are, or a few hostages will be executed. Including Peterson, if he's standing close to the cave door."

"Come on up the ravine, Lieutenant!" Mulvern roared into the dead pickup.

Rolf booted him unmercifully in the shins, pushed him over, and rolled him toward the smouldering remains of the fire. He was grateful for the major's scream when it came.

"Now, let's try it with the mike-button on," he barked.

The sweating officer eyed him with hate, then panted into the microphone. "Longly, this is Mulvern. You were talking to Kenlan. He's got us trussed up here. You better stay where you are. He threatens to kill Commissioners Peterson and White."

Rolf took the mike away and listened to the ensuing babble of two stations trying to speak at once.

He carried the leather-encased instrument to his bat, and strapped it between the animal's legs. Then he slipped beneath the belly, tugged the tether free, and burst aloft. He flew up the ravine, away from Longly's men, then cut plainsward toward the meeting place at the edge of the orchard. A dozen fires pierced the darkness. Soon the entire orchard would be in flames, and communication or transportation between the city and the ravine could be accomplished only by helicopter. And he doubted if a copter could make the haul with heavy welding equipment.

He spoke into the mike again. "Marsville control, this is Kenlan. Get that Commissioner on the air again."

There was a long silence, during which he could hear a mic-button being keyed nervously. Then the curt voice barked, "All right, Kenlan., This is Commissioner Rathwich. Speak your piece."

"All right. Undoubtedly you've got a direction-finder on this transmission, and a searchlight waiting to pick me up. I advise you not to do it, nor to make any other hostile move. We have a lot of your hostages over here. Over."

There was another pause, then: "You're clear, Kenlan. No d-f. What do you want? Not that you'll get it."

"I want a parley. I want to bring a party of my men to the city, under guarantee of safe conduct. Such guarantee, of course, being backed up by our possessing the persons of two Commissioners—and something like a hundred lesser beings, if they count for anything. Do you agree to that?"

"Just a minute."

There was an ominous silence while Rathwich took counsel with others or made some plans of his own. Rolf didn't like it.

"Make up your mind!" he barked. "Okay, Kenlan. Meet us at the west gate of the city."

"Un-huh! I'll pick the spot myself." "Where then?"

"I'll tell you after we get there, Rathwich. And listen! Keep the planes grounded and the searchlights off the sky. If we're not back in two hours, my men go to work on the prisoners. You understand?"

"Agreed," Rathwich snapped after a moment's hesitation.

"See you shortly!" Rolf called in signing off. He replaced the mike and reined the bat toward the spot where the others waited.

IN TWO hours it would be dawn, and Rathwich undoubtedly suspected that time was on his side and that, if he could stall until daylight, he would be able to strike quickly and effectively. Rolf shivered at the realization that his success depended upon the Commissioner's assumption that he was backed by a small army—instead of only a dozen frightened men and a girl. The party came out of the trees to meet him when he landed. Several batsmen were kneeling around a prone figure in the shadows, and for a moment he thought it was Krasala. But the girl slipped out of the orchard and trotted toward him. "They fire at us," she panted. "Grandson of H'nrin wounded."

"Badly?"

"His arm. It's shattered."

"Leave two men to take care of him. Get the rest on their bats. We're going into the city."

She caught her breath. "They'll kill us! They have always killed—"

"Not this time, I think. Let's get on our way."

She summoned the huntsmen, and together they arose above the plain. "Fly as high as the bats will go!" he ordered. "Keep well above the lights." They circled higher until the city was a warm square of brightness on the plain. Then he led the party eastward.

Somewhere in that patch of light, he knew that telephones were ringing, gate-guards were peering up into the darkness, and machine-gun crews along the walls were being alerted. Near the space-port ramp, the small ack-ack installation would be buzzing with activity, and searchlights were waiting to probe the sky. Rathwich's guarantee of safe passage meant nothing, although Rolf knew that he would observe it as long as it seemed to his advantage to do so.

Rolf, being at a disadvantage, didn't intend to bind himself by any rules of honesty. He meant to play the game the way Rathwich played it, and to use whatever opportunities arose. His only long-range

weapon was public opinion.

THE COMMISSION, realizing that a police state would eventually fall, ruled by careful planning rather than by force. Marsville was an isolated society, a city-state that was an independent entity. It had achieved its own form of cultural integration after several generations of living apart from Earth. It had a sense of its own destiny as a nucleus of a Martian future. Its spirit was mildly messianic and, in the mind of its citizen, Mars was an evil wasteland which could only be made into a paradise by the "chosen people", at an "acceptable time", and under the semi-divine leadership of the Commission, whose members were Earthborn and therefore symbols of that almost legendary Paradise which was Earth.

But the time for Martian ascendancy was always "not yet", and there was no frontier spirit among the people. Such attitudes had been carefully preserved and encouraged by the Commission, under the guidance of Earth-state, who wanted to keep the sapling carefully pruned and controlled, and Martian civilization tightly integrated and restricted as to pattern, thereby insuring that it would be exploitable at the "acceptable time". That time would come when Mars' industrial capacity outweighed its potentialities as a mushrooming agrarian nation. Earth-state knew very well that a frontier society would quickly get out of hand, explode outward toward individual freedom, and lose its unity as a colony of Earth. When it reached the stage of reintegration, it would have lost its Earth flavor, and would be a new and hearty nation declaring its independence. Since space-flight was limited by fuel-supply, Mars could never be brought to heel by force. Not at the present level of technical development.

There were certain inherent disadvantages in Earth's scheme of control. It had set itself up as the great green mother, the benevolent symbol of good things and of righteousness. The word "Earth" brought the same feelings to the colonists as "Democracy" or "Liberty" had brought to the ancients. Rolf, who had always been intellectually atypical, foresaw a day in the distant future when "all good colonials would go to Earth when they died". The disadvantage in Earth's scheme lay in its appeal to a mystical emotion.

A MESSIANIC spirit could always be aroused to some extent by the cry: "Now is the acceptable hour! The day of consummation is at hand!" Men who lived for a promise had always been stirred by sudden hosannas in favor of immediate fulfillment. Christianity, Bolshevism, Islam, the surge of the American frontier—history was full of examples. And Rolf had seen local political prophets arise in Marsville to proclaim that the time had come for spatial expansion. Such men had attracted sizable followings, but the Commission had always put them down with ridicule and scornful propaganda. When the hubbub died, the prophet faded from sight and finally disappeared completely.

But if proof could be furnished to show the lichen plains and quioie forests of Mars could be colonized with only the present industry to furnish the necessary tools, and if at the same time the Commission could be discredited, then there would be no restraining a gradual outpouring of emigrants without the use of force. And the Commission did not have the police power to hold down a sizable revolt.

As the small party of bat-riders crossed high above the city's walls, Rolf swept through the frequency bands of the receiver, listening for calls. The police station was busily deploying units to probable landing points. He heard the spaceport, the public square, and the administrative building mentioned, and he learned that his party would be shot "at the slightest hint of hostility". The dispatcher was warning the units that the bat-riding savages were armed with non-human weapons of unpredictable effectiveness.

"If the traitor's behavior seems suspicious," the operator continued, "you are to shoot first, and shoot to kill. Be especially alert if the party lands near a vital public facility, such as the hydrogardens, the pumping station, central heating reactors, power plant, and so forth. A threat to the public facilities is expected, if only as a bargaining point."

Rolf grinned to himself. They were guessing close, but missing. They reasoned that his only chance would be to strike at the city's power, then follow it up with a raid by androons waiting for a signal from beyond the quioie orchards which were now blazing spectacularly. They saw the fires, and heard of the hundred captives, and promptly became guilty of a fallacy—"Big effect, ergo, big cause"—and assumed

that he had an army.

Rolf led his small party toward a sprawling, windowless structure of insulated concrete near the north gate. It was the city's hospital—most certainly a public facility, but hardly what the police would suspect. He reasoned that one of its third-floor offices would make a safe meeting place, since the Commission's guards would scarcely dare to stage a gun-battle amid the sick and convalescent occupants. Rolf himself had no intention of starting one.

He pointed out the building to Krasala. "Think you could find it again if you made a circle over half the city?"

"Sure! Is easy to see. Where you going?"

"Down! Listen, fly a wide circle over the city, but keep that building in sight. Fly low over it every time you circle. When you see someone on the roof, land. If no one comes by dawn, then go back to the hills and lead as many of the tribe as you can across the mountains."

HE HEARD her start to protest, but he goaded the bat and darted away from the others in the darkness. The moons had sunk below the horizon, and the predawn blackness was complete, save for the glow that arose from a few streetlights and from the headlights of prowling-cycles that sputtered about the city, watching the sky. Rolf kept the bat at a safely invisible height and flew toward the Public Information Building, which housed the city's newspaper as well as its popular "radio" station. It was not radio at all, since the city was confined to a limited area, and since there was only one channel in operation. News and entertainment programs were piped to the homes via telephone cables. Marsville had no time to waste on the production and installation of luxuries. Its industry was aimed at future empire.

Rolf skirted the gloomy cubical shadow of the building at a high altitude, then circled slowly downward. A streetlight glimmered on the corner, and he could see a few lights in the basement where printers were no doubt at work, but the rest of it was plunged in blackness. There would probably be a night watchman prowling on the first floor, hovering near the entranceway, and waiting for daylight and relief. As he soared lower, he saw the dim outline of a roof exit, perched like a box atop the structure. He began jockeying for a landing stall.

Never had the *whooshing* of his mount's wings seemed so loud as the bat glided in toward the roof. He held his breath as the beast stalled and settled, but the only sound was a dull thump as he sat painfully on tarred concrete. The roof was flat, and a yard-high guard fence gave him some protection. He sat frozen for a moment as a squad of motorcycles growled past, but soon their sound receded.

He waited until he was certain that he had not been observed or heard, then tied the bat to a steel drain vent, hobbled its wings, and went to examine the roof exit. The sheet-metal door was tightly locked, and there was no window. He worked at the lock with a scrap of wire; but it was hopeless. He stood cursing impotently for a moment. Why should the janitor lock the roof entrance?

He unshouldered the Bolsewi weapon, gave the crank a fraction of a turn, and hopefully aimed it skyward. If it shrieked, he would have to flee. He pressed the stud; a faint hiss was the only result. He berated himself again for not discovering that its intensity was adjustable. A second later, a faint star-glow appeared atop an adjoining building. It disappeared quickly.

He turned the weapon on the door and unleashed another modest burst. The startling brightness faded quickly, leaving a patch of distorted metal, but not a hole. He tried holding the stud down while he slowly eased the crank around and played the muzzle in a six-inch circle. The weapon burred a steady *zzzzz* and left a blue-white trail behind it.

"Swords and ploughshares!" he growled to himself. The thing was probably meant to be a portable welder, and not a weapon at all. He meekly recalled his irritation with the androons for misinterpreting it in another way. "Slaves of our cultures," he grumbled apologetically to any Bolsewi ghosts who might be hovering in the Martian night.

THE CIRCLE of hot metal fell inward, and made a sizzling sound on the stairway matting. He waited for the door to cool from cherry red, then reached through to trip the night latch. He paused briefly after

entering, to extinguish the smoking mat, then tiptoed quietly down the stairway. The broadcasting rooms were dark and empty. A faint light gleamed up from the first floor. He swung the door softly closed and bolted it.

Then he turned to inspect the modulators, after switching on a rectifier unit to provide a faint light. A timing mechanism always switched on the equipment at five o'clock, and automatically broadcast two hours of recorded music before any of the station's personnel arrived after dawn. He found the clock, and assured himself that it had not been changed.

There were three input channels for the amplifiers. One was fed by the station's own microphones, and it was the one most frequently used. Another input was connected by wire to the administrative telephone circuits, so that the Chairman of the Commission could speak to the entire city over the entertainment system without leaving his office. A third input came from a radio frequency pickup which could be tuned to the space-port channel, or any of the special frequencies. The occasional landing of an Earth-ship was an important event to the people, and they were allowed to listen on their home amplifiers to radio-exchange between ship and ground-control.

Rolf found the selector and switched off the preset recordings. Then he turned the radio pickup into the modulator's input, and tuned it to the frequency of his portable unit. In fifteen minutes, the timer would cut on the modulators and begin transmitting whatever was picked up on the radio to the families who switched on their amplifiers while they ate, dressed, and prepared to man the city's industries at dawn.

On his way toward the stairs, he noticed a lavatory and went inside. He glanced at himself in the mirror, shuddered, and dug a handful of depilatory out of the dispenser. He smeared the pungent paste over his cheeks, then washed off two weeks' growth of beard. As he turned to go, he saw a pair of worn coveralls hung on the peg by the door. Apparently belonged to the janitor. He slipped them on quickly over his ragged and dirty clothing, and borrowed the slightly greasy janitor's cap. The apparel was ill-fitting but believable.

THE IDEA of welding the door closed occurred to him briefly, but he feared that someone on the lower floor might hear the bagpipe's buzz and come up to investigate. He left it bolted and quietly returned to the roof.

A few minutes later he was hovering over the hospital, watching for the other riders. When he heard the flapping of their wings, he stalled in for a landing on the roof, and began unfastening the portable transmitter. The others swooped low, circled, and settled about him on the flat deck.

"Have the men unpack the bags from the extra bats," he told Krasala. "Keep reasonably quiet, and wait on the roof. I'll be back in a minute."

He carried the radio to the roof exit and found the door unlocked. He descended quickly to the dimly lit third-floor corridor, and tiptoed past the sleeping rooms toward the desk where a night nurse sat cleaning her nails and studying a paper. She glanced up wearily as he approached, returned to the paper, then gave him a second look and an irritable frown.

"Are you an orderly? What are you doing up here?" she muttered. "Say ...you're not an orderly...what...?"

"Never mind!" he snapped. "Where's your telephone? It's business."

"It better be. Who are you, any way?"

"Rolf Kenlan," he murmured as he reached for the phone. The name had no effect. She watched him suspiciously as he dialed.

After two rings, a curt voice barked, "Headquarters, Colonel Luling."

"Luling, this is Rolf Kenlan. I'm at the City Hospital. If the Commissioners are still interested, tell them to come over."

There was a brief silence while Luling breathed surprise into the mouthpiece. Then he grated, "Very clever, Kenlan. What part of the hospital?"

Rolf glanced at the nurse. Her face had gone white, and she was backing away from him. "Where's an empty room?" he snapped.

"Th-three oh seven," she breathed weakly.

"Three oh seven, Luling. How soon can you get here?"

"Three to five minutes. Let me warn you, Kenlan—"

"Yeah! We'll be waiting on the roof. If you bring more than one squad of guards, you'll have a fight on your hands, and you couldn't win it without hitting at us from the air. I don't think people would like having the hospital strafed. If you don't get tricky, things will be peaceable. Keep aircraft away from the building. We can burn a copter down."

HE HUNG up without waiting for an answer, then dialed the editor of the *Martian Messenger*. A plump-throated, sleepy voice grunted a disgusted "Go ahead".

"Listen quickly, Menshrie! This is Rolf Kenlan. Does the name mean anything to you? If not, you should remember my father, Jason. You gave him quite a build-up."

The phone sputtered confusion as Menshrie came fully awake. "Kenlan! What—"

"Don't ask questions. Just turn on your amplifier, and call somebody from your office staff to take notes. You're going to hear a conference involving myself and the Commissioners. Will you print it straight?"

Menshrie stuttered for a moment. "Why, yes—if the Commission okays it. You don't just print anything—"

"Fool! It's going to be broadcast. Why should they disallow it? And if the people hear one thing, and then you run something else, they'll see you for the toady you really are. The people still believe the fiction that they're running things around here, and the fiction might soon be a fact. They can run you out. The Commission can't get you for printing what thousands of people have already heard!"

"I'll have to check with the Commission. Why are you calling, anyway?"

"You can't. They're on their way here now. That's why I'm calling."

Menshrie hesitated. "If I violate security, I get canned. Then they put a man in who'll respect security. But if an event is observed by enough witnesses, the Commission naturally can't hold it back. I'll get a steno on it, and see what develops. Don't get me wrong, Kenlan. I'm no bootlicker, but they've got me where—"

Rolf dropped the phone in its cradle and hurried toward Room 307. It proved to be a small office, windowless, but with a door in the outer wall. He swung open the door and found a balcony overlooking the grounds. A good place to leave the set. While it was warming up, a car's headlights swung around the corner and came to a halt in front of the building. Five men climbed out into the street and stood beyond the car with drawn weapons. They stared up toward the rooftop.

WORKING in darkness, Rolf adjusted the set, wedged the miccord under the door, and retreated into the room. He found gummed tape on the desk and fastened the microphone button down. It was impossible to conceal the pickup effectively without diminishing its sensitivity, even though the instrument had a conference-dictate adjustment. He switched it to conference, left it in the corner, and dropped a sheet of crumpled paper over it. Then he raced out into the corridor and bounded up the stairs to the roof, where Krasala and the others stood watching the party in the street.

The sky was growing gray with dawn. Another car had drawn up behind the first, and a dozen men were holding a pow-wow behind the vehicles.

"Leave two men on the roof," he said quietly. "Have the others bring those three sacks and come with me."

She nodded and relayed the order. Rolf stepped to the rail and cupped his hands about his mouth. "Hey, Rathwich!" he shouted. "Are you down there?"

Colonel Luling's voice called back: "How many men have you got with you, Kenlan?"

"Come up and find out! Room 307."

Without further discussion he led the batsmen downstairs, after brief instructions to the roof guards. A morning-shift nurse squeaked and bolted for the elevator at the sight of the bearded and furry-legged squad trooping grimly down the corridor. He stationed a guard at either end of the hall, and the rest around the entrance of 307.

When the erect and long-limbed Colonel Luling appeared with drawn revolver beyond the doorway, Rolf was sitting at the desk with the contents of the bags arranged neatly before him. Krasala stood quietly in the corner with the bagpipe cradled easily in her arms. She lifted it suspiciously as the graying colonel strode into the room. He glanced around, then nodded. "I'll bring up eight men to match yours, Kenlan."

"Agreed. Where are the Commissioners? How many came?"

"Rathwich and Poele. Let me warn you against treachery. You won't get out of here alive, if you try it."

"Same rules apply in reverse. Get the wafflebottoms up here."

The colonel nodded curtly and departed. Rolf left the chair and darted to the microphone. "People of Marsville," he said quietly. "You are about to hear Commissioners Rathwich and Poele's reaction to a suggestion for a sensible end to the quarantine that binds us to the walls of the city. Let us listen carefully, reminding ourselves that the Commission's duty is to represent our interests as well as those of Earth—"

HE BROKE it off and returned to the chair as he heard footsteps in the corridor. Luling reappeared, flanked by two guards with sub-machine guns. Rathwich and Poele followed cautiously, while two more guards brought up the rear.

"I suggest we leave our regiments in the hallway," Rolf barked. "One guard on each side should be enough."

Luling nodded curtly and stepped aside to let the Commissioners enter. The plump and panting Poele glanced up to protest, but Rathwich, his hard face twisted into a faint smile, strode into the room and dragged a chair toward the desk. He appeared prepared to enjoy himself as he thrust out a formal hand toward Rolf and nodded wordlessly.

Rolf touched the hand briefly, while Poele sat aside and looked frightened. Luling closed the door and leaned back against it, his arms folded across his chest, his eyes on Krasala, and a revolver in his hand for safety's sake.

"It's your show for the time being Kenlan," grunted Rathwich. "Speak up. What do you want."

"What every native citizen of Marsville wants, Rathwich—freedom to use the resources of this planet for some purpose other than the present one, which is insuring our own perpetual servitude. Freedom to get out of the city and make homes where there's room to move. You and your predecessors have kept the city choked down with the myth that a man can't live out there without all the gadgets you promise to produce tomorrow. What you're really trying to do is insure that Mars will jump from nothing into the middle of complex civilization of specialists, without any intermediate stage."

Rathwich's smile tightened. "Go on. Make your suggestions."

"Fine! Do you see these articles here on the desk? Instruments, machine parts—tell me, Rathwich—did these come from the city's factories?"

The Commissioner glanced over them briefly and shook his head. "No, of course not."

"From Earth, then?"

"Obviously not."

"Then suppose you explain their existence, if the picture your people paint of the planet is a true one."

Rathwich shrugged without interest. "You're going to say, as your father did, that they're relics of an ancient civilization, eh? A pre-androon culture."

"Exactly! You admit that my father told you about it? That you withheld it from the people?"

"I'm not here to admit or deny anything, Kenlan. Get on with what you have to say."

FOR THE benefit of the microphone, Rolf reviewed briefly the events since his flight from the city, inventing a few extras to cover the existence of the imaginary army. He covered the murals in the cavern's



council hall, stressing the significance of the Bolsewi spaceship with Earth in the background.

"The androons are human," he insisted. "And that's why you killed my father's wife, isn't it? She was with child."

"How did you know—"

The Commissioner caught himself, and jerked his head as if to glance at the colonel; then he replaced his faint smile and watched Rolf coolly. He was playing for time. Rolf saw Luling staring uneasily at the back of Rathwich's head. Suddenly he glanced absently at the pistol in his hand, and returned it to his holster. He leaned back to resume his thoughtful gaze at the Commissioner.

"Naturally, you've been appealing to 'race'," Rolf continued. "You've used it as an excuse to keep the androons away from the city, and to keep our people away from the hills. You used it as an excuse to hang Dad. How long have you known about the Bolsewi civilization?"

Rathwich, who kept glancing at his watch, was beginning to look bored. "Ever since I came to Mars and read the reports of my predecessors," he admitted.

Rolf nodded. "And you kept it from the people for just one reason: power." He patted the breach of the bagpipe that lay across the desk. "Power in small units. Tell me, Rathwich, what would happen if every human being could have—for instance—an unlimited supply of power in his own back yard, his own reactor, his own weapons? What would happen if every man could be self-sufficient?"

"Chaos."

"Freedom," Rolf corrected. "Recall your history? On the Great Plains they used to call a six-gun an equalizer, because it made the small man the equal of the large. Rathwich, small power-packs like these are going to be the equalizers of Mars, because they can make men independent of the city's industry. A man can take his family and go out on the plains to live as a city unto himself. Bat-ranching, raising quois, trading with the androons—all possibilities.

"With the artifacts of the Bolsewi civilization, and a knowledge of how to produce more of them, the people can have Mars now. There's no need to wait for the modern equivalents of barbed wire, windmills, and six-guns. The androons have them, and don't know how to use them. With some persuasion, they'll trade them for simpler tools—knives, rope, bat-saddles, small-calibre firearms, clothing—things they need that our industry can readily produce."

"That's enough, Kenlan," the Commissioner grunted. "I've been watching you carefully. Your two hours is up, and you've given no indication that you realized it. Evidently you're either in no position to make good a threat against the hostages, or else your savages have already slaughtered them. Our aircraft are at this moment going out to the hills. I imagine the men have already controlled the quois fires enough so that they can take a ground rescue party through. Your show's finished."

AN URGENT fist began beating at the door in the hall. Luling started away. Rathwich growled, "See about it."

The door burst open and a pair of officers came in panting. "With your permission, Commissioner," said one, as they began dragging furniture aside, and searching shelves and drawers.

Rolf heard a metallic *krrrk* as Krasala cranked the bagpipe. "Hold it, kid," he told her.

"If you're looking for the transmitter, it's out on the balcony."

"What is all this?" barked Rathwich as the searchers bounded toward the outer door.

"The telecircuits, sir. You've been picked up. Half the town's been listening. We've got some men cutting the door down to get into the station. Bolted from the inside."

Rathwich lost his color as the men brought in the transmitter and ripped the tape off the mic-button. "Why wasn't this discovered sooner?" he bellowed.

The officer flushed. "Well, we heard it, sir, but we thought it must be an authorized broadcast. Finally we called administration, and—"

"Fool! Get the station back on the program. Squelch the newspaper before it prints anything. Call every guard on duty. Round up the administration staff for a meeting. Get moving!"

"One thing, sir. There's a big crowd outside. Around the hospital."

"What? How did they know we were here?"

"The hospital staff, sir. They spread the word."

"Are they disorderly?"

"Uh ...no sir. It's not a mob. They're just curious. Bewildered."

"Disperse them. Have a helicopter pick us up."

"I've instructed my men to fire on any copters that come in range," Rolf interrupted.

"Then you'll rescind the order," Rathwich snapped. "You're in a hornet's nest here, Kenlan. You can't get out. We can sit here all day, if necessary. You have a stalemate here, of course. But you can't get out of the hospital. You might as well submit."

"Eventually, I will," Rolf agreed. "At the moment, however, we're going to sit and wait. Krasala, if either of those men starts to leave, burn his legs off."

A hand darted for a holster. Rolf swung the bagpipe around and pressed the stud. He missed the man's hand, but the bright violet flare blossomed on the concrete wall a few inches away. The officer shrieked and began beating the flames out of his clothing. Poele slumped to the floor with a faint moan. Rathwich sat calmly but grew pale.

"Anybody else?"

No one spoke or moved as the orb filled the room with blinding light. When it died, all eyes watched the red spot flake away as powdered silica and fused slag.

Then Luling spoke: "May I make a suggestion, Commissioner?"

"Go ahead."

LULING glanced at Rolf and the girl. His hard cool face was impassive. "I suggest that we escort these people safely out of the city and allow them freedom, provided they agree to go beyond the mountains and stay there."

Rathwich shook his head. "We couldn't trust them to stay. I make no bargains with them. They're criminals, and they'll be properly punished." "

Luling frowned. "I'm afraid there'd be some strong opposition to hanging them, sir. Captain Jason Kenlan was charged on several counts—miscegenation, desertion, quarantine-violation. You can charge this young man with treason and quarantine-violation, but you can't make the treason stick unless you can show that he meant to forcibly overthrow the administration. And the people won't stand for another secret trial, since they've heard some of his story. I can't see how you can try him without making a public investigation of his claims. It's true he broke quarantine, but unless the necessity of quarantine can be reestablished, a trial will cause a lot of trouble. Unless, of course, the hostages have been harmed."

"There are no hostages," Rolf interrupted. "The men sealed themselves in the cavern. The androons aren't adequately armed. If there's been any bloodshed, it's been the fault of the guards who entered the caves. My only support I have here with me."

Rathwich showed irritation and surprise, but maintained a calm attitude. Luling smiled faintly, but erased it when the Commissioner turned.

"When is the next Earth-ship due? We might send them to Earth for trial."

"Not for nearly a year, sir. Earth's on the other side of Sol. I'm afraid it's too long to wait. I suggest you get these people away from here as quickly as possible."

Rathwich drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair and stared at Rolf distastefully. "Will you agree to permanent exile, with the understanding that you'll be shot on sight if you try to return?"

Rolf hesitated. His real mission had been accomplished. The people had heard the truth, and the Commission could probably no longer maintain its enforced containment of the people in the city. The outflowing would be slow, a matter of years, but it would be certain. At first a few misfits and petty criminals would steal away at night, to rob the caverns of the androons, to escape justice, or just to get away from a frustrating existence. There would be trouble with the androon tribes, but new nations always had growing pains, and they were normally built by misfits.

Rolf himself was a misfit, and so was his father before him. Jason had always chafed in the fetters of the tightly integrated little society, and had tagged around after first one prophet and then another who called for immediate agrarian outgrowth.

He glanced at Krasala, who stood alertly eyeing the Earthmen and thoughtfully fingering the stud of the bagpipe. Her batskin clothing contrasted sharply with the impeccable uniforms of the others. And the warm shin-fur that her race had developed since its exodus from Earth marked her as different, as a distinct branch of humanity. Sweaters and woolen slacks were standard feminine apparel in Marsville, and wearing them she could pass for an Earthwoman, despite the ruddy-rosy skin which always reminded him of a painful sunburn. But why should she ape Earthwomen?

In the ancient days, pioneers had often taken Indian women to wife, but they seldom brought them back to Boston or New Amsterdam.

THE FUTURE of Mars lay out on the plains and in the mountains, where men could go out to carve their own private empires. A nation would grow the way nations always grew— through strife, violence, and explosive expansion. When, after several hundred years, the frontiers were gone, the nation would begin to integrate. It would be an independent nation, not a chattel of Earth. Marsville would still be an important center, no doubt—for any immediate outgrowth would begin with a timid trickle, and its industry would remain important. But Rolf had no desire to remain within it.

"Well, Kenlan?"

"I'm willing, Rathwich, provided we can work out a scheme to insure that we won't be shot as soon as we're beyond the eyes and ears of the city."

"If you'll permit me, sir," said Luling. "I think I can arrange a plan of escort that will meet Kenlan's approval."

Rathwich looked around so that Rolf could not see his face. "All right, colonel," he said incisively. "I'll let you handle the details. I think you know what's expected of you."

There was another knock at the door. Luling opened it to admit a courier. The man saluted and spoke hurriedly.

"The other Commissioners request your presence if it's possible, sir. There's a lot of excitement, and people off work. The newspapers—"

"Any rebelliousness?" Rathwich growled.

"No, sir, not exactly. It's just excitement. People along the walls watching the guards come back from the hills. And the report on Commissioner Peterson—"

"What report?"

"Well, the way it's told sir... there was some fighting in the caverns. There wasn't any light in the tunnel, and the androons infiltrated our men. Firearms weren't good in the darkness, with everybody all mixed up that way. Commissioner Peterson kept yelling for help, and somebody clubbed him. He's dead, sir. Commissioner White's gone, too. Disappeared. Major Mulvern took charge, once they got the door off the cave. He led a party back into the caverns to look for White, but they couldn't find him. The androons pretended ignorance. White had a talk with their chief priest, and now Mulvern's behaving peculiarly. He ordered everyone back to the city."

"Where are they now?"

"They're about halfway across the plain, but they've cut around by the cemetery."

"Cemetery!"

"Yes sir. There're some androons with them. The androons are exhuming the body of the woman Captain Kenlan married. They want to take her back for tribal burial. Mulvern's men are standing guard. The major hints that White might be released if we let them have the body."

"Then let them!" Rathwich roared. "But get Mulvern's crew away before they see it! The news'll be all over town that the woman was pregnant!"

"Yes, sir!"

Luling looked at the ceiling and quoted from the bio-laws: "The generation of normal offspring by the union of a couple, one of whose partners is positively identified as human, shall constitute a criterion of humanity for the other partner, unless it be shown that the second partner is biologically inadmissible under Sections One and—"

"That's enough, Colonel!" Rathwich warned.

"Sections One and Three," Rolf continued with a wry smile, "which state minimum requirements for intelligence, physical appearance, and social adaptability—all of which the androons can pass."

"Get Mulvern's men away."

"I'm afraid it's too late, sir," said the courier. "They started digging some time ago."

RATHWICH ran his hands nervously through his hair and moistened his lips. "Colonel, get these people out of here. Keep them away from the crowds. Get them out of the city. And Kenlan, stay away—far away." He looked at the courier. "Drive me to the Administration Building at once."

When the officials had departed, Luling nodded at Rolf. "Are you ready?" he asked, smiling.

Rolf watched him suspiciously. "If I were in your boots, I might take the unwanted group out to an open plain, let them go, then send a flight out to strafe them."

"That," said Luling, "is exactly what the Commissioner expects me to do. Let's go to the roof so you can rescind the order against copters." He lifted the telephone, listened, then replaced it. "No operator on the building switchboard, I guess."

Rolf grinned and held up a pair of cut wires from beneath the desk. "I clipped them while we were talking. That's why they sent messengers."

When they moved out into the corridor, nervous orderlies and nurses were hurrying about their duties, giving a wide berth to the bearded tribesmen who stood silently against the wall, eyeing their surroundings with bewildered awe. Rolf beckoned them toward the stairway, while Luling stopped at the desk to call for a group of helicopters.

"There'll be a transport plane waiting for us at the port," he said to Rolf as they climbed to the roof and stepped out into the morning sunlight. "We'll take you as far as you want to go."

"I'm still waiting for some arrangement whereby we can be certain that we won't be hunted down afterwards," Rolf grunted.

"You'll get it. Just be patient."

The Commissioner's car was nosing its way through the dense crowd in front of the hospital. The crowd was silent, moody. Occasionally someone shouted, "When're you going to tear the walls down, Commish?" and, "Since when is Mars a jail?" But no rocks were thrown, nor was the car molested. The crowd was sullen, waiting for answers.

Rolf watched it for a time, until someone shouted, "There's Kenlan, on the roof." The crowd turned to look, silently. He grinned and waved and turned away. The crowd could possibly become a mob, if they didn't get the right answers.

"I don't think you'll be exiled for long, Kenlan," Luling murmured as the copters appeared. "The Commission can be impeached by a nine-tenths majority on a popular referendum. Earth stuck the provision into the charter to make it look good, assuming you can't get a nine-tenths majority on anything. But I think it can be done."

"I don't plan on coming back anyway, until..."

"Yes?"

He grinned at Krasala. "Prefer a j. p. or an androon priest?"

She wrinkled her forehead and looked bewildered.

"I guess we won't be coming back," he said to Luling.

"Confidentially, I won't either," murmured Luling.

HALF AN HOUR later, a twin-engine jet transport was winging westward over the gray-capped peaks. Four former batsmen had elected to accompany their leader, while the others chose to return to their own tribe. The Martian tundra lay red, gray, and dusty green behind them, while beyond the mountains lay hilly country, with quioie growing in the sheltered valleys and bats swooping low over the landscape. The colonel left the ship on autopilot and stepped back to sit with the passengers.

"You really intend to come with us?" Rolf asked.

Luling nodded. "Frontier fever, maybe. As a kid, I used to sit on the walls and look out at the mountains and wish. I never stopped wishing. Lots of people feel that way, Kenlan, but there's been no

precedent—until your father started it. Now there won't be any stopping it. When the transport doesn't come back, they'll send out searchers. Some of the searchers won't come back. By that time, the Commission will have to either get out, be impeached, or follow the popular will."

He hesitated, glancing toward the cargo compartment. "There are bailout kits with the parachutes—rifles, food, and so forth. You pick your spot, and I'll circle while you heave it out. Then I'll set the autopilot to hold a westerly course, and we'll all bail out.

They'll find the ship a hundred miles or so away; not much chance of our being caught."

"I don't agree," Rolf murmured absently as he stared out at the terrain.

"Eh? You think we'll be caught? By whom?"

"Oh—prospectors, bat-trappers, traders, fugitives...in a few years."

Lulipg chuckled and went back to the cockpit. Rolf watched Krasala carefully preening her shins in a swept-back hairdo, lending the impression of winged feet. He had brought a jar of depilatory but, upon second thought, he decided to leave it aboard ship. Parachute silk should make fine hair-ribbons.

THE END

## SAINT LEIBOWITZ AND THE WILD HORSE WOMAN

SAINT LEIBOWITZ AND THE WILD HORSE WOMAN  
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For David, and all those who sailed against the Apocalypse

The estate of Walter M. Miller, Jr., would like to thank Terry Bisson for his editorial contribution to *Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman*.

## NOTE

The fictional Rule of Saint Leibowitz is an adaptation of the Benedictine Rule to life in the Southwest Desert after the collapse of the Great Civilization, but it is true that the fictional monks of Leibowitz Abbey do not always conform to it as perfectly as did the monks of St. Benedict.

Permission was kindly given by the Liturgical Press, Collegeville Minnesota, to quote from the Leonard J. Doyle translation of *St. Benedict's Rule for Monasteries*, Copyright 1948, by The Order of Saint Benedict.

## CHAPTER 1

"Listen, my son, to your master's precepts, and incline the ear of your heart."—The First Sentence of

### *The Rule.*

"Whoever you are, therefore, who are hastening to the heavenly homeland, fulfill with the help of Christ this minimum Rule which we have written for beginners; and then at length under God's protection, you will attain to the loftier heights of doctrine and virtue which we have mentioned above."—The Last Sentence of *The Rule*.

Between these two lines, written about 529 A.D. in a dark age, is Saint Benedict's      homely prescription for a way of monastic life that has prevailed even in the shadow of the *Magna Civitas*.

HE SAT SHIVERING IN THE GLOOMY CORRIDOR outside the meeting hall and waited for the tribunal to finish deciding his punishment, Brother Blacktooth St. George, A.O.L., remembered the time his boss uncle had taken him to see the Wild Horse Woman at a Plains Nomad tribal ceremony, and how Deacon ("Half-Breed") Brownpony, who was on a diplomatic mission to the Plains at the time, had tried to exorcise her priests with holy water and drive her spirit from the council lodge. There had been a riot, and an assault on the person of the young deacon, not yet a cardinal, whose shaman ("witch doctor") attackers had been summarily executed by the newly baptized Nomad shaf. Blacktooth was seven at the time, and had not seen the Woman then, but his boss uncle insisted that she had been there in the smoke of the fire until the trouble began. He believed his boss uncle, as he might not have believed his father. Later, before he ran away from home, he had seen her twice, once by day riding bareback and naked along the crest of a ridge, and once by dim firelight when she prowled as the Night Hag through the darkness outside the settlement enclosure. He definitely remembered seeing her. Now his ties to Christianity de-manded that he remember them as childish hallucinations. One of the less plausible accusations against him was that he had confused her with the Mother of God.

The tribunal was taking its time. There was no clock in the hall, but at least an hour had passed since Blacktooth had testified in his own defense and been excused from the meeting hall, which was really the abbey's refectory. He tried not to speculate about the cause of the delay, or the meaning of the fact that pure chance had cast that dea-con, now Cardinal ("Red Deacon") Brownpony, in the role of *amicus curiae* at the hearing. The cardinal had come to the monastery from the Holy See only a week ago, and it was well known, but most cer-tainly not announced, that his purpose in being here was to discuss with the Abbot Cardinal Jarad the papal election (the third in four years) which would be called soon after the present Pope finished dying.

Blacktooth could not decide whether the eminent Half-Breed's participation in the trial was favorable or unfavorable to his cause. As he remembered the night of the exorcism, he also remembered that in those days Brownpony had not been friendly to the Plains Nomads, either the wild or the tamed. The cardinal had been raised by sisters in the territory conquered by Texark. It had been told to him that his mother, a Nomad, had been raped by a Texark cavalryman, then had abandoned her baby to the sisters. But in recent years, the cardinal had learned to speak the Nomad tongue, and spent much time and effort forging an alliance between the wild people of the Plains and the exiled papacy in its Rocky Mountain refuge at Valana. Blacktooth himself was of pure Nomad blood, although his late parents had been displaced to the farming settlements. His mother owned no mares, and thus he had no status whatever among the wild tribes. His ethnic background had been no handicap during his life as a monk; the brethren were tolerant to a fault, except in matters of faith. But in the so-called civilized world outside, being a Nomad would be hazardous unless he lived on the Plains.

He heard raised voices from the refectory, but could not make out words. One way or another, it was all over for him but the final break, and that was proving to be the hardest thing of all.

A few paces from the bench where he was supposed to wait was a shallow alcove in the corridor wall, and within it stood a statue of Saint Leibowitz. Brother Blacktooth left the bench and went there to

pray, thus disobeying the last command given to him: Sit there, stay there. Breaking his vow of obedience was getting to be a habit. Even a dog will sit and stay, his devil reminded him.

*Sancte Isaac Eduarde, ora pro me!*

The kneeling rail was too close to the image for him to look up at the saint's face, so he prayed to the saint's bare feet, which stood on a pile of fagots. Anyway, by now he knew the wrinkled old countenance by heart.

He remembered when he first came to the abbey, the abbot of that time, Dom Gido Graneden, had already ordered the statue removed from his office, its traditional place of repose, to the corridor here where it now stood. Graneden's predecessor had committed the sacrilege of having the fine old wood carving painted in "living color," and Graneden, who loved it in its original condition, could neither bear to look at it, with its painted simper and impossibly upturned irises, nor put up with the smell and noise of having its restoration done in situ. Blacktooth had never seen the full paint job, for upon his arrival the head and shoulders of a man of wood emerged from what appeared to be the chest of a plaster saint. A small area at a time was being treated with a phosphate compound concocted by Brothers Pharmacist and Janitor. As soon as the paint began to blister, they painstakingly scraped it clean, trying to avoid any abrasion of the wood. The process was very slow, and he had lived a year at the abbey before the restoration was complete; by that time, a filing cabinet occupied its space in the abbot's office, so here it still stood.

The restoration was less than complete even now, at least in the sight of those who remembered its original condition. Occasionally Brother Carpenter stopped to frown disapprovingly at it, then to work on the creases around the eyes with a dental pick, or caress between the fingers with fine sandpaper. He worried about what the paint remover might have done to the wood, so he frequently rubbed it with oil and lovingly polished it. The carving had been done nearly six centuries ago by a sculptor named Fingo, to whom the Beatus Leibowitz — not yet canonized — had appeared in a vision. A close resemblance between the statue and a death mask which Fingo had never seen was used as an argument for his canonization, because it seemed to confirm the reality of Fingo's vision.

Saint Leibowitz was Blacktooth's favorite saint, after the Holy Virgin, but now it was time to go. He crossed himself, arose, and returned doglike to the bench to "sit and stay." No one had seen him at prayer except his devil, who called him a hypocrite.

Blacktooth remembered clearly the first time he had asked to be released from his final vows as a monk of the Order of Saint Leibowitz. Many things had happened that year. It was the year the news came that his mother had died. It was also the year that the Abbot Jarad had received the red hat from the Pope in Valana, and the year Filpeo Harq had been crowned as the seventh Hannegan of Texark by his uncle Urion, the archbishop of that imperial city. More to the point, perhaps, it was the third year of Blacktooth's work (assigned to him by Dom Jarad himself) of translating all seven volumes of the Venerable Boedullus's *Liber Originum*, that scholarly but highly speculative attempt to reconstruct from the evidence of later events a plausible history of the darkest of all centuries, the twenty-first—of translating it from the old monastic author's quaint Neo-Latin into the most improbable of languages, Brother Blacktooth's own native tongue, the Grasshopper dialect of Plains Nomadic, for which not even a suitable phonetic alphabet existed prior to the conquests (3174 and 3175 A.D.) of Hannegan II in what had once been called Texas.

Several times Blacktooth had asked to be relieved of this task before he asked what he really dreaded, to be released from his vows, but Dom Jarad found his attitude peculiarly stubborn, obtuse, and ungrateful. The abbot had conceived of a small Nomadic library he wanted created as a donation of high culture from the monastic Memorabilia of Christian civilization to the benighted tribes still wandering the northern Plains, migrant herdsmen who would one day be persuaded into literacy by formerly edible missionaries, already busy among them and no longer considered edible under the Treaty of the Sacred Mare between the hordes and the adjacent agrarian states. As the literacy rate among the free tribes of the Grasshopper and Wild-dog Hordes who ranged with their long-haired cattle north of the Nady Ann River was still less than five percent, the usefulness of such a library was a thing only dimly foreseen, even by the Lord Abbot, until Brother Blacktooth, in his initial eagerness to please his master before the work



began, explained to Dom Jarad that the three major dialects of Nomadic differed less to the reader than to the listener, and that by means of a hybrid orthography and the avoidance of special tribal idioms, the translation could be made understandable even to a literate ex-Nomad subject of Hannegan VI in the South, where the Jackrabbit dialect was still spoken in the shanties, the fields, and the stables, while the Ol'zark tongue of the ruling class was spoken in the mansions, the law courts, and the police barracks. There the literacy rate for the malnourished new generation of the conquered had risen to one in four, and when Dom Jarad imagined such moppets receiving enlightenment from the likes of the great Boedullus and other notables of the Order, there was no talking him out of the project.

That the project was vain and futile was an opinion Brother Blacktooth dared not express, so for three years he protested the inadequacy of the talent he was applying to the task, and he assailed the intellectual poverty of his own work. He supposed the abbot had no way to test this claim, for, besides himself, only Brothers Wren St. Mary and Singing Cow St. Martha, his old companions, understood Nomadic well enough to read it, and he knew Dom Jarad would not ask them to. But Jarad had him make an extra copy of one chapter of the work, and he sent it to a friend in Valana, a member of the Sacred College who happened to speak excellent Jackrabbit. The friend was delighted, and he expressed a wish to read all seven volumes when the work was done. The friend was none other than the Red Deacon, Cardinal Brownpony. The abbot called the translator to his office and quoted from this letter of praise.

"And Cardinal Deacon Brownpony has been personally involved in the conversion of several prominent Nomad families to Christianity. And so, you see—" He paused as the translator began to cry. "Blacktooth, my son, I just don't understand. You're an educated man now, a scholar. Of course that's incidental to your vocation as a monk, but I didn't know you cared so little for what you've learned here."

Blacktooth dried his eyes on the sleeve of his robe and tried to protest his gratitude, but Dom Jarad went on.

"Remember what you were when you came here, son. All three of you, going on fifteen and you couldn't speak a civilized word. You couldn't write your name. You never heard of God, although you seemed to know enough about goblins and night hags. You thought the edge of the world was just south of here, didn't you?"

"Yes, Domne."

"All right, now think of the hundreds, think of the thousands, of wild young fellows just like you were then. Your relatives, your friends. Now, I want to know: what could possibly be more fulfilling to you, more satisfying, than to pass along to your people some of the religion, the civilization, the culture, that you've found for yourself here at San Leibowitz Abbey?"

"Perhaps Father Abbot forgets," said the monk, who had become a bony, sad-faced fellow of thirty years, and whose ferocious ancestry was in no way suggested by his mild appearance and self-conscious ways. "I was not born free, or wild. My parents were not born free or wild. My family hasn't owned horses since the time of my great-grandmothers. We spoke Nomadic, but we were farm workers, ex-Nomads. Real Nomads would call us grass-eaters and spit on us."

"That's not the story you told when you came here!" Jarad said accusingly. "Abbot Graneden thought you were wild Nomads."

Blacktooth lowered his gaze. Dom Graneden would have sent them home if he had known.

"So real Nomads would spit on you, would they?" Dom Jarad resumed thoughtfully. "Is that the reason? You'd rather not cast our pearls before such swine?"

Brother Blacktooth opened his mouth and closed it. He turned red, stiffened, crossed his arms, crossed his legs, uncrossed them rather deliberately, closed his eyes, began to frown, took a deep breath, and began to growl through his teeth. "Not pearls—"

Abbot Jarad cut him off to prevent an explosion. "You're pessimistic about the resettled tribes. You think they have no future anyway. Well, I think they do, and the work is going to be done, and you're the only one to do it. Remember obedience? Forget the purpose *of* the work, if you can't believe in that, and find your purpose *in* the work. You know the saying: 'Work is prayer.' Think of Saint Leibowitz, think of Saint Benedict. Think of your calling."

Blacktooth regained control of himself. "Yes, my calling," he said bitterly. "I once thought I was called to the work of prayer—contemplative prayer. Or so I was told, Father Abbot."

"Well, who told you contemplative monks don't work, eh?"

"Nobody. I didn't say—"

"Then you must think scholarship is the wrong kind of work for a contemplative, is that it? You think that scrubbing stone floors or shoveling shit from the privies would put you closer to God than translating the Venerable Boedullus? Listen, my son, if scholarship is incompatible with the contemplative way, what was the life of Saint Leibowitz all about? What have we been doing in the Southwest desert for twelve and a half centuries? What of the monks who have risen to sanctity in the very scriptorium where you're working now?"

"But it's not the same."

Blacktooth gave up. He was in the abbot's trap, and to get out of the abbot's trap, he would have to force Jarad to acknowledge a distinction he knew Jarad was deliberately avoiding. There was a kind of "scholarship" which had come to be a form of contemplative religious practice peculiar to the Order, but it was not the head-scratching work of translating the venerable historians. Jarad, he knew, was referring to the original labor, still practiced as ritual, of preserving the Leibowitzian Memorabilia, the fragmentary and rarely comprehensible records of the *Magna Civitas*, the Great Civilization, records saved from the bonfires of the Simplification by the earliest followers of Isaac Edward Leibowitz, Blacktooth's favorite saint after the Virgin. Leibowitz's later followers, children of a time of darkness, had taken up the selfless and relatively mindless task of copying and recopying, memorizing and even chanting in choir, these mysterious records. Such tedious work demanded a total and unthinking attention, lest the imagination add something which would make meaningful to the copyist a meaningless jungle of lines in a twentieth-century diagram of a lost idea. It demanded an immersion of the self in the work which was the prayer. When the man and the prayer were entirely merged, a sound, or a word, or the ringing of the monastery bell, might cause the man to look up in astonishment from the copy table to find that the everyday world around him was mysteriously transformed, and aglow with the divine immanence. Perhaps thousands of weary copyists had tiptoed into paradise through that illuminated sheepskin gate, but such work was not at all like the brain-racking business of bringing Boedullus to the Nomads. But Blacktooth decided not to argue.

"I want to go back to the world, Domne," he announced firmly.

Dead silence was his answer. The abbot's eyes became glittering slits. Blacktooth blinked and looked aside. A buzzing insect flew through the open window, circled the room twice, and alighted on Jarad's neck; it crawled there briefly, took wing again, and flew buzzing out by the same window.

Through the closed door of the adjoining room, the faint voice of a novice or postulant reciting his assigned Memorabilium penetrated the silence without really diminishing it:

"—and the curl of the magnetic field intensity vector equals the time-rate-of-change of the electric flux density vector, added to four pi times the current density vector. But the third law states the divergence of the electric flux density vector to be—" The voice was soft, almost feminine, and fast as a monk reciting rosary, his mind pondering one of the Mysteries. The voice was familiar, but Blacktooth could not quite place its owner.

Dom Jarad sighed at last and spoke. "No, Brother Blacktooth, you won't disown your vows. You're thirty years old, but outside these walls, what are you still? A fourteen-year-old runaway with nowhere to go. Pfft! The good simpletons of the world would pluck you like a chicken. Your parents are dead, yes? And the land they tilled was not their own, yes?"

"How can I be released, Father Abbot?"

"Stubborn, stubborn. What have you got against Boedullus?"

"Well, for one thing, he's contemptuous of the very Nomads—" Blacktooth stopped; he was in another trap. He had nothing against Boedullus. He liked Boedullus. For a dark-age saint, Boedullus was rational, inquisitive, inventive—and intolerant. It was the intolerance of the civilized for the barbarian, of the plantation owner for the migrant driver of herds, of Cain, indeed, for Abel. It was the same intolerance as Jarad's. But Boedullus's mild contempt for the Nomads was beside the point. Blacktooth

hated the whole project. But there across the desk from him sat the project's originator, giving him pained looks. Dom Jarad was as always Blacktooth's monastic superior, but now he was more than that. Besides the abbot's ring, now, he wore the red skullcap. As the Most Eminent Lord Jarad Cardinal Kendemin, a prince of the Church, he might as well be titled "Winner of All Arguments."

"Is there some way I can get out, m'Lord," he asked again.

Jarad winced. "No! Take three weeks off to clear your head, if you want to. But don't ask that again. Don't try to blackmail me with hints like that."

"No hints, no blackmail."

"Oh, no? If I don't reassign you, you'll go over the wall, right?"

"I didn't say that."

"Good! Then listen, my son. By your vow of obedience, you sacrifice your personal will. You promised to obey, and not just when you feel like obeying. Your work is a cross to you, is it? Then thank God and carry it. Offer it up, offer it up!"

Blacktooth sagged, looked at the floor, and slowly shook his head. Dom Jarad sensed victory and went on.

"Now, I don't want to hear anything about this again, not before you've finished all seven volumes." He stood up. Blacktooth stood up. The abbot shooed the copyist out of his office then, laughing as if it had been all in fun.

Brother Blacktooth passed Brother Singing Cow in the corridor on his way to Vespers. The rule of silence was in force, and neither spoke. Singing Cow grinned. Blacktooth scowled. Both of his fellow runaways from the wheat plantations knew why he had gone to see Dom Jarad, and both lacked sympathy. Both thought his job a cushy one. Singing Cow worked in the new printing shop. Wren worked in the kitchen as Brother Second Cook.

He saw Wren that night in the refectory. The second cook stood on the serving line, apportioning mush to the platters with a large wooden spoon. Each man in passing murmured, "*Deo gratias*," and Wren nodded back as if to say, "You're welcome."

As Blacktooth approached, Wren already held a huge gob of mush on the spoon. Blacktooth held his platter to his chest and signaled too *much* with his fingers, but Wren turned to speak "necessary" instructions to a busboy. When Blacktooth relaxed his platter, Wren piled it on.

"Half back!" Blacktooth whispered, breaking silence. "Headache!" Wren raised his forefinger to his lips, shook his head, pointed to a sign—SANITARY RULES—behind the serving line, then pointed toward the sign at the exit, where a garbage monitor checked for waste.

Blacktooth laid the platter on the serving kettle. With his right hand he scooped up the heap of mush, with his left hand he seized the front of Wren's robe. He pushed the mush in Wren's face and massaged it until Wren bit his thumb.

The prior brought word directly to Blacktooth's cell: Dom Jarad had relieved him of his job in the scriptorium for three weeks, in order that he might pray the stone-floor-scrubbing prayer for the cooks in the kitchen and dining area. And so for twenty-one days Blacktooth endured Wren's smiling forgiveness while knee-skating on soapy stones. More than a year passed before he again raised the standing question of his work, his vocation, and his vows.

During this year, Blacktooth felt that the rest of the community had begun to watch him rather closely, and he sensed a change. Whether the change was really in the attitudes of others, or entirely within himself, its effect was loneliness. Occasionally he felt estranged. In choir, he choked on the words "One bread and one body, though many, are we." His unity with the congregation seemed no longer taken for granted. He had spoken the words "I want out," perhaps before he really meant them; but not only had he uttered such a thing to the abbot, he had allowed his friends to learn of the incident. Among the professed, among those who by solemn vows had committed themselves irrevocably to God and the Way of the Order, a monk with regrets was an anomaly, a source of uneasiness, a portent, a thing in need of pity. Some avoided him. Some looked at him strangely. Others were all too kind.

He found new friends among the younger members of the community, novices and postulants not yet fully committed to the Way. One of these was Torrildo, a youth of elfish charm whose first year at the

abbey had already been marked many times by trouble. When Blacktooth was sent to the cooks for three weeks of floor-scrubbing penance, he found Torrildo already scrubbing there as punishment for some unannounced infraction, and he soon learned that Torrildo's had been the muffled voice reciting a Memorabilium in the room adjacent to Dom Jarad's during the professed monk's unhappy interview. They differed widely in their interests, origin, character, and age, but their common penance pushed them together long enough for a bond to form.

Torrildo was glad to find an older monk who was not impeccable. Blacktooth, while not quite admitting that he envied the postulant's relative freedom to leave, began imagining himself in Torrildo's sandals, with Torrildo's problems, Torrildo's charm, and Torrildo's talents (which evaded the notice of many). He found himself giving advice, and was flattered when Singing Cow told him sourly that Torrildo was copying his mannerisms and becoming his talk-alike. It became a brief case of father and son, but it further estranged him from the ranks of the professed, who seemed to frown on the relationship.

He was beginning to find it hard to distinguish the frown of the community from the frown of his conscience. One night he dreamed he knelt for communion in the chapel. "May the Body of Jesus Christ lead you to eternal life," the priest repeated to each communicant; but as he came closer, Blacktooth saw that it was Torrildo, who, as he placed the wafer on Blacktooth's tongue, leaned close and whispered, "One who eats bread with me here shall betray me."

Blacktooth awoke choking and gagging. He was trying to spit out a living toad.

## CHAPTER 2

The first degree of humility is obedience without delay. This is the virtue of those who hold nothing dearer to them than Christ; who, because of the holy service they have professed, and the fear of hell, and the glory of life everlasting, as soon as anything has been ordered by the Superior, receive it as a divine command and cannot suffer any delay in executing it.

—*Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 5

URING THE TIME OF BROTHER BLACKTOOTH'S translation of the eleventh chapter of the seventh and final volume of Boedullus, and while he was working feverishly toward the end, a special messenger from Valana in the Denver Freestate arrived at the abbey with tragic news. Pope Linus VI, shrewdest if not the saintliest of recent popes, and the man most responsible for healing the postconquest schism, had fallen dead of heart failure while he stood shin deep in an icy trout stream and shook his fishing rod at a delegation from the Curia on shore. He was protesting to them that the Lord had never told Peter to stop fishing for fish when he commissioned him to fish for men. Pope Peter had indeed taken five apostles boating with him right after the Resurrection, Linus correctly pointed out. Then he paused, turned white, dropped the rod, and clutched at his chest; almost defiantly he gasped, "I go a-fishing," and collapsed into the frigid water. It was later noticed that these last words were from John 21:3.

As soon as the message came, the Most Eminent Lord Cardinal Abbot began packing his fine regalia. He notified the Papal Way Station in Sanly Bowitts that he would need armed escorts for the trip, and he arranged with Brother Liveryman to make ready the fastest pair of horses and the lightest carriage, as if he planned a quick trip. He mixed his tears with a nervous sweat, as he alternated between

bursts of grief and flurries of excitement in making ready for the journey. It was the dead Pope who had made him a cardinal. It was going to be his first papal election. The community understood his mixed feelings and stayed out of the way.

After he had eulogized Linus and offered a Mass for the dead, he spoke to the assembled monks in the refectory after supper on the night before his departure.

"Prior Olshuen will carry out my duties as abbot while I am away. Will you promise to render him the same obedience in Christ which you give to me?"

There was a murmur of assent from the congregation.

"Does anyone withhold this promise?"

There was silence, but Blacktooth felt people looking at him.

"My dear sons, it does not behoove us in this monastery to discuss the business of the Sacred College, or the politics of Church and State." He paused, looking around at the small lake of faces by lamplight. "Nevertheless, you are entitled to know why my absence may be extended. You all know that one result of the schism was the appointment by two rival claimants to the papacy of an unprecedented number of cardinals. And that one of the terms of the settlement that ended the schism was that the new Pope, now of holy memory, would ratify the elevation of all these cardinals, no matter which claimant had made the appointments. This was done, and there are now six hundred eighteen cardinals on the continent, some of them not even bishops, a few not even priests. Since these are about equally divided between East and West, it may be very hard to arrive at the two-thirds-plus-one majority required to elect a pope. The conclave may last for some time. I hope not more than a few months, but there is no way I can predict.

"I fear you will hear gossip from time to time as travelers come and go. As long as the papal exile from New Rome continues, surrounded as it is by Texark forces, the enemies of the Valana papacy hope for a renewal of schism, and they keep all possible gossip alive. Listen to none of it, I beg of you.

"The force of the State has abated. The seventh Hannegan is not the same tyrant as the second Hannegan, who, as you know from history, used treachery and cattle plague to capture an empire from the Nomads, driving sick farm animals among the woolly Nomad herds. He sent his infantry as far west as the Bay Ghost, and his cavalry chased stragglers right past our gates. He killed the Pope's representative, and when Pope Benedict laid Texarkana under interdict, Hannegan seized all the Churches and courts and schools. He occupied the lands adjacent to New Rome, forcing His Holiness to flee to asylum in the crumbling Denver Empire. He collected enough bishops from the east to elect an anti—or, I should say, a *rival* pope to sit in New Rome. And so we had sixty-five years of schism.

"But Filpeo Harq is the seventh Hannegan now. Indeed he is heir to the conqueror, but there is a difference. His predecessor was a cunning, illiterate semi-barbarian. The present ruler was raised and educated for power, and some of his teachers were educated by us. So have hope, my sons, and pray.

"If the right Hannegan sits down with the right pope, with God's help, surely they can come to terms and end the exile. Pray that the pope we elect may return to a New Rome free of Texark hegemony. Everywhere, people have strong feelings about the occupation, but it will do no good for us to argue within the Sacred College whether the Texark troops must be withdrawn before the Pope goes home. That will be a decision for the Pope himself, when he is elected.

"Pray for the election, but not for any candidacy. Pray for the Holy Spirit to guide our choice. The Church now needs a wise and saintly pope, not an eastern pope or a western pope, but a pope worthy of that old title 'Servant of the servants of God.' " In a lowered voice, Dom Jarad added, "Pray for me too, my brothers. What am I but an old country monk, to whom Pope Linus, in a weak moment perhaps, gave a red hat? If anybody in the College has a lower rank than I, it must be the woman—er, Her Eminence the Abbess of N'Ork, or else my young friend Deacon Brownpony, who's still a layman. Let your prayers help keep me from folly. Not that I'm going among wolves, eh?"

Barely audible snorts and giggles caused Jarad to frown.

"As a way of showing that I am not an enemy of the Empire, I shall cross the Bay Ghost and take the route through the Province. But I'm going to reschedule tomorrow's Mass. It's a ferial day anyway, so we'll sing the old Mass for the Removal of Schism before I go."

He spread his arms as if to embrace the throng, traced a great cross in the air over them, came down from the lectern, and left the hall.

Blacktooth became wildly anxious. He sought permission to speak to Dom Jarad before the abbot's departure, but permission was denied. In near panic, he found Prior Olshuen before dawn in the cloister on his way to Matins, and he plucked at the sleeve of the prior's robe.

"Who is it?" Olshuen asked irritably. "We're already late." He stopped between the shadows cast from the columns by a single torch. "Oh, Brother Blacktooth, it's you. Speak up then, what is it?"

"Dom Jarad said he'd hear me when I finish Boedullus. I'm almost finished, but now he's leaving."

"He said he'd hear you? If you don't lower your voice, he'll hear you now. Hear you about what?"

"About changing jobs. Or about leaving the Order. And now he'll be gone for months and months."

"You don't know that. Anyway, what can I do about it? And what do you mean, leave the Order?"

"Before he goes, would you remind him about me?"

"Remind him of what about you?"

"I can't go on this way."

"I won't even ask. 'What way?' We're late." He began walking toward the Church with Blacktooth tagging at his side. "If Dom Jarad has a free moment this morning, and if I mention your obvious agitation, will he know what it's all about?"

"Oh, I'm sure he will, I'm sure!"

"Now what was that about leaving the Order? Never mind, we're holding up Matins. Come by my office in a day or two, if you like. Or I'll send for you. Now calm down. He won't be gone for long."

Abbot Jarad, after he offered the Mass for the Removal of Schism, announced from the pulpit his wish that they sing a votive Mass for the election of a pope on the day appointed for the opening of the conclave, and another such Mass on the first day after any news came to the abbey from Valana, unless that news proclaimed a new pope. Afterward, he departed toward the Bay Ghost.

Two dozen or more monks, including Blacktooth and Torrildo, lined the parapet of the eastern wall and watched the plume of dust until it dwindled on the eastern horizon.

"To prove he's no enemy of the Empire, he's taking the way through the Province," Blacktooth sourly echoed his master's words. "But he takes armed guards. Why armed guards?"

"That makes you bitter?" asked Torrildo, who usually concerned himself with Blacktooth's feelings, rarely with his thoughts.

"If he *were* an enemy of the Empire, things might be different for me, Torrildo."

"How?"

"Things might be different for everybody, if nobody here had ever compromised. And he dared talk to me about pearls before swine."

"I don't understand you, Brother."

"I don't expect you would. If my own cousins Wren and Singing Cow don't understand, how could you?" He placed his hand reassuringly over Torrildo's where it lay on the parapet. "It's enough that you care."

"I care, I really do." The postulant was looking at him with those gray-green eyes that so reminded him of his mother's soft and searching gaze. There was something feminine about it. Embarrassed by the intensity of the moment, Blacktooth removed his hand.

"Of course you do. Let's forget it. How is it with you and that difficult Memorabilium?"

"Maxwell's equations, they're called. I can say them forward and backward, but I don't know what they are or what they mean."

"Neither do I, but you're not supposed to know. I can tell you this, though: their meaning has been penetrated during the past century. They're supposed to be among the notes Thon Taddeo Pfardentrott took back to Texark with him about seventy years ago. Maxwell's equations are among the very great Memorabilia, so I've heard."

"Pfardentrott? Didn't he invent the telegraph? And dynamite?"

"I think so."

"Well, if the meaning has already been penetrated, why do I have to keep it memorized?"

"Tradition, I guess. No, it's more than that. Just keep running the words through your mind, as a prayer. Keep it up long enough, and God will enlighten you, so the old-timers say."

"If somebody's penetrated the meaning, maybe I could find out."

"That might spoil it for you, Brother. But you can try, if you want to. You can read what Brother Kornhoer wrote about the subject after Pfardentrott left, but I don't think you'll understand him."

"Brother who?"

"Kornhoer. He invented that old electricity machine down in the vaults."

"Which doesn't work."

"Oh, it worked when he built it, but it wasn't very practical here; and for some reason, his abbot would never let him teach anyone to fix it. Have you ever seen an electric light?"

"No."

"Neither have I, but the Palace of the Hannegans in Texark is full of them. And they've got some at the university there. Brother Kornhoer and Pfardentrott became friends, as I recall, but the Abbot Jerome didn't approve. Say, why don't you read that placard that hangs over Kornhoer's machine?"

"I've seen it, but I never read it. The machine is a nuisance to keep clean. So many cracks and crannies for dust." Torrildo was an underground janitor and warehouse clerk. "You never told me about your Memorabilium, Blacktooth."

"Well, it's a religious one. I don't think it has any secret scientific value. They call it 'Saint Leibowitz's Grocery List.' " He tried to suppress the flush of pride he felt at being given the Founder's Memorabilium, but Torrildo did not notice.

"Does anything special happen when you say it?"

"I wouldn't say yes, I wouldn't say no. Maybe I never worked at it hard enough. As Saint Leibowitz himself used to say, 'What you see is what you get, Wysiwyg.' "

"Where is that saying recorded? What does it mean?"

Blacktooth, who loved the cryptic "Sayings of Saint Leibowitz," was spared answering as the bell rang the hour of Sext, marking the resumption of the rule of silence, which the abbot had suspended for the morning of his departure. The monks on the parapet wall began to leave.

"Come see me in the basement, if you get a chance," Torrildo whispered in violation of the rule.

Blacktooth's Nomadic ancestors had always placed a high value on ecstatic magical or religious experience, and this heritage, while pagan, was not incongruent with the traditional mystical quest which he had found so attractive and natural in the life of the monastery. But as his feeling of unity with his professed brethren gradually waned, he found himself less captivated by the formal worship of the community. Processions and the chanting of psalms no longer elevated his spirits and sent them soaring. Even the reception of the Eucharist during Mass failed to entrance his heart. He felt this as a distinct loss, in spite of his doubts about his vocation to the Order. He tried to recover by his solitary devotional practice what he was losing in the public worship.

A monk's time alone in his cell was limited to seven hours a night, of which at least an hour and a half was to be spent in meditative, affective, or contemplative prayer. Some of this prayer time was devoted to the reading of those parts of the divine office which his daily work at the abbey prevented him from singing in choir at the regular hours, but Blacktooth rarely needed more than twenty minutes to finish his breviary, and the rest of the time he gave to Jesus and Mary. In his sleep, however, his dreams were often colored by the myths of his childhood and of the Wild Horse Woman whom he had seen.

His confessor and spiritual adviser had sharply warned him, more than once, against taking seriously any seemingly supernatural manifestation that came to him during the contemplative work, such as a vision or a voice, for such things were usually either the work of the Devil or simply the spurious side effects of the intense concentration demanded by meditative or contemplative prayer. When the visions began coming to him one night in his cell, he attributed them to fever, for he had fallen ill the previous day, and was excused from the scriptorium.

He knelt on a thinly padded block of wood beside his cot and gazed unwaveringly at a small picture

of the Immaculate Heart that hung on the wall. When his mind strayed, or a thought arose, he brought his attention back to the picture. The painting was undistinguished, lacking in detail, and hardly more than a symbol. The prayer was a wordless, thoughtless fixation of the mind on the image and the heart of the Virgin. He was a bit dizzy from fever, and a numbness came over him as he knelt there. Occasionally his field of vision darkened. The heart began to pulsate, and then expand. He could no longer focus his eyes on it. His mind seemed to be plunging into a dark corridor toward emptiness.

And then, there it was: a living heart suspended before him in the blackness of space, beating in cadence with his own pulse. It was complete in every detail. A puncture of the left ventricle leaked small spurts of blood. For a time he felt neither fear nor surprise, but continued to gaze in complete absorption. He knew, beyond words, that it was not the heart of Mary, but not until later reflection did this puzzle or perplex him. He simply accepted what came to him, at the time it happened.

A rap at the door dissolved the trance. His skin crawled at the sharp change in his consciousness.

*"Benedicamus domino,"* he answered after a moment.

*"Deo gratias,"* came a muffled voice from the corridor. It was Brother Jonan, arousing everyone for Matins. The footsteps receded.

He arose and made himself ready for his usual routine, but he carried the spell cast over him by the vision all that day and the next. It was very puzzling, even after his fever passed.

When Prior Olshuen had not summoned him by the third day of Dom Jarad's absence, Blacktooth sought him out. Olshuen was an old friend; he had been Blacktooth's teacher and confessor in the days before he was made prior, but just now the appearance of his old student at his office doorway evoked no smile of welcome.

"Oh, well, I did tell you to come see me, didn't I?" said Olshuen. "You might as well sit down." He returned to his chair, put his elbows on the desktop, pressed his fingertips together, and at last smiled thinly at Blacktooth. He waited.

Blacktooth sat on the edge of his chair, eyebrows raised. He also waited. The prior began flipping opposed fingertips apart, a pair at a time, and flipping them back together. Blacktooth always found this habit fascinating. His coordination was perfect.

"I came to ask—"

"Dom Jarad told me to throw you out if you came to ask for anything more than a blessing, unless you're through with Boedullus, and I know you're not. I don't throw you out, because I had already invited you." He punctuated each phrase with a pause and a flip of the fingertips. He did this only when nervous. "So what do you want, my son?"

"A blessing."

Easily disarmed, the gentle Olshuen lowered his hands, leaned forward, and laughed his relief.

"On my petition to be released from my vows."

The smile vanished. He leaned back, pressed fingertips together again, and said in a mild tone, "Blacktooth, my son. What a dirty rotten little Nomad kid you are!"

"You've obviously spoken to Dom Jarad about me, Father Prior." Blacktooth risked a rueful grin.

"He said nothing you'd want to hear, and he said a few things you're better off not hearing. He spent at least half a minute on the subject, talking fast. Then he told me to throw you out, and he left."

Blacktooth stood up. "Before I get thrown, would you mind telling me how I can find out about the procedure?"

"The procedure for what, to abandon your vows?" Olshuen waited for Blacktooth's nod, then went on: "Well, you turn right when you go out the door. You walk down the hall to the stairway, and then you take it down to the cloister. You go around to the main entrance, and on out into the courtyard. Across the courtyard is the main gate, and outside that, you go to the road. From there, you're on your own. The way to your new future lies open before you." He found it unnecessary to add that Blacktooth would be under excommunication, ineligible for employment in many places, deprived of all right to petition in ecclesiastical courts, cut off from the sacraments, shunned by the clergy and the pious among the laity, and readily victimized by anyone who realized that he was unable to sue in the courts.

"I meant to get out legally, of course."



"There are books on canon law in the library."

"Thank you, Father Prior." Blacktooth started to leave.

"Wait," said the prior, relenting. "Tell me, son—if, after you've finished Boedullus—this is hypothetical, understand?—if, then, you're given a choice of jobs, how would you feel about the other thing?"

The monk hesitated. "I would probably think about the other thing all over again."

"How close are you to being finished?"

"Ten chapters to go."

Olshuen sighed and said, "Sit down again." He rummaged through papers on his desk until he found a sealed envelope. Blacktooth could see his own name on it, written in Dom Jarad's hand. The prior slit it open, unfolded the enclosed note, read it slowly, and looked at Blacktooth. He put his fingertips together again and began tapping them by pairs as before.

"A choice of jobs?"

"Yes—he left you a choice. When you finish *The Book of Origins*, you can do the same author's *Footprints of Earlier Civilizations*. Unless you're sick and tired of the Venerable Boedullus."

"I'm sick and tired of the venerable one."

"Then you will be assigned to translate Yogen Duren's *Perennial Ideas of Regional Sects*."

"Into Nomadic?"

"Of course."

"Thank you, Father Prior."

Blacktooth went down the hall to the stairway, descended to the cloister, left it by the main entrance, crossed the courtyard, and walked out to the road through the main gate. There he stood for a while, gazing uncertainly at the arid landscape. Down the trail lay the village of Sanly Bowitts, and several miles beyond the village arose the flat-topped hill called the Mesa of Last Resort. There were mountains in the distance, with a few hills in the foreground. The land was lightly covered by cactus and yucca, with sparse grass and mesquite growing in the low places. There were distant antelope, and he could see Brother Shepherd leading his flock through the pass, his dog snarling at the heels of a straggler.

A wagon drawn by a swayback mule pulled to a stop, engulfing Blacktooth in a thin cloud of dust. "Going to town, Brother?" asked its grizzled driver from his perch atop a pile of feed sacks.

Blacktooth was tempted to go past the village and climb Last Resort. It was said to be haunted, a place monks sometimes went alone (with permission) for a kind of spiritual ordeal in the wilderness. But after a brief pause he shook his head. "Many thanks, good simpleton."

He walked back through the main gate and headed for the basement vaults. When Saint Leibowitz had founded the Order, tradition said that there had been nothing here except an ancient military bunker or temporary ammunition dump, which he and his helpers had managed to disguise so that one might pass a stone's throw away and never notice its existence. It was in this place that the earliest Memorabilia were preserved. According to Boedullus, no living quarters were constructed on the site until the middle of the twenty-first century. The monks had lived in scattered hermitages and came here only to deposit books and records until the fury of the Simplification had abated and the danger to the precious documents from skinheads and simplifiers had waned. Here, still underground, the ancient Memorabilia and the latter-day Commentaries awaited a destiny which had, perhaps, already come and was swiftly receding.

## CHAPTER 3

Let the monks sleep clothed and girded with belts or cords—but not with their knives at their sides lest they cut themselves in their sleep. . . . The younger brethren shall not have beds next to one another, but among those of the older ones.

—*Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 22

N OIL LAMP TOO DIM FOR READING HUNG IN each alcove where books were stored. A light held by hand was needed to locate a title on the shelves. Ordinarily one then carried the book up to the clerestory reading room, but Blacktooth scanned the abstract of Duren's *De Perennibus Sententiis Sectarum Rurum*, his next assigned project, by the light of a candle held close to the pages. He soon returned the book to the shelf and went to join Brother Torrildo, who was leaning against Kornhoer's old generator of electrical essence, a rusting hulk in an alcove where no light burned.

"Let's sit back here where nobody'll catch us," Torrildo muttered, and stepped into the deep shadows behind the machine. Brother Obohl's gone out, but I'm not sure where."

Blacktooth hesitated. "I don't need to hide. I have reason for being here, even if I didn't ask permission."

"Shhh! You don't have to whisper, but keep it down. I'm only allowed to come in here to clean. Not that it matters much now."

"What's that door?" Blacktooth nodded toward the rear of the dark alcove.

"Just a closet full of junk. Parts of the machine, I think. Come on."

The monk hesitated. The machine somehow gave him the creeps. It reminded him of the special chair in the chapel, which was really a holy relic.

With the faster travel and communication made possible by the conquests of Hannegan II, invention had become contagious in a world that was beginning to recover twelve centuries after the *Magna Civitas* perished in the Flame Deluge. Most inventions, of course, were reinventions, suggested by the few surviving records of that great civilization, but new devices were nonetheless cunning and needed. What was needed at Hannegan City was an efficient and humane method of capital punishment. Thus, the building of a generator of electrical essences at the Abbey of Saint Leibowitz in 3175 A.D. was followed in a few years by the building of a chair of electrical essences at Hannegan City in the Empire of Texark. The first offender to be executed by the new method was a Leibowitzian monk whose crime was carrying a cardinal abbot's offer of sanctuary to a son of the late Thon Taddeo Pfardentrott, an enemy of the Texark state, whose work at Leibowitz Abbey had, nevertheless, made possible many new inventions that benefited the Empire, including the chair of electrical essences.

It was the first and only time the chair was used. Hannegan III had placed it on a platform in the public square, and while two teams of mules drove the electrical generator, the Mayor himself cut the ribbon that allowed a spring to close the switch. To the crowd's delight, the voltage was low and the monk died slowly and noisily. The method was abandoned until a better generator was built. Steam power came, but the chair was never brought out of storage, because a more recent Hannegan found the best executioner on this continent in the person of Wooshin, whose ancestors came from a different continent, and who used a hatchet with such artistry and ease that a whole afternoon of severing heads left him untired and tranquil, able to sit in deep meditation for two hours before dinner.

The chair of electrical essence was eventually disassembled and smuggled across the southern Plains, then out of the Empire at the Bay Ghost frontier. It reappeared at Leibowitz Abbey, where it was placed in the Church over the crypt that contained the bones of the monk who died in it, and regularly on the day of his death, the chair was incensed, sprinkled with holy water, and venerated in his memory. Leibowitz Abbey became the only monastery on the continent with its own electric chair. Some thirty years later, the abbey inherited the now elderly executioner, Wooshin, who staggered out of a sandstorm asking for

water and sanctuary. That was only three years ago.

"Are you going to stand out there until they catch me?" Torrildo asked impatiently.

Blacktooth sighed and squeezed into the dark cranny beside him. Someone had piled a number of worn sleeping pads, torn and stinking of mildew, in the shadows behind the machine. They sat in comfort.

"I never knew about this," said Blacktooth, amused.

"Blacktooth, are you going to run away?"

The older monk was silent for a time, considering. Earlier he just wanted to run as far as Last Resort, to make a decision, and then maybe come back. Torrildo felt his thigh, as if groping for an answer. He brushed the hand away and sighed. "I just read the abstract on the Duren book. It's a history of local cults and heresies that keep popping up and coming back in different places. God knows why Dom Jarad wants something like that translated into Nomadic. I can't even begin to guess, until I read the whole book."

"You aren't going to run away?"

"How can I? I took solemn vows."

Torrildo released a choking sob in the darkness. "I'm going to run away."

"That's silly. All you need to leave in good standing is Dom Jarad's permission, and for a postulant that's just formality."

"But Dom Jarad is gone. I have to leave now!" His sobbing intensified. Blacktooth put a comforting arm around his shoulders. Torrildo leaned against him and cried quietly into the hollow of his neck.

"Now, what is the matter with you?" asked the older monk.

Torrildo lifted his head and put his face close to Blacktooth's. All Blacktooth could see was an oval shadow with Torrildo's beautiful eyes peering out of it.

"Do you really like me, Blacktooth?"

"Of course I do, Torri. What a question!"

"You're the only reason I've been staying here these past months."

"I don't understand."

"Oh, you say you don't, but you do. Now I just can't stay here any longer. I'd just get you into trouble anyway. I'm impure. I haven't been faithful to you."

"What are you talking about? Faithful how?" Blacktooth shifted restlessly on the moldy mattresses.

"Oh, you're so smart, but you're so naive." He took Blacktooth's face in his soft thin hands. "I'm going. Will you kiss me goodbye?" He felt Blacktooth wince, and dropped his hands. "You won't, then."

"Well, sure I will, Torri." Carefully Blacktooth offered him the kiss of peace, first a peck on the right cheek, then—

"Ohhhh," the youth sighed, and caught him in a fierce embrace.

Blacktooth felt lips pressing his own and a tongue trying to work its way between his teeth. He tossed his head aside and leaned back, gagging. Torri fell on top of him and groped under the hem of his robe, both hands sliding up his legs. Blacktooth was first frightened, then horrified by his own erection, which the inflamed Torrildo discovered with delight.

"Torri, no!"

"You know I was meant to be a girl. . . ."

The door of the closet burst open. A skinny arm thrust out a lantern above them. In the sudden light, Blacktooth caught a glimpse of four naked legs and two erect penes.

"Sodomites!" yelled the senior librarian, Brother Obohl. "I caught you at it. I finally caught you, you scum. Up to the prior's office with you!" He aimed a kick at Torrildo's bare rump, but missed. Obohl was nearsighted. Once he had owned the only pair of spectacles at the abbey, ground for him in Texark, but had given them up for religious reasons. Now he grabbed Torrildo's arm, and yelled at Blacktooth, who was scrambling over the machine.

"Elwen! Brother Elwen! Come back here, you filthy bugger!"

Blacktooth heard a scuffle behind him as he sprinted up the stairway. He paused on the landing to compose himself, then strode quietly through the reading room into the courtyard. Outside he paused in the blinding sunlight, dazed and confused. The myopic old man had mistaken him for Brother Elwen, a

novice who worked for the groundskeeper. Blacktooth had seen Torrildo and Elwen together on several occasions, but thought nothing of it. Now he seemed caught in a trap the librarian had set for another. The mistake would not endure. Across the courtyard, in plain sight, Elwen was on his hands and knees, working manure into the soil under the rosebushes. There was no honorable escape. He started to report back to the copy room, but things might become embarrassing there, when the prior sent for him. He started again toward his cell, but the sound of running footsteps made him look around. It was Torrildo, sprinting toward the main gate. Blacktooth stood waiting for a commotion to follow, but nothing happened.

He waited a full minute. After a brief prayer to Saint Leibowitz, he made up his mind to return to the basement. At the bottom of the stairs, he met only silence in the dim light. He found the candle he had used earlier and looked behind the machine. The old librarian lay on his back. He clutched his head and rolled it side to side. There was blood on his forehead. Blacktooth bent over him.

"Who's there?" he rasped.

"Blacktooth St. George."

"God be praised, Brother. I need a little help."

Blacktooth picked the old man up, edged his way around the machine, and staggered with him toward the stairs.

"Put me down. I'm too heavy for you. I'll be all right in a moment."

They rested briefly against the wall. Then Blacktooth draped the librarian's arm around his neck and helped him up the stairs. Obohl was croaking and wheezing.

"It was Elwen and Torrildo. Those buggers. I knew. What they were up to back there. Just couldn't catch them. Until today. You know, so much semen. Gets spilled. Behind that machine. They call it the seminary. Now. Now. Where did they go?" Still wheezing, he blinked around at his blurred world.

Blacktooth set him carefully on the end of a table in the reading room and made him lie down on it. Monks at the reading desks got up and quickly gathered around. One brought a drinking jug and wiped the librarian's face. Another examined the cut on his scalp. Another asked, "What happened to you, Brother?"

"I caught them. I finally caught them. Brother Torrildo and Brother Elwen again, going at it behind the electric idol. Torrildo hit me—with something."

"Torrildo hit you all right," said Blacktooth. "But Elwen wasn't there. It was me, Blacktooth St. George."

He turned and walked away, not hurrying, and continued to his cell. He lay on his back and stared up at the picture of the Immaculate Heart of the Virgin until they came to get him.

Were it not for the fact that shoveling compost was defined as public punishment, Blacktooth might have preferred it as a career to the job of translating a monk's-eye view of history for Nomads too proud to read. Taking the raw shit out of the privies and transporting it by wheelbarrow to the first composting bin was the smelliest part of the task. There he mixed it with thrice its volume of garden weeds, corn husks, chopped cactus, and plate scrapings from the kitchen. Each day he shoveled the stinking mixture from one bin to the next in line, allowing air to penetrate and hasten the decay. When the mixture reached the final bin, it was crumbling and had lost most of its odor. From there, he loaded it into a clean wheelbarrow and moved it out to the great pile near the garden, where it awaited the pleasure of the cultivators.

On the third day, after an interview with the prior, Brother Elwen went over the wall. Blacktooth expected relief. None came. For three weeks in full he prayed the compost-shoveling prayer, offering up each stinking shovelful on behalf of the soul of poor, poor Torrildo. That he fry in hell—is not my wish, O Lord, he managed to pray.

No one snubbed or shunned him (after he bathed), but the shame of public penance made him isolate himself. In his loneliness, in his cell by night, he sought ever more fervently the indescribable emptying of himself that seemed to occur in a kind of union with the heart of the Virgin: a heart not filled with sorrow, but made empty by sorrow, made open by sorrow, made selfless by sorrow, a heart which was a pit of loving darkness, wherein, sometimes, he glimpsed fleetingly another wounded but still beating heart.

"The Devil too has his contemplatives, they say" was his confessor's harsh judgment upon the vision and upon Blacktooth's private devotional practice. "The focus of contemplation must be Our Lord. Devotion to Our Lady is splendid, but too many monks turn to her only when their vows fit too tight, when obedience is hard. They call her 'Refuge of Sinners,' and so she is!—but there are two ways of looking at this: the Lord's way, and the sinner's way. Pay attention in choir, my son, and stop chasing visions at night."

Thus Blacktooth learned not to mention the vision. He saw his confessor was made angry by it, for how could a professed monk who regretted his vows be granted any grace except that of contrition and repentance? He observed a similar attitude in Prior Olshuen, who, at the end of his three-week penance, sent him back to his regular work, but also ordered him to spend an hour a week with Brother Reconciliator for special counseling, to Blacktooth's utmost chagrin.

Brother Reconciliator, a monk named Levion, was part-time assistant to Brother Surgeon as well as a Keeper of Memorabilia from certain ancient healing arts. He handled cases of senility, fits, depression, delusion, and—contumacy. He had also been ordained an exorcist. Olshuen, without doubting Blacktooth's account of the incident in the basement, saw it as a manifestation of rebellious discontent, and saw the discontent as sin or madness.

Blacktooth's devotion to the Virgin, however, continued and grew in the face of this disapproval. His old hero, Saint Leibowitz, was at least temporarily pushed aside to make more room for the Virgin. He had chosen Duren's *Perennial Ideas of Regional Sects* for his next project, in preference to more Boedullus, partly because so many of Duren's country religions were special cults of Mary, or of some local goddess who had borrowed Mary's identity and carried Mary's Babe on her arm. Duren even mentioned the Nomadic Day Maiden. It was a choice he would quickly regret, because of the extreme difficulty of translating theological ideas into Nomadic, but at first he was captivated by one section ("Apud Oregonenses") which dealt with remnants of what had been called the Northwest Heresy a few centuries before. The description of the cult's beliefs seemed to cast light on his own mystical vision.

"The Oregonians," wrote Duren, "considered the Mother of God to be the original uterine Silence into which the Word was spoken at the creation. She was the dark Void made pregnant with light and matter when God roared '*Fiat!*' Word and Silence were coeval, they said, and each contained the other."

This reminded Blacktooth of the image of the darkening heart that became a pit of blackness containing another living heart. He was deeply moved.

"Thus it was impossible," Duren wrote in a later paragraph, "for the cultist to evade the Inquisitor's accusation that they made of the Virgin a fourth divine person, an incarnation of God's female wisdom."

Since no one at the abbey could read Nomadic except Wren and Singing Cow, Blacktooth felt safe in taking a few liberties with a work so resistant to understandable expression in that primitive tongue. In translating the word *eculeum* ("colt"), he could choose any of eleven Nomadic words that meant a young horse, and none of them were synonymous. But any one-word translation of the Latin "eternity" or "transubstantial" would only bewilder the reader. Theological terms, therefore, he left as Latin words in the Nomadic text, and tried to define them by lengthy footnotes of his own composition. But whenever he imagined himself trying to explain such matters to his late father or boss uncle, these footnotes became flavored with a facetiousness which he knew he would have to remove from the final version. Levity made the task less hateful, but strengthened his conviction that it was useless.

After an absence of two months, Abbot Jarad wrote to the prior from Valana and requested, among other things, that a votive Mass be offered weekly for the election of a pope, for he saw no quick end to a difficult election. Without a government, the Church was in confusion and turmoil. The city of Valana was too small to be a gracious host to hundreds of cardinals with their secretaries, servants, and alternates. Some were living in barns.

He wrote little about the conclave itself, except to note with obvious disgust that more than one cardinal had already gone home, leaving behind a special conclavist to cast his ballot. The practice was made possible by a canon which had been enacted for the convenience of foreign, not domestic, cardinals, but the latter took advantage of it during long periods of interregnum. The special conclavist in

such cases must, if possible, be a member of the clergy of the cardinal's titular New Roman (or Valanan) Church, and he was entitled to vote his own convictions under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but such a proxy was always chosen for loyalty, and rarely deviated from his cardinal's wishes until an election became obvious and he switched his vote to back a winner. The practice made compromise more difficult, as the servant was always less flexible than the master. Jarad would make no prediction as to the date of his return. The messenger who brought the letter, however, got mildly drunk in Sanly Bowitts and expressed his own opinion of the affair: either the cardinals would all appoint conclavists and go home for the winter, leaving a hopeless deadlock, or would elect an ill old man who could be expected to die before settling any real problems.

Other news and gossip trickled to the abbey from Valana by way of travelers, guardians of the papal roads, and messengers who spent the night on their way to other destinations. Abbot Jarad Cardinal Kendemin was said to have received two votes on the thirty-eighth ballot—a dubious rumor which caused a flurry of excitement and joy at the abbey and a surge of panic in the heart of Blacktooth, who needed a pope's assent to be released from his vows, under the laws then in effect.

"You're not making sense," Brother Reconciliator told him at their weekly session after he listened to five minutes of Blacktooth's nervous chatter. "You think Dom Jarad has his foot on your neck. You think he'll never change his mind. If he comes home still the abbot, you can appeal to the Pope. But if he's the Pope, he'll have nothing better to do than keep his foot on your neck, eh? You'll spend your whole life translating the Memorabilia into Nomadic. Why do you suppose Dom Jarad hates you so much?"

"I didn't say he hated me. You're putting words in my mouth."

"Excuse me. He has his foot on your neck. Your father also had his foot on your neck, you said. I forgot. It was your father who hated you, yes?"

"No! I didn't say that either, exactly."

Levion shuffled through his notes. They were sitting in his cell, which served as his office; his role as a special counselor was not a full-time one.

"Three weeks ago, you said exactly: 'My father hated me.' I wrote it down."

Blacktooth sat slouched on Levion's cot, leaning back against the wall. Suddenly he leaned forward, rested his elbows on his knees, and began wringing his hands. He spoke to the floor. "If I said it, I meant when he hated me, he was drunk. He hated the responsibility. Raising me was supposed to be my boss uncle's job. Also, he was angry because my mother was teaching me to read a little." Blacktooth put his hand over his mouth, betrayed by this thoughtless revelation.

"Here are two things I don't understand, Brother St. George. First, you came here illiterate, did you not? Second, why should your uncle be responsible for you instead of your father?"

"That's the way it is on the Plains. The mother's brothers take responsibility for her children."

Blacktooth was increasingly restless. He eyed the door.

"Oh yes, Nomads are matriarchal. Is that right?"

"Wrong! Inheritance is matrilineal. That's not the same."

"Well, whatever. So your father felt put-upon, because your mother had no brother?"

"Wrong again. She had four brothers. My boss uncle was the oldest. He taught me dances and songs, took me to tribal councils, and that's about all. I could not become a warrior. Mother owned no breeding pit, no broodmares, and we were outcasts."

"Broodmares? What have broodmares got to do with—" He left the question unfinished, waved his hand in the air as if trying to dispel echoes. "Never mind. Nomad customs. I'll never untangle that ball of worms. Let's get back to the problem. You felt your father's foot on your neck. You say your mother was teaching you to read? But you said you came here illiterate. Did you lie?"

Blacktooth rested his chin on his hands and stared at his feet; he wiggled his toes and said nothing.

"Whatever you tell me stays right here in this room, Brother."

The patient paused, then blurted, "I couldn't read very well, or speak Rockymount very well. Wren and Singing Cow couldn't read at all. I kept quiet because everyone thought we were real Nomads. If Abbot Graneden found out we came from the settlements, he would have sent us back."

"I see. So that's why you learned faster than Wren and Singing Cow. Your mother had already taught

you. Where was she educated?"

"She learned what little she knew from a mission priest."

Levion was silent for a time as he studied his occasional disciple. "Whose idea was it to run away to join the wild Nomads?"

"Singing Cow's."

"And when the Nomads turned you away, whose idea was it to come here?"

"Mine."

"Tell me again. When did your mother die?"

"Year before last."

"When did you first tell Dom Jarad you wanted to quit the Order?"

Blacktooth said nothing.

"It was right after your mother died, wasn't it?"

"That had nothing to do with it," he growled.

"Didn't it? As a runaway, how did you feel when you got the news your mother had died?"

The bell rang. Blacktooth stood up with a sudden smile, unable to hide his relief.

"Well?"

"I felt very sorry, of course. Now I've got to go to work, Brother."

"Of course. Next week then, we'll talk more about this."

Blacktooth liked these sessions less and less. He had no wish to be reconciled by Brother Reconciliator, who seemed to treat his wish to depart as a symptom of illness, if not madness. As he hurried back to the copy room, he resolved to tell Levion no more about his parents or his childhood.

Because of the man's ignorance of Nomad life, his interviews with Brother Levion, instead of reconciling him with his calling, served instead to increase his nostalgia for that life which he had never quite inherited. He remembered his mother turning Christian, and his father, who sometimes tried to exercise an uncle's authority over him, insisting that he prepare himself for a manhood rite which he knew at the time would never be celebrated. The Church forbade the rite which turned adolescents into fully licensed mankillers of a war cult. But he had undergone training and understood something of the spirit of the Nomad warrior and his battle frenzy. It was hard to say anything true in answer to the question: What is Nomad religion like? Everything the wild Nomad did was religiously or magically hedged. It was hard to say what his religion was not. One might add up a list of ingredients for a religion: his ceremonies, his customs, his laws, his magic, his medicine, his oracles, his dances, his occasional ritual killing, his Empty Sky and his Wild Horse Woman, and call the list his religion, but this list would omit too much of daily living. There was even a ritual for defecation.

Bending over his worktable, he read again his favorite passage from Duren's *Perennial Ideas*, paused to think about his vision, and then penned a footnote to his translation of the paragraph:

This conception of the Virgin as the uterine silence wherein the Word is uttered and heard seems to accord with the mystical experience of contemplatives who have encountered the living heart of Jesus within the dark and empty heart of Mary.

He hesitated over it, neglected to add the word *Translator*, and thought of tearing up the page. But Brother Copymaster was standing nearby, and whenever Blacktooth tore up a page, the copymaster remarked on the cost of paper. I'll come back to it later, he thought, for it was growing dark in the copy room, and he was not allowed more than one candle. Suppressing a sense of mortal sin, he cleaned up his table, and left the problem for tomorrow.

## CHAPTER 4

And let him be punished likewise who would presume to leave the enclosure of the monastery and go anywhere or do anything, however small, without an order from the Abbot.

EARLY A YEAR AFTER THE HEART OF POPE LINUS VI failed him in the cold trout stream, a stormy conclave elected Olavlano Cardinal Fortos, an octogenarian from south of the Brave River, who was a stargazer, a scholar learned in the subject of witch detection, and a man believed to be neutral in the perennial East-West power struggle. He chose the name Pope Alabaster II and lived long enough to issue a bull ("for a perpetual memorial of the matter") which ordered Earth's prime meridian from which all longitudes are measured moved from its ancient (and until recently inaccessible) location. The line of zero longitude thereafter would pass through the center of the high altar of Saint Peter's Basilica in New Rome, and would perpetually remain there, free from the influence of what Alabaster called the Green Witch. Many representatives to the Curia from both coastlines of the continent had opposed the decree, because in this century of rapid development, great wooden ships had begun again to sail the seas; Alabaster's bull would not only confuse navigation, but would hasten the time (previously expected to come in the fortieth century) when it would be necessary to drop a day from the calendar to keep it in step with the heavens. Both East and West suspected political motives behind the bull, somehow connecting it with the occupation of territory around New Rome by the armies of the Hannegan, and so Alabaster died of poison a few months after his election.

The subsequent interregnum lasted 211 days while hundreds of cardinals bickered, and the people of Valana threw stones at the carriages of the cardinals' servants. Divine Providence at last moved the conclave to elect Rupez Cardinal de Lonzor, also from south of the Brave River, and the oldest, sickest man in the Sacred College. He took the name of his predecessor of holy memory, becoming Alabaster III, but immediately repealed his predecessor's decree by a bull (also *ad perpetuam rei memoriam*) which restored the prime meridian to its ancient location, for scholars of the Order of Leibowitz had assured him that "Green Witch" had not been the habitation of a sorceress, but only the name of an ancient village on a distant island which had been depopulated by the Flame Deluge. Again political motives were suspected. Westerners opposed the change, and the old man died in his sleep after eating a dish of hare cooked in wine and vinegar, flavored with sauteed onions and laurel leaves.

Weary cardinals came again to Valana. This time the name of Abbot Jarad Cardinal Kendemin was placed in nomination very early in the conclave, and he, quite unwillingly, gathered the support of nearly fifteen percent of the electors before word was spread that Dom Jarad, if chosen, would utter the "*Non accepto!*" which had not been heard for nearly two thousand years, when Saint Petrus Murro Pope Celestin V futilely spoke them from his hermit's cave, only to be dragged to the throne by a desperate College.

The conclave sought this time in vain for one of its own members with no suspected loyalty either to the Empire or to the Valana bureaucracy and its western allies. The name of Elia Brownpony was proposed, for the Red Deacon was professionally a lawyer and diplomat, skilled in negotiation, but his relative youth, his reputation for being manipulative, and the fact that he would have to be ordained a priest and then anointed bishop before he could accept the papacy, all weighed against him. Only Dom Jarad, never a great judge of character, offered to support his friend, but Brownpony would not accept.

The only telegraph line on the continent stretched from Hannegan City in Texark to the very southeast corner of the Denver Republic. In order to obtain metal for its construction, the previous Hannegan had confiscated all copper coinage in the Empire, all copper pots, and many Church bells. The line helped make the area of conquest in the south safer from incursion by the free Nomads of the north, but now it was being used to keep Filpeo Harq informed about the conclave, to send instructions from the capital to Archbishop Benefez and his allies in the Sacred College. Almost every day, a messenger from Benefez rode south to the terminal station to pick up the mail, while another messenger was taking mail in the other direction. No other cardinal bishop could stay in touch so easily with his home diocese.



The temper of the people of Valana grew ugly again. The Church was Valana's only industry, and the burghers themselves were dependent on the papal exile for their livelihood. Prayers against schism were fervent within the conclave, but unpopular in the local Churches. Workers daily scrubbed the Cathedral Palace walls to remove graffiti of the previous night, painted there by the workers' kinsmen.

There were demonstrations. The people of the city and surrounding villages assembled to propose their own candidates to the inaccessible and unyielding cardinals. The name of one holy man of some local repute as a healer and rainmaker, one Amen Specklebird, was frequently heard in the streets. He was a retired priest of the Order of Our Lady of the Desert, and not unknown to the Bishop of Denver, who had forced him to choose between retirement and a heresy trial.

But driven by the Holy Spirit, a holy fear of the mob, and the onset of a bitter winter, the conclave at last elected the Bishop of Denver himself, the Most Reverend Mariono Scullite, not a member of the College, but a man who could be counted on to make matters no worse than they were. He took the name Linus VII, which suggested that he would return to the policies of the pope who had managed to terminate open schism before he went a-fishing.

But now Linus VII too was slowly dying of a wasting illness which could not be attributed to poison (unless his sisters and nephews who acted as tasters of the pontifical diet were part of the plot). After consulting the Pope's physician, Elia Cardinal Brownpony rented a private carriage without ecclesiastical insignia, hired a Nomad driver who apparently spoke no Rockymount ("I need to practice my Wild-dog dialect," he explained to an aide), and quietly departed for the southwest desert to confer with Abbot Jarad Cardinal Kendemin. Actually, the Nomad driver was fluent in several languages, and they had much to talk about.

• • •

Brother Blacktooth had run away from the monastery again. He knew he would have to go back, but sometimes the wildness of his Nomad heritage took possession of him, and he abandoned his vows and his sanity for a few days, and he ran. He ran not from the bad food and the hard bed and the long tedious hours, but from an all-knowing, all-seeing, pride-consuming authority of his superiors. This time he had stolen coins from the prior's desk, bought bread and a wineskin in the village. The skin he filled with water, and went wandering northward. The first day he had moved across open country, just to avoid travelers on the road; but because of the wolves he had returned to the highway at sundown to spend the night in a monk pen. It was a roofless stone enclosure three paces square and just taller than a frenzied wolf could jump. Among the graffiti, a sign in Latin welcomed all visitors and bade them defecate *extra muros*. Monks of his own order had built such shelters along the way, but nobody kept them clean. A trickle of water from a spring on the mountainside ran across the floor. He built a small fire and boiled some of the water in his cup, adding some roasted mesquite beans for flavor. He ate some of his biscuits and a bit of dried mutton before the stars came out. In a few days, he would begin starving. He slept shivering in a corner, but before daylight revived his fire.

Traveling parallel—as he fallibly judged by the sun—to the direction of the highway from which he had fled at dawn after sighting a party of horsemen with long rifles, he had come to the canyon and there was no way in sight to cross it. It was already late afternoon and he had nowhere to spend the night. On the highway, there was the monk pen, where he could be safe, at least, from predators of the four-legged kind. But they would look for him there. It was soon after he doused the remains of his fire at dawn that he heard the horsemen coming beyond the hill, and he scrambled up a cut from the winding road and hid in the rocks until they came into view. They were soldiers. Papal guardsmen, or Texark? He could not be sure at that distance. He huddled lower in sudden fright. As a small boy, Brother Blacktooth had been raped by soldiers, and horror of it still haunted him.

The two-legged traffic on the highway was very light, and if a man was on foot he was either a monk or a frustrated horse thief. Today there were thieves. He had seen them from afar. It was a good hour and a half before twilight, but there was no sign of a way across the abyss below him. It was already a pit of darkness in the earth. He would have to walk. There was no law in this territory but the distant law of

the Church. Turning back from the canyon, he decided to climb the Mesa of Last Resort.

It was from the Mesa that Blacktooth, missing from the abbey four days, had witnessed the Red Deacon's arrival without realizing that the passenger in the private carriage that emerged from the rooster tail of dust out of the north and hurried on through the village of Sanly Bowitts to the Abbey of Saint Leibowitz was the man who had shaped his unhappy past by admiring his translation of Boedullus and who would even more strongly influence his future.

When his water ran low, he searched Last Resort, looking for the mythical spring and the shanty once inhabited by an eremitic old Jew who had departed from the region at the time of the Texark conquest. He found the shanty in ruins, but no spring or other source of water, which could hardly have existed so far above the surrounding desert. Another myth said that the old Jew had been a rainmaker, and needed no such spring. It was a truth, he observed, that the Mesa was greener than the land below. There was a mystery here, but he sought no solution. For most of the time, until his waterskin ran dry, he prayed to the Virgin, or simply sat in the dry wind and seethed in his own evil under the sun. It was early spring, and by night he nearly froze. Having caught a terrible cold and run out of water, he knew at last that he would have to go back and plead insanity.

Now, three days after the passage of the carriage through the village, he sat shivering with a dripping nose in the gloomy hall and awaited judgment. Occasionally a monk or a novice walked quietly past, on his way to the library or workshop, but Blacktooth sat hunched over with his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands, knowing that no one would acknowledge his existence even by a nod. There was an exception. Someone strode quickly past him, then stopped at the door to the meeting room. Feeling himself being watched, Blacktooth looked up to see his former therapist, Levion the Reconciliator, gazing down at him. As their eyes met, Blacktooth inwardly cringed, but there was neither contempt nor pity in the monk's gaze. After a slight shake of his head, he entered the meeting hall, evidently summoned as a witness. What had passed between them in Levion's cell was supposed to be as confidential as a confession, but Blacktooth trusted no one.

Cardinal Brownpony had learned almost immediately of Blacktooth's unsanctioned absence, for soon after his arrival he asked to see the work of the young monk who had been translating Boedullus into Nomadic, and Jarad had been forced to give an account of the copyist's growing rebellion. Worse, while admiring the Nomadic version of Boedullus, Brownpony read aloud to his Nomad driver, whose Nomad name meant Holy (Little Bear) Madness, and to his secretary, a white-bearded old priest named e'Laiden who fluently spoke Wild-doe Nomadic, read to them some of Blacktooth's translation of Duren, and the three of them became openly contemptuous of it. "These theological ideas are completely alien to the Nomad mind," Brownpony explained to Jarad, thus lending unwitting support to the opinion of the copyist himself, against Jarad's view. Worse, while they were perusing the work, Dom Jarad's attention was called to the footnote in *Perennial Ideas*, which Blacktooth had neither deleted nor signed as his own: "This conception of the Virgin as the uterine silence wherein the Word is uttered and heard seems to accord with the mystical experience of contemplatives . . ."

Brownpony translated it back into Latin for him. No witness to the scene could remember a more furious Abbot Jarad.

Outside the refectory door, Blacktooth's fear became irrational terror when the old postulant named Wooshin came and sat quietly beside him on the bench. The man mumbled what might have been a greeting in Churchspeak with his thick Texark accent (although he refused actually to speak Texark, an Ol'zark dialect), and then he rolled a cigarette, an act requiring a special dispensation from the abbot or prior. But Wooshin was a very unusual man, one who made no claim to a religious vocation of any kind, but whose status as a political refugee from Texark, and whose consummate skill as a smithy, had made him welcome at the monastery, in spite of his gruesome past. He attended Mass and conformed to ritual, but never received the Eucharist, and nobody was sure that he was even Christian. He came originally from the west coast, and his skin was yellow, quite wrinkled now, the shape of his eyes strangely different. Behind his back, those who feared and disliked him called him Brother Axe. For six years he

had been a headsman for the present Hannegan, and some years before that for the Hannegan's predecessor, before he fell from imperial favor and fled for his life to the West.

He had lost weight and seemed to age rapidly during his three years at the abbey, but his presence on the bench outside the judgment hall aroused irrational panic in the culprit who cringed beside him. Until that moment, Blacktooth's worst fear was excommunication, with all its civil penalties and disabilities. Now he thought of the superbly sharp cutlery for the kitchen, and the axes and scythes that Wooshin made for the gardeners. Why, why, was this professional killer summoned to my trial? It was obvious to Blacktooth that Wooshin had been called by the tribunal, but not as a witness. I barely know the man! He had always wondered if the severed head retained a moment of confused consciousness as it fell into the basket.

Wooshin touched his arm. Blacktooth started up with a gasp, but the man was only offering him a large handful of clean, cottonlike waste from his shop.

"Leak the nose."

It took Blacktooth a moment to realize that the man was offering him a mop to wipe away the liquid snot that was running down to his chin.

"Horrid night cold on Mesa," said Brother Axe, betraying his knowledge of the runaway's whereabouts during the absence. So everybody knew.

Blacktooth hesitantly took the mop and used it, then formally nodded his thanks to the donor, as if he were actually observing a religious silence which, in present circumstances, seemed a bit hypocritical even to himself.

Wooshin smiled. Emboldened, Blacktooth asked, "Are you here because of me?"

"I not sure, but not probably. I think I leave here with Cardinal."

Mildly relieved, Blacktooth resumed his former posture. It seemed strange to him that the Axe, who could speak very good Ol'zark, refused to communicate in that tongue, which his accent in Churchspeak betrayed that he spoke. It was one of several languages, besides Churchspeak, which were used with some regularity at the abbey, but when Brother Axe heard it, he usually walked away. What use, he wondered, did Elia Cardinal Brownpony or the Curia have for an executioner who hated his former employer? Was the Church departing from its ancient refusal to shed the blood of its enemies?

An hour late, the bell rang for supper. The meeting hall became a refectory again, and the tribunal adjourned for the meal. As the stream of monks filed silently down the corridor, Wooshin got up to join them. "You not eat?" he asked the defendant.

Blacktooth shook his head and remained seated.

Before the meal was finished, Levion came to the door and spoke to him: "Brother Medic says you should eat."

"No. Too sick."

"Stupid," said Levion. "Stupid and lucky," he added, more to himself than Blacktooth, as he turned back into the refectory. *Lucky?*

The word lingered in his mind, but he could not find an application for it.

There was a faintly audible reading by the lector; then supper ended. Except for the members of the tribunal, the monks filed silently out of the refectory. This time Blacktooth made bold to watch them go, but nobody, not even Wren or Singing Cow, looked down at him in passing. The last man out closed the door. The proceedings resumed.

Soon the door opened again. Someone stepped outside and stood there. Blacktooth looked up, saw a freckled face, graying red hair, and a splash of scarlet. Blue-green eyes were staring at him. Blacktooth arose with a gasp and tried to genuflect with a leg that had gone to sleep. Elia Cardinal Brownpony caught his arm as he stumbled.

"Your Eminence!" he croaked, and tried again to bow.

"Sit down. You're not well yet. I want to talk to you for a moment."

"Certainly, m'Lord."

Blacktooth remained standing, so the cardinal himself sat on the bench and tugged at the monk's

sleeve until he sank beside him.

"I understand you have trouble with obedience."

"That has been true, m'Lord."

"Has it always been thus?"

"I—I'm not sure. I suppose so, yes."

"You *did* begin by running away from home."

"I was thinking of that, m'Lord. But when I came here, I tried to obey. At first."

"But you tired of your assigned work."

"Yes. That is no excuse, but yes."

The cardinal shifted into Grasshopper dialect, with a Jackrabbit accent. "You speak and write well in several languages, I'm told."

"I seem to get along fairly well, Your Eminence, except I'm weak in ancient English," he answered in the same tongue.

"Well, you know, most of our present dialects are at least half old English," said the cardinal, lapsing into Rockymount. "It's just that the pronunciation has changed, and melted in with Spanish, and some think a bit of Mongolian, especially in Nomadic. Although I have my doubts about the myth of a Bayring Horde."

Silence fell while the cardinal seemed to muse. Do you suppose you could serve obediently as someone's interpreter? It would not involve hunching over a copy table for hours at a time, but you would have to translate on paper as well as interpret the spoken word."

Blacktooth mopped his face again with Wooshin's waste and began crying. The cardinal allowed him to sob quietly until he regained control. Was this what Levion meant by "lucky"?

"Do you think you could obey me, for example?"

Blacktooth choked, "What good is a promise of mine? I broke all my vows but one."

"Which one is that, if you don't mind saying?"

"I have never had a woman, or a man. When I was a boy, I was had, though." Torrildo's accusing face came to mind as he said it, but he rejected the self-accusation.

The Red Deacon laughed. "What about solitary unchastity?" Seeing Blacktooth's face change, he hastily added, "Forgive the joke. I'm asking you seriously whether you want to leave this place forever."

"Forever?"

"Well, at least for a very long time, with no reason to expect the Order would take you back even if you wanted to come."

"I have nowhere to go, m'Lord. That's why I came back from the Mesa."

"Your abbot will release you to come to Valana with me, but you must promise to obey, and I must believe your promise. You cannot be laicized yet. You will be my servant."

Once more, the copyist was overwhelmed by tears.

"Well, it's now or never," said the cardinal.

"I promise," he choked, "to do my best to obey you, m'Lord."

Brownpony stood up. "I'm sorry. What is 'your best'? You can't be allowed to decide that for yourself. That makes it a crippled promise. No, it won't do." He started toward the refectory door. Blacktooth fell to the floor, crawled after him, and clutched the hem of his cassock. "I swear before God," he gasped. "May the Holy Mother abandon me, may the saints all curse me, if I fail. I promise to obey you, m'Lord. I promise!"

The cardinal studied him contemptuously for a moment.

"All right, get up then, and come with me, Brother Groveler. Here, this way, give me your arm. Come on through the doorway. Face them, Blacktooth. Now."

Feverish and dizzy, Blacktooth stepped into the refectory, walked a few steps toward the abbot's table, looked at their faces, and fainted.

He was awakened by a voice saying, "Give him this when he comes to, Father." It was Brother Surgeon.

"All right, go see your other patient," said Prior Olshuen.

"I'm awake," said Blacktooth, and sat up by candlelight as the only occupant of the three-bed infirmary. Brother Surgeon came back to his bedside, felt his forehead, and handed him a glass of milky green liquid.

"What is it?"

"Willow bark, tincture of hemp leaves, poppy juice, alcohol. You're not very sick. You can go back to your cell tomorrow if you want to."

"No," said the prior. "You've got to have him well enough to leave in three days. Otherwise, we'll be stuck with him until the next stage to Valana." He turned to Blacktooth, his voice turning cold. "You are confined. Your meals will be brought to you. You will not speak to anyone not in authority over you. If a sick brother needs one of the other beds here, then you will return to your cell. When you leave us, you will take your breviary, your beads, your toilet articles, sandals, and a blanket, but you will exchange your habit for that of a novice. You will remain indefinitely in the custody of your benefactor, Cardinal Brownpony, without whose intercession you would be under interdict and shunned. Is that clear?"

Blacktooth looked at the man who had been his teacher and protector in his youth, and nodded.

"Do you have anything else to say to us?"

"I would like to confess."

The prior frowned, almost shook his head, then said, "Wait until the medicine wears off. I'll ask Dom Jarad about it."

In a very weak voice: "May I have your blessing, then?"

Olshuen stood a moment in angry indecision, then whispered, "*Benedicat te, omnipotens Deus, Pater et Filius et Spiritus Sanctus,*" traced a tiny cross in the air, and departed.

## CHAPTER 5

But if he is not healed even in this way, then let the Abbot use the knife of amputation, according to the Apostle's words, "pel the evil one from your midst ... let him depart," lest one diseased sheep contaminate the whole flock.

—*Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 28

UNDER THE WITHERING GAZE OF HIS FORMER brethren, Blacktooth at last left his cell with his small bundle and made his way into the sunlit courtyard where the Red Deacon's coach was made ready for departure. While he was helping the driver lash his meager belongings to the top of the carriage, he overheard the voice of Singing Cow, just out of sight, talking to a newly arrived postulant who worked in the library.

"He tried persuasion at first, I'll grant that," his former comrade explained. "And when persuasion didn't get him out, he tried violence. And when violence didn't get him out, he tried sodomy. I heard *that* from a witness. But sodomy didn't get him out either, or stealing, or running away. So he inserted a gloss into a copy of the Venerable Boedullus."

"Without attribution?" gasped the assistant librarian.

"Despicable, isn't it," said Singing Cow.

"It wasn't Boedullus!" Blacktooth howled. "It was only Duren!"

Blacktooth rode with the driver as they bumped along the north road toward the mountain passes. He never once looked back at the abbey. The Axe was with them, sometimes driving when Holy Madness rode the cardinal's horse, sometimes riding inside the coach when the cardinal chose to be in the saddle. Both Wooshin and the Nomad treated the disgraced monk with courtesy, but he had as little

intercourse as possible with Brownpony or his clerical companion.

One morning when they had been three days on the road, Wooshin said to him, "You hide from Cardinal. Why you shun? You know he saved you neck back there. Abbot wring like a chicken, except Cardinal save you. Why you afraid him?"

Blacktooth began to deny it, but heard an inner cock's crow. Wooshin was right. To him, Brownpony represented the authority of the Church, previously wielded by Dom Jarad, and he was tired of the obedience which he had been forced to swear again to save himself. But it was necessary to separate the office from the man. After Wooshin's remarks, he stopped shrinking from his rescuer, and exchanged polite greetings in the mornings. But the cardinal, sensing his discomfort, for the most part ignored his presence during much of the journey.

Sometimes Wooshin and the Nomad wrestled or fought for sport with staves. The Nomad called him Axe, which no one at the abbey had dared to do, and Wooshin seemed not to object to the nickname, as long as it was not prefixed by "Brother." In spite of his age and apparent frailty, the Axe was the inevitable winner of these bouts by firelight, and made the Nomad appear so clumsy that Blacktooth once accepted an offer to try fencing the driver with staves. The driver not-so-clumsily whacked him six times and left him sitting in hot ashes while Wooshin and the cardinal laughed.

Let Wooshin teach you," said Brownpony. "In Valana, you may need to defend yourself. You've lived in a cloister, and you're soft. In turn, you help him work on his Rockymount accent."

Blacktooth protested politely, but the cardinal was insistent. So the fencing and language lessons began. "You ready die now?" the Brother Axe asked cheerfully at the beginning of each session, as if he had always asked it of his customers. Afterward, they talked a lot in Rockymount.

But it was with Holy (Little Bear) Madness, the driver, that Blacktooth felt most comfortable, reckoning him to be a servant of no rank or status, and the two struck up an acquaintance. His name in Nomadic was Chür (Ösle) Høngan, and he called Blacktooth "Nimmy," which in Nomadic approximated the word "kid," meaning one who had not yet endured the rites of passage into manhood, Blacktooth was scarcely younger than Holy Madness, but he did not take offense. It's true, he thought; I am a thirty-five-year-old teenager. So the abbot had reminded him. As far as experience in the world was concerned, he might as well have been in prison since childhood. But frightened of an unknowable future, he was already homesick for that prison.

Life at the monastery had not really been equal parts prayer, hard labor, and groveling, as he had told himself. He had done things there he loved to do. He loved the formal prayer of the Church. He sang well, and while he tried to merge his voice in that of the choir, his was the clear tenor that defined itself by its absence when the choir divided into two groups singing the ancient psalms in a dialogue of verse and response. The group without Blacktooth missed him. And on three occasions when there were important guests at the abbey, Blacktooth, at the abbot's request, had sung alone for everyone—once in the Church and twice at supper. In the refectory, he had sung Nomad songs with his own embellishments affiliated to childhood memories. He refused to take pride in this, but his Satan took it anyway. While at the abbey, he had made a stringed instrument much like the one his father had given him. He hedged its Nomad origin by naming it after King David's *chitara*, but pronouncing it "g'tara." It was among the few belongings he had brought with him, and he strummed it a little during the trip, when Brownpony was away on his horse. He was averse to doing anything which might make him seem ridiculous to Brownpony, and he wondered about this aversion.

Some of the territory claimed by right of conquest as part of the Texark Province was not well defined, and the ill-defined area between the sources of the Bay Ghost and Nady Ann Rivers and the mountains to the west was a kind of no-man's-land, where low-intensity warfare persisted at times among poor fugitive tribes of the Grasshopper who had refused to take up farming, Nomadic outlaws, also mostly Grasshopper refugees, and Texark cavalry sometimes joined by Wilddog war parties in pursuit of raiders. The cardinal's party carefully skirted the western edge of this area, for Brownpony claimed without much explanation that the mountains, especially the moist and fertile Suckamint Range were well defended by exiles from the east, of non-Nomadic origin. It was also true that Nomads were

superstitious about mountains and stayed away from their heights. The trail led through the foothills, and the nights were cold. But there was much more life here than on the surrounding desert. From occasional horse-apple trees and scrub oak, the flora began proliferating and growing taller. Devoid of foliage at present, cottonwood, willow, and catalpa-bean trees flourished adjacent to creekbeds, while high upon the snowy mountainsides one could make out the trunks of mighty snow-clad conifers. There were a number of streams to ford, some flowing eastward, trickles of water edged by ice, and some were mere dry washes that would flow only during a flash flood in the foothills. The spring thaw had barely begun. All but the largest creeks would evaporate in the dry land to the east, where a small child could wade through a year's rainfall without wetting its knees.

As they gained altitude on their northward journey, it began to snow lightly. The Nomad took the stallion and began exploring side trails. Before evening, he returned with news of some abandoned buildings less than an hour from the main road. So they turned off the papal highway and drove a few miles along a rough trail until they came to a rickety village. Several spotted children and a dog with two tails fled to their homes. Brownpony looked questions at Chür Høngan, who said, "There was nobody here when I was here a while ago."

"They were hiding from an obvious Nomad," the Red Deacon said, smiling.

But then a woman with one large blue eye and one small red eye came out of a hut to meet them with a pike and bared teeth. A hunchback with a musket limped rapidly after her. Blacktooth knew that the cardinal had a pistol well hidden in the upholstery, but he let it alone. He looked around at half a dozen sickly-looking people.

*Gennies!*" gasped Father e'Laiden, who had just awakened from a snooze in the carriage. There was no contempt in his voice, but it was the wrong word to utter at the moment.

This was obviously a small colony of genetically handicapped, fugitives from the overpopulated Valley of the Misborn, which was now called the Watchitah Nation since its boundaries were fixed by treaty. There were pockets of such fugitives throughout the land, and they were usually at defensive war with all strangers. The hunchback lifted his musket and aimed first at Chür Høngan, who was driving, then at Blacktooth.

"Both of you get down. And the others inside, get out!" The woman's voice dog-whined the Valley version of the Ol'zark dialect, confirming their origins. She was as dangerous as a whipped cur, Blacktooth sensed. He could smell the fear.

Everyone obeyed except the Axe, who was freshly missing. The executioner had been riding Brownpony's horse only moments before. At the woman's call, a blond young girl came and searched them for weapons. She was lovely and golden, with no apparent defects, and Blacktooth blushed as her soft hands patted his body. She noticed his blush, grinned in his face, pushed close, seized and squeezed his member, then darted away with his rosary. The woman angrily called her back, but the girl was gone long enough to have hidden his beads. Blacktooth was almost certain the girl was a spook, that is, a Valley-born genny who passes for normal.

He remembered stories he had heard of ogres, perverts, homicidal maniacs among the gennies. Some of the stories were filthy jokes, and most of them were told by bigots. But, having heard the stories, he could feel the shame from them, but not forget in the face of these menacing figures that one or another of the stories came true from time to time. Anything was possible.

Brownpony stirred at last, stepped down from the carriage, and with some majesty put on his red cap. He said to them, "We are Churchmen from Valana, my children. We have no weapons. We seek refuge from the weather, and we shall pay you well for shelter and a cooking fire."

The old woman seemed not to hear him. "Get all their belongings, from inside and on top," the woman told the girl in the same tone.

The cardinal turned to the girl. "You know who I am, and I know who you are," he said to her. "I am Elia Brownpony of the Secretariat."

She shook her head.

"You never met me, but you do know of me."

"I don't believe you," she said.

"Move!" said the old woman.

The girl climbed inside and began throwing out clothing and other belongings, including Blacktooth's *chitara*, then thrust out her head and asked, "Books?"

"Those too."

Brownpony's concealed pistol would be next, Blacktooth thought, as he wondered why Brownpony insisted that he was known to the girl. He was not self-important, not an egoist who expected to be recognized everywhere. For now the cardinal shrugged and stopped protesting. Apparently, the girl never found the pistol.

Suddenly a muffled cry came from the direction of the largest hut in the cluster. The deformed woman looked around. An old man with mottled skin and white hair appeared in the doorway. Behind him stood Wooshin with his forearm against the old man's throat. The Axe could almost make himself invisible. Having circled the village and approached from the rear, he held up his short sword for their edification. Evidently this was the chief of the village, for the woman and the hunchback immediately dropped their weapons.

"You must not rob them, Linura," the old man scolded. "It's one thing to take their weapons, but—" He broke off as Wooshin shook him and brandished the sword.

The woman fell to her knees. The girl ran. She came back with a pitchfork, darted behind Brownpony, and pressed the tines against his back. "My father for your priest," she yelled to the headsman.

"Put your knife away, Wooshin," Brownpony called, and turned to face the girl. She jabbed him lightly in the stomach and bared her gritted teeth in warning.

"Are you not the Pope's children?" asked the cardinal, using the ancient euphemism for the misborn. He turned about, his arms spread wide, facing each of them. "Would you harm the servants of Christ and your Pope?"

"For shame, Linura, for shame, Ædrea!" hooted the old man. "You will get us all killed or driven back to the Watchitah by acting this way." Then to the girl: "Ædrea, put that away. Also take care of their horses, then fetch us some beer. Now!"

The older woman lowered her head. "I only meant to search their baggage for arms."

"Put your knife away, 'Shin," the cardinal said again.

"I want my rosary and my g'tara back," said Blacktooth to the girl, who ignored him.

The old man advanced to kiss the Red Deacon's ring, found none, and kissed his hand instead. "I am called Shard. That is our family's name. You will be welcome to stay in my house until the snow stops. We have not much to eat just now, after the winter, but Ædrea can perhaps kill a deer." He turned to the old woman with his arm raised as if to cuff her. She gave the musket to the girl and hurried away.

"We carry corn, beans, and monks' cheese," said Brownpony. "We'll share with you. Tomorrow is Ash Wednesday, so we'll need no meat. Two of us can sleep in the carriage. We have tarpaulins to protect it from the cold wind. We thank you, and pray the weather lets us leave soon."

Please forgive the rude welcome," said the mottled man. "We

are often visited by a small bands of Nomads, drunks or outlaws. Most of them are superstitious, and fear the flag." He pointed to the yellow and green banner that flew from the gable of his home. It bore the papal keys, and a ring of seven hands. As a warning of papal protection, it had become the flag of the Watchitah Nation. "Even those who don't fear it soon see we have nothing of value, except a girl, and leave us in peace, but my sister trusts no one. But three days ago, we were visited by Texark agents posing as priests. We knew they were sent to spy on us, so we have been very suspicious."

"What happened?"

"They wanted to know how many of us lived in these hills. I told them just one other family a quarter-hour walk up the trail. I advised them not to go back there, that the bear boy was dangerous, but they insisted. Only two of them came back an hour later, and they were in a hurry to leave."

"Do you really think the Hannegan would chase Valley runaways this far outside the Empire?"

"We know it. Others have been killed closer to the Province. Filpeo Harq exploits people's hatred for gennies, and calls us criminals because we fought our way out of the Valley. Some of his guards were



killed."

While they were unhitching the horses, Blacktooth noticed two cows with shaggy coats in a pen next to the barn. They were not ordinary farm animals, and appeared to be Nomad cattle. But Nomad cows would have kicked and butted their way out through the boards of the fence by now, so he decided they must be hybrids. Or genny animals, like their genny owners. For that matter, the Nomad cattle probably descended from a few successful freaks. Sometimes, rarely, an apparent monster, whether man or beast, proved to have superior survival value.

The gennies' hospitality improved sharply after the bad beginning. Apparently not of Shard's family, the hunchback had disappeared. Soon Ædrea had killed a fawn; she brought a cup of its blood into the house and presented it to Chür Høngan, who looked at it in frozen silence.

The cardinal was turning red as he choked back laughter. When the Nomad looked at him, Brownpony hid his mouth. Høngan snorted at him and took the deer blood from the girl. Growling at her, he frowned mightily and downed it at a gulp. The girl stepped back as if in awe. The Red Deacon's laughter exploded, and after a moment they were all laughing except Ædrea.

"Well, Nomads drink blood, don't they?" she demanded. Blushing at the laughter, she went to dress the fawn.

"Some do," said Holy Madness. "On ceremonial occasions."

After an evening meal of veal-tender venison, black bread, peas, and mugs of cloudy home brew, they talked again, crowding around the fire in Shard's house. Only the Nomad was missing; pretending to speak little Ol'zark, he had taken his blanket roll and gone to bed early in the carriage after losing a drawing of lots for a place in the house. The other loser was Blacktooth, who was glad to sleep away from a headsman, a cardinal, a crazy priest, and several portents, including a pretty female tease.

The common language among them was Ol'zark, but when Shard asked the Oriental a question, Wooshin replied in broken Churchspeak. After this had happened three times, Brownpony turned to him and said, "Wooshin, speak the language of our hosts. That language is Ol'zark Valleyspeak of the Watchitah Nation."

The Axe bristled and stared at Brownpony, who gazed at him evenly. "Valleyspeak is the language of our hosts," he repeated.

Wooshin looked down at the floor. The room was dead silent. He looked up, then, and said in flawless Texark, "Good simpleton, the answer to your question is that by profession I was a seaman and a warrior. But in my later years I cut off heads for the Mayor of Texark."

"And how did you sink to that, Ser?" asked a thin voice from Ædrea.

Wooshin looked at her without anger.

"Not sink, not rise," he said in bad Churchspeak, then returning to her tongue: "Death is the way of the warrior, girl. There is no honor in it, nor any dishonor, if one is just being oneself."

"But to do it for the Hannegan?"

Wooshin's normal expression was relaxed, alert, about-to-smile, wrinkled about the eyes, humorous, scrutinizing. But now it was as frozen as a corpse. Facing Ædrea, he arose slowly and bowed to her. Blacktooth felt his scalp crawl.

Then the Axe looked at the Red Deacon as if to say "See what you made me do!" and went to take a walk in the night. It was the last time the old manslayer ever resisted speaking Ol'zark, but Blacktooth noticed that when he did so, he always imitated Shard's accent, and he called it Valleyspeak. He treated Ædrea with extreme courtesy during their stay. There was no mistaking the bitterness of his regret, but regret for what? Blacktooth was unsure.

After two days of intermittent light snow, they stayed at Arch Hollow, as the Shards called it, for six days, while Chür Høngan spent most his time riding out to investigate the conditions along the trail. Wooshin too was gone most of the time, but made no account of his activities, unless to the cardinal in secret. It seemed best to wait until other passing traffic began to shovel its way along in the near vicinity.

On the second night they sat around the fire in the center of Shard's lodge. Brownpony tried to elicit the family's story without asking too many questions. His skill in conversation soon led Shard into

recounting his family's adventures since the famine and the exodus. There had been a mass escape attempt ten years ago. At least two hundred were hunted down and killed by Texark troops as they fled through forests and up streambeds across the crest of the ridge. At least twice as many escaped the troops that were there both to protect the Watchitah people against intruders and to prevent the escape of the gennies. The Valley was more than a valley; it was a small nation which had kept the name of its place of origin until the conquest. No one had counted the population, but Shard called it a quarter of a million, causing Brownpony to raise an eyebrow. Fifty thousand was closer to popular consensus.

"The approaches to the Watchitah are well guarded by the Hannegan, but the patrols could not catch so many at one time," said Shard. "Probably half of the dead were killed by Texark troops and the others lynched by farmers. Ædrea, of course, could have escaped by passing for normal, becoming a 'spook.' My daughter is very brave to remain with us. The spooks among us are the ones most hated and feared. They can marry unsuspecting normals and pass on the curse, give birth to monsters."

"How safe are you here from the natives?" Brownpony wondered. "I think of this as outlaw country."

"It was, and is, to some extent. The nearest town is two days away. They know we're here. The priest visits us every month, except in winter. He and the baron govern the town. There has been no trouble. Only Ædrea goes to town. Of course she wears the green headband. We're south of the Denver Republic, but the Church is respected here more than in the Empire. The papal highway is patrolled, of course. Still, there are occasional outlaws, but they are looking for traveling merchants. We have nothing here to invite robbery."

"Are there more of you living near here?"

"You saw the hunchback, Cortus. His family lives next door. But the only family behind us is the one with the bear boy."

"Shard, I am the Secretary for Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Concerns."

The old man looked at him with suspicion. "If you really are, then you don't need to ask such a question."

The monk could feel a tension bordering on hostility in the room but it passed in silence. It seemed clear Shard was lying about the presence of other gennies in the region.

After the dishes had been washed outside in the snow, Linura entered and sat beside, but a little behind, her brother. Then Ædrea came in and dropped cross-legged on the floor beside Blacktooth, who stirred restlessly and almost stopped listening. He wanted his rosary back. Her girl-smell teased his nostrils. Her knees were shiny by firelight. When she noticed his gaze, she pulled a blanket over her lap, but smiled briefly into his eyes before attending the conversation again. Remembering that this coy creature had grabbed his penis at their first encounter, he nudged her.

"Rosary back!" he whispered fiercely.

She giggled and nudged back, hard.

"I've often wondered about life in the Valley," the Red Deacon was saying.

"There is more death than life there, m'Lord Cardinal," Shard answered. "Few who live there want to risk giving birth. A normal birth is rare. Most die. Others are too feeble to want life. If it were not for the influx, the Watchitah would soon be empty."

"Influx? From where?"

"You must know, m'Lord."

Brownpony nodded. Many people in families of registered pedigree nonetheless had accursed offspring. Lest they lose their registration with the keepers of such records, families without fear of the Church killed their malformed babies. But often there were children whose deformities could be concealed for a time, and these were sent to the Valley at a later age by the pious. Monks and nuns often brought them. People who lived near the Watchitah hated and feared the inhabitants, especially the near-normal among them. Blacktooth noticed that everyone was glancing at Ædrea.

"Forgive me, daughter," Brownpony murmured when she met his eyes.

"I don't like admitting it," Shard was saying, "but the patrols who guard the passes were as much our protectors as our jailers. But they did nothing to help us when famine came."

And the Church?" said the Red Deacon. "Too busy with its own schism to be of much help to anyone."

"Well, of course we were cut off from papal protection, but the Archbishop of Texark did send in some supplies. I think he is not a cruel man, perhaps only powerless."

"You cannot imagine how powerless is Cardinal Archbishop Benefez," Father e'Laiden sighed.

Blacktooth glanced quickly at the priest, certain that he was being sardonic and meant the opposite of what he said. Benefez had behind him the power of the Hannegans. And e'Laiden spoke Texark like a native, which he probably was, although his command of Wild-dog Nomadic meant he had lived long on the High Plains.

"My rosary!" Blacktooth whispered angrily.

She winked at him and grinned. "I hid it in the barn. You can have it tomorrow."

The way she looked at him brought on an eruption of horniness, and he felt his face turning red. Blacktooth feared her. Many deformities recurred, and many were genetically connected. Various writers had made lists. There was one mutation in which great physical beauty was coupled with a defect in the brain, the most notable symptom of which was the onset of criminal insanity a few years after puberty. He stole a glance at her, but she caught him at it, and flicked her tongue and smirked. She might not be crazy, but she was a she-devil. He wanted to go to the carriage and to bed, but he was ashamed to stand up at the moment. At last he prayed his erection away and mumbled good night to the others. Ædrea followed him outside, but he fled into the latrine, then climbed out the back window. He was immediately seized by the hunchback and another creature and dragged away toward another house with a lighted doorway. Nearly fainting with fright, he heard the hunchback whisper hoarsely that someone needed absolution.

"But I am not a priest!" he protested. In vain. They dragged him into the house of Shard's neighbor.

The hunchback and his companion released Blacktooth after pushing him inside, and they stood blocking the door. The monk could only sit down on a stool pointed out to him, and from there await developments. There was firelight and a lantern. There was a wrinkled old man with a scraggly beard in the room, who said his name was Tempus. He pointed out the others. There was his wife. Irene, whose face was a permanent scar. There were Ululata, and Pustria, females both of portentous mein. The hunchback was called Cortus, and his companion Barlo. They were all siblings or cousins or half-siblings. Barlo had a terrible itch, especially in the genital area. Tempus shouted at him to stop masturbating, but the words had no effect on the creature.

God in His wisdom had given Ululata a deformed foot, although He had in all other ways given her the proportions of the divine image in His mind of God in mercy. But the foot was not something you would want to walk with. "God is thus," said the father.

The father had given her crutches. To him, God had given seven fingers, which he displayed to the monk, a third useless eye, and four testicles with two healthy penes, all of which he exhibited. Pustria was Ululata's half-sister, according to their faithful mother's best memory of their conceptions under the weight of the same sire. Pustria was deformed only by blindness, and Mother Irene was partial to Pustria because Pustria could not see her mother's face, a mask of scab of which Mother Irene was not proud. "God is thus, since the deluge of fire and ice," said the father.

Barlo was in need of absolution, Tempus explained, in order to make him stop masturbating. Blacktooth explained that he could not absolve anybody, and that absolution would not have the effect that Tempus desired. Tempus was adamant. Blacktooth would not be allowed to leave until he performed.

"Will you let me go then, immediately?" he demanded.

Tempus nodded gravely and crossed his heart. Nimmy closed his eyes for a moment and tried to summon a little Latin.

"*Labores semper tecum,*" he said in the softest voice he could muster. "*Igni etiam aqua interdictus tu. Semper super capitem tuum feces descendant avium.*"

"Amen," Tempus said in echo to this malediction.

Nimmy got up and left. At the moment, he was not particularly ashamed of wishing eternal suffering

on the man, of pronouncing a dire sentence of exile, and calling down upon the head of Barlo a perpetual rain of birdshit; the glep who was still scratching his crotch followed him at a distance.

Chür Høngan was already asleep. Blacktooth had drawn lots with Wooshin and lost the third place indoors. He was relieved things had turned out so, especially after his escape from the clutches of the hunchback's family. If he must sleep in the cold carriage, he preferred to sleep with the Nomad. Although, during his waking hours, he had lost his fear of the killer of hundreds, the Brother Axe still haunted his dreams. Sometimes he dreamed he himself was the executioner, chopping heads for Hannegan with a mighty sword, but that night in the carriage, he dreamed he was Pontius Pilate, and Wooshin the headsman stood beside him as Marcus the Centurion, confronted by a pretender to the Kingdom of God among the Nomads.

Kings of the Nomads were common in those days. He crucified not one but four of them during his lucrative career in south Texas-Judea. The first case was the hardest for him, and sad; Blacktooth-Pilate was like a boy killing his first deer. Because the pretender was harmless, the case was jinxed by the scruples of his wife. He had wanted to set the first one free. It was easier to kill the ones that followed, and certainly necessary to show that kings were made by Texark and not by tribal gods. He always asked them the same question. The first one could not or would not answer, and merely stood looking at him. The second to be crucified was more talkative.

"What is truth?" asked Blacktooth.

"Truth is the essence of all true statements," said the second King of the Nomads. "Falsehood is the essence of all false statements. Without saying anything, there is neither true nor false. I offer Your Majesty my silence."

"Crucify him," said Pilate, "with prejudice. And get it right this time. Wrap his arms and legs around the cross. That's the way it shows in the Texark Procurators' Handbook. Of course, that's not enough for you new recruits these days. You have to know why. Well, I'll tell you why.

"Nailing the hands to the back of the cross is sound engineering principle and sound governmental policy because when you nail the hands in front the weight of the body hangs on the nails, they tear, unless you also nail the forearm; but when you wrap the arms across the top of the cross and nail them from behind, the weight of the body hangs from the arm on the crossbar, and the nail does nothing but keep the arm in place. That way, you can smash his bones better when it's time to go home from work. Do it the Texark way, men; the Texark way is the eternal way. Let's carry out the sentence with some snap this time."

"Hail to the Hannegan!" said Marcus the Axe.

"Hail Texark! Next case."

Pontius felt better after that. Half-awake by now, he knew he was dreaming, but let the dream go on. The fellow's silly explanation of truth probably had nothing to do with the silence of the first King of the Nomads, but it noisily invoked silence as policy and thus took some of the sting out of Pilate's remembrance of the first one's half-smiling gaze, which had seemed to say to him at the time nothing philosophical at all but had expressed an utterly intimate, infinite regress of "I who look at you who look at me who look at you . . ." His wife Ædrea had been frightened by the same look. It was perhaps sexy, and for that very reason insulting to those whose duty it was to see such scum as loathsome.

"What is truth?" said Pilate to the third King of the Nomads.

"Root for pearls, Texark pig!"

Blacktooth-Pilate had no qualms at all with that one.

He woke up thinking about Ædrea instead—and their coming assignation in a hayloft. A prank. Drowsily, he remembered hearing Brother Gimpus argue that a detachment from sexual passion was the essence of chastity, and that detachment was possible without abstinence. Brother Gimpus was caught naked with an ugly widow in the village who claimed she paid him every Wednesday for the eighth sacrament. "Rest in peace," Blacktooth whispered against the pillow.

## CHAPTER 6

Nevertheless, keeping in view the needs of weaker brethren, we believe that a hemina of wine a day is sufficient for each.

—*Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 40

HÜR HØNGAN WAS STILL ASLEEP WHEN Blacktooth started up, fully awakened by hoofbeats, which stopped near the carriage. Then he heard voices speaking softly in Grasshopper. They were talking about Shard's cows in the pen next to the barn, until something excited them and there was another burst of hoof-beats, followed by the screams of Ædrea. The monk pulled at the edge of the tarp and peered outside. A few flakes of snow were still falling in the faint morning light. There were three horsemen, obviously Nomads. Two of them held the kicking girl suspended by her arms between them. Shard began yelling protests from afar, and the hunchback ran out with his musket. Blacktooth turned to awaken Høngan, but he was already up and moving, putting on his wolfskins and the leather helmet with small horns and a metal ornament. He usually wore the hat only when mounted. Blacktooth thrust his hand deep into the upholstery and felt the Red Deacon's handgun. The girl had missed it.

Chür Høngan climbed out the other door and came into their view from behind the coach, yelling at the renegades in the Wilddog of the High Plains.

"In the name of the Wilddog sharf and his mother, put her down! I command you, motherless ones! Dismount!"

Blacktooth raised the cardinal's weapon, but his hand was shaking badly. The Nomad not involved with the girl lifted his musket, looked closely at Holy Madness, then dropped the weapon to the ground. The others eased the girl onto her feet, and she promptly ran away. The riders slowly dismounted, and the apparent leader fell to his knees before the advancing Høngan.

He spoke now in Høngan's dialect. "O Little Bear's kin, Sire of the Day Maiden, we meant her no harm. We saw those cows over there and thought they were ours. We were only teasing the girl."

"Only a teasing little rape, perhaps? Apologize and leave here at once. You know those tame cows are not yours. You are motherless. You ride unbranded horses. I heard you speaking Grasshopper, so you don't belong anywhere near here. Never bother these people; they are children of the Pope, with whom the free hordes have treaties."

The visitors complied immediately and were gone. The incident had lasted not more than five minutes, but Blacktooth was astounded. He climbed out of the carriage. Chür Ösle Høngan leaned against the coach and gazed absently after them as they rode away toward the main trail through a sprinkle of snow.

"They're Grasshopper outlaws, but they knew you! Who *are* you?" Blacktooth asked in awe.

The Nomad smiled at him. "You know my name."

"What was that they called you?"

"'Sire of the Day Maiden'? Have you never heard that before?"

"Of course. It's what one calls one's sharf."

"Or even one's own uncle, on some occasions."

"But motherless ones recognized you? Last night I dreamed of a king of the Nomads."

Hongan laughed. "I'm no king, Nimmy. Not yet. It's not me they recognized. *Just this*. He touched the metal ornament on the front of his helmet. "The clan of my mother." He smiled at Blacktooth. Nimmy,

my name is 'Holy Madness,' of the Little Bear motherline. Pronounce it in Jackrabbit."

"Cheer Honnyugan. But in Jackrabbit, it means Magic Madman.

"Just the last name. What does it sound like?"

"Honnyugan? *Hannegan*?"

"Just so. We're cousins," archly said the Nomad. "Don't tell anybody, and don't ever pronounce it in Jackrabbit again."

Cardinal Brownpony was approaching from the direction of Shard's house, and Chür Høngan went to meet him with a report of the incident. Blacktooth wondered if the Nomad was entirely teasing him. He had heard claims of the dynasty's ultimate Nomadic origin, but since Boedullus made no mention of it, that origin must have been in recent centuries. At least he knew now that Høngan was of a powerful motherline. His own family, displaced to the farms, had no insignia, and he had never studied the heraldry of the Plains. Something else that piqued his curiosity about the Nomad was his apparent close friendship with Father e'Laiden, who called him Bearcub. The priest had often ridden beside the Nomad when he was driving, and their talks were plainly personal but private. They had known each other well on the Plains. From fragments overheard, he decided that e'Laiden was formerly the Nomad's teacher, but no longer dared to play that role unasked, lest a grown-up and somewhat wicked student laugh in his face.

Blacktooth went to look for his rosary and g'tara in the barn, which was half buried in the side of a hill. Ædrea was not visible, but he could hear the muffled sound of strings being plucked. The floor was swept stone, and a small stream of spring water ran in a channel from beneath a closed door in the rear and out to the cattle pen outside the wall. Above the door was a hayloft. He opened the door and found himself in a root cellar, with a number of nearly empty bins containing some withered turnips, a pumpkin, and a few sprouting potatoes: the remains of last year's crops. And there were jars of preserved fruits—where could they have grown?—on the shelves. There were three barrels, some farm implements, and a pile of straw for layering vegetables. There was no one here. He turned to go, but Ædrea slipped down from the hayloft and confronted him as he started to leave. Nimmy looked at her and backed away. In spite of the weather, she was wearing nothing but a short leather skirt, a bright grin, and his rosary as a necklace.

He backed away. "Wh-where's the g'tara?"

"In the loft. It's more comfortable up there. You can snuggle down in the hay. Come on."

"The air's warmer in here than outside."

"All right." She came in and closed the door behind her, leaving them in pitch darkness.

"Haven't you a lamp or candle?"

She laughed, and he felt her hands exploring him. "Can't you see in the dark? I can."

"No. Please. How can you?"

Her hands withdrew. "How can I what?"

"See in the dark."

"I'm a genny, you know. Some of us can do that. It's not really seeing, though. I just know where I am. But I can see the halo around you. You're one of us."

"Us who?"

"You're a genny with a halo."

"I'm not—" He broke off, hearing her rustling skirt in the darkness, then the scratch of flint on steel and a spark. After several sparks, she managed to kindle a bit of tinder and used it to light a tallow taper. Nimmy relaxed slightly. She took down two clay cups from a shelf and turned the spigot on one of the barrels.

"Let's drink a glass of berry wine."

"I'm not really thirsty."

"It's not for thirst, silly. It's for getting drunk."

"I'm not supposed to do that."

She handed him the cup and sat down in the straw.

My g'tara—

"Oh, all right. Wait here. I'll get it."

He nervously gulped the wine while she was gone. It was strong, sweet, tasted of resin, and was immediately relaxing. She came back in with his g'tara, but held it away when he reached for it.

"You have to play it for me."

He sighed. "All right. Just once. What shall I play?"

" 'Pour Me Another Before We Do It Brother.' "

Nimmy poured another cup of wine and handed it to her.

"That's the name of the song, silly."

"I don't know it."

"Well, play anything." She flopped down in the straw. Her skirt came up. By candlelight he could see under it. She wasn't wearing anything there. But something was unusual. He hadn't seen a girl that way since he was a child, but it wasn't the way he remembered. He looked at her, the g'tara, the cup of wine in his hand, and the candle. he gulped the wine, and poured another.

"Play a love song."

He gulped again, set the cup aside, and began plucking the strings. He didn't know any love songs, so he began singing the opening lines of Vergil's fourth eclogue to music he had composed himself.

When he got to the words *jam redit et Virgo*, she made a little puff of wind with her lips and blew out the candle from six feet away. He stopped in fright.

"Pour another cup of wine and come here."

Nimmy heard the liquid splashing into the cup, then realized he was doing it himself.

"You drink it," she said.

"How do I get out of here?"

"Well, you have to find the keyhole. It's not very big."

He fumbled in the area of the door.

"It's over here."

He felt her tugging at his sleeve, gulped the wine before he spilled it, and sprawled beside her in the darkness. "Where's the key?"

"Right here." She grabbed what she had grabbed when first they met. He didn't feel like resisting. They came together, but after a lot of fumbling, he said, "It won't fit!"

"I know. The surgeon fixed me so it won't, but it's fun anyway, isn't it?"

"Not much."

She sobbed. "You don't like me!"

"Yes I do, but it won't fit."

"That's all right," she sniffled, sliding lower in the straw. "Just come here."

He had not been so surprised since Torrildo's advances in the basement. Drunkenly, he feared at any moment Cardinal Brownpony would burst out of the broom closet and yell, "Aha! Caught you!" But nothing like that happened.

When he stumbled out of the barn with his virginity diminished, a smiling *Ædrea (semper virgo)* sat twirling his rosary, watched him from the hayloft until he crawled into the carriage and pulled down the tarp behind him. The term "against nature" insinuated itself into his tipsy consciousness. He had never been so drunk.

"Damn that witch!" he whispered when he awoke, but recoiled from the words at once. *I am my own witch!* quickly replaced them. Help me, Saint Isaac Edward Leibowitz. My Patron, I looked forward to entering that barn—pray for me. I was glad she stole my things. It gave me the excuse I needed to pursue her in pretended anger. The things she stole, I should have given her. I know this now. Why couldn't I have known it then? I wonder if I knew what I was doing with Torrildo too. I, or the devil in me. O Saint Leibowitz, intercede for me.

Blacktooth had fallen angrily in love. His sexuality had always been a mystery to him. He had wondered about his once deep affection for Torrildo, among others who once had been his friends at the abbey. His erotic dreams had more often involved enormous buttocks than enormous breasts, but now

he was suddenly smitten by a girl there was no doubt at all in his mind that it was the most powerful love he had ever felt except his love for the heart of the Virgin, a blasphemous comparison, but true. Or was that lust too?

In spite of their tryst in the root cellar, during the days that followed Ædrea responded to his enamored gaze with a self-satisfied smirk and a shake of her pretty head. He knew what she meant. She, as a bearer of the curse, was forbidden to fornicate with anyone outside the Valley. The penalty was mutilation or death. She had taken an awful chance in seducing him. But what they had done in the barn was only passionate play, not against the basic folklaw. Against his fractured vows, surely. She knew that. At the end, she teased him about how easily she overcame his vows. He knew he was still bound by the vows, and straying once was no excuse for straying again. But without more surgery, Ædrea was physically incapable of normal coitus. Her father had it done to her when she was a child, probably afraid that someone like Cortus or Barlo would rape her. O Holy Mother, pity us.

No one had seen them in the barn, but the pulsation of sexuality that happened whenever the girl and the monk came together did not escape the cardinal's attention. The Red Deacon caught him alone while Blacktooth was behind the coach lashing bundles in preparation for departure.

"It's time we talk, Nimmy. Excuse me, Blacktooth. I hear Høngan calling you Nimmy, and it seems to fit. How do you want to be called?"

Blacktooth shrugged. "I'm leaving an old life behind. I might as well leave my name behind. I don't mind."

"All right, Brother Nimmy. Just don't leave behind your promise of obedience. I remind you that Ædrea is a genny. Watch your step very closely here. I'll tell you, Shard's was not the first exodus here from the Valley. It's been happening for years. This place is more than it seems, and Ædrea is more than she seems."

"I had begun to suspect, m'Lord."

"You are not to intentionally see her again. If you ever see her again in Valana, avoid her." He commanded Blacktooth with his eyes.

"This has nothing to do with your vow of chastity, but let this help you keep it. They are hiding a large genny colony back there in the higher hills, but don't let them know that you know. They're frightened enough of us to be dangerous."

"Yes."

"And there's something else, Nimmy. Chür Ösle Høngan is an important man among his people, as you found out from those outlaws, but you were not supposed to know, and it is not known in Valana. Now I have to ask for your silence. There is a need for secrecy. He is an envoy to me from the Plains, but you must not tell that to anyone. He is just a driver I hired."

"I understand, m'Lord."

"Father e'Laiden is another matter. I had no need to read your mind to see your curiosity about him. About him, you must also say nothing. He grew his beard for this trip, to avoid recognition. I picked him up forty miles south of Valana, and will let him off at the same place, which will make you even more curious. Not even my friend Dom Jarad knows who he is. I've told travelers he's just a passenger to whom I gave a ride. You know I introduced him to Dom Jarad as my temporary secretary. No more of that. You will not mention him to anyone. If you meet him in Valana later without his beard, do not allow yourself to recognize him. His name is not e'Laiden, anyway. About these two men, you will be absolutely silent."

"I have had much practice at being silent, m'Lord."

"Yes, well, I took a big chance with you, Blacktooth. Nimmy. For now, your job is just to keep your mouth shut. I may find other uses for you in Valana."

"That would please me, m'Lord. I have felt useless for years."

Brownpony turned to look at him closely. "I am surprised to hear it. Your abbot told me you are quite religious, and seemed called to contemplation. Do you think that useless?"

"Not at all, but it's my turn to be surprised the abbot said I was called to it. He was very angry with me."



"Well, of course he was angry, partly at himself. Nimmy, he's sorry he made you do that silly Duren translation. He thought it would be useful."

"I told him otherwise."

"I know. He thought you were ducking hard work. Now he blames himself for your revolt. He's a good man, and he's really sorry the Order lost you. I know how humiliating it was for you at the end, but forgive him if you can."

"I do, but he didn't forgive me. I wasn't even allowed to confess."

"Not allowed by whom, Dom Jarad?"

"The prior said he would ask the abbot. I suppose he did."

"Nobody shrived you, eh? Well, Father e'Laiden can confess you if you can't wait until we get to Valana. I can imagine you need it by now."

Blacktooth blushed, wondering if the remark implied a reference to Ædrea. Of course it did!

He approached the old whitebeard priest later that day, but the cleric shook his head. "His Eminence forgets something. I'm not even supposed to say Mass. You have seen me do it, but I don't give the Eucharist, and I don't do confessions. Saying a private Mass is my own sin if it is one — not involving others."

A wild and sorrowful look came over the old man's face, as if he were at war within himself. Blacktooth had seen the look before and shivered. Father e'Laiden was just a little crazy.

Strange traveling companions, he thought. A priest under interdict, a seaman-headsman-warrior, a wild but aristocratic Nomad, a disgraced monk, and a cardinal who was not more than a deacon. Brownpony, Blacktooth, and Høngan were all of Nomadic extraction, and e'Laiden obviously had lived among Nomads. Holy Madness, whose mother's family was called Little Bear, and e'Laiden seemed old friends, and often talked of Nomad families known to both of them. Only the executioner was unrelated to the people of the Plains. Blacktooth was more puzzled than ever about the Red Deacon's intentions. The cardinal, he had learned, was head of the Secretariat of Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Concerns, an obscure and minor office of the Curia which he had heard someone call "the bureau of trivial intrigues."

After two days of light snow the skies cleared. There was bright sun and a breeze from the south. Three days later, the thaw was well under way. Chür Høngan was gone for half a day, then returned with an opinion that the highway was not impassable, although they might have to shovel slushy snow in a few places. Brownpony paid Shard a fair sum in coins from the papal mint, and the travelers took their leave of the village. Only the children, Shard, and Tempus watched them go. The monk's eyes searched in vain for Ædrea. He was sure she was angry because of his mixed feelings and his avoidance of her. He wanted to let her know he blamed only himself, but there was no way.

She was gone for good.

They were still closer to Leibowitz Abbey than to Valana when they left Arch Hollow, but progress was faster as the road improved. Several days later, everyone's breathing became labored as they approached the high passes. Something had happened to Earth's atmosphere since the catastrophic demise of the *Magna Civitas*. One could only gaze upward at, not climb to, ruins of ancient buildings on mountainsides far above the present tree line. Once the air had been more breathable. And of course Earth herself had changed, sickened by the wars that long ago brought the end of a world. A new world was rising, but it could not grow as fast as the old. Rich pockets of resources had been plundered and dispersed. Now ancient cities were mined for iron. Petroleum was always going to be scarce. Hannegan had needed to plunder his people for copper. Living creatures had become extinct or changed. The wolves of the desert and plains were known to be different breeds, even by those Nomads who wore "wolfskins" but called their nation "the Wilddog Horde." There was less forest and more grass in the world than before, but not even in the records of Leibowitz Abbey could one learn much about biology before the Flame Deluge and the great freeze that followed. The curse pronounced by God in Genesis had been renewed; Earth and Man were doubly fallen.

On the twentieth evening of their journey, Holy Madness saw *Nunshân*, the Night Hag. They made camp early, and Høngan had ridden ahead in the late afternoon to check the condition of the passes, and he came back ashen and babbling after sundown.

"I looked up, and there she was standing on a crag against the early stars. Ugly! I have never seen a woman so huge and ugly. There was a kind of black light around her, and I could see stars through it. The sun was behind a mountain, but the sky was still light. Then she cried out to me—a great sobbing sound, wild as a cougar."

"Maybe it was a cougar," said Brownpony. "This thin air can make you dizzy."

"Cougar? No, no, a horse! She was there, and then she was a black horse and galloped away, into the very sky, it seemed!"

Brownpony was silent, busying himself with a plate of beans. Blacktooth studied Chür Høngan's expression and found it excited but sincere. He had learned that the Nomad was at least nominally a Christian, but Nomad myths were not dispelled by baptism.

It was Father e'Laiden at last who spoke. "If you saw the Night Hag, who is dying?"

"The Pope is dying," said the Red Deacon.

"Does the *Nunshân* appear for popes, m'Lord?" asked Blacktooth, almost amused.

"It could be my father dying," the Nomad said quietly.

"God forbid," said the cardinal. "Granduncle Brokenfoot must be elected Lord of the Three Hordes, and become the successor of the War Sharf Høngan Ös." He looked quickly at Blacktooth. "This is something else you must forget you heard, Nimmy."

"I shall obey, m'Lord."

For Blacktooth, things were falling into place. There had been no Lord of the Three Hordes since the War Sharf Høngan Ös had led his neople to defeat against Hannegan the Conqueror seven decades ago, and been sacrificed by his own shamans. The Jackrabbit Horde had been completely subdued, as well as a few tribes, including Blacktooth's, of the Grasshopper Horde, and the descendants of these either lived within the Empire as small ranchers, or on the Denver Freestate farmlands. Without the participation of electors from the Jackrabbit Horde, the military and priestly office of the kingship could not be filled. The Hannegans had prevented this from happening. Blacktooth thought of his crazy dream in which he had been Pilate crucifying would-be kings of the Nomads. He believed in the meaningfulness of dreams; such was his Nomad heritage.

Now there were stirrings of rebellion from the conquered peoples, for whom the free Nomads had in Blacktooth's childhood years displayed only contempt. Chür Ösle Høngan, then, was a relative of Høngan Ös, and his motherline was qualified for the high kingship. Brownpony was involved (meddling?) in Nomad politics, which was the same as Nomad religion, for only the shaman class could be electors. The thought came to him now that the cardinal, the elderly priest, and the Nomad with royal family connections in the Wilddog Horde might have stopped to confer with Jackrabbit shamans before they visited Leibowitz Abbey. Several half-overheard conversations during the journey supported the idea.

He was ordered to silence, and he meant to obey. But to regard it as a matter of no concern to him would be to turn his back on his late parents and their heritage. He was grateful for Chür Høngan's kindness toward him. One day it might be possible to become proud of his heritage, if pride were not one of the deadly sins his faith warned him against. If the two northern Hordes, the Wilddog and the unvanquished tribes of the Grasshopper, stopped showing contempt for the conquered tribes, Jackrabbit and Grasshopper, he might be able to hold his head up in the world. But he knew the Jackrabbit Horde and his own exiled people must again assert themselves before that could happen. He knew he would be glad to help if he could.

Blacktooth saw her the following morning. She was a young girl, much like Ædrea but beyond Ædrea in beauty. Naked, she stood under a ledge washing herself and dancing in a little waterfall made of new-melted ice. A stone's throw away, she looked once at Blacktooth, who stopped and stood frozen, his scalp crawling. Her eyes left him to follow Holy Madness, himself unseeing, who rode the cardinal's stallion. They followed him until a big wad of loose wet snow fell over the ledge and made her dart back out of sight. Seconds later a delicate white mare galloped out from under the ledge and disappeared into

a thicket of snow-dripping spruce. Blacktooth shook his head. The altitude made one quite dizzy.

Later, when the Nomad stopped and waited for all to catch up, Blacktooth walked past him and said, "I saw her this morning myself. As *Fujæ Go*, the Day Maiden."

"Was she young?" Chür Høngan asked.

"Very young, and beautiful."

"Whoever he was yesterday, today he's dead," said the warrior. "She wants a new husband."

"She was looking at you. Or the cardinal's horse."

Høngan frowned, shook his head, and laughed. "The horse. They say she copulates with stallions when there is no Lord of the Hordes. It's this thin air, Nimmy. Works on both of us."

Blacktooth continued to walk while the carriage caught up with the waiting Nomad. There was a trade-off somewhere behind him, and the same horse came back with a different rider.

"Why don't you ride beside the Axe?" asked the cardinal, for the first time referring to Wooshin by that name.

"Because I have a boil on my behind, Your Eminence, but also because I need to walk." Blacktooth had smoked some of the strong medicinal stuff the Nomad had brought down from Nebraska, and he was feeling more loquacious and less self-conscious than was his wont. Also, he had lost his fear of Brownpony, and begun to like the man.

"What's this I hear about you and the Wild Horse Woman, Nimmy? Do you change religions often?"

"I hope, m'Lord, that my religion of today is always just a little improved over my religion of yesterday, and a vision of a maiden in an icy waterfall does wonders for my religion of today, although tomorrow I might question the vision's reality. But did I say she was the *Høngin Fujæ Vurn*?"

Brownpony laughed. "You feel, then, that reality and religion might or might not have something to do with each other at this altitude?"

"At this altitude, yes and no, m'Lord."

"Keep me informed if she turns up again," Brownpony said lightly, and trotted on ahead.

It was a time of visions. Blacktooth had heard of miracles in the mountains, magic on the plains, and chariots in the sky. The Virgin was appearing simultaneously to small groups of her elect in three different locations on the continent. Furthermore, what her apparition said in the west, her voice in the east put to a severe test. It was almost as if she was arguing with herself. This, perhaps, was the best proof of her divinity, for in divinity opposites are always reconciled. *Nunshân* and *Fujæ Go*, Night Hag and Day Maiden, aspects of the *Høngin Fujæ Vurn*. There was a third aspect; at appropriate times, she became the War Buzzard, presiding over the field of battle, the feeding ground.

It's just the thin air, Blacktooth told himself. But why not a Wild Horse Woman? He had seen her on horseback when he was a child. He had seen her this morning under the waterfall, and she was the same young woman. The women of the Hordes own the breeding mares, and pass them to their daughters. Nomad women are wonderful breeders of horses. And no warrior rides a mare into battle. To ride a mare is to advertise one's unreadiness to fight. So Cardinal Brownpony's stallion is both a mount and a statement. Wild horses are forbidden, except to her betrothed, because they are hers. She is a natural projection of Nomad culture onto the Nomad consensual world, but to admit this is not to say she is wholly unreal. Christians make similar projections; so many apparitions of the Virgin! And she is an arbiter of power on the Plains; by choosing a husband, she chooses a king. It amused him to imagine her choosing a pope.

Blacktooth's departure from the abbey had not gained him a freedom to think for himself—he had always had that. But now he didn't have to feel guilty about it. His own religious practice was necessarily suffering because of the journey, and because of his sins, but he tried as often as he could to spend an hour silently reciting Saint Leibowitz's Grocery List while he rode or lay awake at night: *Can kraut, six bagels, bring home for Emma. Amen.* Short and sweet, it kept the mind from wandering toward *Ædrea*. He greatly preferred it to the Maxwell's Laws Memorabilium that had so confused Torrildo, and perhaps contributed to his delinquency.

But his anger at himself about *Ædrea* and his feelings kept seeking an outlet. When they camped that evening, the Axe as always asked, "You ready die now?" Blacktooth, without a negative comment,

immediately kicked at the Axe's crotch. The headsman dodged, but the blow glanced off his hip; he laughed with delight. "You very mean man tonight," he said, and allowed Blacktooth to attack thrice more before he threw him on his face in the melting snow. It was the first time the student had ever touched the teacher, and Wooshin embraced him after helping him to his feet.

This time you ready die, yes?"

That was the second night. They were gathering speed as they rode northward and downward. On the fourth night, a messenger with a lantern and a bodyguard trotting along behind delivered the news to Elia Cardinal Brownpony: the Pope was dead. He and the soldier stopped for refreshments with them, then continued southward with a summons for Abbot Jarad and other cardinals across the Brave River. More such messengers would be fanning out from Valana by all roads with the same summons for all cardinal bishops, cardinal priests, cardinal deacons, cardinal abbots and cardinal abbess (1), cardinal nephews and cronies across the continent, while the city of Valana prepared for another conclave.

That night the cardinal huddled in conference with the Nomad and the chaplain, while Blacktooth and the Axe sparred farther away from the fires. On the morrow, they availed themselves of the public baths in Pobla, the first real town they had visited. Father e'Laiden shaved his beard and was seen no more with the rest of them, although Blacktooth caught sight of him later in the company of a fair-haired man in Nomad clothing and with Nomad weapons but with manners that did not come from the Plains. Out of Pobla, Holy Madness rode eastward toward the Plains. Hence too, half an hour later, his Chaplain e'Laiden followed him, accompanied by the blond, urbane young warrior.

Brownpony hired a local driver and proceeded toward Valana with his new servants, a regular headsman and an irregular monk.

Blacktooth had been nursing an unasked question for a long time. Guilt from his encounter with Ædrea made him hesitate, but now he asked it. "M'Lord, back at Arch Hollow, when they were about to rob us, why did you expect the girl to recognize you?"

Brownpony frowned for a moment, then answered easily: "Oh, my office has had some dealings with a group of armed gennies in that general area. I assumed they were a member of the group. Apparently, I was wrong."

Blacktooth remained curious. Wooshin and Høngan had done quite a bit of exploring in the area, but had spoken only to the cardinal about what they found. He resolved to question Brother Axe.

By early afternoon, they were passing along muddy lanes full of dogs and children through brick and stone villages with log roofs with chimneys belching smoke. There was the sound of the smithy's forge and women's voices haggling with vendors over the price of potatoes and goat meat. These villages were now precincts of Valana, surrounding it, having grown up during the schism and the exile, brought by and bringing new commerce and industry to the foot of the mountains whose peaks Blacktooth had seen from the distance in his youth.

But they were too close now to see the peaks, and there was only the hulking presence of the massif to the west. It was all new and dirty, and bewildering to the monk who, although he had spent the first fifteen years of his life within a few days' ride of this place, had never been inside a city. And the city began to loom up around them as the cardinal's coach moved deeper into the more heavily populated area, where most of the buildings were, like the abbey, two and even three stories high. And all of it was dominated by the central fortified hill, looming ahead, the hill whose walls enclosed the Holy See, and from which rose the spires of the Cathedral of Saint John-in-Exile, where the vicar of Christ on Earth offered Mass to the Father. Blacktooth was in a daze and barely heard the cardinal, who turned to address him.

"Pardon, m'Lord?"

"Did you know that the plaza in front of Saint John's is paved with cobblestones brought here all the way across the Plains from New Rome?"

"I had been told, m'Lord, that the area around the Cathedral is New Roman territory. But all of the stones?"

"Well, not all, but Saint John-in-Exile stands on New Roman soil. Imported. That's why the natives

here contend there is no need to go back. In fact, they remind everyone that New Rome itself was built on imported soil."

"From across the sea?"

"So the story goes."

"The Venerable Boedullus thought otherwise."

"Yes, I know. The theory of a schism at the time of the catastrophe. Who knows? How did it happen that Latin came back into use after it was abandoned?"

"That, m'Lord, was during the Simplification, according to Boedullus. The book burners did not destroy religious works. One way of saving precious material from the simpletons was to translate it into Latin and decorate it like a Bible, even if it was a textbook. It was also useful as a secret language. . . ."

"Now, that building ahead of us is the Secretariat," the cardinal interrupted. "That is where you and perhaps Wooshin will work from time to time. But first, we must find quarters for both of you."

He leaned forward and spoke to the driver. Moments later, they <sup>ur</sup>ned off the stone-paved thoroughfare and onto another muddy side reet overarched by branches that were beginning to bud. It was not long until Holy Week, and time to begin choosing a pope.

## CHAPTER 7

Now the sacred number of seven will be fulfilled by us if we perform the Offices of our service at the time of the Morning Office, of Prime, of Terce, of Sext, of None, of Vespers and of Compline, since it was of these day Hours that he said, "Seven times in the day I have rendered praise to You " For as to the Night Office the same Prophet says, "In the middle of the night I arose to glorify you " Let us therefore bring our tribute of praise to our Creator "for the judgments of His lustice" at these times and in the night let us arise to glorify Him.

—Saint *Benedict's* Rule, Chapter 16

HE WARM CHINOOK FROM THE MOUNTAINS HAD breathed on the snow, and the snow vanished. Chür Høngan skirted the poor farming communities along the bed of the Kensau River as he rode toward the northeast. In Pobla, he had armed himself with a heavy shortbow and quiver of arrows. The cardinal had given him his double-barreled handgun and bought him an unshod stallion from a Nomad trader, but he wanted to avoid trouble with Blacktooth's people, who in season tilled the irrigated plots of potatoes, corn, wheat, and sunflowers, and who dwelled in fortified lodges of stone and sod and worked the land for its owners, among whom was the Bishop of Denver. They might mistake him for a Nomad outlaw like the ones who had visited Arch Hollow. The soil was poor here, but careful farming had enriched it. Now it was almost planting time and there were men and mules in the fields, so he avoided the rutted roads and kept to the high ground, while leaving a trail that Father Ombroz e'Laiden and the Texark turncoat could easily follow.

There were always Texark agents traveling back and forth from the telegraph terminal southeast of Pobla, so Høngan rode alone until he was well into the short grass of Wilddog cattle country before he stopped to wait for the others. He waited in a draw, concealing his horse and himself some distance from the trail he had left until he heard them passing to the north. Still, he waited. When their voices died away, he left his horse, climbed out of the draw, and listened carefully to the wind from the southwest. He put his ear to the ground briefly, then arose and crept into the space between two boulders where he could not be seen except from the trail directly below. There were distant voices.

"Three horses have come this way, obviously."

"But not necessarily together. Only one horse is shod."

"That would be Captain Loyte's."

"Hereafter, do not call the renegade 'Captain'! He sold his rank and honor for the cunt of a Nomad spy."

The voices were Ol'zark. Høngan nocked an arrow and drew his bow. The first rider appeared, and fell from his horse with the arrow through his throat. Høngan leaped forth and shot the second rider while he was lifting his musket. With the second barrel, he exchanged shots with the third rider, but both men missed. The survivor turned and fled. This war between Nomad and Empire was more than seventy years old, but such battles were few and fought only when the imperial forces invaded the lands of the Mare.

Holy Madness reloaded the pistol and finished the job of killing the wounded, then went for his own mount and captured the other two horses. After searching the saddlebags and finding the proof he needed that the riders were agents, he released the animals and came back to search the bodies for more papers. He stared angrily at the tracks of the turncoat's horse. Knowing the destination, he had previously not noticed the hoofprints because he had not been tracking.

Mounting again, he rode on with a warm wind still at his back in pursuit of the priest and his guest. His own war with Texark had begun long ago and would never end. This he had sworn in the name of his ancestor, Mad Bear, calling to witness Empty Sky and the Holy Virgin. He followed the tracks through the afternoon and afterward by twilight. There would be no moon until morning. He ate a little jerky, and without building a fire prepared to spend the night listening to the howls and barks of the wilddogs which simpletons called wolves and greatly feared. After he had staked his horse and unfurled his bedroll, Høngan slowly walked a protective circle around the area at a distance of five or six paces and marked his sleeping territory with a trickle of his own urine every few steps. With his sleeping area thus protected, the animals would not usually molest a human sleeper unless they smelled blood or sickness about him. Only once during the night did he sense prowlers. Bursting from his blankets, he leaped to his feet and let out a roar of mock rage. There was a chorus of yelps, and several dark shapes fled by starlight from the downwind border of his realm. Having bellowed the sleep out of his head, he lay with sad thoughts about the corpses he had made that day.

Chür Høngan had killed his first man at twelve, a Texark border patrolman. Ombroz had absolved the boy at the time as he would have absolved any soldier in war, because the trooper had been on the wrong side of the river, in military uniform, and without a traveler's flag as required by the Treaty of the Sacred Mare. As far as the Wild-dog was concerned—and the priest honored the sense of the horde—no treaty later than Sacred Mare had ever been signed with any secular powers including Texark, and the war against Texark had never become peace, it just had slowed down until it mostly stopped happening; it almost stopped because the only frontier across which the Wilddog faced the Empire was the Nady Ann River to the south, beyond which lay the occupied Jackrabbit country. There might be a time to fight there, but not until the Jackrabbit fought too. To the east, in the tall-grass country, the Grasshopper engaged the enemy when it saw fit, but it asked no help from the Wilddog while there was no Lord of the Three Hordes.

Ombroz had easily absolved him of that early killing, but gave him pure hell for honoring ancient custom as well. The boy had cut off the cavalryman's earlobe and ate it as an honor to the slain enemy, as his Bear Spirit uncle had explained was proper. The priest called it something else. He made the boy meditate for an hour a day on the meaning of the Eucharist, and put him through parts of catechism again before he would give him communion. Høngan remembered it in the night with a grin. He never told the priest that while he was eating the earlobe he was crying for his victim. About the men he had just killed today, he could not see what Wooshin had tried to teach him to see. Something about emptiness. The Axe tried and failed to relate it to the Nomad's Empty Sky. Something about emptiness becoming man. Or was that Christianity mixing in? There were too many ways of looking at things. A century ago, for his great-grand uncles, there had been only the one way. Høngan thought that old way might be a little like Wooshin's way, but with more feeling and vision. The right way, his own way, was not clear to Høngan, not quite yet.

Before dawn he shook the frost from his blankets and rode on by the faint light of an old crescent moon in the east. Knowing the route the priest would take, he did not need to see their tracks to follow,

and within two hours he had found them. Ombroz had rekindled their dung fire and they were drinking hot tea and eating jerky at sunrise. The chaplain hailed him, and the turncoat to whom he had not yet been introduced arose expectantly, but the Nomad went straight to their hobbled horses. He petted one of them, spoke to it gently, then cut the hobbling cord and lifted a front hoof to inspect it. Then he turned to confront them.

"Father, you've brought a spy among us!"

"What are you talking about, my son? This is Captain Esitt Loyte, the one Cardinal Brownpony suggested. He is married to a granddaughter of Wetok Enar, your own kin."

"I don't care if he married the granddaughter of the devil's clan. He's riding a shod horse to let them know he's here."

The priest frowned at the former trooper, then arose to stare toward the west.

"Don't worry, Father. I killed two of them, and the other fled. Here are the papers." He faced Loyte and drew his gun. The stranger spat in the fire, and said, "You might look at both sides of the horse. But thank you, if you killed my assassins."

Høngan aimed at his abdomen. "Your assassin is right here."

"Wait, Bearcub," barked the priest. "Do as he says. Look at the brand."

Reluctantly, he lowered the pistol and inspected the stranger's mount again. "One of Grandmother Wetok's horses," he said in surprise. "And you had it shod in Pobra? You damn fool!"

"If they were out to kill me, why should I leave tracks for them?" Esitt Loyte began to explain, but Høngan ignored him, took tools from his bag, and began prying a shoe from a forehoof. "Give me a hand here," he said to Ombroz.

Soon the nails were pulled and the task was done. He put the horseshoes in his saddlebag. "We'll have to show them to your mother-in-law," he said to the stranger.

"I meant no . . ."

"Bearcub, he's an expert in Texark cavalry tactics, and he knows their war plans. They came to kill him."

"But now he's useless to us, because they know he's here."

"From the tracks of one shod horse? It might be anybody. It might be a Churchman. It might be a trader."

"Traitor, you mean. Before they died, they spoke his name."

"Well, it's done now, and the trail ends here. Loyte is right. They came to kill him. At least *they* must think he's useful to us, even if you don't." He turned to the young former officer. "Why did you have the pony shod?"

"Before I rode into the mountains, I talked to the liveryman in Pobra and he recommended it. And I have always ridden a shod horse. It's cavalry—"

"The trail ends here," the priest repeated. "Bearcub, there's nothing to worry about."

"Mount up," said the Nomad, and pointed toward the horizon. "Look at the dust. There's a migration trail just to the east of us. The herds are moving north. We'll wait there until drovers come. Then we'll ride ahead of their cattle for a few hours, and our tracks will vanish."

"If we do that," Loyte protested, "we won't be home before dark."

"Home?" snorted Høngan.

"The hogans of his wife and her grandmother," Ombroz said firmly. "But I agree, we'd better do as you say."

It was midafternoon before Holy Madness was satisfied that the woolly Nomad cattle that were following them in the distant cloud of dust would erase their tracks. They changed direction then, left the cattle trail, and resumed a northeastward course.

Ombroz was still trying to make peace. "If the cardinal's plan succeeds," he said, "the Hannegan will have to stop these incursions into Wilddog and Grasshopper lands, at least for many years. The hordes by then will be stronger under a single king."

Høngan was silent for a time. They both knew that the Grasshopper lands, the tall-grass prairie lands,

lying to the east, would bear the brunt of any invasion. Those of Blacktooth's people who had remained herdsmen there had become the most warlike of the hordes, because they had to be. They faced Hannegan's armies, and the slow encroachment of farmers onto the more arable eastern fringe. And yet the Wilddog was closest to the Church in Valana, and to possible allies beyond the mountains. There was friction between the hordes, made worse by Nomadic outlaws who had departed from the matrilineal system and attracted young runaways from the conquered Jackrabbit south of the Nady Ann.

"There is the more immediate problem of paying for the goods," Høngan said to the priest at last.

"Don't worry about that," put in the trooper. "His Eminence controls considerable wealth."

"Yes, the Half-Breed owns many cattle," said Høngan acidly.

"There are other forms of wealth than cattle," said Captain Loyte, "and how dare you call him 'Half-Breed,' anyway? Aren't you a Christian, after all?"

The priest laughed. "Go easy, Loyte, my son. The Bearcub is just practicing his tribal accent, so to speak. After all, how would The Most Eminent Lord Elia Cardinal Brownpony, Deacon of Saint Masie's sound in the mouth of the son of Granduncle Brokenfoot, Lord of the Three Hordes."

"My father is lord of nothing, yet," Chür Høngan grumbled, his sour mood persisting.

"See how churlish he turns as he gets closer to home?" said Ombroz.

"Not only is he lord of nothing," Holy Madness went on, "I'm only his son, not his nephew."

"You know that makes no difference," said the priest. "In no way can that old office be inherited, in the motherline or otherwise. The old women have their eye on you, Holy Madness. When the old women look for the *Qaesach dri Vørdar*, they look for a magical leader, not a somebody's nephew or son."

"I don't like this talk, teacher," said Høngan. "I love and respect my father. Talk of inheritance is talk of death. And there hasn't been a *Qaesach Vørdar* since Mad Bear. After seventy years, who knows how these modern women will think."

Ombroz chuckled at the word "modern."

"Granduncle Brokenfoot is going to live a long time," said the former Texark officer. "I saw him only three months ago when he came to visit my brothers-in-law."

"The turncoat has a degree in medicine too," said the Nomad.

The officer shot him a resentful look. "Wasn't it Magic Madman here who claimed he saw the Night Hag, Father?"

"Damn it, old priest! Did you have to tell him that?"

Father Ombroz glanced quickly at both of them. "Stop spoiling for a quarrel, you two. Or else give me your weapons, and get off your horses and fight. Right here, right now."

"Trial by combat?" Høngan snickered. "Yes, Blacktooth told me the Church used to do that. Why didn't you teach me that, Father? You neglected the part of the catechism about the Lord of Armies, but here you are now inviting us to submit to the judgment of God in a fistfight? And I was not looking for one. I just wanted to know, of our Texark adviser here, what other kind of wealth does the Half-Breed have besides cattle? If the turncoat says there is such a thing."

"God damn your mouth!" said the officer, and shifted his weight hard to the left stirrup, causing his horse to stop.

Chür Høngan looked at him for a moment, shrugged, and dismounted. Ombroz spoke quickly. "I have to warn you, Captain, Holy Madness has been practicing combat with an expert—a former headsmen to the Hannegan. You may know of him."

"Do you mean that yellow-skinned genny? Woo Shin? Listen, if you fear traitors, fear him. I wouldn't wonder if Filpeo Harq didn't send him to kill the cardinal. He has a cadre of hired assassins, you know. They are all clever infiltrators."

"The Axe is not a genny, you citizen," said the Nomad, using the word "citizen" as an insult. "Where he comes from, *you* look like a genny. And he hates Filpeo Harq almost as much as I hate him, city boy."

"Bearcub, why do you do that? Captain Loyte's on our side. He knows his business. Try not to be an asshole, my son."

"All right, tell the bastard to stop patronizing me." Høngan turned to remount. Loyte was not appeased, and struck him across the back with his riding whip.



Høngan whirled, grabbed the wrist that came toward him with the whip a second time, and kicked the captain in the stomach with his pointed boot.

For some minutes of semi-consciousness, it appeared that the blow might be fatal. But the priest at last revived him, and insisted that they spend the night on the spot to let Loyte recover. Ombroz prayed at them lengthily and angrily, praising God's mercy for allowing them an undeserved time to repent. Høngan groaned at him sleepily. Loyte whimpered and swore. On the following day, Chür Høngan pulled the officer out of his blanket by the front of his jacket and dragged him to his feet. "Now listen well, pigfucker. If you're a captain in our army, I'm your colonel. You say 'sir' and salute."

He pushed the former trooper down on his rump; the jolt brought forth a yelp of pain as Loyte grabbed his stomach again.

"No, you listen to me!" Ombroz grabbed his bearclub by the arm and pulled him quickly out of earshot. "I've never seen you this brutal! Why? Establishing your seniority is one thing, but you may have ruptured his gut. You've made an enemy for life out of pure bad temper."

"No, I haven't. He's already everybody's enemy. A criminal to his own tribe is no friend to *any* man. He is what he is, and he must know his place."

"You don't mean that. His place is the same as yours, before God."

"Before God, of course. But his place in the ranks of a fighting force under a war sharf is what concerns me, and he has to know that his rank is low. He cannot be trusted."

"You know this because of your great insight into character," Ombroz said ironically. "Greater insight than that of the cardinal, who recommended him to us in the first place. I believe him when he says the agents that followed were sent not just to track him, but to kill him. And in any case, he would be living with the Wetok clan, whether he rode with us or not. They have accepted him. He wintered with them."

"Have you seen me quarrel with anybody else lately?"

"No, Holy Madness. And I hope you're wrong about this man. He knows too much about us for you to drive him away."

"No danger. He has nowhere to go. We leave him with his wife's people, no matter what the eminent cardinal said. I still want to know how he knows that Brownpony can find his part of the price of the weapons which he promised. And where do the weapons come from?"

"Elia worked hard for Pope Linus, Bearclub, and Pope Linus rewarded him well. I know that Elia owns estates on the west coast, and up in the Oregon country, but he may not need to use his own wealth. Trust him. If you pay the traders six hundred cattle, the cardinal will arrange for somebody to pay the other two-thirds of the price. As the most powerful state on the continent, Texark has many enemies and few allies. Many of those enemies would be glad to help arm the hordes. You are being ungrateful."

"Not at all. I like Brownpony. I know it's his influence more than his wealth that matters. And I trust his best intentions. That doesn't mean I trust the outcome of his intentions. If he's wealthy, fine. But how does Loyte know?"

"He probably doesn't. He *was* patronizing you. Nomad or citizen, each feels superior to the other. *Nomas et civis*—it's a story old as Genesis. But as for the money, there are states west of the divide which would like to see the Hannegans' empire stop where it is, or be driven back eastward. There is too much talk in Texark about uniting the continent, and their embassies report this talk home. One or more of them may be giving you the weapons for nothing."

"Six hundred cattle are not nothing."

"They are next to nothing. Cardinal Brownpony told me the real price of the merchandise. It's more like six thousand cattle."

"If we get the weapons at all. If the traders don't deliver defective junk."

"What puts you in this awful mood, Holy Madness? I half-expected you to call Loyte a grass-eater."

Høngan laughed. "In my mother's house, that word is still used. So at home, I might use it on him."

"You know, you have a certain political ugliness about you, Holy Madness, that you did not learn from me."

"Oh, but I did!"

"No, you didn't!"

"Are you going to try to whip me too, O Teacher?"

"I *have done* that."

"When I was ten and you were younger. You taught me not to hit clergy, but you're not—" The Nomad stopped. He saw the change in Ombroz's face, shook his head, *sorry*, and walked back to his horse.

By the time they had made camp for a second night under the stars, they met a messenger from the Wilddog Horde's royal tribe. He was riding south with bad news. Granduncle Brokenfoot had suffered a stroke, had lost the use of his left leg, and was composing his death song. It was therefore deemed wise for the grandmothers and shamans to begin considering other candidates for the ancient office of the one *Qæsach dri Vørdar*.

The following day, they arrived at the hogans of Grandmother Wetok Enar's clan. The old woman was weak and ailing, so it was Loyte's wife Potear Wetok who, unaccompanied by her grandmother, bade them welcome. Her husband dismounted and went to embrace her, but she pushed him away; his "learning about our horses," the Nomad euphemism for the breaking in of a new groom by the mothers of his new family, was not yet finished. She bowed to Father Ombroz and Chür Høngan, and invited them into the hogan of her grandmother. Out of politeness, they followed her, although both were in haste to return to Høngan's family.

"Chür, have you heard the bad news?" asked the lovely granddaughter. "I hope I'm not the one who has to tell you."

"We met a messenger. I know about my father." He handed her a leather pouch containing the horseshoes. "Your husband will explain these, but later." She looked at the pouch curiously, but left it inside the door-flap unopened as she ushered them into the hogan.

The old woman sat in a leather slingchair hung between two posts sunk in the hard dirt floor. She tried to rise, but Høngan waved her back. Nevertheless, she signed her respect for Høngan and Ombroz by making the *kokai*, striking her forehead with her knuckles, and bowing her head while placing her hand against her scalp palm outward toward each of them. This politeness seemed excessive, and she did not repeat it toward Esitt Loyte. Her son-in-law she ignored; whether this was normal groom-hazing ("teaching him about our horses") or real contempt was hard to say.

"What the Night Hag has foolishly done to your father grieves me greatly, Høngan Ösle Chür." The utterance was fraught with portent. Ombroz noticed that Høngan was actually fidgeting before her. To attribute Brokenfoot's illness to the Night Hag and call it foolish meant that he had been this Weejus woman's choice for *Qæsach Vørdar*, and her reversal of Chür's name, with the matronymic placed last, meant that the rank of Brokenfoot's son had risen in her eyes, for whatever reason. But *Høngan Ösle* was a diminutive for the historical Høngan Os, who lost a war and half of his people to Hannegan II.

"Will you drink blood with us tonight?" the old woman asked. "We celebrate the birth of twin colts by Potear's best mare. And they are healthy, too—a rare and wonderful event."

"Toast the Virgin for us, Grandmother," said Father Ombroz. "My apologies for the haste, but Granduncle Brokenfoot needs us."

"Yes, he will want to see his son, and from you he will want last anointing. Go then with Christ and the Lady."

The two of them rode on, leaving Esitt Loyte behind with his bride and in-laws.

"The captain still has much to learn about the Wetok horses," Ombroz said wryly when they were out of earshot.

Høngan laughed. "He will learn quite a bit in a hurry when Potear shows that old Weejus the horseshoes."

The mountains had all but disappeared in a dust haze to the west when Holy Madness suddenly announced that Brokenfoot had become irascible in his illness, and that his old wife had found it necessary to appoint another as temporary head of the family.

"How do you know this?" the priest scoffed. "A vision?"

"That vision." Høngan pointed toward the east. Carefully he raised himself in the saddle, and soon

was standing on the back of his horse.

"My old eyes can't see anything but emptiness. What is it?"

"There is someone there, I think my uncle. It's miles away, still!

He moves its arms and dances a message. They see our dust."

"Ah, the Nomad semaphore language. I should have learned it when I was younger. It always amazes me."

"It gives us an advantage over their Texark warriors."

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When the hogans of the Little Bear clan hove into view on the horizon, a small cloud of dust appeared and soon a rider approached them. It was Brokenfoot's wife's brother, Red Buzzard, who was the nominal leader of the clan, who nevertheless deferred to his sister's husband because she willed it so. Now during the husband's illness, the brother resumed his rightful role. He was a thin, serious man, nearly sixty, with livid patches of skin which might have marked him as a genny except among the Nomads, where the cosmetic defect was highly regarded as a mark of Empty Sky. He spoke seriously to Holy Madness about Brokenfoot's condition, which was disabling but apparently not getting worse at the moment.

"Some of our drovers are already back from the south," Red Buzzard said to Ombroz, "including our Bear Spirit men. They are with him now, Father. But of course he wants to see you."

Ombroz started to tell him about the Pope, but Red Buzzard already knew. Even in Cardinal Brownpony's absence from Valana, his Secretariat was constantly sending and receiving messengers from the people of the Plains. When they came to the Little Bear village, the children and younger women came out to greet and be hugged by Høngan and their priest.

"Will you stay with us after you see your father?" asked his mother. "Or must you ride on to Grasshopper country?"

Holy Madness hesitated. He had not told her before. "I think Kuhaly has divorced me." He glanced at Ombroz, who had married them, but the priest was looking away. "She said she would send for me if she wants me. Even if she does, I may not go."

His mother's face melted. "They blame you for having no daughters?"

"Perhaps. Also for being away too much of the time. Her brothers complain. I've done too little for the family. They say I am too attached to you. You know the word for that."

"I was afraid it would be so when you married Grasshopper. Our drovers told us they had to fight Grasshopper drovers again this winter, to get pasturage."

"Anyone killed?"

"Among ours, only wounded. Among theirs, I don't know. It was an exchange of shots and arrows. Now, come and see your father."

The Little Bear family shamans left the hogan while Father Ombroz administered the last anointing to his oldest convert. The priest knew they were embarrassed that some of their practices could not be reconciled with the religion he taught, and that they had accepted baptism themselves because Brokenfoot wished it so. When the old man died, their embarrassment (and envy?) might turn into hostility.

But the whole family knew that when he, Ombroz, had been forced to choose between them and his Order, when a new superior general of that Order, nominated by Archbishop Benefez, and therefore by Filpeo Harq, had called him back to New Rome, he had refused to go. He had been expelled and placed under interdict—measures which he ignored. Still, the punishment hurt him more than he cared to admit. He knew the Weejus women would be his allies in any quarrel with the Bear Spirit shamans, but he wanted to avoid the quarrel, and so far, so did they. Under his teaching, most of this Nomad family had become Christians, while he himself over the years had become a Nomad.

Ombroz was not the first teacher of the Order of Saint Ignatz to watch a favorite student whom he had taught to think for himself begin thinking otherwise than the priest had foreseen. That night he sighed

heavily as he watched Chür Høngan dance the dance of the dying with the shamans in the dim and smoky light of the dung fire in front of Brokenfoot's hogan.

The drums seemed to say: "Gruesome go, gruesome go, gruesome Mama go. . . ."

The dance was to placate Black Wind, Empty Sky's frightful counterpart, and to fend off the Night Hag. For a time he went wandering through the village, visiting similar fires and speaking to old "parishioners." A minority were really Christian, but most he had baptized, and most accepted him as belonging to the shaman class. Among the unbaptized, his wisdom voice was still deemed worth hearing, when he sang in council.

Before the conquest, such villages had not existed. But more and more the Plains were dotted with hogans of stone and sod resembling those of the farmers, and located beside intermittent creeks and waterholes. Here the children and the elderly stayed for the winter, while the drovers moved their woolly cattle according to the seasons or best grazing and for protection from the worst of the howling blizzards which in the dead of winter swept down the Plains from the Arctic over the lands of the Great Mare and on into the conquered province which had belonged to the Jackrabbit Horde. Long ago the Jackrabbit had held the lightly forested land with deciduous trees to the southeast, land now claimed by the Texark Imperium. The Jackrabbit had rented pasturage there, partially sheltered from the icy blasts, to the Grasshopper and the Wilddog in the winter months, and they were well paid for this in cattle and horses. As a consequence, the the Jackrabbit people were the least migratory of the hordes even before the war; and only a minority fled from the south after the conquest to form the Jackrabbit diaspora in the poor farming regions, neighbors to some of the impoverished ex-Grasshopper families who like Blacktooth's had fled toward the mountains across the short-grass country of the Wilddog.

He could not get away from the drums. Now they seemed to say, "Freedom come, freedom come, freedom maiden come. . . ."

After visiting nearly every dwelling, Father Ombroz went back to Brokenfoot's hogan. He stood near the fire watching the dance for a time; then, after a pause to catch the beat, he laughed aloud and joined the dance himself, bringing an amused cheer from his Bearcub.

## CHAPTER 8

The fifth degree of humility is that he hide from his Abbot none of the evil thoughts that enter his heart or the sins committed in secret, but that he humbly confess them. —

*Saint Benedict's Rule, Chapter 7*

THE SECRETARIAT OF EXTRAORDINARY Ecclesiastical Concerns was located in one of the few remaining buildings near the center of the city which had been there before the Pope came west. A two-story building of stone with a basement, it had once been a military barracks for a few dozen sentries, and it stood alone amid spruce trees on an acre of land fifteen minutes' walk from Saint John-in-Exile.

Although the monk and the old warrior spent the first night shivering in their blankets on cots in the Secretariat basement, within a day they were lodged with three seminary students named Aberlott, Jæsis, and Crumily in a small house Brownpony found for them near the western limit of the city. He had won the at-first-grudging consent of the students by paying half the rent on behalf of his servants, and by promising that they would share the housework and exercise no seniority over the much younger students, one of whom—Jæsis—was ill. Aberlott was a chubby, good-natured clown from the northwest, whom Blacktooth immediately liked. Crumily was a long-faced Easterner, who seemed morose at first, but who proved to have a wry wit that usually twisted the tail of Aberlott's jokes. The

character of Jæsis was difficult to fathom because of his illness, but Aberlott called him a bit of a fanatic as a student for the priesthood, but did not dislike the boy, although he came from Hannegan City.

The house itself was adjacent to a brewery. A creek ran through the brewery and out behind the house. It came down the hill as pure mountain spring water in summer, but was now swollen by melted snow. Their outhouse and others in the vicinity were well above the level of the creek and probably drained into it during hard rains. Blacktooth had seen children drinking from the stream down at the ford, and he wondered about the illness of Jæsis, who, when he was not in bed, could be heard moaning in the outhouse. Blacktooth and Wooshin were to share a room in back, and come and go through a rear entrance, although they might use a common kitchen and share a space for study. So it was agreed. The newcomers had several days to inspect the city before going to work at the Secretariat.

They found the city itself rather filthy, except in local enclaves of power and wealth where street sweepers stayed busy and water arrived by aqueduct. Valana had grown up rapidly around an ancient hilltop fortress which had in earlier centuries been a bastion of defense by the mountain people against the more savage Nomads of an earlier age. Except for the ancient hilltop fortress itself, which now enclosed the center of a newer New Vatican, overshadowed in the afternoons by the spires and bell towers of the Cathedral of Saint John-in-Exile, the city was without walls. Before the exiled papacy had moved here, the city had become a sort of middle kingdom among the contiguous communities of the populated region, where merchants traded with miners for silver and pelts, with Nomads for hides and meat, and with farmers for wheat and corn. There had been two blacksmiths, a silversmith, two arrowsmiths, a fletcher, a miller, three merchants, one doctor of medicine, and one gunsmith, when the Pope had fled here from New Rome. Since then, the number of businesses had quadrupled, and there were now doctors, lawyers, and bankers. Half a dozen city governments in the region competed with Valana proper and each other for new business. It had been a growing economy, but with the coming of the head of the Church, the growth became explosive. Only one building in five was older than the beginning of the exile. Among them was the Secretariat building among the spruce trees, almost invisible from the road.

Blacktooth went to work almost immediately at the Secretaria - replacing a volunteer lay translator who spoke Nomadic better than Rockymount and who happened to be a Christian Wilddog cousin of Chür Høngan and was glad to be relieved of the job and returned to his family on the Plains. There were seventeen employees at the agency, counting a janitor, but not counting the messengers that kept coming and going between Brownpony and his many correspondents around the continent, some secret, some official. There were five translator-secretaries including Blacktooth, three copyists, three security-guard receptionists, and five men who worked in a part of the building sealed off from everyone else and accessible from the outside only through a locked iron gate and from the inside only by way of a corridor to the cardinal's own office. Blacktooth was quick to realize that no one but the cardinal knew all the Secretariat's purposes, and employees were isolated from each other as much as possible.

Blacktooth inherited the office space of his Nomad predecessor, which was adjacent to Brownpony's office because the man had needed more careful supervision than others. However secretive the cardinal might be with his own employees, he was forced to confide in a nun named Sister Julian from the Secretariat of State, who was there to keep a close eye on those "extraordinary concerns" which also might affect the official diplomatic relations of the Valanan papacy. She seemed to have a certain nay-saying power, and she treated Blacktooth and Brownpony's other people with suspicion and an attitude of superiority, although she seemed to be on good enough terms with the master. She was, however, apparently not entitled to know what went on in the sealed-off part of the building, and was denied entry there.

There was a confluence of cardinals now, continually arriving for the impending conclave. As soon as they found quarters, they changed their garments from red to the purple of mourning for the dead Pope. Anyway, purple was the color of penance, appropriate for Lent, now drawing to a close. After the period of mourning was finished, the color would change to saffron. They would not again wear cardinal red until the election of a pope.

One of the first cardinals to arrive in the city came from the most remote diocese of all Christendom,

one who had, in fact, set out by sea to attend not this but the previous conclave which had elected the Bishop of Denver, now deceased. His name was Cardinal Ri, Archbishop of Hong, and he had sailed across the Pacific with a wife and two lovely younger women said by some to be his concubines. These were looked upon with horror by the local Society of Purity, but the police were warned by the Cardinal High Chamberlain and former Secretary of State, Hilan Bleze, to keep such people from harassing the strange foreign archbishop, the existence of whose diocese had been unknown for centuries, until just three decades ago when a voyage of discovery had found Christian communities in islands far to the west. Pope Linus had been so delighted to learn there were still Oriental Christians that he made Bishop Ri a cardinal before fully investigating the traditions of his Church. The Axe now too was delighted to learn of Cardinal Ri, for other reasons, and set out immediately to meet some of his staff. He returned to relate that it was possible for him to communicate with them, barely, in his native tongue, so similar were the two dialects of an ancient language. He was also impressed by the advanced weaponry of Ri's guards; when the Axe told Brownpony about the arms, the cardinal paid Ri a visit. He apparently asked that these weapons be kept out of sight, for the guards thereafter carried conventional cavalry pistols.

Wooshin made haste to explain to Blacktooth that the apparent concubines were nominal wives, extrasacramental, and that Ri kept them because it was expected of a man of the archbishop's rank in the society of his home island. Nevertheless, they apparently all bedded down together at times, according to the staff. While they were indeed looked upon with horror by the cardinals of the Society, there was hardly any conclavist who was not looked upon with horror by somebody. Cardinal Ri was very rich, but of course he had brought no more wealth with him than six soldiers could guard with their lives during the voyage, and he needed credit to keep his family and retinue living in comfort. Most merchants in Valana extended him credit, since Brownpony vouched for him orally (but declined to cosign his notes).

Sorley Cardinal Nauwhat from Oregon, himself a candidate, greeted the Oriental prelate most warmly, and Emmery Cardinal Buldyrk, the Abbess of N'Ork, immediately befriended Ri's extrasacramental wives and offered them the hospitality of her rented suite. This Ri reluctantly permitted, after he was told of the city's attitude toward his extra women. He was somewhat ill anyway—his personal physician spoke of dragon's breath from the mountains—and probably felt no need of his ladies. There were other married cardinals, of course, but most of them were laymen or deacons, and most left the wives at home.

Strangely, the most powerful prelate on the continent, Uno Cardinal Benefez, Archbishop of Texark, was late to come to the conclave, sending word by wire that he wished to celebrate Easter Mass in his own cathedral with his own people and his Hannegan.

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Brownpony and his new servants had been in Valana for a week when Blacktooth decided to go to confession. The cardinal, always charitably helpful to the little monk in such personal matters in this strange city had gotten him an appointment with a priest whom he wanted Nimmy to meet.

The Reverend Amen Specklebird, O.D.D. (*Ordo Dominae Desertarum*), lived alone in what had once been a cave in the side of a hill. But somebody with rock-cutting tools had shaped the outer cavern, squared the tunnel, deepened it, filled the hole behind the living quarters with rubble and mortar, and added short walls of stone that protruded from the hill. Father Specklebird had partially reopened the hole where the cave narrowed. (It let the mountain spirits come and go through his kitchen, he explained.) A vaulted roof, also of stone, topped the walls that protruded from the hill so that the visible part of the dwelling reminded Blacktooth of the front of a Nomad hogan that had been half-swallowed by a mountain. Blacktooth learned that the wealthy owner of an ecclesiastical tailor shop had owned it a decade or more ago, and had used it as a root cellar until Cardinal Brownpony had bought it for Father Specklebird when the Bishop of Denver had forced the old priest's retirement. Strangely, after Bishop Scullite had become Linus VII of recent memory, he had summoned Father Specklebird to his private quarters on several occasions. If rumors were true, Blacktooth might be about to confess to a confessor of the late Pope. Another rumor, which had been traced to a papal chambermaid, had it that Linus VII,

on the brink of death, had named the old man cardinal *in pectore*, pending the next consistory, but no one could substantiate the servant's tale.

The monk stood in the shadows under the trees, steeling himself to cross the trail and knock on the heavy pine door. A wisp of smoke arose from a chimney. Except for the light from fire that caused the smoke, it must be rather dark inside, for there were only two small windows, set high in the thick wall. Nimmy had been in a proper frame of mind and heart when he left the cottage, ready to make a good confession. But now that he was here, a kind of dread came over him.

He had left Leibowitz Abbey unshrived and stinking of guilt; moreover, on the trip to Valana from the desert he had done unspeakable deeds, and now he quaked at the prospect of confessing to a stranger, thing he had never before done. The sacrament of penance had always been administered to him by a priest of the Order, and usually once a week. There was only so much mischief a monk could accomplish in a week, even an unruly monk such as Blacktooth St. George. Usually, it was a matter of whispering his self-accusations to his regular confessor, and hearing himself sentenced to, say, a few decades of the rosary, or at worst to make a public apology to a brother, or to flagellate himself three or five lashes with a not very painful piece of rope for solitary sins of impurity, resentful thoughts, and failures of charity or courage. Such penances always left him feeling cleansed and ready to receive the Holy Eucharist at Mass.

But now he had been sinning rather copiously for weeks on end, often neglecting his prayers, breaking his vows, and secretly disobeying his benefactor, the cardinal. It was to the cardinal, in fact, that he had mentioned his fear of confessing to a stranger; when the cardinal had suggested e'Laiden, and e'Laiden had declined, it was the cardinal again who had arranged for him to confess in Valana to a reputed holy man, none other than Amen Specklebird himself, whose name had been once or twice brought before a previous conclave as a candidate for the papacy! Blacktooth now wished he had never mentioned his problem to Brownpony. He would much rather confess anonymously to a faceless priest behind a grille at the seminary chapel than do it in the presence of a holy man, and he thought of sneaking away to do just that before the time came for his arranged interview. But Father Specklebird would ask how long since his last confession, as was customary, and would then realize that Blacktooth had circumvented him. Furthermore, he imagined, a seminary priest might be so horrified by what he heard that he would refuse to absolve him, and then he would have to tell Specklebird about that too. Even outside the abbey, being a Catholic was a very complicated business for a simple ex-Nomad recluse with little knowledge of the external world.

Suddenly the pine door was flung open, and an old black man with a cloud of white hair and great white eyebrows came out and walked straight toward him. His beard was white too, but close-cropped, as if he shaved it once a month or kept it trimmed with scissors. He wore a clean but ragged gray cassock, and sandals that appeared to be made of straw. He was gaunt, almost a skeleton with tight muscles strung along the bones, and hollow cheeks and hollow abdomen that hinted at much fasting. He walked with a lively limp, using a short cane heavy enough to be an effective club. When he came out the door, he was looking straight at Blacktooth in the shadows, and he came right toward him, wearing a thin smile and running his luminous gray-blue eyes over the small and timid figure before him.

"Deacon Brownpony has told me something about you, son. May I call you 'Nimmy'? You have left the monastery for good, is that so? Why?"

"Well, I began to feel I was wearing cangue and chains, Father. But in the end, they threw me out."

Amen Specklebird took his arm and led him across the trail toward his hermitage.

"And now you have lost your cangue and chains, yes?" They entered a room which with its bare stone walls reminded the monk of Leibowitz Abbey. There was a fire at one end and a private altar at the other.

Blacktooth thought about the priest's question. "No. If anything, they fit tighter than ever, Father."

"Who tightened them? Who chained you in the first place? Was it the abbot? Was it your brothers? Was it the Holy Church?"

"Of course not, Father! I know that I did it to myself."

"Ahh." He sat quietly. "And now you want to know how to free yourself?"

"Ye shall know the truth and . . ." He shrugged. "One must know the truth to be free."

"So. And what is the truth that you already know?"

"The truth was made flesh, and dwelt among us. We must cling to him alone."

"*Cling* to him? Nimmy, Jesus came to be sacrificed for our sins. We offer him, immolated, on the altar. And still, you want to *cling* to him?" He laughed, and produced a stole. "Are you ready to confess now?"

Blacktooth delayed. "Could we talk awhile first?"

"Of course, but what would you talk about?"

He groped for a subject. Anything to postpone the moment. "Well, I don't understand what you mean about the sacrifice."

"To sacrifice Jesus is to give him up, of course."

The monk started. "But I gave up everything *for* Jesus!"

"Oh, did you! Except Jesus, perhaps, good simpleton?"

"If I give up Jesus, I will have nothing at all!"

"Well, that might be perfect poverty, but for one thing: that *nothing*—you should get rid of that too, Nimmy."

Blacktooth became bewildered. "How is it possible for a priest of Christ to talk like this?"

Specklebird pointed to his mouth and worked his jaw mockingly in silence. Then, without anger, he lightly slapped the monk's face. Wake up!" he said.

"Blacktooth sat down on a hard bench. He had been reciting formulas, trying to say the right thing for the old man, who was now laughing.

"You are a rich fellow," said Specklebird. "Your riches are your cangue and chains."

"I have nothing but the robe on my back; the g'tara which I made for myself was stolen," the monk protested with some irritation. "I don't even have a rosary, now. Also stolen. I eat other people's food, and sleep in other people's quarters. I don't even piss in my own pot. I promised to be poor for Christ. If I've broken that vow, I don't know how. I broke the others."

"Are you proud of this unbroken vow?"

"Yes! I mean no! Oh, I see, I'm rich in pride, is that it?" Amen Specklebird sat down across from him. They watched each other in the dim light. The old man's gaze was like that of a child, curious, open, pleasant, expectant. He snapped his fingers, unexpectedly loud. Blacktooth did not jump at the snap, but his gaze in turn was wary, and he looked away to the left. Specklebird continued to watch him in silence.

Still delaying, Blacktooth began to talk rapidly, about life at Leibowitz Abbey, not about his sins as sins, but about his frustrations, his loves and friendships, his devotion to the founder of his order and to the Mother of God, his vocation and how he lost it, and his homesickness for the very place he had tried so hard to escape. He kept pausing, hoping the hermit listening to his story would offer advice, but the old ordinary of Our Lady of the Desert only nodded his understanding from time to time. Blacktooth became embarrassed by his own self-pity and stopped talking. A long silence passed between them.

After a while, Specklebird began to speak softly.

"Nimmy, the only hard thing about following Christ is that you must throw away all values, even the value you place on following Christ. And to throw them away doesn't mean sell them, or sell them out. To be truly poor in spirit, discard your loves and your hates, your good and bad taste, your preferences. Your wish to be, or not be, a monk of Christ. Get rid of it. You can't even see the path, if you care where it goes. Free from values, you can see it plain as day. But if you have even one little wish, a wish to be sinless, or a wish to change your dirty clothes, the path vanishes. Did you ever think that maybe the cangue and chains you wear are your own precious values, Nimmy? Your vocation or lack of it? Good and evil? Ugliness and beauty? Pain and pleasure? These are values, and these are heavy weights. They make you stop and consider, and that's when you lose the way of the Lord."

Blacktooth listened patiently, fascinated at first, but drawing himself up, becoming distraught. He felt the old man was trying to undermine everything he knew and felt about religion. Was this kind of talk the reason the bishop had forced Amen Specklebird to retire?



"The Devil!" the monk said softly.

If Specklebird heard it as an accusation, he ignored it. "Him? Throw him away, dump him in the slit trench with the excrement, throw quicklime on him."

"Jesus!"

"Him too, oh yes, into the trench with that fucker! If he makes you rich."

Blacktooth gasped. "Jesus? Whom do I follow? Then why follow? It's blasphemy, what you say."

"You know, it's all right to pick up Christ's cross and carry it, Nimmy, but if you think you get anything special because of it, you're selling the cross, and you're a rich man. The path is without reason. Just follow."

"Without wanting to?"

"*Sine cupidine.*"

"Then why?"

"Your wish for a *why* is the cangue and chains."

"I just don't understand."

"Good. Remember it, Nimmy, but don't understand it. That spoils you."

Blacktooth felt dizzy. Was the old man quite sane?

Amen Specklebird laughed gently. "Now for your confession, if you still want me to hear it."

After confession, which he wanted to forget as quickly as possible, Blacktooth went home first, but the air was foul with recent vomit. Someone had washed the floor near Jæsis' bed, where the student lay moaning. He had lost a lot of weight. Once he opened his eyes and glared wildly at the monk, who asked if he wanted a Doctor to come. "Here this morning," Jæsis croaked. "It does no good."

Blacktooth brought a cold wet towel for his head, then went back to the Secretariat, where he spent the afternoon and much of the evening translating the cardinal's mail to and from the Plains. He was very quickly learning about Nomad politics and the important personages among the hordes. He learned that Chür Høngan had now returned to the hogans and herds of his Little Bear grandmother, that Uncle Brokenfoot had been struck down by sudden illness, that an anti-Christian faction among the Bear Spirit men and the Weejus women of the Grasshopper Horde, some of whom feared Høngan's candidacy, had suddenly rallied to the name of one Hultor Bråm, a mankiller of undoubted prowess, as the most fit war sharf to reunite the Three Hordes. Bråm interested Blacktooth exactly (and only) because he was Grasshopper, and might even be a distant relative. His partisans translated his name as Kindly Light, but in Jackrabbit *hultor bråm* meant a bad sunburn. He also learned that his master was not entirely displeased by this development, for Bråm was possessed by a savagery that made Høngan's temperament seem mild in comparison, and the cardinal, although alarmed by the illness of Høngan's father, believed the majority of the grandmothers would never propose for the highest office and bridegroom of the *Fujæ Go* a hothead after the pattern of Mad Bear, whose reckless chieftainship had lost the Jackrabbit territory in the south to Hannegan II, and cost the Grasshopper dearly in men and cattle. The Wilddog on the High Plains had suffered the least from that old conquest.

Brownpony always left notes to help the monk avoid political pitfalls in his translations, when the wrong wording might offend certain groups, or compromise his plans if his correspondence fell into the wrong hands. The cardinal received more and longer letters than he wrote, and Blacktooth was surprised to learn that he had so many literate allies on the Plains. He knew, or had been told, that Nomad literacy was about five percent. The writers mostly belonged, he realized now, to the Christian minorities within the hordes, and most of them from powerful families. Brownpony was obviously trying to keep these three minorities in close contact with each other. With the help of certain Weejus women, he was even playing marriage broker to forge alliances between Wilddog, Grasshopper, and Jackrabbit families.

Blacktooth came to suspect that an unfortunate marriage of Chür Høngan to a Grasshopper girl was one result of such efforts. He had been doing this since the days of Pope Linus VI, with the blessing of subsequent pontiffs. While examining these files, he inadvertently encountered material from the Weejus women that related to the cardinal personally. For years his friends had been searching among the Wilddog people for some trace of the family of Brownpony's mother or for anyone who remembered

her. The information from the Weeju was transmitted by e'Laiden Ombroz: "With the help of the Bearcub's family, I have come to the end of the search. I can only conclude, Your Eminence, that there is not, and never was, a Wilddog motherline using the name 'Brown Pony.' If your mother's people are among us, that is not their name. The sisters who told you the story must have been misinformed. Perhaps it is a Grasshopper or Jackrabbit name, or perhaps it was an assumed name. I regret that I have been of no help to you."

Embarrassed, the monk returned the file to its place without reading the rest of it, and never mentioned it to Brownpony.

Blacktooth was humbly grateful that his master trusted him enough to let him learn about these matters, even by accident, but he also knew that a few messages to and from the Plains were in code, and these were attended to by Brownpony personally. Something dangerous to Brownpony himself, or to the reputation of the Secretariat, was going on, but he found no clue in the nonsecret correspondence as to the nature of the intrigue. He was not allowed to see the cardinal's correspondence with Oregon and the west coast, but that, of course, was not written in Nomadic. A technical civilization rivaling that of Texark had been developing in the far west for nearly a century, although distance and the mountains kept them apart and not competitive.

The monk had been watching his master pore over his correspondence, wondering why the cardinal himself was rarely mentioned as a candidate for the papacy, when Brownpony whirled suddenly to confront him.

"Nimmy, I am weary of being the target of the corner of your eye, of being the addressee of all your unasked questions. What is it you want to know about me?"

"Nothing, my Lord! It is unseemly . . ."

"It is unseemly to lie to your patron. Ask me a question, an impertinent question, of course."

After a silence, Blacktooth found a small voice: "How is it that you are not a priest, m'Lord?"

"Yes, that would be first question. Explain yourself to the sometime monk, Elia Brownpony. Tell him how you were married once, and now Pope Linus was going to make you a priest before he made you cardinal, but you refused, saying that Seruna might still be alive, although you knew she was dead. She was kidnapped by outlaw Nomads like those at Arch Hollow. They don't keep kidnapped women alive long. Well, Blacktooth, there you have the waves. Do you want the Ocean as well?"

"I'm ashamed that I presumed to ask."

"Don't grovel. I was called to be a lawyer, not a priest, and that's it. There are many priests who should have been lawyers instead, and a few lawyers who should have been priests. I say I have been called to practice law and settle disputes. I'm not so sure where calls come from. Practicing law and negotiating disputes, this is what I do well. Plus politics and controversy. I would not be a good priest, regular or secular. I have neither the charity nor the piety for it. I can serve the Church best as the shepherd's dog, fighting for the flock, or snapping at the heels of the flock to keep the sheep together. There is no chance that Seruna is alive. I loved her in my way, but she was not happy. And if she were alive still, she would not come back to me. But I can't prove she's dead."

"You had no children?"

"I have a son in Saint Maisie's Seminary in New Rome."

"And you are the Cardinal Deacon of—" Blacktooth stopped and put his hand over his mouth.

Brownpony laughed. "Deacon of Saint Maisie's Church in New Rome, yes. Nepotism? Pope Linus made the appointment. Without asking me? Of course he asked me. Now what else do you want to know?"

"I'm sorry I pried."

"You didn't. Looking at me curiously behind my back is not prying. You are a good fellow, Nimmy. You know your place, and you work hard. I raise your salary by half."

"Fifty percent of—" Blacktooth stopped.

"—of nothing is nothing. All right, you may increase your living expenses by that much, and I'll tell Jaron to pay them. Now get on with these letters to the east. I'm so busy trying to keep track of who's here for the conclave and guess at their votes, I've no time for my proper affairs."

When he was not working, the monk fell into moods close to despair. It was not that the sin itself with Ædrea was so terrible, but that he was out of control. His life was reconsecrated to God every day, but if he had kept God in his heart, he would never have climbed into the hay with her. It did not matter to him that what they did together would not make a baby. That it might not even be a sin, if he were not promised to God, but to love her was to love God less, was it not? It was not the act that he despised, but the flaw in his character that permitted it.

Did I go to a monastery to make myself morally perfect?

No, not at all.

What, then?

The monk's ultimate goal is direct union with the Godhead, But to aim at that goal is to miss it altogether. His task is to rid himse of ego so that consciousness, once its usual discordant mental content dumped out of it through ritual prayer and meditation, may experience nonself as a living formlessness and emptiness into which God may come, if it please Him to come. So Eckhart had spoken of it two thousand years ago: "God gives birth to His Son in the soul." Only in self-emptiness may it happen one day that Christ awaken within the monk, as I-to-I. But there was someone else awake there now, for Blacktooth, and he was very lonely, very lonely for her.

## CHAPTER 9

The third degree of humility is that a person for the love of God submits himself to his Superior in all obedience, imitating the Lord, of whom the Apostle says, "He became obedient even unto death."

—Saint *Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 7

LEASED BY THE INCREASE IN HIS LIVING allowance, Blacktooth planned to change his residence as soon as the crowd left town after the election, but for the time being he was forced to continue living with the students. Wooshin would be leaving in a few days at the cardinal's bidding.

When he came home from work on the afternoon of Holy Tuesday, the student named Aberlott called "Catch!" and tossed something to him as soon as he came through the door. Blacktooth grabbed for it, missed, and turned to pick it up when it bounced off the wall. Looking down at the object, he froze in a half-crouch.

"What's wrong?" the student asked. "Isn't it yours? She said it belonged to you."

Blacktooth picked it up and turned to stare at Aberlott. "She? he gasped.

"The nun. My God, what is the matter? You're white as snow."

"Nun?"

"Sure. One of the stricter orders, I believe. Brown habit, white coif. Barefoot. Isn't that your rosary? She said you left it in the cardinal's coach."

"Was she a genny?"

"A genny? Not that I could tell. She didn't wear the headband. Of course, celibate religious don't have to. You can't see much of a nun except her face and hands and feet. She *was* rather pretty for a nun though. She didn't look like a genny to me. You were expecting a genny?"

Blacktooth sat down on his bed and stared at the beads and the cross. The silver had been carefully cleaned of tarnish, and the beads seemed brighter than he remembered, well polished now.

"Did she say anything else?"

"No, not that I recall. We talked a little about the conclave. I was trying to flirt, I guess. She was kind, but she was distant. Oh, she did ask where you were, in an offhand way. That's all."

"What did you tell her?"

"I said you were usually at the Secretariat this time of day. I don't think she was actually looking for you though. She went off in the opposite direction. Just wanted to return the rosary, I think. I wondered what she was doing in the cardinal's carriage."

"Looting it," he whispered.

"What did you say?"

Blacktooth lay back on the bench and closed his eyes. After a long time, he said, "Thank you, Aberlott."

"Don't mention it." The student resumed his reading. Perhaps the nun was really a nun. Ædrea had given the rosary to a nun, that's all. It was all right for a genny to be a nun and not wear the green headband, but for a genny to impersonate a religious in order to conceal ancestry was a crime under the laws of the Denver Republic, as everywhere. Persecution of the genetically diseased was nearly universal. They were protected only by the law of the Church, but not to the extent of allowing the impersonation of religious. And while the Church might protest against discriminatory legislation by the secular authority, she had never taken a firm stand against eugenic laws designed to prevent intermarriage between the healthy and the children of the Pope. Nor had she resisted laws defining the marriageability of citizens in terms of degrees of kinship to known freaks. The baptismal records of Churches were used as evidence in secular courts, and priests were required to note the pedigrees of parents on certificates of baptism. Before any couple were given a license to marry by the secular arm, both had to undress and be tested by the medical inspectors of a civil magistrate. The Nomads, of course, had their own rules, but there was no tolerance among them for deformity, hereditary or otherwise. They simply killed the deformed at birth.

He fingered the beads of his rosary and decided that Ædrea must have given it to a nun in a party of religious traveling up the papal highway. He felt shame for the fear and hope that surged within him when he turned to pick it up. Surely, it must have been a nun. What the police would do to a genny impersonating a citizen was nothing compared to what a mob would do. And surely, Ædrea herself would not have polished the beads and cleaned the crucifix so. If she had sent it back sooner, he would have escaped that horrid moment in confession about bartering it for sex, as Specklebird construed it. But why had she returned it at all, even indirectly?

"What color was her hair?" he called to the student, who was immersed in a textbook.

"Whose hair?"

"The nun."

"Which—? Oh! Her coif hid it." He paused. "Probably blond. She was very fair."

Blacktooth stirred uneasily. Blondes were not plentiful, but there were probably dozens of them in Valana. The mixed ancestry of the continent's population produced skin colors in varying shades of brown, but fair skin and black skin were both rare, as were red and blond hair.

He arose from the bench and went outside. There was nobody in the street but an old man and two children. The rotten smell from the creek behind the house was particularly strong this afternoon. Several neighbors had become ill lately, probably from the creek or its vapors. He decided to take a walk up the hill, in the direction away from the Secretariat.

He walked for an hour. There were fewer and fewer houses as he moved along. At last he came to a guard post at the fenced limits of the city. Beyond it lay only forest and a few hermitages, including the home of Amen Specklebird. He stopped to speak to the sentry.

"How long have you been on duty, corporal?"

The young officer looked toward the sun, hanging low in the west. "About four hours, I guess. Why?"

"Did a young nun pass this way? Brown robe, white coif ..."

The sentry immediately looked toward the woods, studied Blacktooth for a moment, and began to leer. "Oh, *ho!* I wondered why she was going out there alone."

Angered by the leer, the monk turned and hiked back down the road for home. The anger turned to

fear again. He knew it was fear for Ædrea, but she was probably safe at home in Arch Hollow. The nun was just a nun. And yet if nuns had a small convent farther up the hillside, would the sentry have wondered about her destination?

He dreamed that night that he was wearing a green headband and fleeing from a mob who wanted to castrate him for lying with Torrildo, who had breasts as large as Ædrea's, or was it Ædrea with a penis as large as Torrildo's? He was trapped in Shard's barn, which now housed Brother Kornhoer's old generator and the chair of electricity from the chapel. Someone was screaming. Rough hands were strapping him into the chair when somebody shook him awake. The rough hands belonged to Wooshin.

"Stop howling," said the Axe. "You'll wake up the whole neighborhood."

"He already has," Aberlott grumbled sleepily from the next room. Crumily was swearing and pounding his pillow. Jæsis had never stopped snoring and moaning.

When the others had subsided into sleep again, Blacktooth felt under his hard pillow for the rosary. He fingered the crucifix and began whispering the creed, but stopped. Cleaned and polished or not, it felt desecrated. In confession, he had tried to blame Ædrea for stealing it, but Father Specklebird had forced him to admit that he had not taxed her again for the beads after a bout of pleasant but certainly sinful sex in the hay.

"Don't mince words. You traded your rosary for a blow job," the old man had said sourly, "and broke your vow of chastity. Now go on. What else have you done?"

Blacktooth was still doing the penance which Father Specklebird had assigned him. ("You shall make a list, an inventory of all your wealth, my son.") At first he thought it a trivial penance, and that the list would be quite short. But the more he worked at it the more clearly he recognized that his riches were coextensive with, and not different from, his sins. There was more (or less) to spiritual poverty than owning nothing.

The city had not been well since the visitors had come. Down from the mountains perhaps, a fetid chinook or chill miasma had breathed upon it, sickening many of the young, the old, the frail. Food was scarce. Wheat especially was in short supply, and rye of poor quality was imported at high prices. The inns were full to bulging, and inadequate sewers overflowed to the streets in lower elevations. A quorum of cardinals had not yet arrived, but among those already in town, several had fallen sick. The water was blamed at first. It happens every time, the visitors said; none but the locals could safely drink it. But this time was worse than before. There was sickness among the local population as well. The symptoms were various, and not always the same. There was vomiting and fever, as in the case of the student Jæsis. Others experienced dizziness, headache, depression, mania, delirium, or panic. One physician claimed there were two diseases at work and spreading. Only wealthy Valanans seemed immune, but the immunity was not due to wealth itself; visiting cardinals were not notably poor, but a number of them showed symptoms. There was an urgency to get the conclave started, and if possible, done with. Local people blamed the sickness on crowded conditions caused by visitors. Others cited the wrath of God, which would be appeased only by a swift election.

Because of the sickness and of impatience at lengthy conclaves, there were demonstrations and unrest in Valana that month. On Palm Sunday, what seemed to be a religious procession had moved toward the former fortress hilltop from the college of Saint Ston's. As it neared Saint John-in-Exile, its character changed. New banners were unfurled, and the procession became a political parade, whose half-serious purpose was to proclaim popular support of the students of Saint Ston's Seminary for Amen Specklebird as a candidate for the triple crown and the throne of Peter. Hearing about it, Father Specklebird did not wait to be summoned by the current Bishop of Denver, but came limping hastily into town to denounce the enterprise and scold the students. Leaders of the movement were arrested by the secular police—an action which Specklebird felt forced to condemn.

On the following day, students from the secular college staged a parody of the incident by demonstrating in favor of the candidacy of the trigamous Cardinal Ri of Hong, much to the delight of the Axe, who had made friends with Ri's six-man bodyguard, and had learned as much as he could from them about life beyond the western ocean. Again, leaders were arrested, but the jail was already full of drunken farmers, Nomads, and pickpockets who had come to exploit the presence of the growing

crowds of petitioners and lobbyists who always converged on conclaves. The student leaders were lightly flogged, the others given probation. There were also ecclesiastical penalties for attempting to influence the election.

On Tuesday of Holy Week, the Dean of the Sacred College appeared on the balcony of Saint John-in-Exile and promised a turbulent mob of jeering people that the conclave would begin as soon as 398 cardinals were present. "Probably within ten days," he added. Since the death of Pope Linus VI, twenty-two cardinals had followed him to the grave, and the three subsequent popes had observed a moratorium on the bestowal of red hats; but still under present law two-thirds plus one of all eligible electors, excluding those who were certifiably infirm, were necessary to elect. And when no more than the necessary 398 had arrived, they would have to vote unanimously in order to elect a pope, so the Dean's promise was an empty one and the crowd knew it. No serious voting could begin until all but the senile, the sick, and the lame had arrived in Valana.

Votes were being counted in advance, and the bookmakers of Valana were already taking bets, an excommunicating offense. There was no odds-on favorite, but one might bet two alabasters on Golopez Cardinal Onyo from Old Mexico in hopes of winning three, while fans of Urion Benefez could bet one to win three. There were somewhat similar odds on Urion's talk-alike, Otto Cardinal e'Notto from the Great River Delta, and Chuntar Hadala, a greatly respected missionary bishop to the Valley of the Misborn, now the Watchitah Nation. Sorely Nauwhat from Oregon was given at ten-to-one, because of the persistent doctrinal problems in his territory. Abbot Jarad Kendemin was rated fifteen-to-one, because of his reluctance. Only by betting on such improbables as Elia Cardinal Brownpony or Amen Specklebird could a poor porter or housewife hope to become rich.

Holy Week was celebrated with all the pomp possible in the absence of a reigning pontiff. Masses were concelebrated with all able cardinals present, and many of the religious processions were real. But the pageantry was not a distraction to a single-minded population who wanted a pope, a western pope, and wanted him soon. Much anger was directed at the absent Cardinal Archbishop of Texark for his deliberate delay, but his advance party of legists, servants, and conclavists were already busy preparing for what would no doubt be his grand entrance upon the scene at the appropriate moment.

A preliminary meeting of electors, their assistants and conclavists, legists, other prelates, diplomats, leaders of religious orders, and eminent scholars, among them theologians, historians, and political theorists, was scheduled for the afternoon of Maundy Thursday. The announced topic was to be the changing relationship between the Church and the Secular Power in the first half of the thirty-third century. The informal and nonsacred nature of this convention was emphasized by holding it in the Great Hall of Saint Ston at the seminary, and by admitting certain categories of nonparticipants as observers.

"Are you going to this fistfight, Blacktooth?" asked Aberlott, who had put on his student's uniform.

"Who's doing the fighting?" asked the monk.

"Well, it's Benefez against any challenger. Who knows, your own master might pick up the gauntlet for the west."

Jæsis rolled over on his cot and groaned.

"Cardinal Brownpony doesn't get into fights, and the Archbishop of Texark isn't even in town yet."

"Oh, but his whole staff is here. And thirteen cardinals from the Imperium. He's going to make his move, all right."

Jæsis yelped in his sleep, and muttered profanity.

"Mention Benefez, and Jæsis gets mad." Aberlott nodded toward the feverish sleeper. "Or maybe it's the Hannegan he hates."

"You think there'll be a squabble?"

"I know it. Father General Corvany of the Order of Saint Ignatz will be there, for one." This woke Jæsis up, and he began swearing more coherently.

Blacktooth reached for his robe. "I know a priest of Corvany's Order who defied him once."

"And he's still a priest?"

"... 'forever, after the order of Melchisedech,' as they say. But he's under interdict. He wouldn't hear my confession."

"What's his name?"

Blacktooth hesitated, then shook his head, regretting that he had mentioned the Ignatzian. He had learned from his work as translator at the Secretariat that Father e'Laiden, with whom he had traveled to Pobra, and Father Ombroz, the tutor and chaplain of the Little Bear clan, were the one and the same man. "I get the name mixed up with somebody else," he said. "I must have forgotten."

"Well, are you coming?"

"As soon as I finish dressing."

The auditorium at Saint Ston's had seating for two thousand. A quarter of the seats near the front had been roped off for the cardinals, but was still half empty when the campus bell tolled three. Another fourth of the seats were reserved for the cardinals' first servants, and these were filled to capacity with priests and scribes who were obviously here to take notes and be bored. The other half of the seating was open to lesser prelates, faculty, priests, monks, and students, in that order of preference. The supply was greater than the demand. Blacktooth and Aberlott, who came early, took seats behind the cardinal's servants, and were not asked to move to the rear. A few people drifted onto the stage. He recognized the head of the seminary, then a man in a white tunic and scapular with black cappa who had to be a prominent Dominican, probably the head of the Order from the west coast. Blacktooth suddenly slid lower in his seat. The Lord Abbot Jarad Cardinal Kendemin had come from the wings and took a seat beside the Dominican. They beamed at each other, exchanged the kiss of peace, and began a lively whispered conversation over the empty seat between them.

"What's wrong?" asked Aberlott, looking down at Blacktooth. "Would you rather lie on the floor?"

When the clock somewhere above them dinged the quarter hour, Aberlott stood up with a straight face and said, "Here comes the judge." Several others in the vicinity climbed to their feet.

Blacktooth grabbed his sleeve. "Sit down, you clown!"

The man who had come to the podium was the president of the seminary. He spoke brief words of welcome, then invited cardinals who wished their servants to sit beside them to call them forward, and the rest of the audience to move forward to fill empty spaces. Aberlott hitched his corpulent self one seat to the left, told an interloper that the seat between them was taken, and when the audience was quiet again, he turned to beckon Wooshin, standing in the rear, to join them, but the Axe shook his head. His presence meant that Cardinal Brownpony was nearby. The warrior had become the Red Deacon's personal bodyguard, and expected to move soon into the servants' quarters at the cardinal's home.

The first speaker was the Dominican, introduced as Dom Fredain e'Gonian, Abbot of Gomar, Director General of the Order of Preachers in Oregon. "*Tu es Petrus*," he predictably began, and preached a sermon which began with a stirring summons to unity, but soon became a scathing denunciation of those partisans of exile or of return whose motives were economic. He would be seen later in the day with his robe spattered with slops dumped from second-story windows in the merchant section of the city.

The president of the seminary next introduced Father General Corvany of the Order of Saint Ignatz in New Rome, a man obviously in his seventies but still handsome and trim. His graceful carriage and sympathetic persona reminded Blacktooth, to his surprise, of his employer. Like Brownpony, Corvany's normal expression was a natural smile; when the smile disappeared, the effect was startling. He spoke only a few words of greeting to Their Eminences, then lost his smile. "Surely, there has been a mistake here," he said. "Please bear with me for a moment." He left the lectern then, descended the steps into the audience, and audaciously took the hand of Her Eminence, Cardinal Buldyrk, Abbess of N'Ork. "Please," he said to her. "You have a chair on the podium."

Her mouth agape, Buldyrk permitted herself to be escorted to the stage. There was a mutter of astonishment from the cardinals, and even a few muffled cries of outrage, for Corvany was not even a member of the Sacred College, and the expression on the face of the president of the seminary was one of complete surprise.

"See? What did I tell you," Aberlott whispered to the monk. "I'll bet a copper that seat was for Cardinal Ri."

The abbess was seated between Jarad and the Dominican, to the delight of neither, and Corvany thus

established himself as the most liberal and gallant of all the prelates. He resumed his beaming smile and introduced to the audience a learned member of his own Order of Saint Ignatz to speak in his stead. This was Urik Thon Yordin, S.I., who was a clergyman but also a professor of history at the secular university at Texark. He was a lean, gray, bespectacled man in his fifties, and apparently another member of Archbishop Benefez's advance party. His manner of address was that of the lecture hall rather than the pulpit.

"What has not been well understood about the frequent condition of schism in the Church," he said, "is that it reflects a natural schism in the continent. There have always been two Churches, if I may say so, Eminent Lords: one Church in the East, the other in the West. While that pope inhabited New Rome near the Great River, he was living as far from this region and the far west as if New Rome were on the Atlantic. Since the papacy has come here to the foot of the mountains, there has been a great healing of the Church in the West, whose problems are now better understood. This has been made plain to us by events in the Oregon area."

Blacktooth saw two Western bishops leaning together to whisper. It was strange to hear one of Urion Benefez's men begin by admitting the truth of an argument some Westerners used in favor of continuing the Valanan papacy. The approach seemed conciliatory at first.

"And to understand the cause of the Western problem," Thon Yordin went on, "we have only to consider the route which messengers used to take before the establishment of peace in the Province. At the beginning of this millennium, a man foolish enough to travel alone from New Rome to the far West might take a route such as this: south through forest trails, skirting the Valley of the Misborn, then to the Gulf, and, paralleling the coast, on to the Brave River. Crossing the river, he would find the royal road leading west across the desert protected by soldiers of a king; arriving in the far West, he moved north again. A lone traveler coming eastward might make a similar detour. Why?"

He held up a sheaf of papers. "I have here a copy, dated one century and forty-eight years ago last month, of the military regulations for the Papal Guard in escorting the Pope's legates and other ambassadors directly across the High Plains by the most direct routes at that time. Do not be alarmed. I shall not read them to you, although anyone who wishes to examine them may do so. These rules call for forty heavily armed cavalymen under the command of a captain, and a party of twenty archers in light armor with swords, and halberds to be packed with them and carried by mule. The regulations specify certain permissible routes, all riverbeds, and regularly scheduled crossings are forbidden. When a party was ready to leave, its departure was delayed until one man, the captain of the guard, decided to go. Can you guess why?"

"Now, there were occasionally men in those days foolhardy enough to make such a trip alone, or in smaller armed groups. But this was like going to sea in a rowboat. Even if no one at all had lived on that great ocean of grass—tall grass at first, as one moves west, then short grass, then desert grass in the south until one reaches the mountains—if no one at all lived there, the journey would be dangerous enough. This continent itself exists in a natural state of schism, Eminent Lords. It is divided by nature. The open plain is a place of horrid winds and torrid or frigid weather, even today. There is nothing out there but earth, sky, grass, and wind. There is nowhere to hide. Everywhere he looks, a man is surrounded by a far horizon. The grass billows in the wind. That is the great grass ocean.

"In earlier days, there dwelt there upon that grassland those cruel, piratical herdsmen with their woolly wild cattle, and they took delight in torture, and they flayed messengers alive and ate their organ meats, or made them slaves. Some of you who have just crossed the Plains in coming here, in relative safety, I might add—although I sympathize with the hardships you still endured—you have seen the descendants of those cannibals. And unless you encountered an outlaw band, you were not molested. But the forebears of these people were the reason for these extraordinary regulations I hold in my hand.

"Wild they are still, these herdsmen, and cruel, but they let you pass now without harassment. While the Church in the West has, we all admit, rendered fealty to the one true vicar of Christ who traditionally resides east of the Plains, it has always gone its independent way in matters of faith, morals, and doctrine, as we learn from the history of the Oregonians. I refer you to the works of Duren, if you have any doubts about this."



Blacktooth looked suddenly at Abbot Jarad and regretted it immediately. His former ruler was watching him with a faint triumphant smile. Some cardinals in the abbot's vicinity were also murmuring among themselves.

Aberlott noticed Blacktooth's restlessness and turned toward him to whisper. "Nimmy, did you know the Oregonians used leavened bread at Easter Mass?"

"No, I didn't," Blacktooth whispered back. "Neither did Duren. Now hush."

"Oh, yes. Instead of 'Behold the Lamb of God,' when the priest held up the bread, he would say, 'Behold He is risen.' "

Blacktooth kicked his anklebone. His lips shaped an *ooo*.

"Transportation was simply too hard between the East and the West for the Pope to be in constant communication with all his flock and their bishops in those days," the professor continued. "But now we have relative peace on the High Plains and the Prairie, except for outlaw bands. And in the South, for most of your venerable lifetimes it has been possible for a man to travel alone, or in a small unarmed party as some of you from the Southeast have just done, to come from east of the Great River here to mountains with no more danger than you might encounter on the roads in your home diocese. Why? Because the southern horde has been pacified, and the Province is well governed, and those north of the Province are, if not pacified, then at least aware that robbery, rape, and murder of us 'grass-eaters' will bring swift retribution. Thus with travel and communication restored, the imagined advantages to the west of a papacy here in exile are no longer real."

Abbot Jarad had risen to his feet, but the speaker seemed not to notice at first.

"I am not a military man," the professor continued, "but—" He stopped because the audience was looking to his right, and he glanced around to see Jarad standing. "Yes? Your Eminence?—"

"Perhaps the advantages of exile are imaginary, as you say. I pray for a return to New Rome, under the right conditions, for the exile is a scandal and an abomination. But I would remind the learned speaker that the Treaty of the Sacred Mare predates the conquest, that the military regulations which the learned speaker quotes predated that treaty, and that the treaty was negotiated peacefully with the Church as mediator, and that while crossing the High Plains is never without danger, Church messengers have been doing it for at least a century, with no help from the Texark military." Jarad sat down, his face bright red, looking around for a murmur of approval. None came.

"Thank you. As I was saying, I am not a military man, but it has been explained to me that the mission of Texark troops which just happen to be in the vicinity of New Rome has nothing to do with New Rome or the papacy. They were sent there without any thought whatever of provoking or intimidating the Pope. The Hannegan of that time was as astonished by the Pope's flight to Valana, as was the rest of the country. The troops were sent not to outflank the Holy City, but to protect the farmers settling in the timberlands between the Great River and the treeless prairie. The farms were threatened from the west and the north by the eastern horde, the one they call Grasshopper. The troops are there as a peacekeeping force only, as most inhabitants of New Rome now recognize. The herdsmen were penetrating the farmlands, stealing the stock, and kidnapping little boys.

"Nomads give birth to more girls than boys, you know. Something hereditary, I'm told. Anyway, the return of the papacy to New Rome would be protected, not threatened, by the troops in the—"

"Just a minute." Cardinal Brownpony's voice came over the room loud and clear. Blacktooth looked around, as did many others, but no one on the floor was standing. "Just a minute, if I may."

Eyes followed the voice upward and to the rear. Brownpony was standing in the choir loft, with the Axe seated on one side and the Reverend Amen Specklebird, O.D.D., on the other. Blacktooth and Aberlott had been refused admittance to the gallery, but the guards had evidently opened it to latecomers to avoid people wandering down the main aisle after the meeting began.

"I am a descendant of these cannibals, as you call them. My mother, I was told by the sisters who raised me, bore the family name of 'the Brown Pony.' I never met her, but the family was Wilddog, the sisters said, and she was the young widow of a Jackrabbit husband who had escaped a Texark jail, but was killed by Texark bullets. She was raped by one of your Texark peacekeepers when she went south to visit her dead husband's people. I am the child of that violent union. The sisters who raised me in your

province let me keep the name she gave them."

Blacktooth looked up at Wooshin with wide eyes, and his surprise was reflected by the warrior's. Neither of them ever mentioned Brownpony's origins to others, judging it a taboo subject. Now the Red Deacon was announcing his mysterious bastardy to the world, which already knew of it in whispers. And yet he himself knew little or nothing of it, according to the file the monk had seen at the Secretariat.

"And there is my secretary," said Brownpony, looking down at Blacktooth. "His ancestors were Grasshopper refugees from your Texark pacification. They lost all their cattle to Hannegan's diseased animals. His parents died without horses, farming another's land. From him, I know something of the Grasshopper people and their history. For centuries they have pastured their animals on the land of which you speak, among their other lands. That region was called 'Towa' on the ancient maps, I believe, but it is nearly treeless, and yet fertile enough for the farmers to covet it. And the Grasshopper has always gathered wood for poles, stakes, arrows, and spears from the thinly forested lands north and south of that area. If the farmers are there now, they've settled there since Hannegan's slaughter. You paint the Texark forces as protectors. You want the Pope back in New Rome, in the midst of his protectors. I too want the Pope back in New Rome, in spite of his protectors, in the midst of his enemies, among whom you have just counted yourself. You have been sent here to draw fire away from your master. Now the Cardinal Archbishop of Texark, who we all know has sent you, must either underwrite your views, or denounce your slander against the people of the Plains."

There was an astonished silence, followed by brief applause and cheering from two Westerners. Father General Corvany ominously lost his smile again, and came to his feet. The applause quickly subsided. Brownpony sat down smiling. Cardinals were looking over their shoulders at him. On the stage, Jarad's jaw dropped. Brownpony was known as a diplomat, always courteous, a peacemaker who rarely took sides. His tone had been calm, but he had just declared war, and it had to be premeditated.

Before Corvany could speak, a sputtering archbishop from the delta of the Great River, now part of the Texark Empire, arose in a huff to defend the speaker's thesis concerning the protective role of past Hannegans in the Midwest, and to deplore the interruptions. He pointed a finger toward the balcony and began to say something about Brownpony, but the Dean of the Sacred College arose and roared, "God's peace! God's peace!"

The seminar was about to become a verbal melee, and few in the audience noticed the student who wandered down the center aisle. He was staggering slightly. Aberlott suddenly clutched Blacktooth's arm and pointed. The man in the aisle was Jæsis, uncombed and un-shaved, his face livid but with red blotches. He stopped in the middle of the cardinals' section and pulled something out of his half-buttoned cassock. He croaked Yordin's name and a curse. There was an explosion and a burst of smoke. Thon Yordin put his hand to his chest, looked down, but there was no blood. Instead, one of the men seated behind the podium fell from his chair. It was the Father General of the Order of Saint Ignatz himself who lay bleeding. The assailant in the aisle waved a Texark cavalry pistol aloft, yelled again at Thon Yordin, fired the other barrel toward the ceiling, and collapsed in the aisle. The audience was on its feet and roaring.

"Assassin! Texark assassin! Hannegan's agents!"

Blacktooth looked around for the source of this irrational voice, but saw only a fist waving in the surging crowd.

Men swarmed over the fallen student, and from the platform came cries for a physician. Blacktooth and Aberlott were seized by police as they hurried out of the building.

There followed eight hours of questioning at the Valana police barracks, but Cardinal Brownpony quickly appeared on their behalf. There had been no brutality. The police learned from the college that Jæsis was from Texark, had attended Thon Yordin's classes at the university there, had failed his tests and then transferred to Saint Ston's. A physician stated that even now he was delirious with fever. The police released Blacktooth and Aberlott just past midnight; they walked home by the light of the Pascal moon. Jæsis died that night in custody.

While the city slept, the Reverend Urik Thon Yordin sent a rider galloping toward the telegraph terminal at the final outpost on the road to the Province. The message he carried was addressed to Union Cardinal Benefez and, with a copy to the Emperor, would reach Hannegan City by Good Friday's sunrise:

FATHER CORVANY WAS KILLED TODAY BY A STUDENT ROOMMATE OF BROWNPONY'S NOMAD SECRETARY. THE SECRETARY WAS QUESTIONED BUT RELEASED AFTER BROWNPONY INTERVENED. KILLER DIED IN POLICE CUSTODY. DETAILS FOLLOW. I AWAIT FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS.  
YOUR OBEDIENT SERVANT IN CHRIST,  
YORDIN.

## CHAPTER 10

Let a man consider that God is always looking at him from heaven, that his actions are everywhere visible to the divine eyes and are constantly being reported to God by the Angels.

—*Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 7

IN VALANA ON SUNDAY THE 17TH OF APRIL 3244, Blacktooth arose before dawn and watched the moon, now past full, settle behind the mountains, then washed his teeth with ashes and boiled water, relieved himself in the outhouse, got dressed, and then spent in prayer the short time it took for the sun to come up. Without eating anything prior to receiving the Eucharist, he left the house. On the way to Mass in the early-morning chill, he sensed someone following him. Turning, he saw only a man talking to an open window a stone's throw away, and someone wandering in the other direction. The window's occupant, if any, was not visible. The man talking to the window was the same man Blacktooth had seen begging on the same street the day before Jæsis shot Corvany. Probably a denizen of the neighborhood. The feeling of being followed was an illusion caused by shame, the monk decided. He kept walking toward the Cathedral of Saint John-in-Exile. It was Easter morning.

With hundreds of cardinals participating, the Mass of the Resurrection was spectacular in the Pope's own Church, even without a pope. Blacktooth had come early enough to be assigned a spot to stand with room enough to kneel, but most latecomers waited in crowds outside the nave and outside the cathedral itself. Getting out of the building after Mass was worse than getting in, because many of those pouring outside paused to talk to acquaintances and blocked the way. It was a perfect situation for murder. Blacktooth felt the dagger pierce his side as the arm holding it darted between two other worshipers, who immediately fell back in dismay. Blacktooth clutched his side and faced his attacker. It was the man who talked to empty windows, the beggar. Feeling people moving back, he looked around. There were three of them, dirty and shabbily dressed, two with knives, one with a chain. They fought there on the great ascent of cathedral steps which had no landings, and two of them were thrown sprawling to the bottom by a victim with unexpected skills. Someone was screaming for the constable, others for the Papal Guard. The original attacker, the beggar, now cut the monk's face and might have gone on to kill him, but the blast of a constable's horn sent the three of them fleeing.

His wounds were cleaned and dressed at the police station, and he was interrogated by an irritable lieutenant who insisted on believing that he, Jæsis, Aberlott, and Crumily were conspirators in some larger scheme. Blacktooth's relationship with the cardinal provided him with a secure identity in which he dared feel immune to intimidation in the face of anything short of violence. He told the lieutenant what he needed to know and tried to ignore what he wanted to know, based on a wrong assumption.

"No common hoodlums would try to rob a poor monk."

"They weren't out to rob me, just kill me."

"Exactly! and why? They must have some reason to hate you."

"Well, they seemed to be common hoodlums, they had no reason to hate me, so they must have been hired."

"By whom, do you think?" asked the officer.

"By some fool who thinks Jæsis planned on killing Father Corvany, and that I was involved."

The lieutenant, who apparently thought the same thing, glowered at him and left the room for several minutes. Blacktooth prayed to Saint Leibowitz. When the lieutenant came back, his manner had changed.

"You will have to be on guard against another attempt. Stay with people you know. Stay home at night. Stay away from crowds like this morning's. Come outside my office and sit on the bench here. Your employer will be here soon."

"His Eminence? For me?"

"For himself. There was an attempt on his life too. Here, his own man can tell you."

Wooshin had emerged from another interrogation room. He sat beside Blacktooth and briefly described the attack on Brownpony by two strangers armed with handguns. Brownpony was unharmed, and the attackers were dead. The police found one beheaded corpse on the scene, and a severed arm with a gun still in hand. The armless assassin had been found bleeding to death in an alley. If he said anything before he died to the constable who found him, the police were keeping it to themselves. There was no need to ask how they died. Soon an officer brought Wooshin his swords. They had been wiped, but were not quite clean of dried blood. The Axe frowned but sheathed them without complaint. Soon Brownpony emerged, and after an inquiry about Blacktooth's wounds, they all walked together back to the Secretariat with two armed men following at a respectful distance.

"You have thought about what this means, Nimmy?"

"It means somebody made a mistake, connected me with Jæsis, for one thing. And you, m'Lord?"

"Same mistake. It is politically important to the Hannegan that gennies, Nomads, and citizens should live in mutual loathing and fear, that they might be more easily governed in their disunity. Did you know, Nimmy, did you know—Jæsis was a spook?"

"A hidden genny? Oh no, m'Lord! That's hard to believe. I've seen him undressed."

"There was an autopsy, and they found the signs. They've not made the fact public. There hasn't been a pogrom in decades, and we don't want one to start. Move your things immediately. Until the crowd leaves the city, you will live in the Secretariat's basement. In case they try again. We may never know who hired these men, but they were amateurs."

"Locally recruited," the monk added. "I saw one of them before."

"Yes, but the telegraph makes us a suburb of Texark, and words now travel faster than the sun moves over the earth. Fortunately, the conclave should begin by midweek. When Benefez, or even Corvany's replacement, gets here, he'll take command of their people. I don't think Cardinal Benefez hires assassins."

"His nephew does," grunted the monk.

"Professionals only, Nimmy, not amateurs," Wooshin said.

When they came to the Secretariat, a large but low building set well back among trees, Blacktooth found three basement rooms already furnished for use by occasional messengers or political fugitives, one of them now occupied by Axe. Blacktooth chose the room closer to the privy's exit, but Axe immediately warned him: "At night, use a slop jar. Never go out that door in the dark unless I go with you."

But no further attacks had occurred by the time the requisite number of cardinals had assembled on Wednesday of Easter week, and while people afflicted with Jæsis' disease ran amok in the streets, stripped naked in public, or just lay in bed and howled, the attempt at a conclave began. First the cardinals assembled in the great Cathedral to offer Mass together, then left the building in procession to cross the square and enter the palace where the election was to occur. An altar was set up at one end of the great throne room, and the palace was temporarily consecrated.

Cardinal Brownpony had chosen as his conclavists Brother Blacktooth St. George and Sister Julian

of the Assumption; the rule that his conclavists be clergy from Saint Maisie's applied only in his absence, and he would not be absent. Nimmy recognized his master's choice of the sister as an exquisitely diplomatic one, but his own selection jolted him into surprise, until he noticed that Brownpony was having frequent conversations with Jarad, and that Jarad had brought with him as one of his conclavists Brother Singing Cow. Nimmy became vaguely uneasy. Perhaps Nomad politics were to be considered by the Holy Ghost in the choice of a pope. Well, why not? But he dreaded meeting with Singing Cow or the abbot face-to-face.

No sooner had the conclave convened, however, than a cardinal from Utah fell deathly ill and had to be excused, thus forcing an adjournment for lack of a quorum. Blacktooth returned to his new basement home. Police watched the building, but there was no further attack.

During the three days the Cardinal President of the Conclave allowed the adjournment to continue, seven more electors arrived from a far northeastern province. Word came from the telegraph terminal that the Archbishop of Texark would arrive within ten days. As soon as the conclave reconvened, Cardinal Brownpony, joined by one of Benefez's conclavists to show nonpartisanship, proposed a rule empowering the sergeant-at-arms to arrest any cardinal elector attempting to leave the city or even the building without permission from the conclave. A heated protest was made by cardinals fearing the epidemic, but Brownpony in his reply pointed grimly to the anger of the people in the streets, and what might happen to the cardinal electors if they failed to sustain the quorum. The rule was passed by a large majority, and was sent on to the Valana city government with a request for help in enforcement. The request was approved, and it became a crime for a cardinal to flee Valana. And so began the process of finding a candidate agreeable to the Holy Ghost and various earthly powers, began even before that most eminent of earthly powers, Lord Cardinal Archbishop Urion Benefez, had arrived.

The city continued to sicken.

The ancient custom of burning ballots with or without moist straw as a signal to lend white or dark color to the smoke from the chimney was observed, but the laws governing the election of a pope had changed according to the requirements of the age. In theory, the Bishop of Rome was elected by the clergy of Rome, locked in a closed building (*con clave*) until two-thirds reached agreement. For thousands of years, each new cardinal, wherever he might live, was assigned a Roman Church whose upkeep was his responsibility, and whose name was part of his title: Elia Cardinal Brownpony, Deacon of Saint Maisie's in New Rome. Now there were more cardinals than there were Churches in New Rome and Valana combined.

From time to time a protest group would march across the city to gather in Saint John's square and chant slogans before the palace. By the fifth day of the conclave, people were throwing occasional stones at the doors, and the Papal Guard, in mourning for the dead Pope, were sent out to keep order. Unwilling to shed blood, they were soon disarmed by the populace. The civil police were unable to control the crowd, short of using firearms. The crowds gathered and dispersed as they pleased. In fear, the cardinals voted for three days. When there was voting, the crowds drifted away, although there were always people who watched for white smoke.

An occasional cardinal, usually ill, tried to leave the city, was caught, and was hauled bodily back to the palace, where a room adjoining the great hall of the conclave was staffed as an infirmary. An elector in bed could vote, his ballot carried up to the altar by a conclavist helper who held it aloft so that everyone could see that no switching was done before he placed it in the chalice. While the early and indecisive balloting continued, however, citizens from outside the palace were sealing the great, bronze double doors by building wooden scaffolding against them. A blacksmith anchored the scaffolding by hammering long spikes into lead anchors set in holes drilled into the granite walls. Other men boarded up windows.

On the sixth day of confinement, a man climbed to the roof with a sledge and a crowbar and broke away clay tiles while another man, with an axe, chopped a hole in the roof deck beneath the tiles. Buckets of slops were drawn up to the roof, and a citizen cheerfully poured them through the hole. The ladies of the Valana Altar Society were prevented from bringing emergency food, since the kitchen had been closed by rioters. The water to the palace was shut off.

The cardinal with the loudest voice climbed to a broken window and yelled anathemas at the crowd, excommunicating everybody who remained in the plaza after five minutes. The crowd cheered and applauded as if he had been heard to announce good news. Actually, he was not heard at all above the din.

By late afternoon, a cardinal with diarrhea wailed that the privies were full to overflowing, for the Sanjoanini who worked outside were being prevented from emptying them. All requests from within for candles and lamp oil were refused. The palace began to smell like the local jail, with incense. The *conclave* was now indeed "with key." Also with nails and timbers. There were cots enough for the cardinals, but their conclavists slept on the floor.

Blacktooth sat against the wall, alert lest his master beckon, and watched and listened and smelled and tried not to be afraid. He had gained much self-confidence in Brownpony's employ. Also, that he could fight off attackers was a relaxing bit of knowledge to have with him in any situation. Blacktooth knew that he had not been changing, but unfolding in new dimensions. But he felt he was becoming worldly as he did so.

Brownpony waved him forward. "Talk to as many of the cardinals' conclavists as you can. Sound them out on Cardinal Nauwhat and Abbot Jarad, especially Nauwhat."

"Yes, m'Lord." He looked around at a particularly loud crash of a window breaking.

"I've been to four conclaves and never seen anything like this," Brownpony told him as he sent him on the vote-counting mission. "The sickness must be causing madness."

Blacktooth began moving from cardinal to cardinal, not approaching the electors directly, but consulting the prelates' assistants. But he came finally to Abbot Jarad. The self-confidence that had helped him with the police suddenly vanished. Brother Singing Cow was there as the abbot's conclavist, but Blacktooth fell to his knees and kissed the abbot's ring. Jarad pulled him gently to his feet and smiled but did not embrace him, and called him by name without calling him Brother. "You wanted to see me, my son?"

"Domne, my master asked me to solicit advice as to the possible nomination of Sorely Cardinal Nauwhat."

"From me, or everyone?"

"From everyone, Domne."

"Tell him that if the Holy Ghost is not against it, I'm for it." He smiled at Blacktooth and turned away again.

"What of the nomination of Jarad Cardinal Kendemin?"

"The Holy Ghost and I are both against it. Is that all?"

"Not quite."

"I was afraid not."

"I would like to ask the abbot's blessing on my release from the Order."

Jarad looked at him remotely. "I was the minister who conferred on you the sacrament of Holy Orders, remember?"

"Of course."

Jarad pressed his palms together, eyed the darkness above, and said to God, "Have you ever been known to take back Holy Orders?"

"Never," said Cardinal Brownpony, joining them. "What do we have, a problem here?"

"None whatever," exclaimed Jarad, clamping an arm around his shoulder.

"No problem with you, Nimmy?"

"Yes, a problem. When and how am I going to be laicized?"

"Well, that's partly up to the abbot here."

"And without his permission, it's up to the Pope?" Blacktooth shifted his gaze toward Jarad, noticed the anger, noticed the controlling of anger, and saw Jarad's lips move slightly in prayer while he breathed deeply and listened to Brownpony.

"Oh, it's up to the Pope in the end anyway, but his permission is almost automatic if the abbot has given his." Brownpony looked questioningly at Jarad. Jarad let go of his shoulder.

"And almost automatically refused if the abbot refuses?" Blacktooth also looked at Jarad.

"No," said the Red Deacon, "probably the Pope would want to talk to you personally. In your case, I'm sure he would."

Jarad faced Blacktooth squarely. "I suppose I owe you a hearing. Do you want to talk to me about it? Come to my quarters when all this is over."

"I thank you, Domne!"

When he turned away, Brownpony fell in step with him. "Do you want to be laicized, or do you just want to make the whole thing a quarrel with the abbot? He'll let you go, if you don't make him any madder than he is now. Let it alone, Nimmy. He's not happy with you. Don't make it worse."

The monk left the vicinity, his self-confidence drained. He missed the abbey. He yearned for Jarad's blessing, or at least some evidence of forgiveness. He continued canvassing, although he knew that all Brownpony really wanted was to spread the knowledge that he was considering Sorely Nauwhat. A deception, Nimmy thought. Or maybe not. The Northwest had probably been happier when the papacy was located across the Plains. There had been less interference in the Northwest Church's affairs from New Rome than from Valana. Nauwhat was leaning toward an immediate return, in spite of the hostility of Cardinal Benefez toward the Northwest's independence in matters of liturgy and of Catholic teaching. Brownpony was dragging in a red herring to lead the hounds away from politics toward theology, if Blacktooth correctly understood his master's hints. But on the other hand, Sorely Nauwhat would perhaps be a good man for the highest office.

From outside came the repeated roar: "Elect the Pope! Elect the Pope!" Occasionally, it became, "Elect the Amen! Elect the Amen!" Rumor came in from outside that Father Specklebird had left his cave and gone up the mountain, and a committee of citizens searched for his trail. Blacktooth prayed to Saint Leibowitz, and tried to keep up with his breviary, but could not pray well in the midst of havoc, as Abbot Jarad seemed able to do.

He was becoming very hungry.

Cardinal High Chamberlain Hilan Bleze tried to lead the frightened prelates in a *Veni Creator Spiritus*, but the hymn could scarcely be heard above the racket on the roof, the hammering of doors and windows, the splash of slop on the floor, and the babble of frightened conversation among the hundreds of electors and their conclavists.

Two hours later, perhaps in response to the invocation of the Holy Ghost, someone tossed a living bird down through the hole in the roof and covered the hole to prevent its escape. Not a dove but a vulture flapped around the Cathedral in terror and finally alighted atop the giant crucifix which hung suspended in midair by chains from a roof beam between the nave and the altar. Several cardinals were screaming about an omen, a warning from God.

Brownpony climbed up on the temporary altar itself and roared, 'Silence! In the name of God, silence!'

Only the desecration of the altar could have caught their attention, and silence did at last prevail.

"What you see and hear is indeed the judgment of God on us! Now this congregation must invite Father Amen to address us. He should be one of us. We shall hear him, and hear him now. How say you?"

"Get down from there, Elia!" Abbot Jarad shouted.

"Not until you vote!"

There were dissenting murmurs among the cardinals, and a few cries of outrage, but after some muffled shouting outside the walls, the crowd fell suddenly silent. The crowd had posted reporters to listen at some of the broken windows.

"Quiet! Let the nays vote first," Brownpony called. "They'll be easier to count. Those who refuse to hear Father Amen, raise your hands."

Pointing here and there, counting aloud, Brownpony said, "Seventeen!" and stopped. "Amen Specklebird shall speak to us." He nodded and climbed down.

A face was looking in through a broken window above the choir loft. It was a Valana policeman. Brownpony and the Cardinal High Chamberlain disappeared through a doorway and soon were in the

balcony talking to the officer. He shouted their words to the crowd. The hole in the roof was uncovered to allow the buzzard to escape, but the frightened bird took no notice and remained perched on the upright above the INRI sign. A roar of enthusiasm went up from the mob outside.

Soon some of the windows were uncovered, but nothing was done about the doors. Within two hours, shit was being shoveled from the privies. Baskets of sour rye bread with the black specks were lowered through the roof hole, and the water pumps began working again. Screaming reerupted, however, when the buzzard suddenly descended from the cross to the floor, attracted by a smelly lump of garbage on the tiles. Three Sanjoanini were finally allowed entrance through a loft window to shoo away the bird and clean up the slops from the floor.

Chaos subsided, order returned, and the only sound in the palace was the murmur of hiccups, moans, sighs, groans from the ill, a murmur which occluded any whispered conversations drifting past and echoing in the great and temporarily sacred cavern. The light was low, near sunset. Servants were beginning to light the candles, but only a few of the cardinals were up and about. The rye bread had been consumed, and most of the water, but hunger, thirst, and fear presided over the night.

Blacktooth overheard a Texark conclavist talking to one of the abbess's assistants:

"Everybody knows Cardinal Brownpony has taken off his gloves. Brownpony went to Leibowitz Abbey and hired himself a secretary and a bodyguard this spring. And who is this new bodyguard? A Texark runaway criminal, the former executioner Wooshin, now under a sentence of death for treason. And who is this secretary? A Texark-hating refugee from the Grasshopper Horde, brought up to despise imperial civilization but educated at the abbey, who was a friend of Corvany's assassin. The cardinal deacon stood up and denounced our learned Thon Yordin and at the same time slandered Cardinal Benefez and all but declared war on the Texark Church. Now he wants a mountain-dwelling hermit, who barely speaks Latin and would be frightened to death by New Rome, to become the next Bishop of New Rome, in absentia again. Permanently in absentia, as Cardinal Brownpony would probably have it. However my master might otherwise have voted with respect to Amen Specklebird, Cardinal Brownpony's support of him will cause him to abstain, of that I am certain."

The necessary twenty votes were quietly gathered, however, and Amen Specklebird became a candidate for pope even before he appeared to speak.

## CHAPTER 11

Therefore, since the spirit of silence is so important, permission to speak should rarely be granted even to perfect disciples, even though it be for good, holy, edifying conversation.

—*Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 6

MEN SPECKLEBIRD WAS NOT STRONG ENOUGH to resist the crowd that dragged him reluctant to the Papal Palace by midmorning. And so at last, to pacify the people and the conclave, the black, old hermit priest agreed to address the cardinals. For this purpose, the dying Cardinal Ri consented to appoint the old man as his special conclavist, for Specklebird's status as a cardinal *in pectore* of his former persecutor was doubted by most. He was passed in through the broken window in the balcony, and more baskets of bad bread and flagons of water were lowered through the hole in the roof.

There were scribes who were appointed to record all speeches during the conclave, subject to later editing or deletion by the speaker, but some of the few who actually listened to the old hermit throughout



his seemingly interminable homily later swore that some of the scribes had been asleep, and none had accurately recorded the full speech. But at first, the electors listened with intense curiosity.

Strange stories were told of Amen Specklebird by the old people of the countryside. Some said he walked silently on the mountain paths by moonlight and spoke to the antelope, the mountain spirits, and the risen Christ. Some had seen him flying above the treetops at morning twilight, and in the hole in the back of his cave he kept serpents, the mummy of an old Jew, or a wonder-working genny girl. Sometimes he visited the farms of the settlers and made it rain for them. He was a man of subtle power. He had placed a spell on Pope Linus VII, the story went, who as the Bishop of Denver had forced his retirement, and the spell made Linus call him to the Papal Palace several times during his long illness, either to have the spell removed or to treat the sickness whose cause eluded the physicians. (Blacktooth had seen him change into a cat and back, but Blacktooth would be the first to admit that his distance vision could be sharpened by spectacles, but his reason for avoiding it was not so much poverty as the fear that sharpness would ruin the clarity of his occasional hallucinatory insights into people and things.)

Heretics and holy men made pilgrimages to Amen's cave. Children of irreligious parents threw stones at his door and called him a buggery man, and yet it was a fact that the Lord Cardinal Brownpony often came to see him, and he was confessor to prominent sinners from the city. Pregnant women came to have their bellies blessed by him, and for a small donation he would consult the mountain spirits, who controlled the weather even on the western Plains, and whom he addressed by saints' names, about the best time for sowing or reaping or breeding sheep.

But now this dark old man with the frizzy white cloud of hair began speaking to the cardinals in conclave, and his style of address was none other than Blacktooth himself had experienced as his penitent. He was an elderly confessor most tactfully admonishing sinners and less tactfully testing their minds with paradoxes, and sometimes tortured syntax.

He embraced the audience with his long bony arms. "Fathers of the Church, Eminent Lords, there is a simpleton among us who has no rank at all and sits in the midst of us as a spy in an enemy camp. It is to him this sermon is addressed."

The Archbishop of Appalotcha stood up and called out, "Point him out, Father. Call the sergeant-at-arms!"

"He is here without authorization, it's true," said Specklebird, waving the ushers back. "But please sit down, he was here among us from the beginning, and he always will be. He's here to spy for Jesus anyway. And this conclave is the enemy camp."

There was a murmur of righteous protest about the Holy Ghost and the apostolic succession, but it quickly died.

"The simpleton who sits in the midst of us as a spy is conscience. A conscience has no rank and no position. A conscience cannot be a cardinal's conscience or a beggar's conscience. It adheres to the naked man, wholly exposed. And to the naked woman." The Abbess of N'Ork flinched, but Specklebird avoided looking at her. "In him or her, the Father gives birth to His Son.

"To this naked simpleton I speak, regardless of his office. The offices have fought each other. Rank has quarreled with rank. Regional origin argues with regional origin. Does the simpleton want a one and only pope, an everybody's pope? Then let him put off his rank, his office, his regional origin and beg God's grace to vote as a simpleton, a pure man." From this rational opening, he began to wander.

At first he spoke mostly about the return of the papacy to New Rome, because he knew that this was the foremost issue, not the closest to his heart. And he made it clear from the beginning, to the complete astonishment of his Valana supporters, the mob outside, that he favored an unconditional restoration of the New Roman Papacy in its ancient See. Brownpony, his friend, even looked shocked by this disclosure.

Only cardinals from the Denver Republic were in favor of making the exile permanent, and they too were truly shocked. They had refrained from calling the exile Exile, and proposed to change the name of Valana to "Rome." Their motives were well rationalized, but they agreed with the rabble in the streets that the end of exile would be the end of Valana. But the Valana faction was a tiny minority in the conclave. Everyone else wanted the papacy returned to New Rome. The sharp division of opinion concerned the

circumstances of that return, and the demand for a demilitarization of the surrounding terrain by the Empire.

The conclave had dragged to a standstill.

In a general way, the far East and the West were aligned against the middle. The middle was Texark and its vassal states along the Great River. There were also single-issue electors for whom the Valanan exile was not of major importance. Emmery Cardinal Buldyrk was one example. From the far northeast, she had voted with the West in two previous conclaves, but was now apparently leaning toward Benefez because of a possible softening of his position against the ordination of women. Benefez, however, was not present to confirm the inclinations of his conclavists, so the lady's vote was not secure. Cardinal Brownpony was doing his charming best to reconvert her, and she her charming best to seduce his feminine side.

Blacktooth himself took notes occasionally, but the old man rambled on and on. He misquoted Scripture. He belched. He improved on Scripture. He broke wind. He apologized for his frailties. He talked about his boyhood in the Northwest. He talked about barnyard matters. He talked about the wisdom of a mindless God. One passage which was faithfully recorded, and later used against him, was this:

"All this talk about the Church, the State, and the causes of schism reminds me of a story. When the priests asked Jesus whether they should pay taxes to the Hannegan of that time, Jesus borrowed a coin from them, asked them whose head was on it. 'Hannegan's, they said. So he told them, 'Render unto Hannegan what is Hannegan's, and to God what is God's.' Then he put the coin in his pocket and smiled. When the priest wanted his coin back, Jesus asked, 'Who do you think Hannegan belongs to?' When there was no answer, he reminded them, 'The Earth is the Father's and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein.' Of course that's just another way of saying, 'The foxes have their dens, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'

"So he gave the priest his coin back and slept under one of Hannegan's bridges that night, along with Peter and Judas. The priest went home and paid his taxes and drew up an indictment."

Here, Specklebird began to wander wide of his topic of New Rome and Valana.

"Why, you may ask, did Judas and Peter and Jesus sleep under a bridge," he said, pursuing a tangent. "Judas had a good reason, you see: someone had stolen his horse, and he was too tired to walk to the inn. Peter also had a good reason: he had no money to stay at the inn. Jesus had no reason, no reason at all. Jesus was *free* to sleep under a bridge. Such is freedom. Such is reason. Such is rumination."

Another tormentation of Scripture that was later bound to be used against him was this:

" 'What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his own soul?' I spoke earlier about this world, and him to whom it belongs, but what, one might ask, is one's own soul, which can be lost? The soul, insofar as it exists or not-exists, is the seat of suffering, when Jesus was born, he looked around at the world and said to his mother, 'From the outermost to the innermost I alone am the suffering one.' Cardinal Ri, whose conclavist I am, told me that. And this is the first fact of religion: *I am* means 'I hurt.' Why is it that I hurt? Is it God's revenge on a son? No, I hurt because I, my soul, keep grasping at the world to gain it, and the world has sharp teeth. And thorns.

That is the second fact of religion. The world is slippery too, and it wiggles. Just when I think I have a grip on it, it stings me, and slips away, or part of it dies on me, and I am overcome with grief and a sense of loss—the consequence of sin. But there is a way to stop grasping at this slithery world, a way to stop hurting and hungering. That is the third fact of religion. That third fact, Venerable Fathers, can be called the 'way of the Cross.' It leads to Golgotha. For *you* among you who will be Pope, it leads to New Rome."

His return to the topic came with brutal abruptness.

"These are elemental things. The fourth elemental fact of religion is called the 'Stations of the Way of the Cross.' " He waved toward the paintings on the Cathedral walls.

"This, Venerable Lords, is what I say of New Rome: that the way of the Cross ends there. The last station. The Pope must go back to New Rome as to Golgotha, and be crucified. The Hannegan will have his coin of tribute, which belongs to God if you correctly understand the Lord's irony, and Peter will have his crucifixion. When Benedict fled from New Rome in the last century, Jesus appeared to him and asked 'Quo Vadis,' but Benedict mistook him for a Nomad, and said 'Ad Valanam' and did not turn around. This I heard from one of you." He smiled at the conclavists from Texark, whose expressions had changed throughout the speech from initial hostility, to astonishment, through outrage, to suspicious approval, for, although the premises by which he arrived at his conclusions were not flattering to their monarch, and his theology was outrageous, the conclusions were the same as their own. The papacy should go home without any concession of power from the Imperial Mayor of Texark.

Usually so silent, this bewildering man was now talking through the afternoon, and when the lamps were lit in the evening, he talked on by lamplight. Once, when Blacktooth himself nodded off, he reawakened to see a cougar in a ragged cassock change to a dark brown old man with wild white hair again.

Amen Specklebird made a speech that was to become famous in the history of the Church, as written by its severest critics. Such are the quotations and misquotations as written down by the scribes.

Amen on the Fall and its aftermath: "The fruit of the tree, Eminent Lords, was rumination. Out of rumination came good and evil. The devil is a cud-chewing animal with cloven hooves. The serpent Satan ate souls and chewed the cud, and he taught rumination to the female, who taught it to the male. Whatever you do, do not ruminate. The anointed one never ruminates. He marches straight on to Hell from the tomb—and ascends to Heaven if it befall him.

"But if you should ruminate, and thus sin through fornication or rage or greed, never be ashamed of your guilt. Shame is none other than pride, pride is none other than shame. Your pride is your shame, your shame is your pride. They look in opposite directions, shame and pride, because when pride looks directly into the eye of shame and shame looks directly into the eye of pride, both instantly die. They die to the accompaniment of laughter, the laughter of the man who has foolishly kept them in his heart and kept them apart. When he feels his shame as pride and his pride as shame, he is free of them, free forever from the sin of both. Guilt, however, is not a feeling.

"When you see that you have sinned, and you repent the sin, *do not* wish you had not sinned. Wish instead that God in His mysterious way will turn your sin to a good end, for your sin is now already a part of the history of His ongoing creation of the world. To wish it away is to resist His will."

Amen on truth: "The truth is God's subtle, abominable word, Eminent Lords, *subtile et enfandum* is His word."

Amen, repeating himself, on man's place in God's world: "Don't you know that Jesus Christ is alone and friendless in the universe? Don't you know that the Earth is the Creator's, and the fullness thereof? What does *that* mean, Eminent Lords, except that the foxes have their dens, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head? He often sleeps under bridges.

"What is God that thou art mindful of Him, and the Son of God that thou shouldst visit Him?"

"He who is close to God is in danger. It's possible to be so enlightened that blindness follows. The light was too bright for your eyes and you never see God again."

Amen on man, woman, and the Trinity, going on in a kind of rapture: "God lives at the center of the Son. Or Daughter." He nodded toward the Cardinal Abbess. "His throne—it's hotter than Hell there, you know. Even the Devil couldn't sit down in that throne. But you can. I can. We're in His lap, and we know what the Godhead's like—from inside. God-at-the-center-of-the-sun-I am bigger than I am. Jesus too, am. Saint Spirit also, am. And, oh my yes, the Virgin, am. One should be embarrassed to speak of God in the third person."

He went on openly to embrace what Blacktooth recognized as a tenet of the old Northwest Heresy, so called, although many in the audience seemed too sleepy to detect it.

"Whence came the Trinity and the Virgin? The unspeakable Godhead yawns and they emerge. The Virgin is the hymnal silence into which the Word is sung by the Father through the Holy Breath and begotten and made flesh within her flesh from the beginning. 'Before the creation, God is not God.' But

behind this fearsome four-fold God yawns the undifferentiated Godhead. To say so is false, however, Eminent Lords. To mention it at all is to lie. Godhead? To presume to name it or even allude to it is to miss it entirely while immersed in it. And yet it is to a union with this ultimate Godhead that we dare aspire. In such a union the soul is like a glass of water when poured into the great ocean. Its identity as a certain glass of water is diffused into its identity as the ocean. It loses nothing. Nor does it gain. It is home again.

"And the wages of death am sin," he added. It seemed an afterthought.

Brother Blacktooth realized early that the audience was briefly captured by his pious enthusiasm and stopped listening carefully to words. The man had a way about him. He could just be himself in front of a crowd and the strength of his spirit prevailed upon them. But after hours of it, the cardinals began to turn to one another and even to get up and slip quietly about the throne room to whisper.

It was well into the following morning when he blessed his inattentive audience and sat down. He had talked all night. That was the first of the next Pope's miracles. He talked seventeen hours without a glass of water and without becoming hoarse. He had talked them into weariness. Only his friend Cardinal Brownpony voiced an "Amen," as the morning sunlight broke through the eastern windows, but that was because only a few had been listening toward the end, but among these a handful had listened intently. Many were asleep. Others were reading their breviaries, some were pairing off politically—actually wandering from throne to throne—and seated bishops whispered and giggled with neighbors, as innocent as girls in the early morning. When Brownpony said "Amen" to the speech, Specklebird stood up again and answered "Yes?"—and then, as if by a breath of the Holy Spirit, the few intent listeners started erect and answered "Amen" with such deep feeling that others were caught by it, and then there was a chorus of guilty *amens* from the bewildered.

And that is really all there was to it. The speech was not famous then. Like many of the great orations of human history, Specklebird's speech seemed rather confusing to the conclave, which, in desperation, finally elected him in spite of the strange homily. Only much later would his words come alive, when men thoughtfully read the transcriptions and random notes, and either damned it as foulest heresy, or praised it as divinely inspired, a new revelation. But to Brownpony and all who knew him well, Amen Specklebird's talk was like the twitter of birds who say in every language such things as "Bob White," or "To Easter," or "Whip-poor-Will." The meaning is in the ear of the listener.

They elected him that morning, the old man, before the crowd started throwing stones at the door. Cardinal Ri lay dead on his cot. Old Otto e'Notto had gone crazy as a loon. The corridors of the palace were places of vomit and shit. More than twenty-five cardinals were in the throes of the illness, and five were with difficulty restrained by their conclavists from becoming violent. They elected him without debate before noon.

To the surprise of many, including Blacktooth, the old man actually said, "*Accepto*," and called himself by his own name, Pope Amen, to the disapproval of many. It was a break with a most ancient tradition.

There were feeble protests preceding the election, of course.

"He said the anointed one marches straight into Hell!" a cardinal from the Southeast complained to the abbot.

"'From the tomb' he descended into Hell," added Jarad. "And on the third day he arose again from the dead and ascended into Heaven. That's orthodox enough."

"If it befall him! And he called God's word abominable."

"A slip of the tongue," said Brownpony. "He meant admirable."

"'Subtle and abominable' is what he said. Attributes of the Devil. The serpent was the subtlest of beasts. God's word is Satan?"

"Come, come!" said the abbot. "I think you misheard him. *Verbum subtile atque infandum*. It means finely woven but unutterable. Even elegant but unutterable. Truth so subtle it evades speech. The silence of Christ. And he was waving his arms around at the universe when he said it."

At the end, the conclave unanimously agreed on one thing. If any man could return to New Rome as the head of the Church and play Peter to the Mayor's Caesar without any compromise of fear, it was indeed this Amen (cardinal *in pectore* of Linus VII, as many were now willing to concede) Specklebird. But it was in compromise and fear that the conclave at last elected him, even permitting the conclavists of Archbishop Benefez to vote in his absence, which was not legal since he had not been present to instruct them. To their later chagrin, they voted for the gaunt and wild-eyed hermit.

*"Gaudium magnum do vobis. Habemus Papam. Sancte Spiritu volente, Amen Cardinal Specklebird ..."*

The roar of the crowd drowned the rest of it, and the conclave turned within itself again as each cardinal came before the new Pope to kiss his slipper and be embraced by the new heir to Saint Peter's keys, and heir as well—if Brownpony the lawyer was correct—to both of Saint Peter's swords, meaning both the spiritual and the temporal power, the latter subordinate to the former. Brownpony the lawyer who knew more about the history of canon law and the papacy than anyone outside of Leibowitz Abbey had talked freely during the conclave about the ancient Theory of the Two Swords, to the dismay of conclavists of the absent Archbishop of Texark. He quoted from an ancient bull: "*Porro subesse Romano Pontifici . . . de necessitate salutis ...*" "And so to be eligible for salvation everybody must be subject to the Roman Pontiff." According to Brownpony, this never-popular decree had been aimed especially at monarchs, whether civil or Nomadic, and the Hannegans and Caesars as well, but it passed the test for infallibility defining a matter of faith and by backing it with a stated penalty, the loss of salvation, for rejecting it. Perhaps what the electors sympathetic to Texark feared most, Brownpony as Pope, was now replaced by fear of Brownpony as gray eminence. That the cardinal had been the hermit's patron and cultivated his friendship and managed to get him restored to favor with Linus VII was well known to everyone. It had seemed a harmless relationship between a rich and lordly Churchman and a humble holy man. If one lacked a conscience, one could always pay to support one, was the cynical view. But Brownpony and Specklebird, though poles apart, had always seemed genuinely fond of each other. There was that friendship to worry about now.

There was jubilation in the streets at first, but then the people heard with outrage that their hero had reversed his initial position, which was thought to have been that the real Rome was wherever the Pope decided to settle down. A further rebuff to the city was the sentence of interdict which Pope Amen laid upon Valana until the instigators of the violence against the conclave should be brought into his presence. For three days, the population seethed. Under the interdict, Masses were forbidden to be said or confessions heard, and only the last sacraments could be offered to the dying. The city was sick, and the city knew that the punisher behind the interdict was Cardinal Brownpony. But on the fourth day, the terrorists were brought bound before the Pope. He ordered them untied, heard their common confession, and granted them absolution on condition that they repair all damage to the building under the supervision of the Cardinal Penitentiary and satisfy any other claims against them before an arbitrator. Having thus subdued the city, the Pope-elect again called together the conclave and had himself reelected in the absence of mob violence. This too was attributed to Brownpony's influence. A vote against the Pope was a vote against an early departure from Valana; there were no such votes, and only two abstentions.

It was true that Specklebird had once said that Rome was wherever the Pope settled down, but saying that the Pope was Pope wherever he lived was not the same as saying he should live in Valana. Specklebird had never said he should, for he was Pope only by virtue of being Bishop of New Rome. The public ministry which informed and influenced popular opinion published an analysis of Specklebird's views, and it was posted on the doors or walls of every Church in the city. Valanans, this essay concluded, had nothing to fear from Amen Specklebird's return to New Rome, for this was his home, and while he left as spiritual conqueror, he could be expected to return every summer to Valana for the rest of his life, and permanently to establish here many institutions of the Church which were now in New Rome, such as the Ignatzian Order, in order to free them from imperial influence. Nevertheless, the angry burghers seemed intent upon preventing Pope Amen from leaving Valana until Urion Cardinal Benefez had arrived and paid homage to His Holiness.

By this time the attendant electors, cardinals of the College, had knelt before, kissed the ring of, and

been embraced by His Holiness Pope Amen. Only a handful refused to do so, claiming that the election was held under duress and therefore invalid. These few had obvious Texark affiliations and their attitude was not unexpected.

It was about noon on the fateful election day that the coach bearing the Most Eminent Lord Urion Cardinal Benefez, Archbishop of Texark, arrived in the sickened city with a party of cavalry. Blacktooth caught a glimpse of the fury on the portly archbishop's face when he learned of the forced election, and heard him rain abuse on his own conclavists for their votes, but the meaning of the fury and its portent faded almost instantly from his mind. Across the plaza from the palace stood a barefoot girl in a brown nun's habit. It was Ædrea, looking at him in apparent shock.

He took a step toward her; then Brownpony's voice echoed in his mind: *You are not to intentionally see her again. If you ever see her in Valana, avoid her.* He stopped. But she had already turned away and disappeared into the crowd.

## CHAPTER 12

Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore the brethren should be occupied at certain times in manual labor, and again at fixed hours in sacred reading.

— *Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 12

SOON AS ELIA BROWNPONY HEARD THAT HIS old friend-enemy Urion Benefez was in town, he began looking for an opportunity to escape from such ceremonies as the vesting of the new Pontiff. When he found the right moment, he insisted that Blacktooth accompany him to see the Archbishop of the Imperial City, but for what purpose the monk could not quite imagine. As they hurried to the address where Benefez had reserved a residence, Blacktooth confessed that he had seen Ædrea. There was a quaver in his voice, and the cardinal stopped smiling and looked at him sharply.

"I told you to avoid her!"

"I did not disobey you, m'Lord"—yet, his internal demon added silently.

Brownpony's smile dimly returned. "I know. She avoided you. I talked to her myself."

"Where?"

"At the office, while you were out. I had asked Security to send her to me the next time she brought silver from the colony. When we stopped in Arch Hollow, I told you about the group of gennies in the Suckamint Mountains. They call it New Jerusalem. There's an old silver mine they work. She comes to town about once a month to the, uh, other wing of the building to exchange silver for currency. Their contacts are strictly with the covert wing, which keeps me informed. That's why she didn't know me before, although I was very surprised. We keep their secrets. They fear for their silver mine, among other things. You saw the papal flag over Shard's house.

"I'll tell you how our visit looked from their viewpoint, Nimmy. They're on the edge of lawless country. The last party of Churchmen who stopped at Arch Hollow turned out to be Texark agents, and they were very suspicious of Shard's family. One of them penetrated behind their place to the cliff trail, and he saw too much, so the guards killed him quietly and dragged him away. When the other two realized he was missing, they wanted to go looking for him. Shard said there was danger of bear attacks. The guards would have killed them both. Ædrea went to search on their behalf, and brought back a piece of an arm with teeth and claw marks on it. So they prayed over it, buried it, and went back south the way they had come. But before they left, they let Shard know they were on Texark's side, and that all gennies should go back to the Watchitah Nation.

"Then, right after these false Texark priests left, there came a cardinal with no bishop's ring, a monk who plays a guitar, a Nomad in a magic hat, and a swordsman who admits he had worked for the Hannegan. Furthermore, if the cardinal was who he said he was, he should know all about them, but he didn't seem to."

"All they're hiding is a silver mine?"

"Not quite. The gennies in New Jerusalem are about ninety percent spooks, able to pass, relatively normal, like Ædrea. They began fleeing to those mountains generations ago. They put the gleps up front and call it Scarecrow Alley.

"Now, as for Ædrea—" He broke off and looked at the monk. "She sends her regrets."

"For what?"

"Probably for avoiding you in the square. For teasing you too, I suppose, back at her home. How do you feel about her?"

Nimmy groped for words, but none came.

"I see. The Secretariat can have no visible contact with anyone from New Jerusalem. Do you understand that?"

"No, m'Lord."

"Their aims are controversial. So are some of ours. They are refugees, and stand accused of killing Texark guards when they escaped the Watchitah Nation. They fear a raid from imperial forces from the Province. Stay away from the subject, and from her. She's trouble."

Don't I know! he thought miserably.

"She will no longer be accepted by us as their agent," the cardinal added sharply. "That should be the end of it."

The coaches from Texark were still loaded with baggage and both military and civilian personnel standing around as if waiting for orders. A monsignor politely blocked the cardinal's path and asked his name and business.

"Just tell him the Red Deacon is here."

"May I state the purpose—"

"Tell him I came to find out why he tried to have me and my secretary assassinated."

Shaking his head, the monsignor went through a door with the message. Half a minute later, the lecturer Urik Thon Yordin emerged, white as a sheet, looked in terror at both of them, and fled the room. The cardinal looked at Blacktooth and smiled. Nimmy now understood why he was here.

Brownpony was called inside. Blacktooth sat by the door, which was not quite shut. The Archbishop of Texark had not yet changed out of his traveling clothes. The Hannegan's uncle was pacing in fury.

"Elia, how dare you accuse me, even jokingly, in front of my servants and visitors?" he raged.

"I was not aware you had a visitor," the monk heard his master lie. "The fool seemed very upset. I apologize, Urion."

"Well, yes, Yordin is a fool. When he notified us about Corvany's killer, he associated the thing with you and one of your men. I'm sorry someone tried to kill you, but I resent your insinuation, Elia. As you no doubt resented Yordin's."

"I apologize again, Your Eminence. I do wonder if Yordin himself wasn't behind it. But we'll let this wound heal. And now, Urion, will you also heal the Church by paying homage to His Holiness? I know how you must feel, and while the election was very irregular, it's plainly valid. Be generous! The new Pope wants to go home to New Rome, unconditionally, where the Empire wants him, without demands. You have gotten what you wanted." There was such a stoppage of Brownpony's breath with the word "wanted" that Blacktooth could almost hear the *except the tiara* which did not follow. "He makes no demand for a withdrawal of Texark troops, Urion."

There was a long silence. "I shall consult with many other cardinals, Elia. Thank you for your advice," the big man said at last. "I don't like what I'm hearing, but let's not be enemies."

"What have you been hearing?"

"That you stirred up the city, that your agents caused the riots. Or that the, uh, hermit himself did."

"You have been lied to. The people had to drag that 'hermit' to the conclave. Talk to Jarad. Talk to Bleze. Then talk to His Holiness, that hermit, for love of the Church. A love we share."

"Oh, yes, Elia! I know you love the Church. It's what else you may love that I wonder about. We'll

see, we'll see."

On his way out, Brownpony found that Blacktooth had been joined in the outer office by three frustrated electors who had come to Valana as Texark allies. One of them, however, had already knelt at the feet of Pope Amen and been embraced by His Holiness. Brownpony exchanged weather opinions with them and hurried on.

"Why did you want me to go with you there, m'Lord?" Blacktooth asked innocently.

"Because I knew Yordin was there, of course. I wanted him to fear we were going to accuse him. And frankly, I wanted to get him in trouble with the archbishop."

"You think he hired the men?"

"If not, he knows who did, but he knows it was a mistake. I think we'll be safe now. It just proves they're dangerous. Now we all need a rest after the worst conclave I've ever seen. Take two or three days off."

As Blacktooth was leaving the Secretariat, the receptionist guard at the entrance handed him two letters. One was a note from Ædrea. He glanced at the guard, who was watching him with an expression that made Blacktooth ask:

"Did the sender give this to you personally?"

"It was handed me by a young sister in a brown habit, Brother St. George. May it not displease Your Reverence that I did not ask her name, for she was silent herself and I did not wish to spoil it."

"Spoil what?"

"Her silence."

Nimmy studied him in surprise. He was a beefy man of mature years, and looked like a retired soldier. His name was Elkin. "You've been to a monastery, haven't you?"

"I was at your own abbey for three years in my youth, Brother, at the same time as the cardinal. Of course, he wasn't a cardinal then, or even a deacon. And I wasn't yet a soldier. But we left at the same time. He had been there to study, but I was there to—" He shrugged.

"Find a calling or not," Nimmy finished, and resolved to be amazed later by this information. "About the silent sister. Does she come here often?"

The guard's expression blurted a *yes* before he caught himself and said, "You should question His Eminence about things like that, Brother St. George."

"Of course, thank you." He turned to go. The other letter was a note from Abbot Jarad apologizing for being unable to meet with him as promised. *I am writing to His Holiness on your behalf, my son, and you may be sure I shall write only what will be favorable to your good intentions.*

Whatever that means.

The note from Ædrea said: *I shall leave your chitara in the crack in the ledge below the waterfall up the hill from the Pope's old place.* Blacktooth began walking in that direction. He wondered why she hadn't left his g'tara with the guard instead of the note. It was a five-mile hike to the falls, and the climb made him dizzy. When he arrived, a white horse was drinking at the pool under the falls, and he froze for a moment; but then he saw that it was a gelding rather than a mare, and wearing a bridle but no saddle; it snorted at the sight of him and trotted out of sight around a curve in the trail. The waterfall was hardly more than a shower, and it fluttered in the wind, producing an occasional flash of rainbow. He walked around the pool, fearing and half hoping to find her behind the falls. The g'tara was there as promised. It was slightly damp from the mist of the falls, causing him to grunt irritably and wipe it against his robe. Why had she made him walk so far?

He glanced at the hoofprints in the sand as he walked around the pool again. Then he stopped. The hoofprints of the horse crossed and partly overlaid a set of human footprints, smaller than his own. Both led in the same direction away from the pool. He wrestled with himself for a moment, then followed the trail.

Her footprints led him into a wooded ravine, then under a low ledge which overhung the sandy bank of the swollen creek. He had to duck low to walk, then dropped to his knees and crawled. Then he found her. He had heard of this place, but never seen it. The small cavern under the ledge was said to



have been the home of Amen Specklebird before Cardinal Brownpony bought him the remodeled cavern closer to town.

Slanting sunlight filtered through the foliage and made delicate patterns on the stones and the bare thighs of Ædrea, who was no longer wearing the nun's robe but the leather skirt and a halter above her waist. She sat with bare flesh on bare sand. He had been following her trail on his hands and knees, and at the sight of her bare legs he paused to look. She laughed at him, and put away a handgun she had been holding in her lap.

"You might as well admire the rest of me." She pulled up her skirt and spread her legs to let the dappled light shine on her crotch, then closed her thighs quickly. He had seen it before, dimly, in a barn. Her vagina was small as a nail hole because of the stitches, but her clitoris was as big as Nimmy's thumb, and maybe because he loved her he could see nothing repulsive about her crotch, however embarrassing, and she could see that he was not repelled but sad and curious, and embarrassed. She smiled wickedly and patted his arm.

He sat in the soft sand beside her. "Why do you tease me?" he asked wistfully.

"Now or back home?"

"Then and now."

"I'm sorry. There was a runaway monk from your Order who stopped at our place once. He didn't like me, not at all. He was in love with another monk. I wondered if you were like him. And your gap was showing."

"Gap?"

"The gap between what you are and what you try to let show. I'm a genny, remember. I see gaps. Some call me a witch, even my own father when he's angry."

"So what did you see in this gap?"

"I knew you weren't just a runaway like the other, but something was wrong. You were some kind of fake. I wondered if you weren't the cardinal's prisoner."

Nimmy's laugh was remote. "Something like that. I was in disgrace."

"Are you still in disgrace?"

"As soon as the cardinal finds out I've seen you, I will be."

"I know. He ordered me out of town. That's why I didn't stay by the falls, so that you could go back the way you came."

"You left me a trail."

"You didn't have to follow it."

"Yes, I did." He eyed her accusingly.

"Come back here where we can't be seen." She rolled over and crawled back into the cavern entrance, taking the gun with her. Nimmy followed. The rock overhead was less than ceiling height, and he could not stand up, but in the dim light from the door he could see a mattress on the floor, a saddle, a low table with a candle on it, and several wooden boxes.

"You've been living here!"

"Only for three days. Your employer told the sisters to turn me out. I've made my last trip to Valana. I'm not welcome at the Secretariat anymore. Our people will have to get somebody else. I'm going back home alone. That's my horse you saw outside."

"But why? His Eminence told me you trade silver for scrip, but—"

"Scrip?" She laughed. "Yes, that's truth. Not the whole truth, but true. He doesn't want me to handle it anymore because of you and me, and because of Jæsis. Jæsis was one of ours. And now your cardinal thinks we have a spy among us. He may be right, but it's not me."

"Where did you get the gun?"

"I swiped it from one of the crates in our shipment."

"Shipment?"

"From the Secretariat to New Jerusalem, of course."

Nimmy was incredulous. "We are giving you guns?"

"Not giving. Selling us some, depending on us to store some for the Secretary's own arsenal. Didn't

you know? We're bigger than you think, a nation almost. The mountains are easy to defend."

"I don't think I should have come here," he said in alarm.

She caught his arm as he backed toward the door. "We won't talk about it anymore. I thought you knew." Her hand moved up his arm under the sleeve of his robe, caressing. "You're nice and furry."

He sat down again. The gun was lying on one of the packing crates. He picked it up.

"Be careful, it's loaded. I was afraid, staying here alone. That's the smallest model, but it shoots five times. Here, I'll show you." She took the weapon from him, manipulated it, and five brass objects fell one at a time out of the gun into her lap.

"If those are the bullets, where is the powder?"

She handed one of them to him. "The lead part is the bullet. The brass part contains the powder. Now watch this." She cocked it and part of the gun rotated through a small angle. She pulled the trigger, and cocked it again, causing another rotation. "See? It shoots five times. And it's this easy to reload." She turned the cylinder one click at a time and dropped the cartridges back into their chambers.

"But how do you reload the cartridges?"

"You don't, in the field. You carry a lot of cartridges with you. There's a loading press back at your base, if you don't lose the casings."

"I've never seen anything like it."

"Neither has the Texark cavalry. The guns come from the west coast. I think the design came from Cardinal Ri's country, but it was probably copied from the ancients." She put the gun away, and embraced him suddenly. "I'm not going to see you again. Let's make love—any way we can."

Resigned to what he had started, he did what he could to please her. They lay on the mattress, rubbing bodies and kissing. God, she is beautiful, he noticed in the faint light from the entrance. Spirit in the primordial ooze fucked the Earth, and the Earth gave birth to her, golden-haired as the new corn and laughing in the wind. O Day Maiden, thy name is Ædrea, and I love you.

*"Fujæ Go!"*

"What?" she whispered, squirming under him and grinning at her own pleasure.

*"Fujæ Go, It is one of the names of—"*

"What?"

He remained silent, watching her violet eyes search his own.

"Unspeakable?" she guessed.

"You, are, almost, awake," he groaned in sudden orgasm.

"Oh, let me take it. Like before!" She reached down with her hand and caught his discharge.

Spent, he nevertheless started up in total surprise. She was rubbing it into herself, into that tiny orifice no larger than a buzzard-quill pen. "What are you doing?" Nimmy gasped.

Still grinning, she said, "Getting pregnant. Like last time. I'm way late for my period since we did it."

Stunned, he sat up. It had been black as pitch in Shard's root cellar, and he had been too drunk to be certain what happened, and he could feel it but not see it, in spite of what he said in confession to an old onetime hermit.

"Nimmy, you're white as a sheet!"

*"Why?"*

"Shard had me stitched up by a surgeon, and he won't have it undone, and he's my father, and I love him, and I won't defy him, but this way I can let a baby tear it open, if he won't let a surgeon cut me."

"Oh, my God!" He rolled over with his face in his hands.

"Nimmy, please don't cry." She held his shoulders and tried to keep him from shaking so. "Oh, please!—I didn't mean to make you unhappy. I just picked you to have a baby with. You!"

Nimmy felt dizzy and sick. There seemed to be only a moment of blackness, but when he awoke and went outside, Ædrea and the white gelding were gone. He was alone in front of the tiny cavern. She had written in the sand: *Goodbye, Nimmy. You really are a monk.*

He saw her in town again, however, on his way home from the hills. Walking down the street, he looked over his shoulder at the sound of a horse and saw Ædrea slowly overtaking him. She shook her

head quickly, but barely looked at him. He nodded understanding and kept going. She had stopped somewhere along the way, but had to come through town to go back home by the main road. Blacktooth, who was wearing his Leibowitzian novice's robe, turned a corner and just avoided running into another man, who was skipping rope. He wore a wood and leather harness which held a harmonica up to his mouth. He played a rapid but recognizable *Salve Regina* while he jumped the rope; a cup on the ground at his side asked for, and had collected, a few coins. Blacktooth suppressed a sharp gasp and tried to pass behind him as quietly as possible. For there wearing a Leibowitzian postulant's robe in the road was Torrildo playing the fool for coins. Blacktooth had gone about six paces when the music and the slapping of the rope suddenly stopped, so that he could hear the tread of hooves of his love's mount as she too passed the excommunicated musical mendicant.

"Hey, Blacktooth. *Darling!*" Torri called.

Blacktooth broke into a fast trot. Behind him, he could hear them. Ædrea stopped to exchange pleasantries with Torrildo, whom she had apparently met before.

"Oh, so he was the one!" he heard her say as he fled.

The sound came from the chapel, a *whishing* slap followed by a moan. It was repeated every two or three seconds. His Eminence Cardinal Brownpony stopped to listen, then walked inside. After three days of absence without leave, his secretary for Nomad affairs was found at last. Blacktooth was kneeling before the altar of the Virgin in the Secretariat's private chapel; he was flagellating himself with a scourge of thongs.

"Stop it," the cardinal said quietly, but the sound went on. *Whish*, slap, moan. Pause. *Whish*, slap, moan. Pause.

The head of SEEC cleared his throat loudly. "Nimmy, stop it!"

Finding himself ignored, he turned toward his office, the Axe at his elbow. "Come see me as soon as you can," he called over his shoulder as the flogging continued. "We have an audience with His Holiness early tomorrow. It's about your petition."

• • •

The audience went badly. As they walked to the Papal Palace, Blacktooth, his back sore and his guilt making him sick, said nothing to his master and his master said nothing to him. There was an alienation between them that he had never felt before. Brownpony obviously knew he had disobeyed and seen Ædrea, but he could not know, or perhaps only suspected, that she had told Blacktooth about the smuggling of guns. If they had spoken as they walked, mutual accusation might arise, and Nimmy was grateful for the strained silence.

The Pope, still looking uncomfortable in his white cassock, greeted them warmly and without formality. As Blacktooth knelt to kiss his ring, Amen nodded to the cardinal, who then disappeared, leaving the surprised monk alone with the Supreme Pontiff.

"Please get up, Nimmy. Come let us sit over here."

Blacktooth moved as if in a dream. As he sat down, he felt as if he were resuming his role as a penitent in Specklebird's home cavern. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Specklebird become a cougar.

"There seems to be a divine being among us," said the cougar, smiling a thin smile.

"The divine being should shut up," Nimmy heard himself say, and heard with pleasure the cougar's laugh. The being was playful.

"You are going to continue in Cardinal Brownpony's employ for some time, unless you object," said the cougar, dissolving into an old black man with a cloud of white hair and white skullcap.

"I am surprised he still wants me." (Nimmy again hearing himself.)

"Why do you think he chose you among his translators as a personal secretary?"

"I have wondered that myself, Holy Father. I can only think that he has become attached to the people of his unknown mother, through his frequent contacts with them. I am of the same blood."

"It's just ethnic nepotism? Do you really think so?"

"The alternative is to suppose that he thinks I have some particular quality or talent that he appraises rationally, and so chooses me, in spite of my disobedience, but I cannot, Holy Father, imagine what that could be. Whatever it is, it must be imaginary on his part."

"In other words, you're just a poor sinner who deeply loves God, but hasn't got much to offer in the way of talent."

Sarcasm? Blacktooth withered. He had unconsciously spoken through a mask of humility, and the cougar as Specklebird-Peter ruthlessly held up a mirror to the mask he was looking through.

Recovering after a moment, he said, reflecting the sarcasm, "All right, let's admit that I'm a genius in Nomadic languages, having invented the new alphabet myself, which even Saint Ston's uses, I'm told. Not only that, I've learned to defend myself, understand most of my master's affairs with the Nomads, and that's where we're going. So perhaps his choosing me is rational. Also, I've been taught how to kill a man."

"You are to abstain from deadly violence, my son," said the old mountain cat.

"Neither am I to covet my neighbor's ox, Holy Father."

The Pope laughed heartily. "You're awake sometimes, Nimmy. I do believe it: you are called to contemplation."

Blacktooth sighed and lowered his head. "I could be laicized and still work for the cardinal, Holy Father. And I don't have to be a monk to contemplate."

Specklebird returned to his subject: "In your case, I think you do. Cardinal Brownpony chose you because you *are* a monk, Nimmy, a real monk, and a contemplative. Why do you think he, a rich and powerful man, formed a friendship with me, a hermit and beggar, a bedraggled and much-reprimanded priest with no parish, denied access for several years to the altars of Valanan Churches? Your master wants to learn more about people like us, Nimmy. There is hope for him, just because he perceives we are different, and the perception leads him to curiosity rather than contempt. If you were not truly a man of religion, why would he choose you?—who know less about the Secretariat's business than at least three of the others. I know him. He wonders what it is like to know God."

"If you are being infallible, I surrender. If not, I say he made a mistake, because I am, or was, a very bad monk."

"You bring in a load of donkey shit. That's yours to confess if you think so, but it's not yours to judge on the last day."

"I'm in love with a spook, a genny girl, Holy Father."

"Is that why you want to be laicized?"

"Not at first." He sighed. "Maybe that's part of it now."

"Maybe?"

"Because she too says I'm a monk. Everybody says I'm a monk but me."

"Smart girl. When you feel love for her, see God in her. Do not let this love lessen your love of the Lord. Passion is the other side of compassion, not its negation. You should be able to see and love God through any of His works, including a forbidden girl. But remember that you are a monk of Saint Leibowitz. Love is not a sin."

"But consummation is."

"For you. You yourself chose it to be so."

"As a runaway at age fifteen."

"Your solemn vows were taken much later, Brother St. George!"

"But I was still ignorant of the world I was undertaking to shun by my vows, from which only you can absolve me, Holy Father."

"You have learned so much about the world lately?"

"I am in love."

Pope Amen laughed. "Loving God through His creatures is admirable, if you know what you are doing. Now let me remind you of something. I have spoken to Abbot Jarad, and he reminded me. The Order of Saint Leibowitz was originally an order of hermits. It is possible for you to remain in the Order,

but live apart from the monastery. You would live by the ancient rules of Saint Leibowitz, as he originally established them. This would be after your present employer releases you, of course. I ask you to consider the possibility, and postpone your request to be laicized until you decide."

Blacktooth sighed deeply. He looked at the old black man; the cougar was gone. He lowered his head in submission, but a question remained: *What if she is really pregnant?* he thought, walking away empty from the audience. Well, not quite empty: a poor monk had talked back to a Pope. Riches, riches.

Other employees of SEEC briefed him on events during his five-day absence. Valana was still in turmoil. The external violence and internal cowardice that tainted the Conclave of 3244 were acknowledged even by the new Pope, who had astonished everyone by placing the sickened city of Valana under a sentence of interdict. The security guard Elkin recited for Blacktooth the names of the leaders of the violence, who were brought forth to undertake to repair damages to the palace. "These seventeen thugs knelt there before Pope Amen, their hero. He got from them a promise to repair all damage. Then he imposed a penance of prayer and fasting, and then absolved them."

"But this did nothing to satisfy the Benefez people," Nimmy guessed. Elkin nodded.

It was immediately apparent that the election of an eccentric religious ascetic of dubious orthodoxy and religious impulsiveness caused a nervous shuddering to pass through the hierarchy and the institutions of power from coast to coast. It was either an unexpected attack by the Holy Ghost upon the conclave, or the work of the Devil and the Red Deacon.

The Archbishop of Texark interviewed nearly 170 cardinals who had participated in the election before he found enough electors who willing to affirm that their votes for Amen Specklebird had been given under duress. He stayed only three days in the city, and, claiming illness, failed to come to pay homage to the elected Pope. He departed with his troops and quite a few Eastern cardinals who were healthy enough and eager to escape the sickened city. Some members of his faction announced that the Holy See was still vacant because the election was forced. They called upon the old man to admit the election was invalid, to announce another conclave to be held in New Rome, and then to step down from the throne he illegally occupied. Brownpony and others made the case for a valid election, and proposed that the faction recognize His Holiness or face ecclesiastical sanctions. Only one of the group changed his mind at this point, and the others left Valana for home. It seemed obvious that the old wound of schism had again burst its stitches.

By his will, locally drawn, Cardinal Ri left his servants to Cardinal Brownpony, an embarrassment which the Secretary for Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Concerns managed to share with His Holiness the Pope, to whom the Archbishop of Hong left his wife and lesser concubines. The lawyer who drew the will became angrily defensive when questioned about the possibility of a mix-up of the two bequests, with Brownpony supposed to get the women. The Red Deacon echoed his anger, and testified that Cardinal Ri before his death had asked him to take care of his servants afterward. He called it obvious that Ri had intended to leave the fate of his loved ones in the hands of none but the servant of the servants of God, Amen Papa Specklebird. Since the servants of Cardinal Ri were very happy to find a new master, Brownpony decided to keep all but one of them, not as bond servants, but on five-year contracts renewable only with mutual consent. The Pope granted SEEC an increase in funds to pay the expense of keeping them. They numbered six skilled warriors, two personal servants, and Ri's confessor. This priest he released to Saint Ston's, who wanted the former chaplain eventually to teach courses in the Oriental Rite as practiced in his land and in the language spoken there.

As for the Pope's inheritance of the three women, Amen gave them the gold which the prelate had willed to him, plus freedom, and, if desired, he offered a choice of school, a convent, or a marriage broker.

Wooshin for his part was delighted to be in command of a squad of well-trained fighters who shared a military tradition not unlike his own. The Axe was beginning to speak Rockymount like a native, and this fact alone made it natural that he assume command of Brownpony's private army, but he made them go through the formality of choosing him, and then swearing allegiance to him and to the Cardinal Secretary, their employer. Blacktooth wondered if Brownpony knew, as the Axe had once told him, that

any one of the men of his tradition would kill anybody his employer designated, even the Pope, even themselves. Wooshin's comparison of these fighters to Hannegan's assassins revealed his contempt for even the professionals among the latter.

There was too much excitement in Valana for anyone yet to think of questioning what excuse the Secretariat might have for keeping an army of six professional killers on the payroll, although Blacktooth had been wondering the same thing ever since he left Leibowitz Abbey with the Axe under Brownpony's wing. He felt he was less privy to the cardinal's intentions than his inside job suggested. He now realized this more clearly since he had seen Ædrea's weapon. A whole wing of the Secretariat was closed to him. A whole range of SEEC activities were invisible to him. He tried not to be curious. He was temporarily sharing Brownpony's outer office with two other specialist secretaries, and they observed that at least once a day someone from the forbidden wing came to the office with a folder of documents, was admitted to Brownpony's private sanctum, and departed without the folders, which were never filed by the outer office. He had no files in his sanctum, but a stove for burning papers. Together, the other two secretaries had induced an opinion that the forbidden wing dealt with intelligence and operations, and with this Blacktooth did not disagree. He said nothing to them about weapons.

## CHAPTER 13

The Abbot shall see to the size of the garments, that they be not too short for those who wear them, but of proper fit.

—Saint *Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 55

IT SEEMED TO BLACKTOOTH THAT HIS MASTER had become obsessed with Nomad politics during a time of trouble for both the papacy in Valana and the Eastern Church. While he might have been in constant correspondence with Eastern cardinals who had taken part in the election of Pope Amen, he was instead inviting Hultor Bråm of the Grasshopper to enter Valana with all the guards he cared to bring in order to meet the Pope. The purpose was obvious. The cardinal stood accused of favoring the candidacy of Chür Ösle Høngan of the Wilddog Horde over that of the Grasshopper war sharf. To establish a neutral posture, Brownpony had invited Hultor Bråm to meet the Pope before he invited Høngan. He left the Pope's immediate vicinity to ride out onto the Plains accompanied by only one meek-looking policeman instead of his usual ferocious bodyguard to meet the Grasshopper war sharf, although the Pope certainly needed him near at hand during such troubled times. Blacktooth's admiration for his employer's courage had grown, even while he was entertaining suspicions laced with fantasy about the Secretary's loyalty to the Pope and his perceived guns-for-the-misborn activities. "This is the world, O Saint Isaac Edward Leibowitz, that I abandoned as your monk. And where am I now?"

He went early with Wooshin to the place Brownpony had set for their meeting upon his return from the Plains, and there they saw Ædrea's replacement as messenger from New Jerusalem already standing there in the street. Now that Blacktooth had learned both officially from the cardinal and directly from Ædrea something about the exchanges between New Jerusalem and the covert wing of SEEC, he and the Axe had both been introduced to Ulad from the colony. Blacktooth had assumed that all spooks were normal in appearance. Ulad looked normal, if one saw him at a distance with nothing nearby for comparison. But when he stood next to another man in a crowd, he stood about a man-and-a-third high and probably weighed about two men and a half. Thrice Blacktooth had watched the giant, whose hands seemed disproportionately slender, pick the pockets of passersby before he crossed the street to warn

the giant, "If you do *that* again, I'll tell."

Ulad picked him up by the head with one of those long slender hands, the thumb so crushing his temple that he almost lost consciousness from pain. Wooshin slipped behind him and did something to his knee which made him release the monk with a howl and sit down on the pavement, clutching his leg. The Axe stepped in front of him and pressed a sword to his nose, flattening it. "If you do *that* again, I'll kill."

"I didn't recognize you at first," the giant sang out, his voice a surprising contralto, to the tiny old warrior.

"Do you like your job?" asked the Axe.

"It's good to be able to come to town, yes."

"Do your people know you're a thief?" the monk asked, picking himself up.

"It's part of my cover. People know me hereabout. It doesn't matter if I get arrested. The police know me. They think I'm local, and so I am, part-time. Sometimes they lock me up for a few days, but sometimes I work for them. I used to ride as a guard for Ædrea. This place is where we met before going home."

"Does His Eminence know all this?"

"I'm supposed to meet him here. He's coming in the Grasshopper Nomad's coach. I hate Nomads. You look like a Nomad to me, and you called me a spook."

Nimmy faced his glower. "Did you ever see a Nomad wearing a monk's habit?" he scoffed. "Do you look like a spook?" He felt Wooshin touching his arm, trying to warn him, but it was too late.

Ulad growled and pulled a knife. Steel met steel, slid together, and then the edge of the short sword cut the giant's forearm, all in one sweep of motion from the thrust of the dagger through the cut to the fall of dagger and blood on the ground. They stood frozen for a moment; then Wooshin sheathed his blade and said, "Go do something for your arm. It's not a deep cut."

"I think he tried to stab me, Axe."

"You do?" Axe snickered. "Well! The cardinal warned me about Ulad, and he is very unhappy with him as Ædrea's replacement. The man has a habit of going berserk once in a while. He's only temporary, in my opinion; the New Jerusalemites were so infuriated by our master's rejection of Ædrea as persona non grata that they made Ulad her replacement. They can be arrogant."

"Why isn't he caged up?"

"Well, one, because the cardinal wants him to meet this Nomad he's bringing home, and two, because he's apparently a warrior of power and a high officer of a small army that's supposed to be on our side."

"Our side against *whom*, for the love of God? Do your one and your two make a three? Which is our side?"

"Why, our master's side!" Wooshin snapped, glaring at him. "Your loyalty is a question in my mind, Brother St. George. Do not think I would not cut your throat if you ever betray him!"

"Whoa, please! It's me, Blacktooth. I was just trying to understand his thinking."

"That is not your place."

"Are you the one to tell me my place and keep me in it, Axe? This is new."

"I can't tell you your place, but don't let me catch you out of it."

*This is new*—yes, and real. It was the first time he had felt real menace from the old warrior. Brownpony must be more angry than he realized. His fear of Wooshin at the abbey was founded on nervous imagination. But lately he had learned that Wooshin lived only to carry out his master's wishes and protect his person and his welfare; this was the warrior's highest good. Blacktooth, of a different persuasion in matters of loyalty, had disobeyed his master. Wooshin knew it, at least in a vague way, because the monk had been gone so long. Things were not the same between them, although Axe had just saved him from Ulad's dagger. Ædrea had changed everything about his life. Just as Ulad came back with a bandaged forearm, a coach pulled by four beautiful gray stallions appeared from the east and stopped in front of the Venison House. The standard-bearer of the totemic Grasshopper triumph pole rode up, dismounted, and stood at attention with his standard in front of the restaurant.

"Forth come the banners of the king of hell," Blacktooth said sourly, quoting an ancient poet.

Nimmy later learned that when Brownpony met Hultor Bråm, the latter was riding in his royal coach, probably of Eastern manufacture and stolen during a raid into the Eastern timberland, and he was accompanied by sixteen well-armed horsemen, while the Prince of the Church himself had left behind even his formidable bodyguard and brought along only a meek-looking Valana policeman. Bråm seemed embarrassed when he saw that the lone Churchman was his host, and promptly sent all but two of his warriors home. Thus Brownpony rode back alone in the coach with a surprised but not yet friendly sharf. As the party dismounted, Ulad the giant strode toward the coach and presented himself to the cardinal, who frowned at him, spoke a few words, and waved him away.

"He will call you first," the giant said to Blacktooth, and to Axe, "You shall guard the entrance."

Ulad was plainly upset. "They should put all Nomads in jail when they come to town."

"Then how could they do any business?"

"Their only business is to steal!"

"I see. With you, it's a hobby, with them a business."

Ulad growled, and Wooshin nudged the monk again.

Next to the driver sat a Nomad with a long rifle and a mean mouth. Two mounted warriors rode guard. A policeman and a Nomad got out of the coach and then helped the prelate and another Nomad get out. The second Nomad was fancier than the first. Ulad was plainly disappointed to see that the Nomads were not in custody. Three Nomads and the policeman stayed with the carriage while the fancy Nomad and the prelate went inside to eat.

The coach was dirty from crossing the Plains but was of costly design and workmanship. The horses, while obviously tired, were elegant and well-bred animals that could be sold for at least a thousand pios as a team. The door of the coach was enameled blue and gold, with a touch of red on the crest that showed through the dust on the door. Someone was talking about the crest. They stood among a small group of people who, upon passing by or coming out of the inn, saw the Nomads and the police and the well-fitted coach with its spirited team, and lingered, becoming a crowd. Blacktooth kept a wary eye on Ulad.

"I tell you it can't be the Secretary's," the grocer from next door was saying. "Those aren't his arms, nor any Churchman's." "What about the motto?" said a woman beside him. "It's Latin, isn't it?" When the grocer shrugged, she turned to a friar who had come out of the inn and was staring at the coach. "Isn't it Latin, Father?"

"As a matter of fact, it isn't."

"It can't be Nomadic!" she said.

"No, it's a Church language, all right. It's English."

"What does it say?"

"I've been out of school for twenty years," said the cleric. He turned to go, but paused to add, "It says something about fire, though. And that's Cardinal Brownpony inside, so you'd better leave."

"You leave, Father! I live here."

"Maybe the Pope's starting his own fire department," said a student from Saint Ston's who turned out to be Aberlott.

Blacktooth himself put them straight. "The motto says: 'I set fires.' It's the heraldry of a Grasshopper war sharf.

"See you later," he said to his ex-roommate, left the group, and went to stand near the window.

Inside the tavern, the cardinal shared a meal with the Nomad officials. The fare was chicken cooked with herbs served with a local beer. The hungry plainsmen were polite enough not to scorn the lack of beef, but they did scrape away every trace of greenery from the meat. Bråm was continuing a monologue he had begun on the road, but the cardinal saw his secretary at the window and beckoned him inside. Blacktooth entered and found his master being theologically harassed by an offensive sharf in the crudest of terms.

"The father of the mother of God is also her son and her lover," the Nomad was saying. He squinted toward the window and pretended not to be watching the cardinal. "That's the way our Weejus explain it."



The cardinal took another bite of chicken and chewed vigorously while he looked at Brām.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"No," Brownpony lied. "Say it again." His Grasshopper dialect was adequate but he occasionally looked at Blacktooth for support.

"The father of the mother of God is also her son and her lover. This is the way the Grasshopper Bear Spirit sees it as well."

"Just so." Brownpony dipped the chicken leg in the sauce and took another bite. Hultor Brām was trying to antagonize him in the most obvious possible way.

The sharf straightened and frowned. " 'Just so!' You agree?"

" 'Just so' means I heard what you said, Sharf. I'm a lawyer, not a theologian. Have a piece of chicken."

"He invites you to have a piece of chicken," said the monk, sensing a Wilddog usage.

"If you're a lawyer, then why don't you have me arrested?"

"Because I'm not a theologian's lawyer, and if I had you arrested, you would be of no use to anybody." He looked at Blacktooth, who nodded. Only occasionally did he need to clarify what was being said.

"You're the Pope's lawyer."

"Just so. The white meat is dry. Try the dark."

"Jesus is Mary's lover."

Cardinal Brownpony sighed with disgust and began using his drumstick to beat on the table.

"Why do you want to pick a quarrel with me? Do I say ugly things about Empty Sky, or your Wild Horse Woman?"

"You did so once. At a holy council fire. That's why I'm talking to you this way. You tried to drive her away, and your Christian puppet killed her priests."

Brownpony sighed. "So I haven't lived that down, eh? Sunovtash An was nobody's puppet. As for me, what I did was foolish. I know that now, and I regret it. But that happened in the farming areas, not on the eastern Plains."

"No matter, the tribe was formerly Grasshopper. You must remove the sacrilege."

"How can I do that?"

"We have discussed it. You must go to her."

"Where? Back to the farming area?"

"No. In the navel of the Earth, she lives: the breeding pit for her wild horses. It is a place of deadly fires, called Meldown."

"I have heard of it. Isn't that where Mad Bear became Lord of the Hordes before the conquest?"

"The same. Anyone nominated for the sacral kinship had to be chosen by her in that place. After election, each had to spend the night in that place by the light of the full moon. It will be so again. A new *Qæsach dri Vørdar* will be chosen. One of the three of us. It is also the place where we try men charged with crimes, a place of ordeal. Many never come out alive. Many come out sick, and lose their hair. Few emerge in full health. You committed a crime in the eyes of our Weejus and our Bear Spirit, Brownpony."

"And if I submit to the ordeal?"

"There will be an alliance, if you live. And peace with the Wild-dog."

"No matter who is elected Lord?"

Brām shook his head, seemed puzzled.

"As *Qæsach dri Vørdar*," Blacktooth put in.

"Ah, no doubt about that! The old women know best. And the *Høngin Fujæ Vurn*."

The cardinal spoke to Nimmy in Rockymount. "Explain carefully and politely to the sharf that His Holiness is the high priest of all Christendom, and that diplomatic immunity, which he has been practicing on me, does not cover the *crimen laesae majestatis*, so tell him to curb his tongue before the Pope."

Hultor Brām was a powerful Nomad about Chür Høngan's size, but perhaps leaner. His body language had few words. The predominant accent was force, a force prepared to spring at you, either for a hearty hug or to kill. All his muscles seemed drawn up that way.

Nervously, Blacktooth translated Brownpony's message.

For a moment, the sharf glowered at him. The body language said "kill the messenger," but then he turned to the cardinal and nodded curtly. At that moment Ulad stooped to enter the doorway and crossed, as a crouching mass of muscle, toward the table. Brownpony sent Blacktooth away in Ulad's wake. Ulad, the monk intuitively surmised, was to discuss matters not for his ears, for Brownpony needed an interpreter more than ever, because the genny giant spoke only Valley Ol'zark and a little Rockymount. Probably Ulad was there to discuss weapons with the Grasshopper sharf, and Brownpony would have to be interpreter for both of them. Temporarily dismissed, he headed home, accompanied by Aberlott, whom he had not seen since the election.

"Listen, I heard there is going to be schism, maybe even war. What about it?"

"Takes two to make a schism or a war. Who do you have in mind for the war? And why ask me?"

"You work for the Secretary."

"Who probably couldn't answer your question either. Why don't you ask a Weejus woman?"

"I don't know any, do you?"

"Not yet."

"When? I hear your cardinal is thinking of leaving for Nomad country."

Blacktooth shot him a suspicious look. Everybody seemed to know more about his employer's doings than he did. "Where did you hear that?"

"From a man who came out of the inn just before you did."

Blacktooth worried. Brownpony was careless enough to let his conversation with Hultor Bråm be overheard by another customer who understood Nomadic. But there had been no one else visible from their table.

"A secret's out?" asked Aberlott after a moment.

"I don't know. I have a feeling I'm going to be fired, sooner or later."

"By the cardinal? For what?"

"Remember the person who gave you my rosary back?"

Blacktooth said no more than that, but his friend watched his face, saw a blush, and asked no further questions. He turned away to cover a laugh with his hand, then asked, "What will happen to you then, Nimmy?"

"I don't know. I have a big debt to pay. What the hell are you doing out of school?"

"I take no courses during the summer. I like to travel."

"Where do you plan to go?"

"Where the horse takes me. No reins, you know. You just kick the animal when he stops to graze too often."

"Be sure and pick the right horse, you half-wit, or it will take you to its birthplace." He waved east toward the flatlands. Aberlott laughed and walked on alone.

It was two days before Hultor Bråm was admitted to an audience with His Holiness. During Cardinal Brownpony's absence from the Curia, the Pope announced a date for his return to New Rome. If the head of SEEC felt miffed about being left out of the decision process, he at least had an alibi for the bad decision. The Pope planned a very early departure. There had been no communication with Texark about the matter. The Pope used his interview with Hultor Bråm to send the Apostolic Benediction to the Grasshopper Weejus and Bear Spirit people, and to ask permission to cross Grasshopper lands on his way to New Rome. Graciously the war sharf promised that one hundred warriors would escort the Pope's party once it emerged from Wilddog country. Brownpony listened in silence to this, but made it clear to all that he would not accompany the expedition, having urgent business both on the Plains and in Texark itself.

"It is my wish to make you Vicar Apostolic to the Three Hordes," the old black Pope told the Red Deacon the next day.

Brownpony actually gasped, Nimmy noticed, and the few members of the Curia who were present exchanged frightened glances. There was a long silence, because what the Pope just said caused a mental

avalanche. First thought: to make the territory of all three hordes a Vicariate Apostolic was to abolish the de facto status of the Jackrabbit Horde as missionaries of the Texark Archdiocese. It would end the archbishop's authority in the Province, and would force him to recall his missionary priests there or let them submit to a new authority. Second thought: it would infuriate Benefez, no matter who was appointed. But Brownpony? Third thought: before Brownpony could be appointed a Vicar Apostolic, he would have to be ordained and then consecrated as bishop of an extinct ancient diocese, for he would be the equivalent of a bishop in a missionary area not yet a diocese. Blacktooth remembered the cardinal's own words: *I was called to be a lawyer, not a priest, and that's it.*

"Well, Elia? Will you do it?"

"Holy Father, I don't think I have a calling."

"We are calling you. Right now." It was the first time Blacktooth had ever heard Amen use the pontifical *we* except in formal Latin.

With great dignity, Brownpony prostrated himself before the old man, but still he said nothing. He stayed that way until the Pope interpreted it as consent, whereas it was, as it seemed to Blacktooth, merely submission.

"Get up, Elia. We'll have you ordained, consecrated, and on your way by next week. If we do it quietly, you can go to the convention on the Plains before Benefez hears about it."

Later, at the cardinal's request, Blacktooth explained the situation to Hultor Bråm before the sharf left town. "He will be the representative of the Pope to all of the hordes, and govern all Churches and missions both north and south of the Nady Ann. However, you must not speak of it before it is accomplished."

The sharf shook his head. "He will not be accepted by the Grasshopper," Bråm growled, commenting on the appointment, "unless your master makes his peace with the *Høngin Fufæ Vurn*, as he has promised. And the Bear Spirit must be consulted."

"It seems," said Brownpony, when Blacktooth relayed the remark to his employer, "that ever since I made the mistake of denouncing Yordin's speech, I have been ambushed by unpleasant surprises, not all of them from my enemies. Aren't you astonished, Nimmy?"

"Not altogether, since I provided one unpleasant surprise myself." It was as close as he had come to an apology, but the cardinal just looked at him curiously.

The monk's attitude toward Brownpony had been tainted by suspicion, but not to the extent of doubting that the deeds of his friend, Pope Amen Specklebird, were entirely unexpected by the cardinal. Perhaps it had been Sorely Cardinal Nauwhat or Hilan Bleze who, during Brownpony's absence, had put Amen in mind of making all Nomadic territory an Apostolic Vicariate, to be ruled as a diocese would be, but by a bishop directly responsible to the Pope, clearly ending the de facto role of the Texark Archdiocese as missionary to the conquered province. The Churches throughout that Province were now headed by missionaries appointed by Urion Cardinal Benefez, but in no way had the Province been added to the Texarkana diocese. Most of its first priests had been military chaplains. But to create a papally dominated Vicariate out of the whole domain of the Three Hordes was to deprive Benefez of power and revenue throughout half of his nephew's domain. Could a holy old hermit come up with such an idea without a sinister force at his elbow? The sinister force might indeed be the Holy Ghost, so far as Blacktooth could distinguish. The old man was, as Saint Leibowitz used to say, "Independent as a hog on ice." It was an idea just crazy enough to have come from either God or Specklebird. Or as Urion Benefez might say, from either Satan or Brownpony. The very fact that the Red Deacon became an overnight archbishop made it evident, to anyone who wished to think so, that the promotion was a coup, coaxed by cunning out of a crazy old pope-contender who began to rule before he was legally elected.

Elia Brownpony's ordination as a priest and consecration as Bishop of Palermo were conducted in secret ceremonies to which no one was admitted except the participants, nor did Blacktooth's master change his manner of dress or wear a bishop's ring until he was ready to leave the city for the Plains, somewhat in advance of the Pope's own departure for New Rome. It was clear that Filpeo Harq and Urion Benefez were to remain in ignorance of Brownpony's new rank and office until his acceptance by the Nomads of all three hordes as the spiritual leader of Christians on the Plains and in the Province had

been established.

"There's no doubt they'll hear about it, Nimmy," the cardinal told him. "But only the Pope will inform them officially, and when he's ready to tell them. Now I have a new task for you. You will find your predecessor has taken over your office for the time being. I am going to visit first Chür Høngan, then Hultor Bråm.

"Deliver my written message to Mayor Dion in New Jerusalem; among other things, it introduces you. Tell them that Sorely Cardinal Nauwhat will, for the time being, be in charge of the Secretariat. Tell them that Ulad is out of control and must be replaced. If they insist on knowing why I refused to deal with Ædrea, I suppose you'll have to say she became too intimate with clergy."

"I am ashamed, m'Lord."

"How about contrite? Never mind. Do your best to mollify them. Learn as much as you need to know about New Jerusalem. Along the Way, let Wooshin brief you on what is going to happen. These things are secret for the present, although they are becoming less secret every day. You may, or may not, continue working at the Secretariat—for Cardinal Nauwhat. You *may* report back to him, if you wish. If he finds no use for you, he will tell you where to find me, or you *may* go back to your girlfriend in Arch Hollow and perhaps find a home in the colony. Or you *may* go beg them to take you back at the abbey, or become a hermit. I do not want to see you again unless and until this attachment is behind you."

"I expected to be dismissed, m'Lord. I did not obey."

"We'll see how it goes with you."

"And Axe is coming with me?"

"Along with all six of Cardinal Ri's men, and someone from the other wing—Elkin, I believe you know him."

"I didn't know he was from the other wing. I thought he was just a receptionist."

"Top security, and also a fighter almost in Wooshin's class. He was at Leibowitz Abbey once. You'll have a lot of expensive baggage with you, a twelve-mule train, but that will be Ulad's and Elkin's responsibility. When it's safe, they may let you and Ulad and Axe ride on ahead of the train and shorten your journey. Pack your habit and wear something else on the trail. You can put your habit back on when you arrive. Nimmy, I'm trusting you with new secrets."

"I'll be careful. And you, m'Lord?"

"I go to the convention of all the shamans of the hordes, all the Weejus and Bear Spirit people. I hope, with help from Holy Madness and Father e'Laiden, to be admitted as a Christian shaman observer and explain my new role."

"Hultor Bråm will try to keep you out."

"Of course, but the Jackrabbit will want to hear what I have to say, because they will be most affected by the transition. Bråm can't put together a majority. His grandmother might be able to do it, but she won't. Depending on what happens, I may go on to New Rome after the Pope, or even to Texark. Goodbye now, Nimmy. I would bless you, but you have heard me say I have no calling, yet here I am, a pretender."

"M'Lord, I know from history that once upon a time in a much earlier Church, a vocation to the priesthood meant a call from the bishop, not necessarily a call from God. And I heard the Bishop of Rome himself call you to be that which you have now become by ordination and consecration."

The cardinal smiled. "Thank you, Nimmy. Bless you, then, until tomorrow."

Blacktooth bent to kiss his ring, but the cardinal avoided his lips, squeezed his hand, said, "We'll say goodbye again tomorrow," and was gone.

Nimmy found himself near tears, and began to pray as he walked toward the nearest Church. Brownpony had been to him like a kindly Nomad father who was never drunk, while Abbot Jarad had been like a sterner Nomad uncle, always judging and finding fault. But he had missed the latter; he knew he would miss the former more. He knew too that loving people was a way of loving God, but to be attached to the one loved was not proper for a poor monk, and evidence of world-liness or delusion. Not wrong to love, but wrong to be attached to the one loved, for always came the anguish of tearing

loose from all impermanent things.

By the morrow, he had sufficiently recovered from his lapse of anxious worldliness to think of his former roommate and then confidently cajole his beloved (and possibly bedamned) cardinal into interviewing Aberlott, who as a friend of the late Jæsis could serve well as an emissary from SEEC to the dead student's family and help convince the ruling council that nobody had exposed Jæsis as a spook until the police learned of it after his death. There was suspicion at both ends, in the relationship between the colony and the Secretariat, which would now be managed temporarily by Sorely Cardinal Nauwhat, and Brownpony agreed that some gesture of reconciliation was advisable.

"But that would be one more person who knows about the armaments, Nimmy. So I think not." It was the first time Brownpony had mentioned the subject of the guns to him. And he would not have mentioned it now without a realization that the monk already knew through his forbidden contact with Ædrea.

"Do you really believe the secret is safe from Texark, m'Lord?"

"No, it's only possible to minimize their knowledge. They know the genny colony is there. They know it is well armed, and that I have been helping them. I hope that's all they know. I only pray the secret, as you call it, is temporarily safe from the Pope."

The remark caused the monk some surprise. In the first place, nothing was safe from Amen Specklebird, but his surprise was more due to a smell of betrayal about the words. The surprise was duly suppressed, and after some further discussion, the cardinal agreed to see the student, and so Blacktooth departed to seek him out before he began another journey.

"They say the mountains there are wonderfully cool in summer. You get to ride a free horse. You'll meet the family of Jæsis. You'll learn a brand-new skill."

"Like what?"

"Keeping your mouth shut?"

"What use is that?"

"You'll live longer as a secret agent."

Aberlott walked with him to the Secretariat. Brownpony was marching out the main entrance. He greeted his assistant, and his young friend by saying to Aberlott, "Student at the college, I'm told. And what do you think of our city and its young ladies?"

Aberlott answered fast, and the monk felt his face grow hot. "Well, when Blacktooth and I walked down past the police station last month, we saw a corpse hung there feet-in-your-face high, with a sign tied to his ankles. Blacktooth read the sign. 'For coitus interruptus' is what it said. I'm afraid of young ladies here."

Brownpony eyed him in mock dismay. "Do you think the Valana police force is a branch of the papacy?"

"Theology is not my strong point, Your Eminence."

"Or is the papacy a part of the police, perhaps?"

"Certainly I had no such idea in mind, m'Lord!" Aberlott was beginning to turn white.

"Of course you did, and you still do. In Texark, the mayoralty is part of the police. The cities are quite different in that regard."

Aberlott had flirted with danger and was becoming scared. Brownpony had crowded him into a corner and was pressing him for comment. The joking student was, after all, talking to a Prince of the Church.

"Actually, I think the sign said, 'Hanged for impudence to a prelate.' I beg your pardon, m'Lord."

"I don't have your pardon. Get your own." Brownpony smiled a consoling smile at him, then shook his head at Blacktooth. "Do you really think this man can be trusted?"

"Of course, Your Eminence."

"Everything you need for the journey is ready at the stable. Pick up your papers at the office. Wear mufti until you get to the colony. After Ulad is replaced, and the council is satisfied, your ties to the Secretariat continue only if Cardinal Nauwhat needs you. I am going east to meet Chür Høngan, Hultor Bråm, and a Jackrabbit sharf who is still a stranger to me. No telling how long I'll be away."

"Then what, m'Lord?"

"You are free until you hear from me or Cardinal Nauwhat. *Or your abbot.* Goodbye, Nimmy. God love you."

Blacktooth thought about it later. He had expected to be fired. What astonished the monk most was not his master's tolerance of impudence, or even his offhand approval of Aberlott, but that Aberlott had looked at this one cardinal among cardinals and felt safe in being impudent. The student usually had a good instinct for audience. Aberlott had picked up the aura of Brownpony's nonhostile personality; his personality showed through the red cloth. Blacktooth had seen it before, and knew the aura was deceptive. Brownpony wasted no hostility when he struck. He was never hostile, except for show. He seemed to be anticipating the *now* of things just a moment before they happened, and anticipating with the best expectations. When he expected the best, many people hated not giving it to him.

Others who gave him the worst usually regretted it, without much effort on the cardinal's part. He moved easily among a herd of people, but he seemed more a friendly undercover sheepdog than one of the sheep, even among cardinals most of whom had far outranked him before his consecration. He made himself a safe man, approachable from above or below, or from straight and level.

"What a pope he would make!" was Aberlott's only comment. He looked at Nimmy for confirmation, but the monk was pointedly silent.

## CHAPTER 14

Likewise those who have been sent on a journey shall not let the appointed Hours pass by, but shall say the Office by them-selves as well as they can, and not neglect to render the task of their service.

— *Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 50

THE WESTERN ROUTE TO NEW JERUSALEM FROM Valana was less clearly defined and proved more difficult to traverse with wheeled vehicles than was the Pope's road to the east, which Blacktooth and Wooshin had traveled with the cardinal in early spring. There were only four wagons, besides the pack mules, but their wheels had to be spoke-levered to help the animals at every draw, especially after a late summer rain. Annual rainfall was sparse, but this was the season for it, and flash floods often rushed through the desert's low places. The eastern road would have been so much easier and faster if the travelers had no reason to avoid other wayfarers. The reason was "security." While they forded a stream, one of the tarp-covered boxes fell from a wagon and broke open. Blacktooth watched Wooshin and Ri's guards scramble to retrieve rifles from the shallow water, while they furtively looked around as if for spies in the juniper scrub. Later, he was unable to avoid learning about handguns and ammunition in the mule packs. When he asked, Elkin told him it was a comparatively small shipment. The receptionist guard at SEEC seemed to be in charge of the expedition, and he let Nimmy know that he came from the covert wing. The party included several mule drivers, Wooshin, Aberlott, Ulad, and the six warriors from the party of late Cardinal Ri.

Ri's men were already skilled as weaponless warriors. By firelight they sparred with each other, and with Wooshin, who was hard-pressed to cope with the foreman among them, his junior by thirty years. They were speaking their own language among themselves, and Wooshin was laughing. "O Axe, please do remind them," Blacktooth called, "that they're supposed to be practicing either 'Mount or Church."

The Axe grunted at them, and they tried haltingly to continue their conversation in Churchspeak. Nimmy suddenly realized they had been talking about him, because he was an exception to what they saw to be the rule here, that monks don't fight, or can't, or won't. Whereas they themselves were Christians with vows, although one of them had a wife back home. When Wooshin explained this to Blacktooth, the monk was astonished.

Ri's guards were a puzzle to him at first. Wooshin had fallen right in with them, and they seemed to understand each other's language well enough when words were accompanied by frenetic gesticulation. On the third day, Blacktooth dared to remind Wooshin again that he was tasked with teaching Churchspeak to the "Yellow Guard," as they had begun to be called around Valana. Wooshin glowered at the reminder, but after a moment explained, not without embarrassment, that Cardinal Ri's men had been trying to convert him to Christianity.

The monk looked at him incredulously.

Axe laughed at his expression. "I don't think you want to hear that argument in Churchspeak. Have you forgotten that they were Cardinal Ri's men?"

"I assumed they were Christian, and I've heard them chanting, but—"

"But you wouldn't expect soldiers to be very religious?" Nimmy thought about it for a while. His mind caught a chilling glimpse of remembered warriors, his boyhood rapists, in action. "I suppose I'm prejudiced, Axe. The soldiers I've met are often pious, but I never met any warrior except you who seemed to have a spiritual dimension."

"Except me? Do I have a spiritual dimension, Nimmy?"

"You may laugh, but I've thought so. All I really know about you is what you want me to know. Isn't it so, Axe?"

"Well, where these men come from, all monks, even Christians, have a weaponless warrior tradition."

"They're not weaponless now! Are you saying they are monks?"

"Yes, I think you can call them monks. As for the weapons, Ri dispensed them from that rule, and our master extended the dispensation. The order they belong to is Asiatic, and it isn't recognized here. When either Cardinal Brownpony or the Pope understands that they do have religious vows, they will lose their freedom until the Church can decide what to do with them. They are not anxious to go home, but their vows are similar to yours. They want to be free to form a community, but they've been afraid to ask. That's why they want and need to learn Churchspeak as soon as possible. You don't need to nag us about that. I suggested to the cardinal they stay awhile at Leibowitz Abbey. There, they could wear their habits and learn your liturgy. Would they be welcome?"

"I am not the one to speak for Abbot Jarad Cardinal Kendemin." He fought bitterness for a moment, but went on: "You've read the Rule of Saint Benedict, Axe. The Brothers of Leibowitz still honor most of that rule, which means that they must offer hospitality to anybody who comes to them, as if he were Christ wandering in from the desert. But I'm not suggesting that Ri's men take advantage of that rule."

"No, of course you wouldn't want the abbot to know you suggested it by suggesting against it," Wooshin said sourly. "But you're right about their learning Churchspeak. I'll drill them more. If they go to Leibowitz Abbey, it will not be at your suggestion, but the cardinal's which he already made."

"All right. I hereby forget it, although I would like to know about their Order."

"They know that I taught you to fight a little, and they want to know if other monks of your Order would be allowed to learn weaponless combat, or would it be against rules?"

"Well, there is no rule, as long as it's for sport or exercise. We have occasional ball games outside the walls, those of us whose jobs don't involve physical labor." He laughed. "But if you can imagine getting the Lord Abbot's permission to train fighters!"

"I know. It's too bad. Their Order has an interesting tradition. If they are to remain there, they would like to form a community, or merge with one."

Later he confessed to Blacktooth, "You know, Nimmy, my people out on the coast were refugees from these Asian Christians several generations ago. Cardinal Ri was a super-Benefez in his own country."

These Christians were conquerors. My people were the losers, and crossed the ocean."

Nimmy looked at the executioner as if seeing him for the first time. "Mine were the losers too," he said. "We should be spiritual brothers."

A sharp glance from Axe told him this intimacy was getting too thick. He wheeled his mount around and rode back toward the guards and the wagon. Once again, Nimmy realized that Axe did not fully trust him since he had disobeyed the cardinal.

Wooshin had become strange to him again, but he knew the estrangement lay within himself. The news, conveyed by a possibly ironic Wooshin, that the Yellow Guard was trying to convert him to their Christianity—that news discomfited him. Why had he and his fellow monks ignored Wooshin's religion, if he had any? Axe had come to Mass habitually, but never received communion. His dedication and loyalty had a spiritual quality, as did his attitude toward death. He would have made a good monk, Nimmy thought. But the Albertian Order of Leibowitz was never devoted to the conversion of the heathen. That was why. It was against the rules. Monks were free to answer a guest's religious questions, but the Axe never asked any. Now these strange men wanted to bring him into their religious brotherhood. The Order of Leibowitz had missed its chance to have, besides its electric chair, a warrior monk and executioner.

Wooshin's new friends in the Yellow Guard had learned of his years as a headsman for the Hannegans, Filpeo Harq and his predecessor. Nimmy had heard them talking, understood very little of their mixed dialect except when they practiced Churchspeak, but could tell that the aliens were both sympathetic and amused, and he sensed that the Axe came away from the conversation both irritated and relieved. It seemed to Nimmy that Wooshin had succumbed to an attack of almost Christian guilt about his old job, and the warriors were apparently trying to cure him of it by conversion. The Axe obviously missed the cardinal as Blacktooth did; and the monk wondered who was now acting as Brownpony's bodyguard after the attempted assassination. Ri's men had all been loaned by the new Vicar Apostolic to SEEC's clandestine wing, once they had learned to communicate a little in Rockymount, but here they were: far from their new master, and as lost as Nimmy himself.

The monk tried to make religion his only concern again, at least for the duration of the trip, but the effort gradually failed, and the effect of the failure was that he became so irritable he went for three days without even attempting to pray, meditate, or read the canonical hours. His mind, affected by periods of heat exhaustion, kept reaching out to grasp at Jarad, Brownpony, Ædrea, Holy Madness, or the Pope, and to rehearse imaginary dialogues with them, to shake sense into them. Especially Ædrea. This was self-indulgence, self-absorption, vanity, and ego. Because he could not pacify his mind internally, he finally turned outward and tried to stay busy and available for conversation with even Aberlott.

The group of travelers had taken on an almost military structure of command under Elkin, with Wooshin and Ulad as lieutenants. By the route they were to take, there was danger neither from Texark agents nor from motherless Nomads, although drifting outlaws of every stripe occasionally wandered through the arid land, and there was always the possibility of hostile confrontation. The terrain was rougher than that which Blacktooth had encountered on his first visit to Valana. There was no fixed road; only passes through mountainous areas were clearly defined. The group carried conventional arms, besides those carried by pack mules and in the wagons, but they met no one except a wizened old man who joined them one night after sundown, having wandered in behind them from the direction of Valana. The advent of the old man was the occasion of an argument among those concerned with secrecy and security, but the old fellow seemed half dead, and he was headed toward New Jerusalem anyway. Ulad claimed that he had seen him before. "He's been to New Jerusalem," said the giant. "Magister Dion hired him once, so he knows about us."

"Hired him? For what?"

"He can make it rain, for silver."

"Is he any good?"

"It rained, but not much. Dion paid him, but not much."

"He knows the town, then, but does he know about our baggage?" Elkin wondered. "He's already seen us, so he must come with us. If he behaves himself, he's a guest. If he tries to leave, he's a prisoner,



until we get where we're going."

Nevertheless, the old man refused to join them at first, and might have been arrested and bound to one of the wagons if he had not changed his mind upon learning that Blacktooth was a monk of Saint Leibowitz, a fact that seemed to amuse him greatly. He teased the monk about not wearing a habit while still wearing his rosary around his waist. Nimmy tried to avoid conversation with the old man, who seemed to know more about Leibowitz Abbey than seemed probable. The ancient stranger, after a few attempts to talk, shrugged at the monk's reticence, perhaps attributing it to religious silence, but he continued to snipe at him occasionally as if to keep in practice.

He called himself a pilgrim but not a Christian. He wore tattered garments of hemp, coarsely woven, and he carried his belongings in a bag tied to the end of his staff. He protected his pate from the sun with a curiously embroidered skullcap which he called a "yarmulke." Although defensive and suspicious at first, he seemed harmless enough and became talkative after the first day. Nimmy could not believe that Brownpony's enemies would send such a decrepit fellow as a spy. Elkin seemed to agree, for besides allowing him to ride an extra mule, the security man put him on one of the wagons after he complained of being saddle sore, even though he had to sit on a crate of weapons.

He told them he was a Jew and a tentmaker among other things. He was obviously one of those wanderers who peddled his skills as a rainmaker in areas of low rainfall. This old Jew had several useful skills and thus several sources of income. For fifteen pios, he would pull a tooth; for eight, he would scrape the incrustation from the rest of your teeth and scrub them well with talc. Root canals were negotiable. He contracted as a rainmaker, and if he made no rain in a week, he got no pay beyond his week's room and board; if rain came, he received whatever the petitioners could, in his opinion, afford. His advice in every imaginable matter was freely given to whoever would listen to him, and sometimes imposed upon whoever would not.

Blacktooth tried to use the journey for privacy and silence, insofar as his wish to be polite survived its many trials. But the old Jew would not let him be, and he asked all sorts of questions about an Abbot Jerome, who, to the best of Nimmy's recollection, had died seventy years ago at an advanced age, and yet this old man claimed he had been Jerome's friend, Benjamin.

"You must be nearly a hundred years old," Nimmy said skeptically. "Or maybe even more."

"Hmm-hnn! I would have to be, wouldn't I?"

Claims to extraordinary longevity arose in the Valley of the Misborn, but the old pilgrim was not an obvious glep. Still, he had been admitted to the secret nation in the Suckamints, had been allowed to leave again, and was not going back. Magister Dion must have looked into his background. But if he was a spook himself, Ulad should know. Ulad, however, seemed to regard the old Jew as disreputable, at least as a rainmaker. That the Suckamint Mountains were a refuge for the misborn was widely known within the Church, but the nature of the heart of the colony as a nation of spooks was obscured by the fact that gleps like Shard and his family inhabited the surrounding foothills, not admitted to full citizenship, but protected by the well-armed central colony from outlaws, loose Nomads, and Texark agents. Wanderers usually shied away from the area, as they shied away from Misborn Valley, and those who did try to enter were killed or driven away.

"And what business would a monk of Saint Leibowitz have in New Babel," the old man asked. "Especially a monk in disgrace."

"Who told you that?" Nimmy looked at him sharply, surprised that gossip had already passed on to this total stranger. Who in the party knew of his status? Well, they all did. Wooshin, Elkin, Aberlott, everybody. Nevertheless, he was embarrassed that his private life was open knowledge.

"I am merely the bearer of a message from a cardinal to the community. Why do you call it New Babel?"

"Why do you call it New Jerusalem?"

"It is theirs to name, and they named it so. Where did you come from on your way to New Babel?"

"From Valana, the same as you."

"And what were you doing in Valana, praying for rain?"

"I went to see my old friend Amen Specklebird, but they would not let me in, and besides—he's not

the One."

"Which one is that?"

The old Jew shrugged. "Who knows?" was all that he said.

Ulad the giant, whom Blacktooth had first assessed as a dangerous brute and a lunatic, became almost a playful child during the expedition to the Suckamint Mountains. The ugly side of his character apparently arose from his initial mistrust of any human being except a genny, but the mistrust subsided as they all became better acquainted during the long ride south.

On the journey, Nimmy lost his temper once, but not with the old pilgrim. It was only Aberlott, thank God. But, then, he lost it again! with the Abbot Jarad Cardinal Kendemin, in absentia, and really in a daydream. There was something beautiful about the mental image of his own hands grasping Jarad's throat, thumbs against the windpipe, although he always stopped the strangulation before the old geezer lost consciousness. Evil could be lovely, just lovely. This he knew. It was hard to try to tell a confessor how good sin can feel; it made the priest angry, as if the penitent were trying to force him to enjoy such putrid blackguardy. He felt his mind was slipping away from reality of late, and Wooshin caught him muttering blasphemously to himself as they rode the trail. He almost started out of the saddle when Axe whacked him on the back to bring him out of it. So much had happened to him in so few months, and none of it seemed real, and sometimes he felt he was going mad. He daydreamed, when he should be praying, then swore at himself under his breath.

"Stay busy, Brother" was the Axe's advice.

Staying busy was not very hard. Making and breaking camp every day took time and work. The ideal day involved eleven hours of traveling through the pitiless lands in summer, then thirteen hours packing, unpacking, seeing to the animals, hunting, cooking, eating, cleaning up, mending, repairing, and finally sleeping. Eleven hours traveling, with luck. Most days it was only ten.

On the seventh day, Ulad, Wooshin, and Elkin conferred and decided that the train with its valuable cargo would be just as well protected without Blacktooth, Aberlott, Ulad, and Elkin, who could ride on ahead of the baggage and be in New Jerusalem in half the time. Wooshin and Ri's warriors would stay with the mule drivers to fight off any outlaws or desert drifters. The only question was about the safety of the party riding ahead, but Ulad and Elkin were soldiers, and Blacktooth had been taught to fight by Wooshin.

The old Jew was allowed to come with the advance riders, and so was Aberlott, for both were useless if a need arose to defend the ordnance against seizure by enemies or outlaws. Aberlott attributed Blacktooth's recent black moods to madness. "I think you're going crazy," the student said to him the first morning as they emerged from their bedrolls. "You talked all night in your sleep, although you won't talk to anybody else by daylight."

"What did I talk about?"

"A girl with a very small hole."

"What girl?"

"One with a very small hole. You called it a hole in the universe. You're going crazy, Nimmy."

"Holes? Did I call you an asshole, perhaps?" But he saw that Aberlott was serious, and he added, "Well, I was dreaming. But maybe I am going a little crazy. I've failed at two jobs. I guess I need somebody to tell me what to do. I don't know how to get along without an uncle or an abbot or a cardinal."

"Or a pope? Once you mentioned Amen Specklebird in your sleep."

At last the advance party of five came to the western slopes of the Suckamint Mountains. Elkin was convinced they had gained three days on the remainder of the party with the pack mules and wagons. The slopes were steeper here than on the east side of the range near Shard's place, and they had hardly begun to climb before a volley of arrows and stones struck the ground only a few paces ahead. They stopped immediately. Three gleps with bows and one with a musket stood atop the cliff, glaring down at them in the noonday sun. Ulad swore blasphemies at them and identified himself and their mission. The gleps withdrew.

"Scarecrow Alley," the old Jew scoffed. "They would be better off and safer back home in the

Valley."

"Perhaps. There are people in the Valley who believe Christ will come again as one of them," Ulad told them as they rode up the rocky trail.

"You mean he will be born as one of them?" Blacktooth asked.

"Yes."

"But that's not the way it's supposed to happen," said Aberlott. "He will be seen coming on the clouds."

"But he has to be born again before he is seen coming."

"That's not what it says."

"Does it say otherwise?"

"I guess not."

Blacktooth remained silent. The old Jew laughed scornfully at them all.

When they came to a small plateau, Elkin asked Ulad how many hours' journey remained until they reached the heart of the community.

"At least eight hours," the giant said.

The road leading into the mountains at that place was flanked by a deep ravine on the north and on the south by a few flat acres at the foot of a mesa. As darkness was approaching, Elkin decided to make camp here, a decision which Ulad resisted first by describing the land as haunted, then as populated by cougars. A vote was taken, and the giant was overruled.

"Just stay away from those woods, then," Ulad insisted.

They passed a peaceful night, with each man taking his turn at being awake to keep the fire burning. There were neither cougars nor ghosts. It fell to Blacktooth to take the last shift, and the sky became luminous with dawn as the shift ended.

Before waking the others, he descended into the wooded ravine for a bucket of water. Beyond the trees, he found himself on a beach in a boneyard. There was a ten-pace width of sand beside the creek where floodwaters visited the place every spring, and the sand was full of small human bones washed here from some upstream disposal site. New Jerusalem produced its share of monsters, then, and its claim of returning such children to the Watchitah Nation was a lie. Not all the bones were those of newborns. One half-buried skull seemed that of a child of five. Dead kids, a blight inherited from the Great Civilization. There were places like that on the Plains. Nimmy was not shocked, but decided against filling his bucket. There was still drinking water in the canteens. Shaving and washing could wait.

Halfway up the slope, he met somebody coming down very fast. Ulad skidded to a stop, spraying the monk with dirt and gravel.

"What were you doing down there?" he demanded.

"Nothing, as it turns out." Nimmy patted the empty bucket. Ulad grabbed his arm.

"There was an epidemic two years ago," he said. "Many children died."

"I understand," Nimmy said evenly and managed to detach his arm from the other's grip. Ulad let him go. What Nimmy understood was that communities all over the continent fell victim to such epidemics every few years. Often all the victims died in the same week, and all were incredibly glep or worse. When Nimmy later mentioned it to the old Jew, the pilgrim named the epidemic disease "Genny Passover."

"So much for what you said about New Jerusalem and its policy of returning gleps to the Valley," said Aberlott.

Blacktooth shrugged. What he knew of New Jerusalem, he had heard from Ædrea. Dead babies downstream of a village was more of a rule than an exception. That was just it. New Jerusalem was supposed to be the exception.

The climb into the mountains carried them into long U-turns around the sides of a valley or a mountain, and in places the trail was obscured by landslides which the drivers of the mule train would have to remove to gain passage. Great conifers rose above them on the mountainsides. Soon there were new signs of habitation, but the people who came out to eye the travelers were apparently normal. The

few glep families lived on the periphery of the sprawling colony, as Shard and Tempus lived on the eastern slope of the same mountain range. But here there were real farms, although the guardian gleps inhabited the less fertile land. The mountain peaks attracted rain and snow, and the streams flowed continuously after the thaw. In the passes and valleys, beside the streams grew orchards of apples, cherries, pears, and peaches. The crops were ripe now in late summer, and peddlers hawked their produce from donkey carts parked in the community centers, of which there were several. Whole carcasses of beef, mutton, and venison were hung from poles and were cut to order for women shopping. Dusty men with faces darkened by soot and blasting powder walked home from the mines in the late afternoon.

The capitol, so called, was a three-story building of stone and mortar with, on the ground floor, a kitchen and communal dining hall divided into a large room for dirty miners and a smaller one for government workers and guests. The second floor, Nimmy was told, housed Mayor Dion's office and a council room where a small body of legislators met weekly to approve or disapprove administrative decisions. There were only a dozen or so buildings in the center of town, while residences and barns—mostly log structures built on stone foundations—were scattered throughout the mountains.

Blacktooth's perception of the country was colored by what Ædrea had told him, but the baby boneyard had aroused his suspicions. He was relieved when Ulad, who had ridden ahead into the heart of the community, rejoined them to say that Mayor Dion was away in another part of the mountains, and would not return until the next afternoon. Aberlott's meeting with the family of Jæsis was also postponed until tomorrow. He, with Blacktooth, Elkin, and the old Jew, would spend the night in a guesthouse, which already housed one visitor from outside the colony, who came out to meet them with a wide smile. Blacktooth, who first gasped in surprise, knelt to kiss the ring of Chuntar Cardinal Hadala, Vicar Apostolic to the Watchitah Nation.

"And how is Cardinal Brownpony?" asked the Bishop of the Misborn.

"Well when I saw him last, Your Eminence. I believe he is with Chür Høngan and the other Nomad leaders on the Plains."

"Yes, I knew of his plans. I suppose you are quite surprised that I am here?"

"Yes, but I should have realized that you would have a special relationship with New Jerusalem, which was colonized from your diocese."

"Vicariate," Hadala corrected him. "Well, you have come just in time to unpack and wash up for dinner. I'll see you then."

They followed Ulad to their assigned quarters. Hadala's presence reawakened Nimmy's shame for his disobedience to his own cardinal, but he weighed it against his recent perception of Brownpony as subverting the papacy, as disloyal to Papa Specklebird, and if not the author of the conspiracy then a promoter of an earlier plan. The plan was obviously to assure the Valanan Church some military power independent of Nomad alliances. Blacktooth decided nothing was necessarily wrong with this, except that the plan involved concealment from the Pope. Would Amen Specklebird necessarily disapprove the ownership by the Church of arms? Probably, was Nimmy's guess. Was it his duty to tell? He tried to think of a way to determine whether Chuntar Cardinal Hadala was already privy to the secret, but decided he had only to watch the cardinal carefully when Axe and the Yellow Guard arrived with the weapons.

That night at dinner, however, the cardinal invited Ulad and Elkin to share his table, well across the room from where Blacktooth, Aberlott, and the old Jew dined with several clerks from Mayor Dion's office. Watching the cardinal carefully would be a waste of time. That he used dinner for consultations with Ulad and SEEC's covert agent told him enough. He decided to enjoy the venison, potatoes, and fresh fruit, while trying to understand the colony better by listening to Aberlott banter with the clerks. He learned little that he did not know. They described how New Jerusalem had grown by immigration from the Valley.

Watchit-Ol'zarkia, the name claimed by the mountainous region which, north of Texark, had grown into a ghetto nation from the original Valley of the Misborn, was surrounded by frontier guards of both Church and State, but the border was a sieve by night for escapees traveling without baggage, and

escape by spooks was commonplace. Some escapes were mere escapades, and the fugitives returned to their homes after a few days or weeks abroad, and of course they usually came back richer than they left. Men left their mountain homes to steal or work at temporary jobs in the city. Women left for the same reasons, but also sometimes to get pregnant by farmboys with supposedly healthy genes. However, some escapees never came back, and while there were a few small colonies of spooks in the east, the isolation of New Jerusalem in the Suckamint Range, its resources and natural defenses, made it the largest congregation of genetically dubious persons outside the Valley, and most appealing as a sanctuary for permanent fugitives. Especially in the years since the conquest, the population had grown rapidly because under imperial dominance the Jackrabbit Horde was no longer a threat to travelers through the Province, and it was only necessary to evade Texark outposts and local militia.

"We can defend our mountains," the chief clerk explained after dinner, when he walked Blacktooth back to his quarters, "but against Texark we have no offensive weapon except terror. Spooks become good at infiltration. We have people in the army and the Church in Texark. We have people in Valana as well as New Rome. If they abuse our people in Watchitah, we respond with terror."

Nimmy paused and looked around. No one was observing or listening, and the chief clerk seemed more inclined to talk outside the dining hall.

"Was it your men who tried to kill the cardinal and me?" the monk asked.

The official sighed. "I cannot be sure. The order did not come from here. Our people denied it, naturally. Rational men sometimes go crazy under cover.

"Jæsis was to become a priest, before he failed at the university. We have others. Terror is possible. When the time comes, we may use it, although the Church will condemn us, including our friend Brownpony, for all I know. I know no more about Cardinal Brownpony's plans than you do. Cardinal Hadala probably knows, but it may be that there is no long-range plan. I have watched Magister Dion play chess with your cardinal when Dion was in Valana. He won as many games as he lost. He looks ahead a few moves, but there can be no long-range plan in chess. He piles up arms here, for us and for others. We can't know who the others are, but we presume there will be Nomads. He makes alliances with all nations who fear Texark. He has allies east of the Great River and south of the Brave River. He seems to me like a man playing for territory in chess. He does not take any pieces yet. He piles up power."

Nimmy found the clerk's openness surprising. Perhaps Brownpony was not as well liked here as he had supposed. The colony had its agenda, and Brownpony had his own. The monk changed the subject: "Can you tell me the whereabouts of your former agent to Valana?"

"And who would that be?"

"Her name is Ædrea, daughter of Shard."

The clerk opened his mouth, then snapped it closed, frowned at Blacktooth, and replied in a hesitant voice, "I have said too much. Here are your quarters. I have to go now." He turned on his heels and walked back toward the stone building.

That night Blacktooth dreamed he was back at the monastery. No one looked at or spoke to him, and he wondered if this were part of excommunication, this being shunned. But "shunned" was not quite the word for it. He stood directly in Prior Olshuen's path, head slightly bowed, waiting. When the prior's sandals advanced rapidly into his vision, he leaped aside to evade a collision. Olshuen would have walked right into him. Or through him, as if he were a ghost. He went outside to the cemetery and stood by the open grave.

It was the same open grave, and in the same place, as when he left in early spring. There was always an open grave at the Monastery of Saint Leibowitz in the Desert, even if no one was ill. No one had died, then, since the saintly Brother Mulestar. It still awaited its next occupant. The lip of the hole was protected by thatch all around, pointing inward so that drops of rain would follow the straws and drip into the hole instead of eroding the lip. When necessary, a monk would descend into the grave with a shovel and remove any earth which had fallen since the last cleaning. There were seven penitential

occasions every year when the Brothers formed a procession that led to the grave. There they stood looking down for some time while the sun moved westward into the shadows of that yellowish adobe hole. A not-thing was that hole, like the soul itself, a not-thing at the center of the all. Blacktooth did not like this hole or this ceremony of meditation, although some Brothers found it to leave the mind wonderfully focused for at least the rest of that day.

Now the straw thatch appeared damp. As he watched, the grave stopped looking like a grave. As he stared, he saw that the straw was pubic straw, and the hole was not a grave. He shook his head, and, thinking of Ædrea, started to go see the abbot, to tell him that the grave was now a cunt, but then he heard a baby crying. There was a baby in the hole, and he went to look. It was covered with patches of fur, and had no hands: obviously misborn. A genny. His own son?

He heard himself making strangling sounds, then felt a sharp slap on the back of his neck. He came out of the dream-trance and Aberlott was sitting beside him. The student had stayed quite aware of the change in Blacktooth's state of mind and body since the departure from Valana. His daylight fantasies had begun to acquire the quality of nightmare. "The Devil is on my back," Nimmy said.

Blacktooth's sense that the world is a weird place was stirred again when he met a Nomad, Önmü Kun, who returned with Mayor Dion and his party the following day. It was not until he spoke Ol'zark with an accent that Nimmy recognized him as a Nomad. That he was Jackrabbit was apparent from his clothing, which was cloth, his legs, which were not bowed by growing up in the saddle, and his skin color, which was not much burned by the sun. Because of diet, the present generation of Jackrabbit Nomads were shorter than both their ancestors and the wild Nomads of today. It was obvious Kun was present as an unofficial spokesman for his horde to this *Parva Civitas* of New Jerusalem, which was evidently becoming an arsenal for all the children of Empty Sky and the Wild Horse Woman. Nimmy approached him and spoke Nomadic, shifting to a Southern dialect. Kun grinned broadly and they exchanged pleasantries and bits of life histories. They discussed the meeting on the Plains of the Weejus and Bear Spirit people from all the hordes, and Nimmy surprised and delighted him with the news that Cardinal Brownpony was now Vicar Apostolic to the Plains, including the south, pervaded as it was by clergy from Texark. When the monk asked Önmü Kun about his business in New Jerusalem, the monk was gruffly told to mind his own. The Nomad shrugged off his apologies.

"Perhaps your position as the cardinal's former secretary entitles you to ask, but I am unable to answer." To soften the rejection, he then told a dirty Jackrabbit joke about a Weejus woman, the Bishop of Texark, and a long-sought erection.

Aberlott was sent to see the family of Jæsis, and Blacktooth did not see him again in New Jerusalem. No one would talk to him about Ædrea, or even admit an acquaintance with her. As for the Mayor, he did not send for the monk until the day after the party of warriors arrived with mules, wagons, and guns, and a transaction was completed between Elkin and the *Civitas*. Every night the monk dreamed wild dreams about the blond and blue-eyed imp with an impassable gateway. The dreams frightened him.

The dreams also prepared him for the first meeting with Mayor Dion, who came directly to the point. "We know why you are here, Brother St. George," he said gently. "We took insult when the Secretary refused to deal with the agents we designated. We suspected that the killing of our Jæsis was a betrayal, too. But then we were persuaded by Shard's Ædrea that we had been mistaken. She took full responsibility. You need not explain or apologize. A new representative will hereafter contact the Secretariat for us. You will meet him later today. Now do you have any other messages for us?"

Blacktooth looked down for a moment, then up into Dion's gray eyes. "Only my own apology, Magister. Ædrea is not at fault. The fault was mine. Even the cardinal knows that. Ædrea is innocent. Where is she, and may I see her?"

The gray eyes watched him closely. Finally the Magister said, "I must tell you that Shard's Ædrea is dead." He watched the monk again for a moment, then beckoned a guard. "You! Don't let him fall!" then said to another, "Get the monk some brandy, the peach is strongest."

Blacktooth lowered his face into his hands. "How did she die?" he asked at last.

"There was a miscarriage. Something went wrong. As you know, they live way down by the Pope's highway, and by the time our physician got there, she had lost too much blood. So I am told."

The Magister briefly watched his grief, then quietly left the room, after whispering to Elkin, "We'll meet again here tomorrow."

When he had gone through all the motions, and his duties as an emissary were ended, Blacktooth went to confession at the local Church, and fasted for three days in constant prayer for his love and her lost child. To cherish grief was as bad as to cherish anything: lust, triumph, or, as Specklebird would say, as bad as cherishing Jesus. He then spent several days in the city's library. When grief overwhelmed him, he paused in his study of the history of the colony, and studied the grief, pressing it firmly down into his abdomen from the diaphragm, then continued to peruse some of the private correspondence between early colonists and their relatives in the Watchitah Nation. He was looking for anything that would tell him about Shard's people, or their ancestors. Evidently, they were latecomers, as they claimed to be, and of no historical interest to the beautiful inhabitants of these mountains, bristling with guns, and surrounded by their ugly first line of defense. Why did not the glep Helots of those scarecrow alleys rebel against the well-armed Spartan spooks? Perhaps because those Spartans were relatives of men like Shard, and Shard was proud of his Ædrea. There was segregation here, but no visible repression. Only the glep's genes were unwanted.

He found out that the penalty for sexual union between a citizen of the Res Publica Jerusalem Nova and a glep was death for the citizen and the offspring, if any. There were people in New Jerusalem with special talents. Marriages were made by contract between families, and ratified by the Magisterium. People were bred like animals, but people throughout recorded history had bred not only slaves, but sons and daughters like animals. The only thing new here was the criteria by which the genetic potential of such unions was judged, whereas the historical matchmaker was usually interested in combinations of wealth. Nimmy felt vaguely that the criteria were not very different from what the Mayor of Texark would have chosen. But here you grew up a healthy citizen, with special talents, or went to the boneyard of infants, the one they had passed the morning after that night in the foothills. Maybe some glep children of citizens were returned to the Watchitah Nation, as Ædrea had said, but it was a long dangerous trip back to the Valley.

Having given much thought to his doubtful future, he decided that upon completion of his rather unimportant mission here, he would return to the world through Leibowitz Abbey because Ri's yellow monastic warriors wanted to go there, while Wooshin himself had been ordered back to Valana. Nimmy had his own reasons for going as a guide for the warriors. First, he suspected Brownpony had sent him here to get rid of him, and he no longer trusted Cardinals Brownpony, Nauwhat, and Hadala. He wanted to stay clear of any conspiracy, and a conspiracy was anything to which Pope Amen was not privy. His conscience and his relations with God were in need of repair as well. He wanted to confess to Jarad, and Jarad owed him a hearing. He would not be thrown out, but he knew he would not be welcome to stay beyond necessity. He intended that nobody think he was there as a suppliant, but Jarad would try to make him feel like one.

When Blacktooth and the party of warriors were packing gear and saddling horses for the trip, they were joined by Önmü Kun, who was driving a wagon, obviously loaded with arms.

"You can't take that to the abbey," Nimmy told him.

"Who said I'm going to the abbey?" said the Jackrabbit Nomad, and followed the party of riders eastward. The old Jew who called himself Benjamin followed them for a short distance, but changed his mind. "Tell the abbot I shall visit him before winter."

Nimmy promised to deliver the message.

He badly wanted to visit Arch Hollow on the way out of the mountains, despite the Mayor's warning, but as soon as Shard saw him, he ran for a gun. The guards fired a warning shot over Shard's head; then one of them popped the rump of Blacktooth's mount with his crop, and yelled, pointing a direction of retreat. They galloped past the homestead and down the road which led east to the papal highway. Nimmy was not allowed to weep at her grave.

As soon as they came to the Pope's Highway, the Jackrabbit Nomad bade Blacktooth farewell, and announced his intention to leave the trail and travel cross-country to the southeast. This would take him into a kind of no-man's-land where the border of the imperial province was in dispute.

"Aren't you worried about Texark agents?" Nimmy asked.

"I'll be meeting my customers tonight," Önmü Kun said with a grin. "They will then go home, and I back to New Jerusalem."

They parted after exchanging the Jackrabbit peace sign. Nimmy decided that Kun was simply a gunrunner for his captive horde. But he had seen the weapons in the wagon and noticed that they were not of the most advanced design—a precaution against their possible seizure by imperial forces.

On the trip to the abbey, the Yellow Guard's Foreman, whose name was Jing-U-Wan, cautiously questioned Blacktooth about the Order of Leibowitz, and then explained his own.

"The Order of Saint Peter's Sword has two traditions. One is purely Christian. Our creed is not much different from yours. Our canonical prayers are not identical, but quite similar. We use less from the Psalms, and there is more silent meditation. In our work, people expected us to do what non-Christian monks had always done in that country. Outside the chapter house we work in the fields and we beg only when we travel. We maintain a weaponless warrior tradition, because the Tanter's monks had always done so. It was a necessity. In our history, the unarmed victim of a robbery was considered negligent for going about without a gun, and he had to pay for any police action against the robber. Unarmed monks had to be skillful with feet and fist."

"But you carry arms now."

"The rule is dispensed when a monk's job requires it. When the master died, we talked about going unarmed, but the master is at the edge of war."

It took Blacktooth a moment to realize that second master the man referred to was Cardinal Brownpony. "What makes you say he is at the edge of war?" he asked.

The man paused. Being cautious. "In a sense, we are always at war." It was a generality to get rid of the subject.

Nimmy did not pursue it.

He had dreamed about the open grave at the abbey, and it was the first place they visited after exchanging greetings with the gatekeeper, because the gatekeeper pointed them toward it without breaking his silence. To Nimmy's surprise, the open grave had been moved. The old one was recently filled, and a new wooden cross bore the name of the grave's occupant:

HIC JACET JARADUS CARDINALIS KENDEMIN, ABBAS. The date of death was two weeks old.

"Brother St. George," a familiar voice called out to him.

He turned to see Prior Olshuen approaching. He was looking with astonishment at the Yellow Guard, which bristled with swords. The prior was in mourning. The whole monastery was in mourning. Blacktooth went to the chapel to pray sterile prayers for his mistakes, but it felt like self-indulgence. After a while, he went with mounting dread to seek a conference with the prior.

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*It was a truly massive hemorrhage. While offering Mass on a Wednesday morning, Abbot Jarad, having consecrated the bread and the wine, turned to his community in choir and began to say the "Ecce agnus dei" when he turned white, emitted a strangled yowl, and fell down the sanctuary steps with a great crash and a ringing of brass chalice and paten on the stone floor. "Body and blood all over the pavement," said Brother Wren. The Cardinal Abbot of Saint Leibowitz died without regaining consciousness.*

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## CHAPTER 15

And let the Abbot be sure that any lack of  
profit the master of the house may find in 1  
the sheep will be laid to the blame of the  
shepherd.

—*Saint Benedict's Rule*. Chapter 2

Y THE TIME NEWS OF ABBOT JARAD'S DEATH reached Valana from the Texark telegraph terminal, the Holy See and most of the Curia had already departed in the direction of New Rome, while Cardinal Brownpony had taken the more northerly route to the sacred meeting place for the Weejus and Bear Spirit shamans. The message went first, of course, to the Sacred Congregation for Religious, whose presiding cardinal had gone with the Pope. His vicar promptly notified SEEC and the Secretariat of State. Cardinal Nauwhat at SEEC was one of the few cardinals who lingered in Valana, and he promptly sent messengers to chase after Brownpony and the Pope, but they had been gone for some days and would not be easy to find on trackless grasslands. Had Nauwhat sent the message with a Nomad skilled in distance signaling, it might have arrived before those to whom it was addressed, but Nauwhat had not inherited Brownpony's Nomad connections with Brownpony's office, and the messengers would have to wander for a time.

The 6th of September 3244 was a Tuesday. The moon was five days beyond first quarter, and arose well before sundown. The Wild-dog's lookouts who watched from the boundaries of the settlement at the "Navel of the World," the breeding pit of the *Høngin Føjæ Vurn*, saw at last a tiny plume of dust on the horizon. A lone rider waved his arms in a Nomad signal meaning "Church," and repeated it until he knew he had been seen, and was therefore recognized as the expected guest from Valana. But alone?

Father Ombroz was astonished, for he had expected the cardinal to be accompanied by his young secretary and at least one familiar bodyguard. He immediately sent for Oxsho, his young acolyte and most recent student, a warrior who was remotely related to Chür Høngan, and who had served at the priest's Masses for three years now.

"I can't go to meet him, because of the funeral," he told the young man. "I want you to stop him before he gets much closer, and warn him of the news. Treat him as you would treat a great uncle, with utmost respect. But you must tell him things he will not want to hear. Hurry, before he gets too close to camp. Try to stay on low ground, or behind a rise. Enemies will be watching. Remember to mention what is said of his mother, whether it is true or not."

"Certainly, Father," said Oxsho, and immediately rode out of the encampment. The youth was as surprised as his master to see that the new Vicar Apostolic had come alone, with a bedroll and a musket, wearing only a red skullcap—easily concealable—to distinguish himself from any other citizen trespassing on Nomad land. The young acolyte had too many things to say to give the cardinal an opening through an exchange of pleasantries. Still staring straight at Brownpony's apostolic ring after kissing it, he began listing the items in the Wilddog news. He seemed ill at ease, and did not directly meet the cardinal's curious gaze.

"Bearcub's father died last night. The sharf is dead. The Mare here is a widow again. The funeral is tonight. It was a ritual death.' His glance flickered up to Brownpony's face to make sure he understood the word "ritual" in this context. A slight wince from the cardinal revealed his comprehension. "But there was much argument among the Bear Spirit and the Weejus. The slaughtering festival would be on Friday, when the moon is full."

"Would be? What does that mean?"

"They postponed it. It lasts several days, and it was about to begin. A postponement of so holy a

celebration is without precedent, but it was inappropriate for the Great Uncle to be, uh, to *die*, while cattle are being slaughtered. And, uh, you know, the feast."

"I see. Go on."

"The funeral will be tonight. Much has happened, m'Lord. A representative from the Church in Texark is here: Monsignor Sanual. An observer from Benefez, but also a spokesman. He ordered Father Ombroz on behalf of the Archbishop to return to his order in New Rome ..."

Brownpony laughed. "I can imagine how the good father responded. Well, as his new Vicar Apostolic, I shall order him to stay. I am very sorry to know that Granduncle Brokenfoot is dead. Your teacher gave him the last sacrament, of course?"

Ombroz's acolyte stared at him for a moment, as if not comprehending, and resumed his list. "The Lord Chür Høngan thinks he has located your mother. He said to tell you she is on her way to this place. He cannot be sure. For that and various other reasons, the desire of Kindly Light, the Grasshopper sharf, to see you spend the night in the devil-woman's breeding pit is probably going to be frustrated. His arrogance does not sit well with the Weejus."

"I may very well spend a night there anyway, whether Hultor Bråm wants it or not."

The young Nomad seemed alarmed. "It is a terrible place, m'Lord. Many have died there."

"Men do die, everywhere."

"She slays anyone she rejects."

"Are you not a Christian?"

"Yes, but she is not!"

"Perhaps I can convert her."

Oxsho showed great consternation. "The *Høngin Fujæ Vurn*—"

Brownpony cut him off. "Of course I would not try. But how else would I prove my right to rule over your Churches? Monsignor Sanual may join me, if he pleases."

The young Nomad giggled. "I think he would wet his cassock."

"Tell me, what makes Holy Madness think my mother is alive?"

"I know only what Father Ombroz said—that the Sisters who raised you spoke only the Jackrabbit dialect, and wrongly translated her family name."

"So I am perhaps not a *brown pony*?"

"There is a Wilddog family name that means a 'sorrel colt.' But in Jackrabbit—" He shrugged.

"What do you know about her?"

"Only gossip, m'Lord. She has royal blood, but her small family is neither wealthy nor distinguished. She is old enough to be your mother, but she has never married. She lives with another woman as husband, and is said to hate men. Perhaps I should not tell you this. But it is not an uncommon thing among us."

Ombroz met them at the edge of camp, his shaved pate shining in the sun. It was dotted with scars where skin tumors had been removed. Looking at him, the cardinal realized that his name in Wild-dog sounded a lot like "shaved bear," although the priest claimed he used the razor to mark himself as different from the typical shaman. When the cardinal told him that Amen Specklebird had canceled his suspension from the Order of Saint Ignatz, and was considering his appointment as Father General of the Order, Ombroz laughed sadly.

"That will carry as much weight in New Rome as your recent promotion, m'Lord."

"Well, yes, but the Pope must assert all of his rights and prerogatives as if no one doubted the legitimacy of his election. He must act the Pope in every way."

"I understand that, but of course the Order will ignore my reinstatement. What about you, Eminence?"

"Well, at the very least, I shall invest you as a pastor of a Church in my Vicariate."

Ombroz laughed again. "My Church is in my saddlebags. Your couriers bring my wafers and my wine along with my mail."

"Even in saddlebags, a wandering Church needs a name."

"It has a name. Our Lady of the Desert."

Brownpony smiled. "The same name as the Pope's old Order? *Ordo Dominae Desertarum*. Very well, and you would no doubt be happier if you changed orders?"

"If His Holiness consents. The Order of Saint Ignatz has been disloyal to the popes of the exile, and they haven't made a move to recognize Pope Amen. I am on their list of their God's enemies. So if His Holiness permits it?"

"Why not? He'll agree, I'm sure." The cardinal looked toward the crowded area. "Now, what's going on? Where is Holy Madness?"

"He is in mourning. As you know, Your Eminence has arrived just in time for his father's funeral."

"His death was expected, was it not?"

"Yes, even planned."

"Human sacrifice again?"

"It was a ritual killing, yes, but I prefer to think of it as euthanasia in his case. Still forbidden to Catholics, of course."

"Did Chür Høngan assent to this?"

"No, he was excluded by the Bear Spirit shamans, because of his religion."

"A religion his father shared."

"Brokenfoot was out of his mind. He did not understand."

"They are not going to—"

"Honor him? I'm afraid so. Tonight."

"I wish I had come a day later."

"I am amazed that you came alone! Where is Brother Blacktooth? Where is Wooshin and the Yellow Guard?"

"In New Jerusalem."

"With the guns?"

"With the guns. You must know that the Pope is crossing the Plains to the south of us, probably camped for the night by now."

"I know. I hope they let him pass. Eminence, there is a legate from Texark here. From Benefez. I would say you have arrived just in time."

"Your young man told me. Who is Monsignor Sanual, and what does he want?"

"He is simply here to meet with the Bear Spirit, the Weejus, and the sharfs. Benefez has never condescended to this before. I wonder if he'll be fool enough to proselytize. I dare say the Grasshopper sharf would have killed him as a spy, if he had tried to attend a meeting in the Grasshopper realm. But he is a guest of Chür Høngan's bereaved family. I counseled Bearcub to play host to the fellow, because otherwise the Jackrabbit delegates would have been forced to accommodate him."

"And thus either make him seem their protector or their ally. Very good, my friend. This will work out better than you could have known."

"No, I knew that all the Jackrabbit Churches in the Province have been made subject to you. *If* you can win them over."

"I cannot take the Churches or their pastors by force, but perhaps I can take their congregations away from them—with the help of enough priests loyal to the Pope. Of course, the priests have to speak Jackrabbit."

"There are many in the Province already, m'Lord, and they are just the ones who will be loyal to the Holy Father, even though they were taught by the Archbishop of Texark. The Nomadic-speaking priests are mostly converted Nomads. They embraced the Mayor's uncle's religion, but not the Mayor or his uncle."

"I'm glad to hear you affirm what I thought was true."

"I also know about Kindly Light's threat to have you atone to the Wild Mare Woman by spending the night in the Navel of the World, as they call it. Hultor Bråm will never be nominated, and he can't

make you do it. However, the Bearcub and I have hatched a plan. May I tell you now, or later?"

"Later, please. We are being observed, are we not?"

"Yes, and it's a mistake not to be seen laughing together more than speaking seriously like this. Let me take you to the leading grandmothers and their spouses. Or do you need rest first?"

"Rest, please. And a bath, if that is possible."

The cardinal slept for a few hours. When he awoke, it was dark except for the flicker of many fires. The Nomads were already celebrating the royal funeral, and there was chanting and dancing. He could smell the cooked sacrament even from inside his tent. When he came out into the firelight he was immediately joined by Oxsho, who pointed and said, "There's your Father Ombroz."

"Mine?" Brownpony eyed him curiously. "Holy Madness told me you were baptized. Is he not your pastor?"

Sheepish, the warrior shrugged. "Sometimes, but he shaves."

"It sets him apart. It saves wearing his collar backward."

"Bear Spirit men do not shave, but sometimes he acts as a Bear Spirit man, as right now. I like him, as we all do, but I do not understand him very well. You want to talk to him now?"

"I should, but I hesitate to interrupt his, uh, meal. He seems to be, if you know the word, zonked."

"He has been smoking Nebraska *keneb* with the others." Brownpony approached him. The unfrocked old priest of the Ignatz Order, whom Amen wanted to be its Father General, sat there on a heap of dried cow hides and gnawed with his good front teeth at the well-roasted remains of a human hand. He dropped the hand back in the bowl as Brownpony approached, but looked up at the cardinal brightly and without shame. Oxsho hung behind. Brownpony could see that he was not drunk but in an extraordinary state of mind from the Nomad sacramental mixture of potions he had consumed. After participating in tribal rites, he seemed a changed man to the cardinal, but Ombroz smiled at him lovingly. Brownpony met his smile with a gaze that seemed to come from a thousand miles away. I do *not know this man, this old friend*.

Ombroz was first to break the silence. "The old sharf willed me his right hand—an honor!—and an insult to refuse."

The Vicar Apostolic remained silent, watching him.

"Sometimes," Ombroz said, picking up the gristly hand of Granduncle Brokenfoot, "I take a piece of bread and consecrate it as the true body of Christ. And sometimes I take the true body of Christ and consecrate it as a piece of bread. Do you understand?"

"Ahh!" It was a surprised grunt from Oxsho. Brownpony looked at him curiously. Oxsho was smiling slightly, as if he *did* suddenly understand.

The cardinal, still from a thousand miles away, said, "You really do wish to join the Pope's old Order, Father?"

Ombroz e'Laiden, not so far gone as to miss the hint of sarcasm, answered, "Tell His Holiness that illness forces me to remain as I am, m'Lord. I cannot return to my Order, but I am too old to change."

"Very well. I'll tell him." Brownpony turned and walked away. Oxsho hesitated, and patted the old priest's shoulder before following. Ombroz grinned at the young man, and resumed his sacramental meal. Oxsho followed Brownpony.

"So much for the Order of Saint Ignatz," said the cardinal.

"Does it disappoint you that he is one of us now?" asked the warrior.

"No, I'm sorry for Ombroz e'Laiden, the man."

"Because he has become a Nomad himself?"

"No, but outside the Church there is no salvation," murmured the cardinal, quoting an ancient claim. The answer seemed to puzzle Oxsho; he had heard of the cardinal from Ombroz, who admired and called him liberal. It was an uncharacteristic remark for such a man to make. But he was a priest now, and a bishop too.

"M'Lord, who is to say who stands outside the Church?"

"Why, the Pope says, and the law itself says, Oxsho."

"Does not God decide?"

"Father Ombroz is an enlightened man," said Holy Madness, who had overtaken them. Both of them looked at him strangely, waiting for Høngan to continue, but he only yawned, shook his head. "The woman who may be your mother has come, m'Lord."

Brownpony looked at the moon and changed the subject. "The Pope is taking a walk tonight. He always walks under a bright moon and sings to the Virgin, her sister. The Pope that would give the Church away to the poor, if Nauwhat and I would let him." My God, what are we going to do?

"Your Eminence, do you not want to see the woman? She is of royal blood, a distant cousin of mine. Which would make you my cousin too." He laughed, perhaps with a trace of bitterness.

"The family name is Urdon Go, not Avdek Gole," he said, after the cardinal's silence. "Not a brown pony, but a sorrel colt."

"Oxsho told me. But my God!" Brownpony whispered, his face draining. "After all these years. The Sisters spoke Jackrabbit, of course."

"Your mother, if that's what she is, is there. She is that old woman sitting on the blankets by the door of the hogan there. I would be very careful. She can be as violent as the *Nunshân*."

"Of course. Thank you." Brownpony walked quickly toward her, then stopped a few paces away. The woman's eyes were white with cataracts. But she had perceived his approach with her ears, her wrinkled mask facing him. "You are Texark?" she asked suspiciously.

"Only half," he said in Wilddog. "Only half, Mother." Calling her "mother" was a polite form of address; she did not need to take it literally.

But she stood. She spat on his face and his cassock. She was chewing a quid of herbs. Perhaps her aim was bad. She was nearly blind. Surely it was unintentional? But they had told him about her. Had they told her nothing about him?

The cardinal retreated. It was no good. He could not tell her that the man she faced without eyes was what had been planted in her by force and ripped unwelcome from her thighs, and that his hair was red. He knew she would not want to know him. She was a simple woman, but bitter. He could see the family, while royal, was not wealthy. But now that it was known to Chür Høngan and the chieftains that he was her son, the news would come back to her that he was here, if she did not already know. Surely she was expecting it. There was nothing he could do about that but tell the Nomad sharfs that he was willing to come to her if she called. He felt certain she would never call. Though depressed, he was glad he had seen her, and glad to think she did not know for certain.

"Your Eminence, please!" The voice calling to him from the doorway of a tent was that of Monsignor Sanual, the Texark Archbishop's legate. The chubby diplomat seemed distraught. "Come in, please, Eminence, come in a moment."

Although Sanual had nearly snubbed him earlier in the day, Brownpony silently complied, stooping to enter a lantern-lighted space, stuffy with earth odors and the smell of spilled sacramental wine. The wine too was on Sanual's breath as he grasped the cardinal's arm.

"They're eating the old chief! I thought you would be staying in your tent tonight!"

"And miss the show?" He carefully recovered his arm from Sanual's grasp. "The Archbishop's legate may sulk in his tent if he chooses. The Pope's legate may not."

Sanual drew back. Both knew they were vying for the favor of the wild tribes and the new Christian chief who might soon unite the Three Hordes.

"You'd do anything!" said Sanual. "If His Holiness knew . . ."

"Look at it this way. My mother was a Nomad. The dead chief was a cousin of mine. The new chief is also a cousin. Remote, of course. But I'm not going to shun the last rites of my own people. Now what did you want to see me about?"

"Just that. Your relationship." Sanual was sneering. "Ombroz told me you've been chosen to be in the

kingship ritual!"

"I just saw Ombroz. He said nothing to me about it. Besides, you always turn your back on the man. I don't believe you, Father. You've been drinking."

"He shouted it at me! And that cackling laugh of his. Of course, he's senile and quite mad, but I believe him. It's so, isn't it?"

"I have only been informed that, as a son of the royal mother-line, I am entitled to be honored during the celebration. The honor is personal, and has nothing to do with my office or my mission."

"Then for the honor of God, Your Eminence, take off the vestments of your office when the time comes."

"Are you here to express Texark's disapproval of the Nomads' pagan ritual, or are you here to honor the inauguration by them of a Christian chief?"

"I was hoping to do both, but I hadn't counted on your willingness to take the Devil to your bosom. We ought to be together on this. For the love of God, Cardinal, tolerance has to stop someplace."

"I was never a priest, Father, until just recently. I'm just a lawyer to whom my late lord the Pope Linus Sixth gave a red hat, and Pope Amen just made a bishop. Fine points of theology are not in my repertory."

"Cannibalism is a fine point, Your Eminence?"

"I take note of your objections, Messér. I'll mention them in my report to the Pope, as I am sure you'll mention them in your report to your Archbishop. Is that all you wanted to see me about?"

"Not quite. There is a rumor that you were sent to assert a pretended episcopal authority over Churches in our missionary territory. Is this true?"

"Your missionary territory is not your missionary territory except by right of conquest, and no right of conquest exists except when a war is a just and defensive war. Pope Amen has made me Vicar Apostolic to the Three Hordes, if that's what you mean, and it has nothing to do with your masters, either of them."

"Damn! There is no pope! We agree on nothing! Not on common decency. Not even on saving the Church from schism!" Sanual turned his back. Brownpony left the legate's tent at once, strode toward the main bonfires, briefly observed the orgy, and then retired.

But that night the blind old woman came and tried to kill him in his sleep. At his outcry, Oxsho leaped from his sleeping bag, grappled with her briefly, forced the knife from her hand, and led her away.

"She cannot be your mother," the warrior said upon returning.

"She is. She just proved it."

Cardinal Brownpony spent the rest of the night staring at the drifting patch of stars framed by the smoke hole in the top of the tent. He thought of Seruna, his wife. He thought of the Sisters who raised him, of the Church and the Virgin, and the *Høngin Føjæ Vurn* to whom the nearby pit was sacred. He knew now that he must indeed accept the ordeal of courting the Wild Horse Woman in her place of ancient fire. If he was to become the highest Christian shaman in the eyes of the People, he must become a Nomad as fully as Father Ombroz. The drunken words came back to him: *Sometimes I take a piece of bread and consecrate it as the true body of Christ. Sometimes I take the true body of Christ and consecrate it as . . .*

Somehow it sounded like a thing Amen Specklebird might say.

The moon had almost set when a dark shadow filled the doorway. Not his mother again! Oxsho was snoring. But it was Holy Madness who called softly to him: "Dress quickly, m'Lord. I want to show you the pit."

Brownpony obeyed, but when they were outside, he asked, "Couldn't we see it better by day?"

"No. If you must face the test, you must face it at night. Even full moonlight obscures the glow of the poison."

They mounted the two horses Høngan had brought and rode quietly out of camp. The orange moon was just touching the horizon and there was little light, but the horses knew the terrain. The rim of the crater was a half hour's ride from the camp. A sentry gave them a sleepy challenge as they passed the

outskirts, but he recognized a grunt from his sharf and sat down.

When they came near the edge of the pit, the moon was down and there was scarcely a hint of morning twilight in the east. The pit was a lake of blackness, and they approached cautiously on foot. Holy Madness grasped the cardinal's arm.

"Damn!" he said after a moment.

"What's wrong?"

"The fire comes and goes. Tonight I can't even see it."

"I don't even know where to look."

"Look at the sky. Find the brightest star in the Thief and then bring your eyes straight down. There should be a tiny red spot near the center."

"The Thief is a Nomad constellation."

Høngan pointed. Brownpony sighted along his arm. "I think we call that Perseus. Yes, and that star must be Mirfak."

They both sat at the rim of the crater and watched in silence. The only sound was the wind and the distant howling of the wilddogs. Occasionally Chür Høngan swore under his breath.

"Does it really matter?" the cardinal asked. "Can't you show me by daylight?" He glanced east. The sky was brightening.

"It does matter. You should see it glow. You must take note of the wind, and stay out of its lee. Some nights you can see a trail of vapor, as well as the hole it comes from."

"Isn't it better if the fire is inactive?"

"Yes, but the whole pit is somewhat contaminated. The only vegetation in it is on the weather side of the average wind here. You should stay where the weeds grow, except when the wind is wrong. You can see what I mean in a few minutes."

Their vigil lasted until the sun cleared the hill. The pit did seem lifeless, except for a little vegetation at the foot of a cliff. At the moment, the breeze was blowing away from it.

On the following day, the leaders of the Bear Spirit and Weejus met to consider Brownpony's wish to pay court to the *Høngin Fujæ Vurn* in the Navel of the World and face the hidden fires of Meldown. The cardinal himself was excluded, but twice Chür Høngan emerged from the council lodge to ask a question.

The first question: "Will you treat the Great Mare with the same reverence as the Holy Virgin?"

"Yes, if I may say my usual prayers to her."

An hour later came the second question: "You realize that if she rejects you, you will not be accepted as having any authority over Christian Nomads of any horde. Will you resign the office the Pope gave you?"

"If I live long enough to resign, yes."

Høngan gave him a hard look and returned to the meeting. When it was over, the Wilddog sharf announced that the cardinal would spend Thursday night in the pit. Friday the Wilddog sharf Holy Madness would pay court to the Wild Horse Woman, and the Saturday's vigil was for the Grasshopper sharf Kindly Light. The Grasshopper's complaint was that of the three of them, only Høngan would have a full moon from dusk to dawn, but Holy Madness explained to him privately: "If you are familiar with the pit, so that you do not stumble into trouble in the dark, the moon is not your friend. You cannot see the hellfire by bright moonlight, and as you know, sometimes not even by dark. Clouds may cover the moon. Spend the day studying her breeding pit from every angle. When the wind changes, you will have to move."

The following night he spent in the pit. Oxsho led him to the place of descent. The moon, nearly full, was in the east at sundown. He carried a blanket but no bedroll. Sleep would be dangerous, but a chill would settle over the area after midnight.

"My teacher wishes me to spend the night on the clifftop and keep a fire burning," the young warrior told him. "I'll hold up a torch when the wind is changing. Watch for the torch. Sometimes a light breeze may be hard to feel down there."

"Is this permitted?"

Oxsho paused. "I won't start it until everyone's asleep, and behind this rock nobody'll see it. And only Sharf Brām might object. God and the Mare keep you, m'Lord."

A wind that swooped down from the lip of the crater carried wisps of dust that dimmed the stars, but it was the dust of the prairie, not the pit. He chose a resting place in the sparse clump of vegetation where the dust of the devil's hole would blow away from him. He was still very sad because of the encounter with the bitter woman whose womb had borne him against her will. He had been a son of violence and hate before his adoption by the Sisters, but his memory of the Sisters was tinged with resentment, except for Sister Magdalen ("Cries-a-River"), a former Jackrabbit Nomad who told him stories and made his education her special concern. Seruna, when he married, had reminded him of Magdalen. Now both were dead. When he passed through Jackrabbit territory to visit some of his Churches, would he visit the orphanage? And was it nostalgia or resentment that made him think of it? Better not, he decided. Neither emotion would benefit his ecclesiastical and political project.

After a while the cardinal began to pray, saying his rosary at first, and letting his eyes linger around the patch of darkness that marked the cave entrance under the moonlit ledge of rock. He spoke softly to the patch of darkness, but he still felt the sting of his real mother's spit like acid in his face. He spoke now to that other mother of myriad names: *Regina Mundi, Domina Rerum, Mater Dei, Høngin Fujæ Vurn*, even the War Buzzard. Her manifestations were always associated with a place: Bethlehem, Lourdes, Guadalupe, and here at the Navel of the World.

"I was born in the south end of your realm, Mother, and I know your paths. Even there, where the People are servants of those who took your land, I have seen your ways. Miriam, mother of Jesus, pray for me."

Oxsho held up his torch when a cloud covered the moon near the zenith. He could at last see a kind of luminosity above and about the hole at the center of the pit, and he moved a hundred paces away from the direction pointed out by the flame.

"Lord, have mercy. *Kyrie eleison.*"

Fortunately, the wind was at his back again.

"My mother was a woman of the Wilddog tribes, Mother; my father did evil to her, and to your people. Let him be dead, as she is now dead for me. Let me not find him, lest I kill him. Long ago, before I knew she was dead to me, her spirit told me to come here. I have not done as she wished. I have left the People. I have taken the religion the Sisters taught me. But at last I am before you, Mother."

The wind was shifting a lot that night. He kept moving.

"Christ, have mercy. *Christe eleison.*"

He moved again to keep the wind at his back, taking his cue from the occasional torchlight, but he went on talking softly in the direction of the cave.

"My hair is red. His was red, she told them. The Sisters who took her in. The Sisters raised me. Miriam, Mother of Jesus, pray for me. If he were living, I would kill him. *Ora pro me*, Wild Horse Woman. *Kyrie eleison.*"

Once during the night, he actually saw her: a woman's figure, black against the glow from the fire pit. Her arms were raised like wings. The *Nunshân*? No, the figure was young; the Night Hag was old. Because of the wings, she had to be the Burregun, the War Buzzard. But when he stood, she vanished.

Amen Specklebird spoke of her as if she were a fourth member of the Holy Trinity, and that was one of the excuses of the Benefez faction for refusing him recognition. A pope who could utter heresy was no pope. But he had not been pope when he said it. Would he say it still? No. Surprising to Brownpony was the ease with which the old man shifted into his papal role. A doubter would call it hypocrisy. A believer would call it the work of the Holy Ghost, protecting the flock against error.

How many popes were in Hell? he wondered. Dante had named a few, but the list was incomplete.



The last pope before the Flame Deluge was surely one of them.

On that thought, he lapsed into slumber, for the moon had sunk below the rim of the pit. It was the brightness of the sky and the shouting of Oxsho that woke him. The wind had gone wrong. He grabbed the blanket and trotted as fast as he could toward the path leading upward. For better or worse, his trial was over.

"If you are sick within the week, you will die," was the matter-of-fact first prognosis of the Weejus who talked to him. "If you do not die soon, you can expect a shorter lifetime. They told you this beforehand?"

"Of course, Grandmother."

She questioned him closely. He told her about seeing the woman with upraised arms he had seen against the glow of the hellfire. She stared at him. After a long pause, she asked, "Do you know of the Buzzard of Battle?"

"I have heard of the Burregun."

"The Buzzard of Battle is red in the sky."

"She was not in the sky."

The old woman nodded, and that was the end of the interview. She took her opinions with her into the council lodge. Later that day, Chiir Høngan came to tell him that the Bear Spirit accepted him conditionally as Christian shaman. The condition was that he not fall ill anytime soon.

Brownpony saw little cause to celebrate. A messenger came from Valana to report that Jarad Cardinal Kendemin, Abbot of Saint Leibo-witz, had gone to meet the Judge. A report also came that the Pope and his party were encamped in the no-man's-land between Wilddog and Grasshopper domains. Holy Madness graciously offered to swap his appointment with the *Høngin Fujæ Vurn* for Kindly Light's, so that Hultor Bråm could leave with his escort party of warriors on Saturday morning to meet Amen Specklebird and lead him to the frontiers of the Empire.

Brownpony decided to ride south with the warriors. Bråm, fresh from his encounter with the Mare, offered no objection.

Early Saturday morning, an hour before their departure, Cardinal Brownpony borrowed bread, wine, a missal, and a portable altar from Father Ombroz. It was his wish to celebrate a pontifical High Mass; it would be good politics and showmanship, but he could not sing well, and had said no more than a dozen Masses since his ordination. Monsignor Sanual stiffly declined his request to serve either as co-celebrant or acolyte. The Red Deacon looked at Ombroz.

"Will you hear my confession first?" asked the old Ignatzian.

"You have something recent to confess?"

Ombroz took his meaning, and shook his head in annoyance. He called instead for Oxsho, his own altar boy. Between them, they rounded up all Christians and invited all the Weejus and Bear Spirit people who wished to attend. The Vicar Apostolic to the Three Hordes offered a simple Mass there on the high prairie with the smoke of dung fires in the breeze and a congregation of wild Nomads circling the altar at a safe distance. Probably more people came forward to receive the Eucharist than there were Christians in the encampment, but he questioned no one. Those who looked surprised at the bland flavor of the Body of Christ were probably pagan shamans. Neither Sanual nor Ombroz came forward to receive. After the *Ite, missa est*, a cheer arose from the crowd, but he could not be sure who incited it. Obviously, he was accepted as the Christian high shaman of the People.

Monsignor Sanual was drinking again. He came out to watch them ride away, and called out to the cardinal that he was following a loser, that the false Pope would never enter New Rome, and that grief for the whole Church would follow.

"Thanks for your blessings, Messér," the Hultor Bråm was not yet prepared to be a friend to a friend of his rival, but he had suffered a bad Friday night in the pit, and he knew that his report to the Bear Spirit council afterward had not been well received. Plainly, the Weejus had already made up their minds. He

conceded to his warriors that unless Holy Madness experienced an even worse Saturday night in the Navel of the World, the office of *Qæsach dri Vørdar* would fall to the Wilddog sharf. At least the ancient office would be restored, reuniting the Three Hordes.

He noticed that Cardinal Brownpony had heard his remarks, and he gruffly asked the cardinal about his experience with the Mare.

"Were you accepted as her stallion the other night?" he wanted to know. "Did you see her at all?"

The cardinal hesitated. "I'm not sure what I saw. You spend hours staring at patches of darkness, you begin to see, but it isn't there."

"What is it that wasn't there?"

"There seemed to be a woman between me and the patch of dim light. I can't describe her. She faced me, and her arms were raised. Then she disappeared."

"Like the Buzzard of Battle?"

"They told you that's what I saw. I never said it."

Bråm nodded. "If I had seen it, I would be *Qæsach dri Vørdar* now. But I am going to die soon."

"Are you ill?"

"You saw the Buzzard of Battle. That is your future. They say I saw mine." Bråm laughed and rode away. Later one of the warriors told the cardinal that the Weejus had decided that the Grasshopper sharf had met the Night Hag in the pit, although, the man said, the Weejus had prejudged the contest in favor of Holy Madness, provided he survived the pit, and that he personally did not believe that Bråm would die as a result of the pit.

The warriors were feeling playful. Bråm had promised them they would be well paid by the Church for performing this escort duty. Brownpony grew more uneasy about the promise each time it was mentioned. He had not spoken of money to the Grasshopper sharf. Perhaps someone else in the Curia had made the offer, or even Papa Specklebird.

He watched the warriors gamboling on the grasslands under the September sun. A man stood up on horseback. Another stood up, and chased the first rider so closely that he had to sit down fast or fall. There was whooping laughter. One warrior could slide down his stallion's flank and crawl under his belly and up the other side. After he had done this three times, the horse began to have an erection. He crawled down a fourth time, took a look, and crawled back up. Somebody yelled a merry insult at him, and in a moment both were on the ground in a knife fight. Hultor Bråm came riding back, watched the deadly dance for a moment, then adjusted his tall leather helmet with his grandmother's crest and the badge of a war sharf..

There was a splatter of blood, not a deep cut, but it brought an order to drop the weapons. "Finish it with your hands and feet," Sharf Hultor barked, "or stop it right now. Hear me well! No killing! Not among ourselves. If you have a grudge against a comrade, save it until this war party gets back home."

"Why does he call it a war party?" Brownpony asked the man who rode beside him. "It was meant to be an honor guard."

"The Grasshopper is *always* at war," declared the rider, and spurred his horse to distance himself from this farmer and red-hat Christian.

## CHAPTER 16

The beds, moreover, are to be examined frequently by the Abbot, to see if any private property be found in them. If anyone should be found to have something that he did not receive from the Abbot, let him undergo the most severe discipline.

—*Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 55

T WAS A TROOP OF FOOLS, THOUGHT THE commander of the police guard. Thirty-seven

cardinals rode horseback along with the Pope while another twenty-four bounced along in the beds of wagons dragged across the roadless grasslands by mules. Thirty Denver mounted police and thirty Wilddog warriors escorted the party, although this force would turn back when the party reached Grasshopper country and met the riders of Sharf Bråm.

When they reached the boundary, they pitched camp and waited for the warriors of the Grasshopper.

Amen Specklebird had waited more patiently than the others. The tents provided by their Wilddog escorts were comfortable enough, and the Pope insisted that the cardinals join him each day in singing Lauds, the Mass, and Vespers, and to pray the other canonical prayers in common. Most of them were accustomed to muttering the first few lines of each psalm; they called it reciting the breviary.

The camp of the itinerant Curia was surrounded by curious women and children of both Wilddog and Grasshopper families whose herds or breeding pits were located nearby, but the escorting warriors kept them at a distance to prevent thievery. Everyone was relieved, except perhaps the warriors themselves, when the Grasshopper riders appeared on the crest of the hill, not gamboling or quarreling now, but riding in a typical Grasshopper battle formation, a line of advance that surged alternately here and fell back there, making the order of battle difficult for the enemy to portray. The Wilddog scouts, outnumbered, grabbed their lances and sidearms and moved to mount their stallions, but Hultor Bråm called a halt and cried out, "Peace! In the name of the *Fujæ Go*."

The Curia watched as Cardinal Brownpony left their fierce ranks and rode forward. Amen Specklebird advanced to meet him, and raised him up when he fell to the ground to kiss the fisherman's ring.

"We have heard, Elia, that Jarad is with Christ, not yet risen."

That was a curious way of putting it, but the cardinal answered, "I knew that would be the first thing you mentioned, Holy Father. If you will excuse me from your presence, I should like to travel now to Leibowitz Abbey and join their mourning."

The old black panther seemed surprised. "I thought you would be going on south of the Nady Ann to visit your Churches in the Province."

"That too, Holy Father. But the Texark forces will be expecting me to cross the Nady Ann, not the Bay Ghost. If I come in from the west, I may not be arrested. And it should only take a day or two to pay my respects at the abbey."

"We shall excommunicate anyone who dares lay a finger on you in the Province. I'll put that in writing. You are ordered to go to Leibowitz Abbey, and then east to Jackrabbit country."

"Thank you. I wish to go on to Hannegan City afterward, Holy Father."

"Then you go as my legate. The wax on your orders will be sealed by my ring. I'll send the papers by messenger to the abbey."

"Forgive me, but that may not impress the Archbishop or his nephew."

"You do not have my permission to be a martyr, Elia."

"Do I need it?"

Amen smiled and changed the subject. "How are our friends among the Weejus and the Bear Spirit? And how was that cave of theirs? You were in it one night?"

"Breeding pit, Holy Father. To be frank, I think its reputation is highly exaggerated by myth and storytelling. It must have been a dangerous place centuries ago, but unless some ill befell Holy Madness, I believe its devil has lost her cunning." He spoke these words three weeks before an attack of nausea and lethargy came over him at Leibowitz Abbey.

When he parted from the Pope and the Curia, he went to thank Hultor Bråm for his courtesy. Bråm complained that no money was forthcoming. The cardinal merely denied any knowledge of the problem, and left it in the hands of the weary prelates of the Pope's company.

Pope Amen's last words to him were "See about Leibowitz Abbey, Elia. Tell them to elect their new abbot, and you impart to him my confirmation. Cardinal Onyo here will be a witness that I so instructed you, if there is any later question."

A quick embrace ended it. He looked back at the Grasshopper escort. The Wilddog warriors and

the Valana police gave them wide berth. The Wilddog mounted, and rode west-northwest, while the policemen lingered for a time.

Later historians were to suggest that the war which destroyed the papacy began when Amen Specklebird accepted the ninety-nine Grasshopper warriors who had been recruited by Hultor Brâm, separated from their families by Hultor Brâm, trained, drilled, and indoctrinated by Hultor Brâm, but not paid by Hultor Brâm, because the Grasshopper sharf was angry with Cardinal Brownpony, and extended his anger to Brownpony's master. After the comptroller with the Pope's party told him there was no gold with the train, the commander of the police guard explained the situation to the Pope.

The papacy in Valana had signed a contract with certain Wilddog and Grasshopper families to furnish for hire fresh horses to Church messengers at relay stations so that crossing the Plains from the Denver Republic to the marginal farmlands of the East could be accomplished in less than ten days. One enterprising Wilddog family and one Grasshopper undertook to carry mail across the Plains, competing with Church messenger service, but not with Hannegan's telegraph. These families were given certain immunities in both written and horde law. It was too early to say that a new class of Nomad entrepreneur was immediately coming into being, but certain grandmothers were accumulating an embarrassment of riches from providing services to the enemy: to civilization. Nomad society had always followed the wild, unfenced cattle, and a wealth of possessions made one's village less portable. But it was under the terms of this contract, as construed by Brâm, that payment was expected.

"Promise to pay them later" was all Pope Amen could say.

After a promise was made to Brâm, the Pope and the Curia proceeded east with these tutelary demons on horseback. Because of the weariness of old men, the journey took four days instead of two. The Pope was fond of chatting with ordinary people, and he spoke frequently to members of the Grasshopper escort along the way, whenever an opportunity arose.

"Our tribes are angry," one of them told him. "We are angry because the Wilddog has allowed Churchmen to be guests at the sacred meeting of the hordes. Not only is Cardinal Brownpony there, but so is an emissary from Archbishop Benefez. And Brownpony favors Ösle Høngan Chür over Hultor Brâm."

The Pope took note of the warrior's polite reversal of Holy Madness' name. Angry or not, he accepted the grandmothers' political will, their favoritism for the Wilddog sharf, as legitimately governing the electoral situation on the Plains. But his resentment of Brownpony was extended to Brownpony's master, the Pope, and thus wages had been requested in advance.

Amen tried to reassure him that the men would be paid, but the list of complaints was not ended.

"Furthermore, the Wilddog offered Monsignor Sanual food and shelter."

"I would have thought Benefez's man would stay with the Jackrabbit delegates," Specklebird remarked.

"Oh, yes, he wanted to. There are Christian priests among the Jackrabbit Bear Spirit delegates. The Jackrabbit delegates are in danger of seeming to be puppets of the Texark Church."

"There is only one Church, my son."

And so went the journey.

According to the Treaty of the Sacred Mare, any farmer or soldier of the Empire who entered Grasshopper territory while bearing arms could expect attack, and any armed Nomad within musket range of the Empire's frontier could be fired upon. Thus, when the Pope's party crossed the hill overlooking the frontier checkpoint, Hultor Brâm and his men halted. The warriors were still grumbling to their sharf about not being paid, but the sharf was watching the confrontation at the border crossing.

"One way or another, you'll all be paid," he insisted, "maybe sooner than you think."

As the procession of prelates approached the gate, Amen Specklebird descended from his coach and brushed the dust of the Plains from his white cassock. He approached the officer who stood with folded arms in the center of the road. Flanking him were two soldiers with double-barreled weapons, probably loaded with buckshot.

"By orders of the Hannegan, you cannot pass," the officer announced. "If you try, you will be arrested."

"Do not bar the way, my son. Bow to God's will."

"Show me God's will."

"Pick up your right foot, and look."

The officer obeyed, and reddened.

"I see my right foot's shadow," he said, ignoring the horseshit with his footprint in it.

"His will is already done," said Specklebird. "Too bad."

"Such a smartass! They call it your 'wisdom,' don't they? Forgive me, but it is a pain in the butt to me, Your, uh, Holiness. I don't think the Lord Mayor will find it a pleasure, either. Why don't you say something new, in plain Ol'zark?"

Amen grinned at him and pointed to the sun while squinting. The colonel's eyes may have flickered, but he resisted looking and said, "Nice try, old man. There are good frauds and bad frauds, I guess. You're pretty good, aren't you?"

"I never thought of it that way, my son, but my office requires it of me, doesn't it?"

"I don't know whether to spit on you or kneel to you, old fool. But make it easy for yourself and go home."

"Colonel, why trap yourself in dualism that way?"

"What are you calling dualism?"

"Spitting God or kneeling God."

"I have my orders from the Hannegan himself. Get back in your coach, turn around, and go back to Valana, or you will find yourself in Hannegan City, facing a heresy trial. Say another word, and I'll testify to everything you say here."

"Bless you, my son, and thank you."

The colonel snorted, spoke in an aside to a captain, then mounted and rode away in a huff. The captain pointed a cavalry pistol at the Pope's thin black face. Two cardinals caught the Pope's arms and a third pushed him back toward the train.

Thus was the road to New Rome closed to New Rome's bishop.

The Grasshopper warriors parted to allow them to pass, but made no move to escort them back, even when Golopez Cardinal Onyo beckoned to Bråm. Bråm frowned and shook his head. His warriors stood there watching until they became a patch of dust in the west. Warily, Amen's party (a good part of the Sacred College) turned to remake the long journey. From far behind came the faint sound of shouting and gunfire, but there was nothing the prelates could do about it, and Pope Amen was a little hard of hearing. From the patches of forest at the east, through scrub and tall grass, through open grassland, through blistering days and chilly nights in the near-desert, some of it irrigated at last, and finally to the mountains they passed. Along the way, they accepted Nomad charity, and they were intercepted at one point by a delegation from the breeding pit.

Chür Ösle Høngan had married the *Fujæ Go*. The new *Qæsach dri Vørdar*, Lord of the Three Hordes, whose wife was the Day Maiden, knelt to kiss the Pope's ring and swore allegiance to His Holiness forever, in the name of God and His Virgin.

Before they parted, Golopez Cardinal Onyo called Holy Madness aside and told him about the behavior of Sharf Hultor Bråm after they had been turned back by the border guard. "They did not return with us, and I heard gunfire and shouting. I cannot be sure, but I think there was fighting."

The Lord of the Three Hordes sat astride his stallion and gathered a slow frown. "If he did what I'm afraid he did, I'll have his head."

"The Pope knows nothing," Onyo told him.

"I'll send to find something out immediately." He grunted an order to a subordinate, then rode away with his party back toward the breeding pit. The subordinate rode east.

There was something to find out. At the border that day, the Grasshopper escort, standing half a mile distant from all events at the gate, began to move. As soon as the dust of the Pope's party had dwindled

beyond the hills, War Sharf Hultor Bråm ordered his ninety-nine elite fighters to take the road to Rome by a feat of arms. They circled south, and cut the road to Hannegan City toward which the colonel who had defied the Pope was riding homeward. He was among the first of many troops to die that day.

They turned north again. The road to Rome was swiftly taken, but only on a very temporary basis. These born-in-the-saddle man-animals cut through the Texark Light Horse, leaving other men and animals full of arrows and spear wounds on the ground. Slow firearms fell back before rapid and accurate bows. Many Grasshoppers used captured sidearms, but only as backup weapons. The Nomad horses were faster and better, and together with their fighters they became for the unseasoned troopers truly the riders of the Apocalypse, ninety-nine of them and a leader with a demonic attitude. They had not been paid, for nobody had brought the papal treasury. They cut the troopers to pieces, killed 146 farmers, raped their wives, daughters, sisters, mothers, sons, and then cut their way back to the frontier through fresh but green reinforcements—cut their way back, yes, all thirty-three of them, adrenaline-drunk, exhausted, including a leader with a brooding attitude and a bad leg. But their saddlebags bulged, and once on the Plains again, they made travois to carry some of the loot. Now they had been paid.

The foray had been just a hell of a good party for the survivors, who came back to their grateful and waiting wives, some of whose hearts and crotches quivered with anxiety and hope, with mostly overworked and limp male members! It took amatory ingenuity on a warrior's part that night to convince a wife that he came home from battle with a real lust for her sexual candy, but most pleaded combat fatigue and went to bed alone.

Being at war was more fun—no doubt about that: even with the odds at two to one you'd die before you got to rape, steal, and burn barns full of newly baled hay.

There was both celebration and mourning that night in late September in the encampment of the sharf's own mother clan. The war cries almost drowned the sound of women crying.

*"I set fires! I set fires!"*

It was the royal motto on the flag of Hultor Bråm. And no one doubted that it was a deliberate slap in the face of the new Lord of the Hordes, whose emissaries would arrive within two days. On the morning after the celebration, several new widows brought their complaints to the Grasshopper Weejus and Bear Spirit. Bråm was summoned before the council. He listened to the accusations in silence and made no defense.

The incursion to the very walls of High New Rome seemed of a devilish inspiration, because it fractured the Treaty of the Sacred Mare, and resumed a state of war between Texark and the Grasshopper. But everybody had fun except the dead, the raped, and the permanently maimed. In war, God is thus! old Tempus might have said.

Helped by telegraph, the news of Hultor Bråm's raid arrived in Valana long before the Pope did, the Pope who knew nothing of what was happening a few miles behind him, except that his Nomad escort had vanished and some shouting and shooting was heard. At home, he found himself facing accusations from Texark that he or the Secretariat of State had ordered the Nomad attack.

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Subsequently in Valana the short, unhappy pontificate of Pope Amen Specklebird produced more important legislation for its duration than had the pontificate of any pope since the schism of the previous century. This was not surprising. The lack of participation by Texark's allies meant that the Curia could approach unanimous consent to proposals by the Pope's new advisers, who were led by Sorely Nauwhat, since Elia Brownpony was on the road. Sorely was in many ways Brownpony's talk-alike. In no way, however, was Amen Specklebird ruled by the Curia. He spoke of resigning, but first there would be legislation.

In a bull named *Unica ex Adam Orta Progenies*, after its opening words, the Pope again affirmed that no one of human ancestry should be regarded as less than human, and that the misborn must not be denied equal rights under the laws of the Church or of the nations. Nor were the Pope's children to be

confined by law to a special domain, such as the Valley. He specifically outlawed their use as virtual slaves in the lumbering camps of the Ol'zarks. There was nothing new in the bull, except that the Pope denounced the practice within the Church of noting family pedigrees on baptismal certificates, since the lack of such documentation was used prejudicially by many states; a stranger might be required to prove that he was not a spook trying to pass as normal. "Rulers who, for political gain, exploit the people's fear of those with hereditary defects, and who sin against them through unjust laws and by stirring up mob violence, shall be held accountable for these evils. Sentences of ipso facto excommunication passed by Our Predecessors against any who, God forbid, do violence to the so-called Pope's children, are by these presents reaffirmed." The bull ended with a punitive clause, defining penalties for the violation of its letter and spirit, and extending the penalties to include violence done under the pretense of law. The language was that of a lawyer, but the message was clearly Amen Specklebird's.

With no help from the Curia, he originated a *Motu Proprio* (strictly by the Pope's own doing) in his own spidery calligraphy, deploring a drift in the Church away from proper liturgical reverence toward the *theotokos* (Mother of God). He did not need to mention which areas of the Church's spiritual domain needed reform in this area. The bishops of patriarchal societies were given to denouncing the Mariolatry of the Northwest, which Amen Specklebird had indirectly endorsed in a speech to the conclave before (emphasis by his supporters) his elevation to the papacy lent infallibility to his ex cathedra pronouncements. The *Motu Proprio*, however, lacked the defining and punitive clauses which were expected of infallible utterances by any pope; it was hardly more than a *tut tut* to his most vocal critics, and a poetic tribute to the Mother of All.

A law governing papal resignation, an event which had hitherto occurred about once per millennium, was ordered revised by the Pope. He decreed that such a resignation must come from the man himself, not from a Pope. A man who had been Pope would rise from the throne, remove all his vestments, and declare that *sede vacante* by saying, "The Pope is no more," and walk away as if the Holy Spirit had departed from him. He would not be admired for quitting, but he would not be punished for it either, unless he tried to change his mind. Specklebird insisted on this change in the existing law, and Hilan Cardinal Bleze tried to sell the others. It did seem to put an end to an ancient argument to the effect that papal resignation was impossible.

"He's planning his own departure," said Nauwhat, but still gave his assent to the law.

Kindly Light was marked for death. He had been so marked when the Weejus told him that what he had seen in the pit was the Night Hag. He had predicted his death to Cardinal Brownpony. Within two weeks of the ordeal at the Navel of the World, he fell ill. When the Wilddog shamans came to confer with their Grasshopper counterparts, he knew what the decision would be. He offered to submit voluntarily to a sacrificial death, provided that his younger brother, Eltür Bråm (Demon Light), be made Grasshopper war sharf in his place. Otherwise, he would take his own life. The Weejus of both hordes conferred, and all the grandmothers were consulted. Eltür was a warrior of considerable renown, but he had not been a member of the raiding party, and was known to be even-tempered, unlike his surly brother. The grandmothers in turn questioned their sons and nephews as to their willingness to follow Eltür. The battle frenzy had died out in the Grasshopper camp, and even the thirty-three warriors who survived the raid understood that Hultor Bråm had committed treason against the *Qaesach dri Vørdar*. They were commanded to purge themselves by ritual fasting for seven days, but were not otherwise punished for obeying their sharf.

It was decided that Hultor Bråm would not be honored by a ritual funeral such as had been conducted for Wilddog Granduncle Brokenfoot. Because of his heavy losses in battle, most of the grandmothers were quite angry with him. One of them said, "There is a wild stallion in my pit which I am about to release."

All of them looked at her, and the manner of Hultor's dying was immediately decided.

To prevent too much inbreeding the Weejus sometimes mated their mares with wild stallions, which

men were forbidden to touch. The Weejus had her own way of stalking a wild stallion. Sometimes it took weeks, even months. A woman gradually introduced herself to a wild herd by staying far upwind. She worked her way closer, bit by bit, until the lead stallion first noticed her. Then she calmly but swiftly went away. The horses begin to tolerate her as a part of the terrain. One day a warrior of her family would bring the Weejus a jar of urine from a rutting mare of her own remuda. She smeared herself with it and approached as usual. When the lead stallion perked up and started to approach, she retreated again. This was repeated, with and without the scent, until the woman could actually walk in among the *grazing* mustangs. Eventually she would choose her animal, feed him tidbits, hang a rope on him, calm and cajole him, entice him, and lead him away to mate with her mares, and then be released. This was a way they had of keeping their own herds from too much inbreeding, but always, the wild ones were respected. When the Weejus seduced him, she did it without riding or breaking him. The only problem was that the stallion, no longer as wary of humans, might now be subject to capture by the motherless ones.

To make this stallion wild and wary again, the former war sharf of the Grasshopper Horde was sacrificed to the Owner of all wild horses, dragged to death by the released animal at the end of a long rope.

## CHAPTER 17

Before all things and above all things, care must be taken of the sick, so that they will , be served as if they were Christ in person; for He Himself said, "I was sick, and you visited me."

—*Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 361

BIQUIU OLSHUEN, ALTHOUGH HIS ELECTION AS abbot after a decent period of mourning was assumed by everyone, limited his decisions to small ones and exerted no more than his usual authority as prior until such elections might take place. He therefore assigned both Blacktooth and the Yellow Guard to visitors' quarters, invited them all to participate in the usual four or five hours a day of manual labor, and told Nimmy himself to join the other monks in choir in the liturgy, but not to receive the Eucharist without specific permission from a confessor, meaning himself.

When Blacktooth told him that the alien guardsmen were not only Christian but had taken religious vows, Olshuen was perplexed. He called Levion the Reconciliator for advice, and with Blacktooth the status of the foreigners was discussed at length. Olshuen and Levion were both uncomfortable with the idea of professional killers with religious vows, and Nimmy knew really very little about their creed and practice. He did know, and reminded Olshuen, that many centuries ago the monks of Saint Leibowitz had defended the monastery by force of arms, as evidenced by the parapet walls and the rusty iron weapons in a locked basement armory, to which only Olshuen now had the key.

Blacktooth found himself distracted by Levion's garments. The monk had become a priest. Although he did not dislike the man, Blacktooth imagined that having the Reconciliator as his confessor might be one of the pangs of his own personal hell, if both of them went there. Blacktooth had not changed a lot since leaving the abbey, but one minor change that had come from serving Cardinal Brownpony and studying warrior's arts under the Axe was a reduction of his fear of people such as these. It shocked him to realize that the ability to kill was a great tranquilizer, even among people he liked and respected.

"Why don't you talk to them instead of to me?" he said to Father Levion, his old shrink.

"I tried to, Brother St. George, but I can hardly understand them. Can't you?"

Not wishing to be stuck with the role of interpreter, Nimmy shook his head. "They are learning Churchspeak, Father. It would be kind of you to help them by communicating. I'm sure you are much better at it than I."

Afterward he tried not to indulge a temptation to feel smug. The alien Christians were soon invited to join the brethren of Saint Leibowitz at prayer; the reception of the Eucharist, however, would be delayed until their understanding of this continent's form of Catholic Christianity could be tested by catechists and



confessors. Not elected abbot yet, Olshuen feared Valana's disapproval, and knew little about the character of either Amen Specklebird or the members of this yellow-skinned war band of the late Cardinal Ri.

He put Nimmy to work washing dishes and scrubbing floors in the kitchen. The errant monk was not respected by former friends, and he tried to avoid their charity. Apparently Abbot Jarad had told them little or nothing about his work for Cardinal Brownpony, and only Olshuen seemed aware of it but not much impressed. If Brother Singing Cow had told anyone that Blacktooth was one of Brownpony's conclavists when Pope Amen was elected, no one was interested. The business of the abbey was prayer and preservation of a heritage. Interest in the outside world was deliberately kept to a minimum. Nimmy was grateful that nobody sneered in his face or spoke of him loudly enough to be overheard.

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Leibowitz Abbey had many visitors that season, and there were only a dozen furnished cells in the guesthouse. When Blacktooth came back from Vespers in the evening, he noticed a lamp burning in a cell which had been empty that morning. He glanced through the small door-window and froze at what he saw. Elia Cardinal Brown-pony, looking pale and drawn, was lying in bed, propped up by pillows. Blacktooth pressed his forehead against the grille, the better to stare at the ailing prelate, his once and future master.

"Is that you, Nimmy? I wondered where you were hiding. Come in, come in."

"Nobody told me you were here, m'Lord." Blacktooth fell to his knees and kissed Brownpony's ring. He felt the cardinal flinch, and resolved not to kiss his ring again.

Two days later, Önmü Kun arrived at the abbey. Nimmy thought it a weird coincidence, but then saw that the Jackrabbit outlaw was taken directly to meet the ailing cardinal without even a visit to the prior. They had talked for several hours when Nimmy brought their dinners from the kitchen. Önmü was friendly, but their conversation stopped dead when Blacktooth entered, and did not resume until he departed. The Jackrabbit smuggler was on his way from the Province to New Jerusalem again, but he stayed until Brownpony was ready to depart, and then stayed some more.

There was no doubt from the beginning that Prior Olshuen would be elected abbot, spiritual father and ruler of the Order of Saint Leibowitz, but Brownpony let him worry about the power of confirmation which had been delegated to the cardinal by the Pope and it apparently came to Olshuen's mind that restoring the cardinal's health must be a paramount concern at the abbey.

For a time, the Red Deacon was afflicted by nausea and fatigue. He had no appetite. Attempts to vomit after picking at the cook's food usually resulted in the dry heaves. He was dizzy whenever he left his bed. He was short of breath, and his heartbeat quickened when he stood. Blacktooth asked to be relieved of his floor-scrubbing duties in the kitchen in order to consult the Venerable Boedullus again, for that respected author had written of Meldown, the breeding pit, and the illnesses that sometimes resulted from exposure to radiation there. He had even recorded a recipe called summonabisch stew, thought by the ancient Plains dwellers to be helpful in its treatment.

Prior Olshuen at first refused to release Blacktooth from the kitchen, for Brother Medic wanted no assistance from the likes of him. But when Brownpony learned that the prior had assigned the most menial of chores to the errant monk, he called the prior to his sickroom and showed symptoms of bad temper. The cardinal even raised the question of his approval of Olshuen's election, if he were so persistent in Jarad's error.

"What error is that, Your Eminence?"

"Keeping your foot on Nimmy's neck, you damn fool!"

"Why, we all do manual labor, and I thought . . ." He desisted, seeing that the Red Deacon was about to explode.

Brother Blacktooth was relieved of his kitchen assignment, and placed at the cardinal's disposal.

Nimmy read Boedullus again, and consulted with Brother Medic and the cooks. The cardinal allowed himself to be placed on a strict diet formulated by these consultants. Twice a day he must eat an

apple into which iron nails had been driven and left for three days. The summonabisch recipe called for organ meats only. "Whatever the dogs won't eat," said a grouchy cook, quite incorrectly, according to the shepherds, whose dogs would eat every part of an animal but horns and hooves, if permitted to do so. The recipe called for wild onions and tiny wild peppers. The smelly wild onions grew only along riverbanks, and there were none near the abbey. The cook used onions from the garden, and although the shepherds found a few chiltepins while tending their flocks, hot peppers from the garden were deemed an acceptable substitute; the curative power was thought to reside mostly in the combination of tongue, liver, heart, brains, sweetbreads, kidneys, and tripe, all finely chopped. These were to be simmered in an iron pot with a splash of red wine or vinegar. The original recipe called for a calf, not a lamb, but none of the abbey's few milk cows had calved this year. Since about two young sheep a week were sacrificed for their organ meats, the monks were allowed, even encouraged, to eat mutton stew, although the Leibowitzian diet normally eschewed red meat. The very religious among them preferred to fast when it was served, but most novices ate it with relish (pepper and garlic relish) and in good conscience.

During the second week, the cardinal's appetite improved. "You know, Nimmy, this stew is actually quite delicious. Ask the cook what's in it, will you?"

"I doubt if you really want to know, m'Lord."

"No? And why are there holes and brown streaks in these apples? And why do they keep feeding me pumpkin seeds?"

"Iron nails in the apples. The Venerable Boedullus thought it's good for the blood. This is October and the pumpkins are ripe."

"But seeds only? Boedullus, eh? He's the one to whom you added a footnote, wasn't he? But not about pumpkin seeds."

"Apparently, I'll never live that down."

"Don't look so downcast. It's nothing to me. Tell me about your stay in New Jerusalem."

"She is dead, m'Lord."

'Ædrea? I'm very sorry to hear that. She was a bright young lady. A bundle of mischief, of course. Do you think you will recover from her?"

"I'll never forget."

"You learned something?"

"Yes."

"Then you have a choice of coming east with me, or staying here with your Order."

"I'll come, m'Lord. And thank you. This place has become an occasion of sin for me. I feel too much unjust anger here."

"Save your thanks. It's likely to be dangerous. And cold. It will be winter before we reach Hannegan City. Do you think you can induce one of Cardinal Ri's guard to come with us?"

"Induce? I don't understand. They regard you as their master, and even their owner."

"I know. That's why I won't tell them to do anything, until they get over that idea of ownership."

Nimmy had no trouble recruiting a bodyguard for the cardinal. They all wanted to come.

"We can't have that," he told them. "We'll be traveling with forged papers. Whoever comes will have to hide his weapons in a bedroll and wear a cassock."

Wooshin had told him Qum-Do was the best warrior among them, but he chose Weh-Geh, the smallest, whose skin was almost light brown. Only his eyes distinguished him from the local population.

By the time the cardinal's sealed papers and a letter from the Pope arrived, Brownpony was ready to leave the monastery and travel east to the Province and then to Hannegan City. The letter told him very little about Hultor's raid, except that it had happened and the Pope was being blamed. The cardinal penned a reply, begging the Pope not to think of abandoning the papacy until Brownpony returned from the Imperial Court. The message was posted in Sanly Bowitts, along with the abbey's mail, which was picked up by a messenger every ten days.

Then the three men, dressed as monks, left for the Province.

Soon after their departure, two more travelers arrived at Leibowitz Abbey. One was an old Jew on his way to the Mesa of Last Resort; he was leading two young nanny goats with blue heads, full udders, and swollen abdomens. Accompanying him was a young woman with bright blond hair, only a little less pregnant than the goats. The old Jew would accept no hospitality beyond a drink of water, a few biscuits, and some cold young mutton. The girl had escaped from captivity by her family, and demanded to see the father of her unborn child.

"They left two days ago. He told the cardinal you were dead," said Olshuen.

"He thinks I'm dead, but the cardinal knows better."

The abbot gritted his teeth and offered grudging hospitality, although the guesthouse was half full of alien warriors and a gunrunner; there were no separate facilities for women, and the monk she was seeking had departed.

"You can stay in a locked cell," he told her, "with a night pot. You'll be safe enough."

"Who keeps the key?"

Olshuen thought for a moment. Might she not come out and molest the men, as well as the other way around?

"Oh, well, I'll keep it myself," he said at last.

"Locked in by you?" She glanced up at three monks regarding her curiously from the top of the parapet wall. Grinning wickedly, she pulled up the front of her leather skirt to waist level. Under it she wore nothing. With her swollen abdomen and her bright blond beaver, she did a bump and grind just for a horrified abbot, dropped the skirt, turned on her heel, and marched away with a wiggling ass toward Sanly Bowitts. Someone cheered. The abbot glared up at the parapet, but the three monks had vanished. Soon a man with a mule and a wagonload of sheep manure stopped to give her a ride. Some minutes later he picked up the old Jew, and went on with the goats tied behind the tailgate.

"Blacktooth, Blacktooth," Olshuen muttered in disgust, and retired to the chapel, where he fell on his knees and tested his pulse before praying. A monk who began to pray, without first quieting heart and mind, prayed badly. He said a rapid paternoster with a rapid pulse and went back to his office.

The journey from Leibowitz Abbey to the eastern boundary of Jackrabbit territory would take nearly two months. Önmü Kun had provided the cardinal with a list of Churches whose pastors and their flocks were of mostly Nomad ancestry, and to whom Kun had sold guns. Some of them were also on the cardinal's list of correspondents with SEEC. As long as they visited only such Churches, their identity was secure. But the cardinal wanted to pass through settlements close to the telegraph line, so that he might pick up news from Valana and Hannegan City. They traveled far enough north so that the Bay Ghost River could be forded without swimming the horses, and also without passing an imperial checkpoint. Their journey thereafter was plotted on a map from Church to Church, settlement to settlement. It was grim dry land, for they traveled mostly to the north of fertile hill country.

It was at one such settlement at the old town of Yellow that Brownpony learned the extent of the offenses of War Sharf Bråm against the *Qæsach dri Vørdar*, and of the former's ritual death. He had never met Eltür Bråm (Demon Light), who was said to be Hultor's fraternal twin, younger by two hours. A Jackrabbit priest named Steps-on-Snake who knew the Grasshopper family told the cardinal that Eltür was less belligerent, less impulsive, but perhaps more cunning than his twin, whom he had worshiped. His election by the grandmothers surprised Steps-on-Snake, who said Eltür would certainly avenge his brother.

From the Grasshopper, Filpeo Harq had demanded the surrender as criminals of all warriors involved in the massacre, and the surrender too of fifty Grasshopper children to be held as hostages insuring against future raids, and the payment of half the Grasshopper's total wealth in cattle and horses. The alternative was said to be total war. But the Imperial Mayor's forces at present lacked logistics to support a dug-in infantry force on the open Plains, although Texark was working on it. Filpeo could only send out his cavalry to harass and be decimated. He would be ready to fight when he could occupy and hold territory. It was his continued occupation and holding of Grasshopper lands that left him little to

spare for enlarging his lands in the west. If Texark's fighters had lost sixty-six out of ninety-nine men in a battle, the survivors would not celebrate. "It took dirty, heathen Nomads to act thus," the priest said wryly. For the foreseeable future the war against the Grasshopper was going to be fitful and opportunistic, but cruel.

The Province south of the Nady Ann was ruled by a proconsul commanding an army of police whose obvious and age-old job was to protect the property of the rich from the greed of the Jackrabbit poor. Blacktooth thought of the guns Önmü Kun was bringing into the territory. Lest some of them fall into Texark hands, they were not the most advanced weapons in the New Jerusalem arsenal, and it seemed to him doubtful that the Jackrabbit was yet capable of revolution, although he had heard talk in Yellow of Jackrabbit bandits, motherless ones, in the hill country far to the south. "Bandit" was a Texark political term.

One fact to Filpeo's advantage was that the Lord of the Three Hordes, Holy Little Bear Madness, was pressing the new Grasshopper sharf to avoid battle. The only permissible attack was a counterattack. Whether Demon Light was more loyal to his lord, the Sharf of Sharfs, than his brother had been was an open question. News of Brām's raid had caused exultation in the Province, coupled with rage at the Grasshopper grandmothers for his ritual death.

All these things Brownpony learned from the Jackrabbit priest at Yellow, where there was an interesting crater nearly as large as Meldown, but inhabited by living things. Steps-on-Snake was in close touch with a Grasshopper Nomad who lived nearby with the family of his Jackrabbit wife. News from his own family and the horde this husband picked up from a man who lived on the Nady Ann and watched Grasshopper and Wilddog signalmen on hilltops beyond the river. The signals were whole-body movements, many rhythmic, and the movements included those of his closely reined mount; such signals were broad enough to be seen and understood at great distance. After such a broadcast, Grasshopper news took several days to reach Yellow.

And so Brownpony's host, Father Steps-on-Snake, was in touch with the Grasshopper, and also with a Texark sergeant who overheard all the official news at a nearby telegraph terminal, and apparently decided for himself as to the sensitivity of information.

"How can you trust the sergeant?" the cardinal wondered.

"His girlfriend is one of my parishioners, and she brings him to my Church every Sunday. I trust her because she likes him less than he likes her. He is too simple to dissemble. But no, I am not prepared to believe him always and every time."

"Is there any way you can get a message to the Pope in Valana?"

"No," said Steps-on-Snake, but hesitated. "It would be a dangerous thing to try."

"I need to try dangerous things."

"It would put a parishioner in danger."

"The girl?"

"Yes, and the corporal, and myself."

"But you know a way?"

"She sent a message once to a relative in the west by coding it and getting the boyfriend to inject it anonymously into the stream of traffic."

"And she could do it again?"

"Don't press me about it tonight," Father Steps-on-Snake answered crossly. "I'll see what can be done."

"The Pope must be persuaded not to resign."

"And a message from Your Eminence would persuade him?"

"I can't promise it."

"Neither can I, but I'll talk to her."

In three days, the message was sent. Although it said only, "Do nothing until I see Filpeo Harq," this tiny nugget was concealed somehow in a few hundred words of schoolgirl correspondence, and Brownpony had no idea how the addressee was identified or what the method of delivery would be.

"All I can say is that it's better than not trying" was all he could say.

He was reluctant to hurry away from the town of Yellow, because this was as close as their journey would take them to the Nady Ann River, across which came news of events on the Plains to the north. Father Steps-on-Snake was a man knowledgeable about the ongoing interaction between civilization and the Nomadic societies of the great grasslands. He had been born during the conquest, and remembered when his father had gone to join rebels in the hill country to the south. When his father was killed, he, like Brownpony more than a generation later, found himself in the custody of nuns for schooling. Later, as a young man, he had gone north with a Wilddog friend, but he lacked the talents of warrior and herdsman, and thus found no family willing to adopt him. He considered joining a band of the motherless ones, but the nuns had given him a sense of sin, so he returned to the Province and became a priest.

Now he was delighted to accept Cardinal Brownpony as his spiritual leader instead of Cardinal Benefez, and his sense of sin did not object to allowing his parishioners to acquire forbidden firearms from Önmü Kun. He even promised to encourage the development of a secret local militia among those he knew to be loyal both to the Church and to a Nomad heritage.

Probably he knew little more about Nomad culture than did Blacktooth and Brownpony, but he was seventy-five years old and saw things from a different viewpoint, which seemed global and almost detached from the passion of his Jackrabbit loyalty.

Father Steps-on-Snake had the most comprehensive view of the Nomad situation any of his three guests had ever heard. Much of it they already knew, in fragments. But the septuagenarian pastor put the fragments together in a larger picture. He was very disturbed by the raid of Hultor Bråm, and not just for the moral reasons of a priest.

The dead sharf was not stupid. He had believed in his own imminent death, for the Weejus had prophesied it to him after his ordeal in the pit. His raid, according to this Jackrabbit priest, was a message to none other than Cardinal Brownpony himself, right here in this rectory, to Brownpony whom Bråm had recognized as the significant figure of power in the Church at Valana.

The cardinal shook his head in apparent discomfort with the idea, but Nimmy noticed he made no denial. "The Grasshopper is always at war," he murmured instead.

"What do you mean by that?"

"It's just something one of his warriors said to me when we rode south from Meldown to meet the Pope."

Steps-on-Snake insisted that Bråm took the war party all the way to the gates of Rome to show the cardinal (and, of course, the Pope) that the brunt of any war would be borne by the Grasshopper, not the Wilddog, and that the Valana papacy was wasting its energy in courting Chür Ösle Høngan. The "success" of the raid was also a demonstration to Filpeo Harq that his opening to the west was more apparent than real, given certain advantages possessed by the Grasshopper. As he listened to this provincial Jackrabbit father, Blacktooth began to admire the late Grasshopper sharf for his bravery and steadfastness of purpose, in spite of his murderous bent. Again, Nimmy wondered if Bråm might be his remote relative.

Steps-on-Snake summarized the military, cultural, and historical situation as he saw it:

One advantage which the Nomad warrior had over the Texark cavalryman was that, as everyone knew, the warrior had grown up on horseback. It is commonplace that a tribe with no previous experience of horses, upon first seeing mounted warriors of an alien nation, see the horse and rider together as a single strange animal. Then they learn to see the phenomenon as two. But if the warriors of the alien nation happened to be Plains Nomads, the first impression would be the correct one. The Nomad horse and the Nomad rider together are one. When at work or at war, a mounted man is not called by his own name, but by the name of his horse, and on formal occasions by the name of his horse and the name of his horse's breeder, often the man's wife's mother. The man was, after all, only the controller of the horse, in war or at work with cattle.

Among the things one first noticed about a Nomad encampment, temporary or permanent, was that there were more females to be seen than males, unless one happened to come on a feast day when most

of the warrior herdsmen returned from the open plains, where they usually lived with the half-wild cattle. When the herdsmen came home, they appeared almost as wild strangers in their own camp or village, where the old men, young boys, the maimed or disabled lived and sometimes worked with the women. At least the boys worked. Older boys became horse wranglers. Younger boys tended the remuda and tried to ride the partly broken horses. The old men tended to feel that their deeds of past glory entitled them to nonproductive retirement in comfort while the boys and women cooked, cleaned, carried water, mended, made clay pots, and tended the horses. Occasionally, a Weeju woman would use her supernatural powers to induce a retired old warrior to work, as long as the task was not demeaning, but the veterans were a lazy lot, usually protected in their retirement by multiple affiliations to the Bear Spirit. Sometimes they redeemed themselves by offering bursts of healing wisdom when the young men were split in angry controversy.

The average herdsmen-warrior north of the Nady Ann was still illiterate, and spoke only the dialect of his horde, but his mother was Weeju, or his grandmother, and was probably learning to read herself, and might even be teaching his younger brothers and sisters. Although lacking in letters or a second language, the average Nomad now imagined in his mind a much larger world than his great-granduncle had imagined. He knew that the Earth did not drop off beyond the mountains, and that there were people who lived beyond the Great River to the east, and that they were just as dangerous and despicable as the human herbivores that lived on this side of the river. He even suspected that the great breeding pit of the Wild Horse Woman was not really the Navel of the World at all, and that his own grandmother's breeding pit, if she had one, was not necessarily lethal to a male human who dared enter it, although staying out of it was probably better for one's luck. He was not quite as much a Nomadic purist as his oldest uncles. He used the tools of citizens, wore citizen's cloth, drank citizen's liquor, and often ate the citizen's beans and corn if he didn't have to grow his own, as Steps-on-Snake remarked with a chuckle.

The Earth was made for growing grass, for cattle and deer and antelope and rabbits and prairie dogs and horses to live on, in turn to be lived on by men and wilddogs and several kinds of cats and buzzards. The animal hierarchy of the Plains was ruled by three overlords in a predatory partnership: men, horses, and dogs. Also by their women, mares, and bitches. Things were much simpler on the Plains than in the country of the growers of corn and beans. One might feel sorrow for farmers, as one felt sorrow for one's own prey, for the Nomad could see that the farmers were actually the prey of other men: soldiers, police, priests, and tax collectors. They were bound to one piece of land, while the Nomad owned the whole world beneath Empty Sky. That indeed was one of the Nomad's ancient names for himself: the Nephew of the Empty Sky. Empty Sky, of course, was a person, but also he was just-look-up-at-it: empty sky. Nowhere but on the Plains from the back of a horse can a man see the Earth's vastness, unless it be from the masthead of an ocean schooner, but the Nomad was not sure he believed in oceans. He knew things came in opposites, so where he was surrounded by a semi-arid ocean of grass, to imagine an ocean of water was just a natural thought. But not all natural thoughts were real. Since his defeat of his great uncles by the second Hannegan's soldiers and the Hannegan's diseased cattle, this new Nomad had become a skeptic. He did not believe everything his uncles or his Weeju woman told him, unless he was getting ready to be a Bear Spirit man. But the average Nomad did not become a Bear Spirit man, and was skeptical of their powers. Among the Wilddog Horde, it was not a rare occurrence for a sick Nomad to visit a mountain town to find a doctor of a different tradition, especially for surgery. Usually the sick ones were young, but sometimes a half-willing older patient would be dragged to a mountain doctor by her younger kin. More than a few Bear Spirit men had worked for a time in the hospitals of the Church or the Empire, learning as much as they could of this different kind of healing. They learned to wash their hands. They learned which drugs to steal for use at home.

Then there were the myths of origin, of the birth of this grassy Earth and its true People, out of an ancient cataclysm.

During the primordial time of the great death, there was fire and ice. A few animals and a few men arose out of that terrible death. Then, after that primordial time, came the Old Time. In the Old Time, there arose a conspiracy among man, dog, and horse to rule the furry, ungoverned cattle that ranged freely on the Plains, that holy country of Empty Sky and the Sacred Mare. The alliance, the

Man-Horse-Dog-Thing, controlled the furry herd to the herd's advantage, usually against the herd's will, driving them to where men knew the grass grew greener. The cattle got something from their predators in return for their flesh and hide and bone; they got Man-Horse-Dog's protection against wolves and large cats, but they remained Man-Horse-Dog's freely running prey, shot down from horseback, and the horses were superior horses.

"Today, the herds of cattle often no longer run," said Steps-on-Snake. All around the fringes of the Plains, fences were going up. These were attempts by some tribes to stay in one place year-round, building permanent houses, culling their herds (now flocks, even) in the fall, first picking out the breeding stock, then slaughtering whatever animals could be used, eaten now or preserved for winter, and finally selling the rest or trading with the farmers for grain. To the true People's ultimate disgust, some of them even raised hogs.

The hordes at first considered these fence-line Nomads as outcasts, as despicable as ex-Nomads who farmed as Blacktooth's family did, except that Blacktooth's kin farmed another man's land. But the old women of the High Plains, these gaunt old grandmothers with leather fists, grinning eyes, and Weeju powers, they took up the cause of the fringe-area people, and they besieged the ears of husband, brother, son, and father with warnings about the Night Hag, who called to her dark bosom those chiefs who wronged their own realms or hurt the beings that lived therein. Not only that, but if these settled herdsmen were alienated by the roving herdsmen, they could only become allies of the farmers and of Texark.

When people began seeing the Hag, the nervous chieftains began to agree that Nomads who settled down behind fences should not be pillaged and killed, but wooed back to the common life of the horde if possible. This tolerance was reserved for haciendas adjacent to existing fences, however. There were a few families on the Plains who had dared to fence off choice areas for themselves, far from any other fences. To these the leaders of the hordes sent warriors to tear the fence down. They forced such people to choose between returning to the common life or leaving the common land. Those foolish enough to stay were killed by outlaws, who could be counted on to save the tribes the trouble and the blood-guilt. The hordes of course joined with the Church in condemning these murderous motherless ones. Things had changed since the time of Høngan Ös, when Hannegan II had spread cattle plague as a weapon of war by driving his infected herds among those of the hordes.

The future was revealed to the tribal seers. It was foreseeable that the open Plains would shrink, and the people and the cattle on it would either perish or change. They had been changing continuously through three generations since the Conquest, and what characterized the present population was youth. The prolific grandmothers and mothers had doubled the population in a very short time. Every Nomad warrior believed that his women's ability to produce babies fast, running even to twins and triplets, rose and fell according to the nation's need. For whatever reason, the Great Plains were shrinking, while their population had been growing fast of late. Was this not the chief cause of war? It usually happened when men settled down in one place with their women and had a lot of sex and babies, too many children to fit into the local scheme of things. Teenage gangs become the first warriors in this process, and because they start trouble with other neighborhoods, it is necessary to put the gangs under the chief's command and give them violent things to do against people who are not enjoying the chief's favor. War is caused by agriculture, in the Nomad opinion. It was, after all, a herdsman killed by a farmer when Cain slew Abel, so Christians said.

The tribes were restless, anxious, angry. They all had compromised; even the wildest among them used the tools and the weapons that were manufactured in the towns and cities to the east and in the mountains. They brought their beef, hides, artwork, wolfskins, bear grease, and surplus ponies to a trading post, and then rode back to Grandmotherland leading a pack mule loaded with tools, gunpowder, musket balls, fabric, beans, and enough distilled spirits for at least the elders to get sloshed. They sang the old songs and danced the old rituals, honored the Wild People, and moved their dwellings and their herds according to the season. Each horde owned a sacred path, and sacred places along it to pitch camp for a season. They navigated the grasslands by the doings in the night sky as much as by landmarks. The sky told them when to move south. It was the middle of the thirty-third century, and Polaris traced a larger

circle in the north sky than it did in the time of Leibowitz, but the hordes called themselves the people of the Polestar when they wandered. When they camped in summer, they were the people of Empty Sky and the Day Maiden. When they huddled down for winter, they were sons of the Wolf and the Hag.

Blacktooth knew much about the tradition, even though he had never lived it. But things were changing. He could see the change now; he had missed it as a boy. Power on the Plains among the warrior herdsmen was out of control, and the old women worried about it. Some leaders were chosen by men without due process of consultation with the grandmothers, the Weejus women, and the Bear Spirit men. War threatened the horses and the sacred bloodlines, and it killed grandsons. The women were usually against any war, except when necessary to curb intertribal horse theft.

When Empty Sky was dying in the presence of his Seventeen Crazy Warriors, he promised them he would come back from the dead in their time of need if each and all seventeen of them would in time of need utter his magic name of seventeen syllables. Empty Sky as part of his last will and testament taught the name to these warrior-Priests who had served him best in battle, leaving to each man a different secret syllable which could be spoken only once—to speak it twice permanently paralyzed the tongue. A dying man could leave his syllable only to his eldest son, or if the son were unfit, to another chosen by the Bear Spirit shamans. Empty Sky promised to come whenever they spoke his name correctly, but to pronounce the name each man would have to utter his syllable in correct order.

What was the correct order?

They had been crowded around his couch at the time, and while most of them agreed as to who owned the first and last syllables, nobody had been counting the ones between; for example, there was a spearman who said Empty Sky had spoken in the ears of at least ten men before him, but not more than twelve. Inevitably, a skeptic who inherited his syllable from his father spoke it aloud, tried to speak it again, and was immediately struck dumb. Others heard him speak the syllable, but now doubt arose. Would it be effective if spoken in the correct order by a man other than its original custodian? And if a man spoke his own syllable, would he be able to repeat the orphan syllable as well, or would dumbness grasp his throat? But one day, about a century ago, they all got together, all except the speechless skeptic, and decided to try to call Empty Sky, because times were getting bad for the people.

When they spoke the syllables, nothing dramatic happened. They deemed it a failure, until they heard the cry of a newborn baby from the adjacent tent. The baby was the son of a mother of the royal tribe, and she was prevailed upon to name him Empty Sky, although at the time of his rite of passage to manhood, he was given the name of Høngan Ös, Mad Bear, who grew up to become the *Qæsach dri Vørdar* who led the hordes into horrible disaster. Obviously, the holy name had been misspoken.

They were fascinated by Step-on-Snake's storytelling. Nevertheless, it was necessary to go on, and to cross one branch of the Red River to the southeast, then make haste toward Hannegan City.

On the edge of town, following such a heading, they stopped at the rim of Yellow's crater. There was a small lake in the center, and the ground around it was fertile and green. Two wild horses were grazing, and somebody was fishing in the lake.

"I'm told," said Brownpony, "that this was a Jackrabbit breeding pit before the conquest."

"Is it like Meldown?" Blacktooth asked.

"No, it is not like the breeding pit of the Wild Horse Woman."

"I see there is a stone marker ahead. The place has a name."

"What is it called?"

"Lake Blessdassurance," Blacktooth read, and looked up at Brownpony, who was staring at the other side of the marker.

"Does it say something on the back side, m'Lord?"

"It says, 'Boedullus was here.' "

"Wh-a-at?" Nimmy took a look. "Paint! Recent paint. It's a joke. It has to be. Or else—" He paused. "Did you know, m'Lord, the Venerable Boedullus died in an explosion at an archaeological site he was investigating? There's a legend about a lake with a giant catfish named Bodolos that later came to



live in the crater where the bomb went off."

"So it's a joke with a theory behind it. It has to be a Leibowitzian joke. Who outside your Order knows about the Venerable Boedullus?"

"Almost nobody, m'Lord, unless Nomads have been reading my translations."

"It seems to be signed with initials: BRT. I'd hate to lose time by going back to ask Father Steps-on-Snake about it."

"Let's ask that Jackrabbit farmer instead," Nimmy suggested, watching a man riding a mule toward them down the road.

The farmer laughed heartily. "My great-granduncle caught that old Bodolos nearly a century ago. He fed the whole village with it. Whoever painted the sign on the back last month couldn't spell. He was wearing the same robes as you, though."

Brownpony and Blacktooth exchanged glances. Nobody at the abbey had told them of a monk of the Order who had recently departed for the Province.

"Well, at least one Jackrabbit farmer learned to read," Brownpony later observed.

"There was a small Church school at Yellow, you know."

"I'm sure there are many Nomads in the Province who can read a book but cannot ride a horse, especially in battle."

"How fast can they learn to march and shoot?" asked the usually silent Weh-Geh.

The question was considered by the monk and the prelate, but not answered.

They crossed the Red River and headed east across the grasslands. In all, they stopped at twenty-three Churches, and secured the loyalty of seventeen Jackrabbit pastors, but many nights they slept in farmers' barns or found natural shelter along creekbeds. Twice they rented rooms from Texark landlords, but there were too many prying questions. The cardinal disliked lying and decided against doing it again, although it became a very cold winter during their trip; freezing rain did not usually come until January in these parts. The cardinal was still not quite well. He began to believe the Weejus' promise that he would have a shorter lifetime as a result of the ordeal. Blacktooth fed him a lot of apples into which nails had been pressed, but he seemed to be losing some of his graying red hair as well as his energy. Such was the curse of Meldown.

## CHAPTER 18

The fourth kind of monks are those called Gyrovagues. These spend their whole lives tramping from province to province, staying as guests in different monasteries for three or four days at a time. ... Of the miserable conduct of such men it is better to be silent than to speak.

—*Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 1

HEY REACHED THE OUTSKIRTS OF HANNEGAN City by early evening, and the cardinal decided to rent rooms and spend the night at an inn outside the city limits. There was the possibility of learning recent news from the innkeeper or fellow travelers; there was the inevitability of reading the government bulletin boards to learn of the response of the bureaucrats to the same recent news. There was a need to change from a monk's habit to red and black. Weh-Geh would need new clothes altogether, and could again wear his weapons as the cardinal's bodyguard. All Blacktooth needed was a bath and a change of habit. They had grown beards during the journey, but only Weh-Geh decided to shave. His whiskers were rather thin and added an alien touch to his appearance. Brownpony's beard was redder than his thinning hair. Blacktooth had more gray on his chin than on his pate, which badly needed reshaving. Weh-Geh barbered Nimmy's tonsure with a short sword, grasping the blade with both hands and drawing it smoothly under the soapy hair. Blacktooth complained that the swordsman was leaning on him too hard.

"Only to hold you still. If you prefer, I could shave you just as easily standing back here," Weh-Geh

said to the lathered monk. Blacktooth looked at him with affected fright. The guardsman held the sword drawn back past his right shoulder, as if to deliver a roundhouse cut to the scalp's long stubble.

"Stop boasting. Lean on me if you need to." He was surprised, because it was the first time Weh-Geh made a joke, a sinister joke besides, and one of the few times he spoke at all. In Jackrabbit country, only once did a need arise to draw his long sword and Brownpony's pistol, when a group of young bullies had decided to pick on three itinerant mendicant monks for fun. Both Nimmy and the cardinal missed Wooshin. Blacktooth wondered if they had, without meaning to, resented Weh-Geh as a poor substitute for the Axe, on whose head there was a price in this realm. But Weh-Geh had no wish to be a substitute for anyone. Nimmy resolved to befriend him, if there was still time.

By midafternoon of a cold and sunny day, they were standing on the steps of the Cathedral of Holy Michael, the Angel of Battle, talking to its Cardinal Archbishop. At the Archbishop's left and rear stood an attractive young acolyte wearing a long surplice with lacework and crocheted borders. Torrildo smiled happily at Blacktooth on first seeing him, but then misinterpreted Nimmy's expression and cast his eyes on the ground. The monk was less shocked that Benefex had hired the pretty fugitive than surprised by a sudden realization that the letters BRT beneath the painted "Boedullus was here" legend at Yellow's crater lake stood for "Br. Torrildo," who had been traveling from Valana to Hannegan City.

Weh-Geh seemed ill-at-ease, for Benefez kept glancing at him, until finally the cardinal asked, "Young man, where have I seen you before?"

Brownpony answered for him, "In Valana, Urion. Weh-Geh was in Cardinal Ri's employ. Now he is in mine."

"Ah, yes, there were five or six of them, weren't there? Where are the others?"

Brownpony shook his head and shrugged. "I've been on the road for two months." The evasion was almost a lie, Blacktooth noticed.

"Of course," Benefez said, then returned to their previous conversation: "Elia, mmm, Your Eminence, of canon law, I too have been a scholar. Before the Flame Deluge there had been only two papal resignations. One Pope, so-called, was a great sinner, one was a great saint. The former sold the papacy, the latter fled from it in holy terror. But the question arises whether either of these men was a legitimate pope. So can a real pope resign? I think not. If he resigns, he was never elected by the Holy Ghost in the first place. This may be against the majority opinion, but it is my opinion. A poet of his own time put him in Hell, but that poet was a bitter man. I think the old fellow was really hallowed, but I doubt the legitimacy of his election in the first place. If he were Pope, he would not and could not resign, and would not be talking about resignation."

"Are we talking about San Pietro of Mount Murrone, or Pope Amen Specklebird?" Brownpony asked.

"Aren't they two of a kind?"

"No, Urion, they are not." He hesitated. "Well, how can I say? Amen Specklebird I have known. I know San Pietro only from a book at Leibowitz Abbey. The writer thought he was a saintly clown."

"Doesn't this describe Amen Specklebird? In a charitable way?"

Brownpony paused. He seemed to be leaving himself open on all sides. Blacktooth tried to remember Wooshin's word for it. *Happu biraki*, he thought. In a fight, it was usually a deadly invitation to be foolhardy.

Brownpony closed in. "If so, then this saintly clown, Pope Amen, His Holiness, is disposed to absolve you, Urion, of any penalty of excommunication you may have incurred, *crimine ipso laesae majestatis facto*, or any other act of rebellion you may have committed in thought, word, or deed. I am here to announce this."

Blacktooth noticed that the purple in the face of Benefez was not merely reflected light from his purple vestments (it had been a day for burying the dead). He did not sputter, however, but purred, "How utterly wonderful of him, Elia. From so generous a man, I'll bet the penance I have to do is only kiss his ring."

"I doubt he would allow you to do that, Urion. He is an honest man. There are no conditions, and no penance unless I choose to impose one."

"You?"

"The Pope sent a plenipotentiary in this case. Me."

"You!"

"And I unbind you, Urion, without condition, *in nomine Patris Filiique Spiritusque Sancti*."

Blacktooth saw the Archbishop's right hand twitch toward mirroring the sign of the cross Brownpony made over him, but it was only the twitch of habit.

"Your credentials are as good as your Latin, Elia. Go home and stop being my gadfly."

"I am also empowered to offer you control over those Churches in the Province where the parishioners are mostly settlers or soldiers whose native tongue is Ol'zark."

"Oh, I see. It's not a matter of geography, then."

"Geography is boundaries and fences. These don't mean much to a Nomad."

"Yes, we had a recent demonstration of that just west of New Rome. Human life doesn't mean much to them either, and they eat men's flesh."

"Only men they honor. It is a funeral rite, or a tribute to a brave dead enemy."

"You defend this evil thing!"

"No, I merely describe it."

Someone was yelling "Make way! Make way!" in the distance, and Cardinal Benefez looked up the street.

"Apparently my nephew is coming down the road," he said to Brownpony. "Do you want to step inside?"

"You mean do I want to hide? No, Urion, thank you. I must see him in order to deliver this." He showed Benefez the sealed papers which he had received at the abbey from Valana. "I must go to the palace to request an audience, unless he sees us and stops."

The Emperor was in a hurry as usual, and ordered his driver to wield the whip. He waved in a friendly way to his subjects in the streets who bowed or curtsied as the royal coach hurried on, preceded by two mounted guards whose costumes were more elegant than that of their ruler. Filpeo wanted to be seen as a man of frugal habits, generous to his subjects, and devoted to the economic interests of the Empire. He sought to distance himself in public from the ferocity of some of his predecessors, and had shortened the list of crimes for which the penalty was death. His own ferocity was carefully contained. He had secretly, on several occasions, insisted on administering the supreme penalty himself, but few men knew about this. One who had known it was named Wooshin, and it was the Hannegan's personal fascination with death by the art of the headsman which had, in fact, cost him his best executioner. The fellow had been repelled by his own art when practiced by his master. And Harq had let him get away! It was one of his few mistakes in judging men.

Filpeo Harq was a Hannegan only on his mother's side, and some considered this inheritance of the throne through the motherline supremely ironic, given the masculine, patrilineal, and certainly patriarchal cast of the Texark civilization, which in its origins was a reaction to the matriline culture of the Plains. The original Hannegan (or Høngan with a Jackrabbit pronunciation), the conqueror of the city, had been leader of a band of Nomad "outlaws," and his acquisition of the mayoralty of the small town and trading post called Texark had been by conquest. The term "outlaws" was a farmer's word; Nomads, who despised them but feared them less, called them "motherless ones," a term which was applied to those wanderers of the Prairie who either evaded family ties because of hostility, or found themselves unwanted by any woman of the horde, and these men formed homosexual (not necessarily in the erotic sense) war bands, taking their women by violence when they felt the urge and saw the chance, and keeping them, if at all, as servants.

From the point of view of the *civis*, every *nomas* was an outlaw, but in the Nomad view, the motherless ones had deviated so far from the Nomad cultural norm that they were loathed by the people of the Plains more than they were by the farmers along the eastern fringe whom they sometimes plundered. As is usually the case, a completely alien enemy is less to be despised than a deviant brother. The motherless ones who originally conquered Texark had been driven there by the right-thinking

orthodox Nomads of the several hordes. It was an infusion of fresh blood and new ideas for the sleepy trading community and the surrounding farmers, and Texark began to grow and to be fortified. It was located in a place where, exposed on both flanks, in order to grow at all it was forced to conquer or perish. However, after five generations the mutation of barbarian outlaw into civilized aristocrat was nearly complete, and Filpeo was a popular ruler except in the conquered territories.

The town of Texark itself, or Texarkana improperly so-called in the Latin of the Church, was not located at the site (now lost) of the ancient city of that name. Now called Hannegan City, it did lie on the Red River, and it grew up at the vague boundary between forest and plain, where it was originally a minor center of commerce between the two areas, the sown and the treeless wild. The relatively peaceful Jack-rabbit people had come here to trade surplus cattle, horses, and hides for wood, metal, spirits, medicinal herbs, products of the blacksmith's art, and whatever trinkets the merchants could show that caught the Nomad fancy. Among the merchants, however, there were a few panderers who took advantage of the sexual hungers of the motherless ones, and actually sold them brides, or rented them for a while. That was the beginning of it. When the price of brides went up, the bandits killed the merchants, took what they wanted, and settled down, but they themselves, not their captive wives, kept and managed the horses—and every other kind of property. In one generation, a way of life was turned on its head.

Filpeo Harq himself was a student of this local and family history, which was not so well known to the residents of his realm. He had taken a personal interest in the writings of historians at the collegium, now a thriving university, and he who wanted tenure and royal favor wrote to please the monarch. He who wrote otherwise was rarely published, and failed to thrive. To put it mildly.

In passing his uncle's Church, the Monarch suddenly signaled his driver to go slow. He pointed at a group of clergy, including his uncle Urion, standing on the steps in the morning sun. Cardinal Benefez seemed to be arguing warmly with another man in a red zucchetto whose back was toward the coach.

"Who is that man?" Filpeo asked sharply.

"Which one, Your Imperial Honor?"

The cardinal with his back toward the coach suddenly looked over his shoulder. The Mayor's head disappeared inside the window and he knocked for the driver to hurry on. Beside the second cardinal stood one man in the robes of the Albertian Order of Leibowitz, and another man-at-arms who was probably a bodyguard. He thought he knew who one of them might be. The armed man was too alien in appearance to be the cardinal's secretary. And Uncle Urion appeared to have acquired another pretty young man as acolyte.

"Drive on, drive on."

The manufacturer's representative had already arrived at the War College when the imperial coach discharged its royal passenger and his courtiers, but he and the officers in charge were not yet ready for the demonstration. Irritated by the delay, but determined to make use of every idle moment, Filpeo called an immediate meeting of staff to discuss long-term strategy on the Plains. It was disquieting to the officers to be quizzed by the Monarch on such an impromptu basis with no preparation, and Filpeo always enjoyed putting them in such a situation. He learned a lot from the practice, and it helped him weed out the fools. The commanders of Infantry and Corps of Engineers were out of the city on maneuvers, however, and their seconds were summarily yanked out of their offices and hauled to the conference room.

Admiral eFondolai was there in person, and so was General Goldæm, Chief of Staff, and Major General Alvasson of the Cavalry.

Infantry and Engineers were represented by Colonels Holofot and Blindermen. Not as a joke, but in a joking manner, Filpeo Harq himself collared Colonel Pottscar, S.I., in the corridor while the Ignatzian Chief Chaplain was returning from Mass and pulled him along to the meeting. "Someone may need your services here, Father," said the Monarch to the astonished Pottscar. "It may even be me. Did you know that Cardinal Brownpony and probably his troublesome monk-secretary are in town."

Colonel Father Pottscar nodded. "I just heard about it as I left the Church. By now, he must have

requested an audience with Your Honor, no?"

"No! Not that I have been told about."

"I'm sure he will, but naturally he would see the Archbishop first."

"By God, I should have him arrested. If Urion knew he was coming, he would have told me. What the hell is going on?"

"I would guess, Your Honor, that he has come to plead the cause of the man he calls Pope."

"Hah! The man who sent the Grasshopper Horde to smash its way to New Rome! By God, they killed two-thirds of the Nomads, and we chased that bastard Curia back to Valana with their Specklebird, all right. But they left a lot of dead men and raped women and burned buildings. There hasn't been an atrocity like that before the second Hannegan's conquest. And now we've got trouble with the Grasshopper all along the frontier, mainly because of him!"

"Who, Brownpony? Sire, you have been misinformed. He was not even with the Curia, so-called, at that time. He was with Monsi-gnor Sanual at the Nomad election. Sanual told me that. He was quite shocked by Brownpony. Says the man is a pagan. But although he rode south with the Grasshopper to meet the Pope, he did not join the others but continued south. Your Honor, according to one of my chaplains in the area of conflict, the, uh, pretender Pope turned back with his whole retinue when the guards refused to let them cross the border. This priest says the Nomad escort attacked only after they were separated from the Valanan cardinals. It's not at all clear that they were acting under Valana's instruction. I know the Archbishop had received a message from this crazy Specklebird. It probably told him Brownpony was coming."

"I wonder that the guards let him cross the border!"

"I doubt that he came through the skirmishing zone, Sire. He probably crossed from the Province."

"By way of Leibowitz Abbey, I dare say, for he was with a monk of theirs. Right now, I want you to send one of your chaplains to bring Brownpony to me. Let a military policeman go with him. Let them not take no for an answer. Bring that monk along too."

Colonel Father Pottscar hurried away. The Hannegan glanced curiously at Admiral e'Fondolai and asked, "I don't remember calling you here. Do we need the Navy to fight Nomads on the Plains? Not that you aren't welcome—"

"I asked him to come," explained General Goldæm. "Brownpony inherited six alien warriors from a cardinal who died in conclave, and Carpy here knows something about their race and nation. We might need to know."

The admiral frowned. Carpios Robbery had been e'Fondolai's nom de guerre in his pirate days, when he had become the second man since antiquity to circumnavigate the globe, but he hated to be called "Carpy," especially in the presence of his Hannegan.

They entered the conference room. First, the Emperor asked about the status of the forces protecting new farming lands, and any further encounters with the Grasshopper people. Told they had drawn back defensively, Filpeo ordered there be no punitive raids by Texark forces until he so commanded. He then stated, "If I were a Grasshopper war sharf, I would make an alliance with the Wilddog to strike the Province. I would cut the telegraph line in several places. The Wilddog will cut the Province in half, while Grasshopper strikes toward Texark. What is your response?"

Colonel Father Pottscar entered the room and nodded to Filpeo.

Colonel Holofot spoke. "They can destroy, but they cannot hold. Such an invasion can be no more than a massive cavalry raid. Our forts would remain secure. They might massacre the Jackrabbit settlers and the colonists, but they would quickly exhaust themselves and be driven back, as in the Grasshopper raid."

General Goldæm looked levelly at his ruler and shook his head. "Your scenario is improbable, Sire. When they began establishing winter quarters after the war, they became vulnerable. If they attacked the south, they know our cavalry would strike in the north at their family settlements, which would not be well defended. When the hordes were entirely mobile, they could retreat forever. They could lead pursuers to exhaustion. Now they have fixed property. It's vulnerable. They have no infantry to take or hold ground."

"Suppose the Jackrabbit revolted and joined the invaders?"

"We have kept them disarmed," said the engineer, Colonel Holofot. "What will they fight with, pitchforks?"

"No, but if they could provide the invaders with food, water, shelter, and places to hide," said the general. "The question is: would they? The Jackrabbit has bitter memories of the Northerners, for the wild hordes were contemptuous of the Jacks. Frankly, to me it seems a tossup whether they hate us more, or the Northerners. But even with Jackrabbit support, Colonel Holofot is right. A mass cavalry attack would exhaust itself in the south, and the northern underbelly would be exposed. They would be more likely to strike the farmlands north of the Valley, uh, north of the Watchitah Nation, and that is what we are not well prepared for yet. But we are preparing fast, and the whole border will be fortified in two years. The surviving farmers there are well armed now, and since the raid, they have a lot of hate for Nomads. We have the troops to back them up, but not to attack prematurely, because we have the same problem in the north as they in the south."

"And that is?"

"We can attack and kill, but we don't have the men or the logistics to occupy Grasshopper territory. Unless, of course, we weaken our forces in the Province."

Filpeo became thoughtful. "I wonder," he said, "why is it that these farms on the eastern fringe, which get more rain, are not as productive as the refugee lands at the foot of the Rockies, where the land is said to be nearly a desert?"

There was a brief silence. The Hannegan's remarks seemed almost idle, having nothing to do with the Nomad as a military problem.

"Sire, that question is outside my field," said the commanding general. "But it may have something to do with discipline. As you know, ours are free peasants, and they work mostly for themselves. When you say 'productive,' you mean it in terms of commercial crops. The ex-Nomads are sharecroppers, working for landowners, especially the Bishop of Denver. They are forced to work, and they grow only a few crops."

"I think that is not an explanation," said Father Colonel Pottscar. "And it's not quite true. The ex-Nomads learned from the mountaineers, who have been dry-farming for centuries. And as for the rainfall—there is a monastery in the hills north of Valana where the monks keep records of events in the heavens, waiting for the coming of the Lord. One of the things they keep track of is rain, because they pray for the weather. They say the rainfall on the western side of the mountains is now nearly twice what it was eight hundred years ago. That, and that alone, is your miracle of the ex-Nomad farms. Of course, the monks think it's their miracle, answering eight centuries of prayer. But the runoff for irrigation is better than in ancient times, miracle or no."

"Well, doesn't the increase apply to the whole Plains?" asked the Monarch.

"Their records are local. I can't say. Thon Graycol points out that there are no very old trees in the edges of our forests where the prairie begins looking eastward. That suggests our tree line has been moving slowly westward for a few centuries, but nobody is sure. The Nomads may have cut the older trees for wood."

"Well," said General Goldæm, "if nature is closing in on them from the east and the west, they're going to lose their precious desert anyway. We'll just give nature a hand in their extinction."

"Extinction? I don't want to hear that word again, General," Filpeo Harq said sharply. "Pacification and containment are the goals, not extermination. We have achieved that in the south. The Jackrabbit population is stable."

"Except that their young men keep running away to join outlaw bands."

"The northern Nomads kill most of those. One way, maybe the only way, to secure the area between the forests and the western mountains is to colonize."

"How, Sire? Except along the eastern fringe, the land is poor, the water scarce, and the weather horrid. Who could, who would live there but wild herdsmen?"

"Tame herdsmen, and a tamer breed of cattle," said Filpeo Harq. "Fenced ranches, as in the south. Some places down there, they use yellowwood trees for fences. If you plant them a foot apart and keep them pruned, they make hedges dense enough and thorny enough to keep cattle in. There may not be

enough water for agriculture, but wells can be dug to water stock. Some land can be fenced, farther north where the cold kills yellowwood. We hold much forested land in the east. Enough timber can be shipped to settlers, and they'll pay with beef and hides. And I'm not so sure agriculture is impossible either. The university is studying that problem. Until civilized men can live there, the Plains will remain an obstacle. The Pope might as well be living on the moon, and there is no way to unify the continent."

"But who in hell would want to live there?"

Harq the Hannegan thought for a moment. "The Jackrabbit itself has settled down in the south. That's why I won't stand for talk of extermination."

"But they were always half-settled anyway, Sire. The Wilddog and the Grasshopper would prefer to die in battle than give up their ways. To farm or to ranch is hard work. To the Nomad, work is slavery."

"The ex-Nomads learned to work when they lost their horses. You merely predict their choice. We must not allow them to have such a choice. There is no need to colonize the Plains if we can civilize the wild tribes themselves. I want Urion to send missions to the northern hordes."

"Cardinal Urion sent Monsignor Sanual to them, and he came back empty-handed, and I think empty-headed. The Christians among them are already tied to Valana, Sire, and there is a rumor this Pope in Valana means to take the Jackrabbit Churches away from our Archbishop," said the chaplain.

"There is no Pope in Valana, and until there is a Pope in New Rome, they are tied to nobody. And Urion hopes to be the next Pope. If not, we'll see whether Urion or some antipope offers them sweeter salvation. Especially to the Grasshopper, after we punish them. The time is ripe for change. The papacy is up for grabs. The new Lord of the Hordes is a Wilddog, not a Grasshopper. We have to influence both.

"Please understand," continued the Hannegan, after a pause, "that what I ask of you is to tell me what you think would happen if we do this, or we do that, even if I would never do either. To show you what I mean, I ask General Goldæm what he thinks would happen if we undertook a war to simply wipe out the Nomad population of the northern Plains."

He spoke again after a silence. "Well, General?"

"Sire, I did not really mean to suggest—"

"Very well, I realize you were just making bellicose noises to exercise your military gland, but go ahead. Answer my question: What would happen if we undertook to wipe out the Grasshopper and the Wilddog?"

The general reddened, and after a few seconds said, "I think we I would fail. We're stretched out. We occupy and police the Jackrabbit country below the Nady Ann. If we try to hit the Grasshopper hard, he can pull back until our supply wagons can't supply our forces."

"The Nomad can live on carrion and crickets. Why can't you?" "I can, but we can't fight without powder and shot."

"Good enough. You have now taken charge of your military gland. However, you can put it to work again and organize a battalion of a special strike force. I want men trained to out-Nomad the Nomads. Take the biggest, toughest, meanest men you can find, both from our own ranks and from any motherless outlaws you can recruit. Teach them to live on the land, speak Nomadic, and learn their way of signaling."

"And what exactly is the battalion's mission, Sire? Not to hold ground, surely."

"Of course not. The mission is to surprise, kill, destroy, and run. Punitive strikes, in case there's another attack on the farmlands. As for weapons, be sure they have the new biologicals from the university. Draft Thon Hilbert, if you have to."

Goldæm looked at Carpios, made a sour mouth, and winked. He did not believe that biologicals were the wave of the military future and he hoped Carpy agreed; but the pirate admiral merely shrugged.

Filpeo turned to the chaplain.

"Colonel Pottscar, suppose my uncle the Archbishop had unlimited funds to spend on the conversion of the Grasshopper Horde. What would happen?"

"Well, if he didn't spend it on young boys, he would waste it sending people like Monsignor Sanual."

The Mayor seemed to suppress a giggle. "How would he spend it on young boys? Charitably?"

"Oh, of course. I was only thinking about how he just last week took in a refugee from Leibowitz

Abbey. He hired a young Brother Torrildo as his assistant and acolyte. He's always thinking of the welfare of young boys."

"I'm acquainted with my uncle, Father Colonel Pottscar. My question is: do you think spending money to Christianize the Nomads would be a wise investment?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because the Nomads would be baptized, take the money, ignore the priests, and do as they have always done."

"Just so. Well, look at the clock! Let us go inspect the wares of the gunsmiths, gentlemen."

"Wait a moment, Sire," said Goldæm. "I think Carp . . . uh, the admiral might have something to say first."

"Go right ahead, Carp," said the Hannegan.

The admiral winced slightly, but said, "The guns the alien warriors brought with them disappeared soon after they met Brownpony."

"How do you know that? And if true, what does it mean?"

"I heard it from Esitt Loyte, Sire. Their homeland has firearms superior to our own, and such guns are now being made on the west coast." He took out a small pistol, only to have it snatched from his hand by one of Filpeo's bodyguards. The guard seemed to have trouble determining if the gun was loaded. The admiral assured him that it was not.

"Where did *you* get that thing?" Filpeo asked.

"About fifty-eight hundred nautical miles from here, Sire. On a great circle course, almost northwest, I'd guess. Or sixty-three hundred miles, by rhumb line course, nearly due west. That's my best guess without looking at the charts."

"Across the ocean? Not our west coast?"

"No, but they're in production on our west coast by now."

"Show me how it works, Admiral," said Filpeo.

Carpíos Robbery pulled five cartridges out of his pocket, loaded the revolver, walked to the nearest window, aimed at the sky, and shocked their eardrums by holding down the trigger and rapidly fanning the hammer five times with the edge of his hand. When he turned around, Filpeo looked pale.

"My God! Is that what's been piling up in the Suckamint Mountains?"

"I have no way of knowing that, Sire. But this special battalion you want Goldy to organize should have a lot of firepower."

"Give me the weapon. Let's go see the gunsmiths."

The admiral released the pistol with obvious reluctance.

According to the gunsmiths' salesmen, the prototype of a similar weapon was already on the drawing board and might be ready in two years, but they were alarmed to see a competitive firearm already in production.

"Would your possession of this gun hasten production?"

"That is very likely, Sire."

Carpíos Robbery winced again.

"I'll let you have it before you leave the city," Filpeo said, then looked at his admiral's expression and added, "Of course, you must send it back to its owner here when you're done with it."

"Certainly, Sire."

Brownpony's interview with His Imperial Majesty Filpeo Harq, Mayor Hannegan VII, happened in City Hall, also called the Imperial Palace, on Thursday, the 5th of January, thus giving the lie to a Jack-rabbit rumor extant in the Province which held that Filpeo Harq always had himself locked up in his private quarters for three days about the time of the full moon, and would see no one. That Thursday the moon was full, and after opening the sealed papers from Pope Amen, the Monarch flew into such a rage that Blacktooth wished the rumor were true. He and Weh-Geh were made to sit on a bench in the corridor outside the mayoral throne room, and they could hear only muffled shouting without being able



to understand much of it. None of the shouting was done by the cardinal.

Presently a priest with a monsignor's bellyband came down the hall and spoke to the guards. One of them knocked hard, opened the door, and shouted, "Monsignor Sanual, in obedience to the Lord Mayor's summons," and pushed him inside, then followed him and closed the door. There was a lull in the shouting.

Blacktooth had never seen Sanual before, but had heard enough about him from both his master and Father Steps-on-Snake to know that he would be anything but a friendly witness, and that Brownpony's actions at the funeral festival on the Plains and his participation in the affair with the Wild Horse Woman were on the court's agenda. He exchanged a glance with Weh-Geh, and saw that both of them were aware of this.

The guard who took Sanual inside now opened the door and spoke to the other guard. "Seize them," he said, and again closed the door.

The guard had no way to seize them, but he pointed his gun at Weh-Geh and told him to throw his swords aside. Two seconds later, he was flat on his back with a sword point at his throat.

"Get his weapon, Brother?" It was a suggestion, not a command.

"No," said Blacktooth. "That was a mistake, Weh-Geh. Remember the cardinal."

Weh-Geh looked at the door. Then he booted the fallen guard in the stomach. Having taken the wind out of the man, he grabbed the gun and burst through the door. Nimmy observed the startled Monarch sitting on his throne. Brownpony had been forced to his knees, and the guard was holding a pistol to his head. Weh-Geh aimed at Filpeo Harq, and barked, "Let my master go!"

Nimmy leaped away from the door, for the Mayor was flanked by two more guards with raised muskets. The man gasping for breath crawled toward Nimmy, who leaped over him to avoid a fight.

There were three distinct explosions, then silence, followed by Filpeo Harq's voice: "Take him and the one in the hall away."

Blacktooth looked inside again. Weh-Geh lay in a growing pool of blood. One of the musketeers was down, but the Mayor himself was holding a pistol. It looked like the one Ædrea had showed to him in the cave. It was impossible to guess who had killed Weh-Geh. All weapons were still pointed at his body. When the Hannegan saw Nimmy standing white-faced in the door, he raised his pistol again, but the monk leaped aside. He made no attempt to escape. A frightened and humiliated Cardinal Brownpony was still kneeling there.

One of the jails at Hannegan City *was* part of the public zoo, where interesting prisoners were exhibited in cages not unlike those used for cougars, true wolves, and monkeys. On the way in, they passed an open area girded by a heavy fence on which there was a sign saying CAMELUS DROMEDARIUS, AFRICA, CONTRIB. ADMIRAL E'FONDOLAI.

"Guard, what are those things?" Brownpony asked.

"It says right there," snapped the jail guard. "Don't stop to gawk."

"They're domesticated!"

"How astute of you. Otherwise, the boy wouldn't be riding on the animal's back, eh?"

"Are they useful?"

"They can go for longer periods without water than horses. The admiral says they are used in desert warfare where he got them."

"Are there more of them?"

"Not as far as I know, but there soon will be." He pointed to a female with a large belly. "But they're the only camels in captivity on this continent, as far as I know. The admiral brought them in the hold of a giant schooner. Now move along, move along!"

They were escorted past cells full of lesser animals, and then cells full of human prisoners. On each cell was posted the name of the occupant species. The humans were mostly murderers: a *Homo sicarius*, a *Homo matricidus*, but two *Homines seditiosi*, and one child rapist. All of them jeered as the two clerics were locked into the third cell on the left. The jailer unwrapped a sign and posted it above the door of the cage, out of sight and out of reach. The man in the cell across the roofless corridor from

theirs looked at it, entered a whispered conversation with the man in the adjacent cell, and fell silent, watching them as if in awe. His own cage was labeled not *Homo* but *Gryllus* (Grasshopper), and his crimes were war crimes. His jeering had been limited to Nomad grunts, so when the jailer was gone Blacktooth spoke to the man in his native tongue.

"What does our sign say?" he asked.

The man did not answer. He and Brownpony were staring at each other. "I know you," the cardinal said in Wilddog. "You were with Hultor Brâm."

The Nomad nodded. "Yes," he answered in his own dialect. "We took you south to meet your Pope. You asked me why the Lord Sharf called us a 'war party.' Now you know. I was the only captive, to my great shame. But Pforft here says that you tried to murder the Hannegan."

"Is that all our sign says?" Nimmy asked.

Evidently the Nomad could not read. He conversed again with the man named Pforft, then shook his head. "I don't know what all those words mean."

Pforft, himself a pederast, spoke to them: "It says heresy, simony, the crime of wounding majesty, as well as attempted regicide."

Fortunately, the hour was late and the zoo was closed for the day. Although the other prisoners wore uniforms, none were furnished for the cardinal and his secretary. Each of them received three blankets against the January cold. The cage was open to the weather on the south side. At least they would get sun during part of the day.

The cardinal still had not fully recovered from the curse of Meldown. "My Lady of the Buzzards had a buzzard's breath, it seems," he told Blacktooth, when he was feeling almost hysterically cheerful. "When Urion's Angel of Battle fights my Buzzard of Battle, which do you bet on to win?"

"M'Lord, doesn't that old prayer go: 'Holy Michael Archangel, *deliver* us from battle'?"

"No, it doesn't, Brother Monk. It's '*defend* us *in* battle,' but '*deliver* us *from* the snares of the devil.' As you well know. But what would you bet right now on either prayer being answered?"

"Nothing. If I remember the Nomad myth right, your Burregun, since you claim her, always mourns as she eats the fallen warriors, the children of her sister the Day Maiden. She doesn't want war either."

"You are right, we must pray for peace while girding for war. Of course you are right, Nimmy, you're always right."

Nimmy hung his head and frowned. But Brownpony was not being just sarcastic. To avoid being understood by other prisoners, they were speaking neo-Latin, and the cardinal's speech was unguarded.

"I mean it. You were right to leave the abbey, although you are a monk of Leibowitz. You were right to fall in love with a girl like Ædrea. You are right to disapprove of my importing and selling west-coast weapons without telling His Holiness." Blacktooth looked at him in surprise. Brownpony noticed the look and went on: "Pope Linus Six, who gave red hats to your late abbot and me, was the man who assigned me the task, in a letter which I still have in Valana. Linus told me not to show it to anyone unless I got caught, and then only to a pope. Frankly, Nimmy, I have almost wanted to get caught."

"Oh." Blacktooth thought it over. It was certainly true that Brownpony had not been cautious, allowing even Aberlott the Mouth to learn of his activities. But he would probably rather be caught by Amen Specklebird. Suddenly the cardinal seemed less sinister, an unwell man with a hump on his back and an uneasy conscience.

Fortunately, during visitor's hours, when children would spit at them through the bars of their cages, the human animals were fed raw beef and raw potatoes for the amusement of the crowd. No one was watching when they ate cornmeal mush for breakfast. Nimmy remembered from Boedullus that eating raw meat, or better still, drinking fresh blood as the Nomads sometimes did, was "good for the patient's own blood," and he persuaded Brownpony to eat some of the meat. Nimmy liked flesh raw, if fresh, but sometimes the jail meat tasted like coyote kill, and raw potatoes gave them both a stomachache. Filpeo's government did provide enough mush to keep the zoo's display specimens from looking starved. During their stay at the prison, three inmates were led from their death cells to the chopping block. From fellow prisoners, they learned that Wooshin had been replaced with a chopping machine, not another electric chair. The electric dynamo, an expensive affair, could be put to more productive use than frying felons.

The moon phase had waned from full to new. Then one afternoon past visitors' hours, a man in a lacy surplice came and stood looking in at them.

"Torildo!"

The former brother winked at Nimmy but remained silent.

"What do you want, man?" Brownpony snapped.

"My Lord the Archbishop wonders if you would like the Eucharist brought to you here."

"I would like bread and wine with which to offer Mass myself."

"I'll ask," said Torildo, and departed.

"Find out if the Pope knows we're in jail!" Blacktooth called after him.

"Nimmy!" hissed the cardinal.

But Torildo had stopped. Without looking back, he said, "He knows," and resumed his departure.

"Damn! It's all over." Brownpony was angry and downcast.

Blacktooth decided to let him alone. He rolled up in his blankets and took a nap in the icy wind.

Three days later Torildo came back. This time Blacktooth winked at him. Torildo blushed. "I never saw a sarcastic wink before," he said.

"What about the bread and wine?" the cardinal asked.

"Your Eminence will not have time to say Mass." He produced a letter from a sleeve and a key from his pocket. "I am to let you go when you read this and promise to obey these instructions."

Brownpony accepted the papers and began reading, handing each page to Blacktooth as he finished.

"Damn! It's all over," the cardinal repeated, again downcast but without anger.

"I thought every cardinal had a Church in New Rome," Nimmy remarked as soon as he read the first lines.

"There *is* a Saint Michael's in New Rome," Brownpony told him. "And it's Urion's Church, but there he is not called the Angel of Battle."

They read in silence while Torildo watched and impatiently drummed the key in his palm. The first page was thus.

To His Eminence Elia Cardinal Brownpony, Deacon of Saint Maisie's.

From Urion Cardinal Benefez, Archbishop of Saint Michael the Archangel.

Inasmuch as the pretended Pope, one Amen Specklebird, has by trying to resign the papacy, admitted that he was never Pope, it has pleased His Imperial Grace the Mayor of Texark to pardon all of your crimes except attempted regicide, for which you and your servant Blacktooth St. George are under suspended sentences of death. You are to be expelled from the Empire as *personae non gratae*. By countersigning this letter in the place indicated below, you enter a plea to the remaining charge against you of *nolo contendere*, which His Grace is persuaded to accept, and you agree to be escorted under guard as swiftly as possible to a crossing point of your choosing on the Bay Ghost River, and promise never to return except by order of a reigning Pontiff, a General Council, or a Conclave, and only for the purpose of direct passage to or from New Rome from the nearest border crossing.

There was a place for their signatures below a statement acknowledging the charges with a plea of no contest, and agreeing to obey a decree of permanent banishment.

The other pages were a more or less personal plea from Benefez to Brownpony and other Valanan cardinals to accept New Rome as the proper place for an immediate conclave to elect a pope. When Brownpony finished reading, he looked up at Torildo. The acolyte was holding a metal pen and a phial of ink out to him through the bars. They quickly signed, and the key turned in the lock.

Their trip back to the Bay Ghost by coach on the main military highway west was a fast, rough ride, taking less than ten days. Before they left the Province, the guards permitted Brownpony to buy two horses from a Jackrabbit farmer. The moon was full again, allowing them to ride sometimes by night. When they came at last to Leibowitz Abbey, an excited Abbot Olshuen knelt to kiss the cardinal's ring and tell him that he, Brownpony, was now Pope-Elect, chosen by an angry conclave of Valanan

cardinals, called by Pope Amen before his resignation. The cardinals were eagerly awaiting his *accepto*.

"Who brought this crazy message?" Brownpony demanded.

"Why, it was an old guest of ours, who went to New Rome with you. Namely, Wooshin. Cardinal Nauwhat sent him with the letter from the Curia—it's in my office—and an oral message from Sorely."

"What was the oral message?"

"That he had opposed the conclave, but hoped you would accept the election anyway."

"He knows it isn't legal" was the Red Deacon's immediate comment. "Of course I won't accept."

"You have a more immediate problem," said Olshuen, recovering from his initial awe of the cardinal.

"And what is that, Dom Abiquiu?"

"Have you told Brother St. George about his young lady? She came for him while you were gone. He thought she had died. She said you knew she was alive."

Brownpony was suddenly nervous. "We'll talk about that. Let's go to your office. I need to read the letter from the Curia."

## CHAPTER 19

Let all guests who arrive be received as Christ, for He is going to say, "I came as a guest, and you received me."

—*Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 53

HEY HAD ARRIVED AT LEIBOWITZ ABBEY DURING the recreational hour in the late afternoon of Ash Wednesday. The Yellow Guard presided over several kick-boxing matches between novices, and even the professed Brothers Wren and Singing Cow were sparring clumsily. Blacktooth observed that the style of fighting differed in some respects from that of Wooshin—although the Axe would never admit to having a "style". However, Foreman Jing, who had fenced with Wooshin, called it the "way of the homeless sword," and a "style of no-style."

Brownpony's first duty was to confer with Abbot Olshuen.

Blacktooth's was to bring bad news to the Yellow Guard. First he established himself in the guest room.

"You're still here!" he exclaimed upon entering.

"No, no," said Önmü Kun, the Jackrabbit gun smuggler. "I'm back for the second time since you left." He was full of wine and the urge to talk. "The Jackrabbit Weejus and Bear Spirit have chosen me as sharf, did you know that?"

Nimmy doubted it, but didn't much care. By looking around at their war gear, Nimmy knew the comrades of the late Weh-Geh, although they were working hard around the abbey, participating in the liturgy, and teaching weaponless fighting to novices, were still staying in the guesthouse along with Önmü Kun. This to Nimmy meant that Olshuen was not about to take them on as postulants or novices without permission from on high.

They greeted him with smiles and handclasps as they returned from the bouts in the courtyard, but Önmü was still talking and laughing about his adventures in the Province, and the warriors were a polite lot. Only their eyes questioned him ("Weh-Geh? Where?"), but they waited for the smuggler to finish.

Brownpony's flirtations with Churches in the Province had made it easier for Önmü to sell guns, he said. He had only to ask a pastor whether he had seen Cardinal Brownpony on his way toward Hannegan City. If the priest said that he had not, Önmü hurried away. If he had seen him, and showed the slightest enthusiasm, it meant there existed a group of local partisans wanting arms. One cadre which called itself the Knights of Empty Sky was a charity organization. He had supplied them not only with infantry weapons, but made a special trip to bring them three cannon that fired either a peach-size ball or a load of heavy buckshot, for those badly in need of charity. According to "Sharf" Önmü, the Knights anointed each cannon with oil, placed it in a well-caulked box, dug a shallow grave in the Churchyard,

and buried it by night.

Blacktooth murmured politely in reply, but finally turned his back toward the tipsy smuggler, and faced the five warriors who watched him expectantly with those dark eyes with uncreased lids. He was ashamed of his failure to befriend an alien in a strange land for no better reason than that he was not Wooshin.

"Brother Weh-Geh was killed while defending his master," he told them—rather loudly to silence Önmü. "I heard it happen, but I did not see it. There were three shots. There were four men holding guns pointed at him when I looked through the door, and he was already down. He had taken a gun he took from one of our guards. If he fired it, he must have missed. I am very sorry. Whether it was a mistake or not, he was living out his duty. He was a better monk than I."

"Was it a mistake?" asked Jing-U-Wan, the Foreman.

"Who were those four men?" Gai-See wanted to know.

"Did he have last rites?" asked Woosoh-Loh. "A proper funeral?"

"Dare we ask Abbot Olshuen to say a Mass for him?"

Nimmy tried to answer some of their questions and apologize for his inability to answer others. He finished his talk with them by promising to see Olshuen about a Mass for the repose of souls on behalf of Weh-Geh, and he went at once to the abbot's office. The door was open, and Brownpony was sitting at the abbot's desk and talking while Olshuen sat on a stool.

"It's a shame the Hannegan has a monopoly on the telegraph," the cardinal complained as he finished writing a letter which Nimmy was certain was addressed to the Valanan Curia. He turned sideways at the desk to look at the abbot who owned the desk and he saw Nimmy in the doorway, beckoned him in, and continued. "The Church has the money to hire Filpeo's technicians. We could build a line from here to Valana, and perhaps from Valana to the Oregonians."

The abbot said, "Money enough, yes. But what about the copper? I heard Hannegan had to confiscate coinage, pots, and Church bells. Buy it, you might. But who has it to sell?"

"I'm told silver conducts electrical essence even better than copper. And I'm not sure it's practical, but we have a source of silver."

"Oh? Where is that?"

Brownpony changed the subject. He handed Olshuen a letter and asked, "What do you think of this? Come in, Nimmy, come in."

The abbot took it and studied for a bit, holding it so that Blacktooth might read it as well if he wanted to:

To Sorely Cardinal Nauwhat, Secretary of Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Concerns.

From Elia Cardinal Brownpony, Vicar Apostolic to the Hordes.

*Non accepto!*

You know it is not possible to hold a conclave without notification of every cardinal on the continent. The Curia must have recommended to His Holiness that he clarify the law on both resignations and conclaves, and I cannot believe that he made legal a conclave such as the one the Curia has apparently conducted. You know it, and I know it. You must have been a minority in an angry Sacred College.

My imprisonment by the Hannegan forced His Holiness to offer his resignation. But I am free now, and I pray that he reconsider. He is not bound by anything he did under pressure of blackmail; let him renounce his resignation saying that it was forced. If he will not do that, then you must summon every cardinal (including me here at the

abbey) to Valana to choose another successor of Saint Peter, complying in every way with existing legislation.

Although I appreciate the irony of electing a Pope that Hannegan just released from jail in a trade-off of this kind, I have to say again, *non accepto*, as you, Sorely, knew I would.

I await instructions from my sovereign Pontiff, Pope Amen, and when they come, it would please me greatly if you can spare Wooshin to bring them here.

"You ask me what I think? How should I know?" Olshuen said while shaking his head. "In the name of God, m'Lord, I am only a monk of Leibowitz. I am not Abbot Jarad. My only vocation is here, my God is here, and although I am a servant of Holy Mother Church . . ."

"Oh, bother. Stop, stop, please! I'm sorry I showed it to you. Jarad should have refused the red hat, but the seventh Linus insisted. I know that, and you probably do too."

"I'm trying to remember if an abbot here ever refused a Pope's request, m'Lord."

"Maybe not, but if Amen Specklebird made you a cardinal, what would you say?"

Olshuen hesitated before he said, "No, not even from him." It was plain that even those who knew him only by hearsay adored the old priest-hermit-magician Pope. But among lovers of power, only Brownpony seemed to feel a deep affection for him.

Nimmy presented his petition on behalf of Jing-U-Wan's men and their deceased brother, and Olshuen promised a Mass. The next morning Brownpony sent Blacktooth to Sanly Bowitts with the message and gold enough to hire a courier with two horses to carry it quickly to Valana. The messenger promised to ride from dawn to dusk, and by night when the moon permitted, and to wait in Valana for a reply, unless Wooshin replaced him.

While he was returning to the abbey, he met Gai-See riding toward the village. They exchanged greetings and paused for a moment. Nimmy asked why he was going to town, and Gai-See said, "After you left, the cardinal decided to send another message. I have it with me."

"Another letter to Valana?"

"No. New Jerusalem." He frowned at himself. "You have a right to ask that?"

"Probably not. I'll try to forget it."

They went their opposite directions. Nimmy knew well what the cardinal had to say to Mayor Dion. Somehow a small weapon from their west-coast arsenal had found its way into the hand of Filpeo Harq. Both master and servant had seen it. There seemed to be no other possibility than that New Jerusalem had been infiltrated by the Hannegan's agent. But he would not ask Brownpony about it, lest he make trouble for Gai-See, who told him the letter's destination.

While Nimmy in October had found unfriendly attitudes in the atmosphere at the monastery, he now found them downright hostile in early March. He was being shunned again by the professed. On the other hand, some novices seemed to find him much more interesting than before. He tried to find out what had happened since, but "unexpected visitors" was the only mumbled answer he could get to his questions.

The three novices who were in the abbot's waiting room overheard a shouting match between the abbot and Cardinal Brownpony—or "Pope Brownpony," as one of them called him—and mentioned it to Nimmy. Very little of the shouting was understandable, but that it was about Blacktooth, they were certain.

Blacktooth decided to confront the cardinal, but upon finding him kneeling before the lady altar praying to the Virgin, he merely knelt beside him and waited. Brownpony stirred, and Nimmy sensed his discomfort. The Red Deacon crossed himself and arose. The monk waited a few seconds and did the same. Brownpony was pacing toward the door. Nimmy shuffled behind him. Hearing the shuffle, the Red Deacon turned.

"Do you want something, Brother St. George?"

"Only to know what's going on."

They walked outside and stopped.

"I knew she *might* be alive. But I did not want to arouse false hopes. Go climb the Mesa of Last Resort. The man who saw her last may be living there now." The cardinal started walking away.

"She? Who?" Nimmy called after him.

Brownpony looked back at him without answering.

"*Edrea!*"

"Go to the Mesa. I'll tell the abbot I sent you. He wanted to send you himself. But it was my responsibility. I let you down."

Pale as a ghost, Nimmy hurried toward the kitchen to beg some hard biscuits and water for the journey. From the cook, who was in a good humor, he received the biscuits, some cheese, and a

wineskin filled with a mixture of wine and water. Then he went to the guesthouse to pack a bedroll; it was too late to leave that day, so he slept and left before daylight while his brethren were being called to Lauds. It was a long hike to Last Resort, and the first thing he saw when he arrived at the usual way of ascent was a recent grave with two sticks lashed together for a cross. Its meaning eluded him. After the slow climb, the sun was sinking behind distant mountains. He went straight to the ramshackle shelter he had discovered the previous year and found it rebuilt, but no one was home. He was reluctant to try the door.

After shouting a few times and hearing no answer, he sat on his bedroll to wait. The light was becoming too dim for reading Compline, so he said his rosary, sometimes contemplating the mystery of each decade and sometimes contemplating the beautiful waif who had stolen it from him. The grave at the foot of the Mesa kept coming to mind. He shook his head impatiently and resumed contemplation of the fifth glorious mystery, which was the coronation in Heaven of the Mother by the Son, after her bodily assumption. But there was no before or after, according to Amen Specklebird, for whom the coronation of the Virgin was an event belonging to eternity. The Virgin's face became Ædrea's, and he finished the last decade as quickly as possible. When he looked up, a gaunt silhouette with a club raised on high stood over him against the twilight sky.

It croaked: "Don't get up! Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"I am Brother Blacktooth St. George, and my master Cardinal Brownpony sent me."

"Oh, I remember you now," said the old Jew, squinting in the twilight. "On the road to New Jerusalem, you asked too many questions."

"Did you make rain for them?"

"Still asking too many questions. Your master sent you with a message? For me?"

"No, he sent me with a question. What can you tell me about Ædrea? You saw her. Where did she go?"

The old Jew was silent for several seconds. "I happened to be of some assistance to her when she fled from her father. She came here with me, after the abbey turned her away. She had her babies. She went away."

"Babies!"

"Twin boys. They were not alike, though. She left them with me, because they were not perfect. Her father would have killed them. And she had nowhere else to go but home. She knows too much about affairs in New Jerusalem to risk getting caught on the way east to the Valley."

"Where are the children?"

"The milk of my goat did not agree with them. I took them to Sanly Bowitts. I left them with a woman who promised to take care of them until they were sent for."

"By whom?"

"Hmm-nnn. How should I know? Someone from the Valley. Or you, the father, probably."

'Ædrea told you that I am the father?"

"She is a talkative young woman. She was here for, hmm-nnn, seven or eight weeks. She was always singing or talking. I miss her singing, not her talking." He groped in his bag and handed Nimmy pieces of flint and steel. "That's the hearth, there in the shadow. Light the tinder. The wood is stacked."

"Was it a hard birth?"

"Very hard. I had to cut. She lost a lot of blood."

"Cut? You are a physician?"

"I am all things."

Nimmy got the fire started at last. Following the old hermit's instructions, he found in the hut a box of crumbled dry meal, dumped two double handfuls to a pot with a bail, and added water from a great jug by the door.

"Hang it from the tripod. Stir it with a clean stick."

"What is that stuff?"

"Food, Father."

"Don't call me that. I'm no priest!"

"Did I say you were? You're a father, though. I could call you 'Dad.' "

Blacktooth felt himself reddening. "Why don't you call me 'Nimmy'?"

"Is that what they call you at the abbey?"

"No, but my master does."

"Is he not at the abbey?"

"Yes?"

"Well, it seems your master let you think she was dead, isn't it so?"

"He said he couldn't be sure, didn't want to arouse false hope. I think I believe him."

"Hah!" The old Jew began chuckling to himself.

Nimmy stirred the pot until the mush turned thick. The old hermit brought out metal plates, spoons, and cups. Nimmy pulled his biscuits out of the bedroll, poured the cups full of his watered wine. They sat on a bench made of a flat stone supported by fat legs that were sunk in the ground, and ate dinner by the firelight.

Blacktooth crossed himself and whispered the blessing. The old Jew, holding his bowl, sang out a few words of prayer in a strange tongue which Nimmy supposed to be Hebrew.

The mush, Benjamin told him, was made of processed mesquite beans he had brought from Sanly Bowitts. Later in the year, he would pick and process his own. He had raised goats here before, and would try to acquire a herd again. He spoke of past ages as if he had been there personally. Several times he spoke of an "Abbot Jerome" as if he were still ruling the monastery, and referred to the conquests of Hannegan II as if they were still happening. For him, all ages seemed to coexist in his own private Now.

Nimmy spent the night inside the old man's hut. Again he dreamed the dream of the open grave at the abbey, the one with the baby in it, but he awoke in surprise from the dream, knowing that Jarad Kendemin was buried there. In the morning, he dared to ask Benjamin about the recent grave at the foot of the Mesa. The hermit denied any knowledge of it, then noticed Nimmy's doubt.

"If you think I buried her there, go try to dig her up."

"I believe you."

Nimmy was not in a hurry to leave. His anger toward the cardinal had been aroused, and he wanted to rid himself of it, or turn it into mere diminished trust. Brownpony had withheld the truth from him before, but he could not remember an outright lie. From what the old man said, he knew Ædrea thought he lied. But she had not heard his actual words to Blacktooth.

He stayed an extra day and night. The sky was overcast, and a cold wind had risen. The waterskin and the hermit's jug were empty.

"Where do you get water up here?"

Benjamin looked at him, pointed casually at the sky, then continued milking the goat.

Twenty seconds passed. A large, cold drop of water hit the monk in the face. Moments later, there was a brief cloudburst. Nimmy asked no more questions.

The old hermit complained that Nimmy was eating more food than he brought with him. So he left shortly after dawn on the third day. When gravel came rattling down the way behind him, he looked back up the path. The old Jew was following him down with a shovel.

Because of the dream, Nimmy had a brief vision of an open grave. And on the third day, she arose again—

But the grave was not open. Instead, they now found two graves at the foot of the Mesa. Obviously one had been dug only yesterday. The old Jew leaned on his shovel, and squinted at Nimmy.

"No, I won't dig," the monk said. "Goodbye and thank you." He hurried away toward Sanly Bowitts without looking back.

Benjamin had given him the old woman's name. He found her old adobe house without difficulty, and counted seven children playing in the yard. He suddenly realized this was the "orphanage" the abbey had always supported in the town. The woman was sullen. She seemed to know who he was and why he



was here, but considered him an outcast and a scoundrel. "Why did you not come for them ten days ago? They have been taken away for adoption."

"By whom?"

"Three sisters."

"Where were they taken?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

When Blacktooth showed signs of anger, she called him a scoundrel, a libertine, a false monk. She ordered him to leave at once, and retired to the old adobe building.

"Where did the mother go?" he yelled after her, to no effect. So he marched in gloom back to the abbey.

The shooting began while the monks were in the convent's refectory for lunch on the following day. Atop the parapet wall, Father Levion, now Prior, was fasting when the first distant *boom!* occurred. He was praying, as he often did, toward the grandeur of the broken desert horizon and to the God who made it. The first explosion scarcely distracted him from prayer, although his eyes scanned the open country for a sign of smoke. After the second *boom!* Önmü Kun came running out of the refectory and across the courtyard. He saw Levion on the wall and raced up the stairs to join him.

"Where?" he asked breathlessly.

"I don't know. I didn't see anything."

*Boom!* The interval between explosions was about a minute and a half.

"It sounds like it's coming from over there," said Levion, pointing down the valley.

"The crosswind makes it sound that way," Önmü replied, looking straight at the Mesa of Last Resort.

After the fourth *boom!*, he pointed at the Mesa. There was indeed a tiny wisp of smoke up there.

On the fifth *boom!*, a plume of dust shot up from a spot about two hundred paces from the abbey.

"Damn! He's getting our range!" cried the smuggler.

On the sixth *boom!*, a cannonball hit the center of the road in front of the abbey, bounced through the open gates, caromed off the stone curb around the rose bed, and went on bouncing directly into the convent and through the refectory doors. Screaming was heard, and monks came pouring out of the building.

"Take cover!" yelled the Jackrabbit. "He's got two balls left."

There were no more shots, and while the monks at their meager Lenten lunch were badly frightened, the only damage was in the kitchen; but Önmü had indicted himself by knowing too much. The cannonball was found, and although it had been deformed and somewhat flattened, there appeared to be a few characters in Hebrew scratched upon it. An expert was summoned. The legible part of the inscription said, ". . . maketh bread to spring forth from the Earth." It was a blessing over food. "Apt enough, considering the target," said the translator. There was an immediate conference in the abbot's office. Blacktooth was called in, and appointed interrogator, since he knew the man as well as anyone, and spoke his dialect best.

They met in the guesthouse.

"By what right are you staying here, good simpleton?"

"I was invited," said the Jackrabbit.

"By whom?"

"By Abbot Olshuen, who else?"

"At the cardinal's insistence?"

"Probably."

"The abbot knows what you do?"

"I don't know. But even if he knows, I would not, I could not, bring my merchandise here. I never have."

"So you bury it in the desert here until you're ready to travel again. Then you dig it up."

"This time, the old man dug it up. My bad luck. I thought he never came down, and never had visitors. It's the first time I used that spot. I didn't expect him to desecrate a grave."

"He's a little crazy, but not stupid. He knew it was no grave. So he dug up your cannon, and sent us a message with it."

"He must have exceeded the maximum load to reach this far. And pointed it up about forty degrees."

"And he's shooting from about five hundred feet above us."

"Was he trying to kill someone?"

"Old Benjamin? No. He was telling the abbot about you."

"I'd better leave."

"What was in the other grave?"

"Rifles."

"If you're going to try to reclaim your merchandise, someone is going to go with you. There are six of us. Any one of us can manage you."

"Even you?" The Jackrabbit laughed.

Blacktooth knocked the wind out of him and threw him in the corner. Önmü looked up in surprise, gasping for breath, but without anger.

"Why did you do that, Brother St. George?"

"To show you, if you get into a quarrel with the old man over your guns, you're going to lose."

"But they *are* my guns! They are for the Grasshopper, and I am Sharf."

"You know that's a lie. You told me yourself you get a commission."

"Sure, if I sell them. If I lose them, they're mine."

"I don't understand."

"I have to pay for them. Who do you think owns them, Cardinal Brownpony?"

"I don't know, but I doubt it. Mayor Dion, probably. But whoever sells them, you're only the broker."

"I am also Sharf! Secretly, of course."

Önmü Kun disappeared from the abbey that night, never to return. Being related to the royal tribe was prerequisite to election as sharf of a horde, and Nimmy doubted that any Nomad north of the Nady Ann would recognize his claim. Gai-See was sent galloping toward Last Resort on the abbot's horse to protect the old Jew, and if possible to negotiate the surrender of the weapons. He returned the following day dragging one cannon, and reported two empty graves, also reported that Benjamin had not opened the second grave. Evidently Kun had recovered his rifles and moved on. But so it was that Leibowitz Abbey came into possession of modern ordnance, but as yet no ammunition. Abiquiu Olshuen locked the cannon in the basement room with the rusty weapons from earlier centuries.

Novices reported another loud argument between the cardinal and the abbot behind closed doors. This time it was about guns. Brownpony emerged angry and humiliated; he told Blacktooth that Olshuen felt the abbey's hospitality had been abused.

"He knows now that the Jackrabbit is being armed," he told Nimmy. "He's afraid for the monastery, if the Hannegan suspects his monks are involved. He wants Jing's men to leave."

"But they have nothing to do with it!"

"No, but the concept of warrior monks is alien to Dom Abiquiu's idea of Christianity. To him it's a scandal. We should leave here soon."

"Did the Jackrabbit grandmothers really choose Önmü Kun as Sharf, as he claims?"

"Everything is secretive in Jackrabbit country, Nimmy. With them, the test is not legal but practical. If the men follow him in battle, he is Sharf. If they don't, he is not, no matter what the Weeju say."

Well into Lent, a messenger from Hannegan City brought a petition addressed to all bishops and signed by Urien Benefez and seven other cardinals. It announced a General Council of the Church to be held in New Rome six weeks after Easter, and all bishops and abbots able to travel must attend. The purpose of the Council would be to draft new legislation concerning conclaves.

"Only a sovereign Pontiff can summon a General Council," said Brownpony, and refused to sign. Olshuen also refused. The messenger shrugged and rode on.

Wooshin arrived the following day with the expected summons to a conclave in Valana. He was

warmly greeted by Brownpony, Blacktooth, and the Yellow Guard, but the summons he brought was rather strange. Apparently the Curia knew of the petition for a General Council, for the tone of the summons was angry, and the last paragraph threatened excommunication to any cardinal who attended a rump session in New Rome "where schismatics and heretics will try to install a known sodomite to sit on the throne of Peter the Apostle." The document was signed by *Amen, Episcopus Romae, servus servorum Dei*, but Brownpony was suspicious of the signature, and the language was certainly not Specklebird's.

"Things are getting ugly," said the Red Deacon. "We must leave here at once."

## CHAPTER 20

We think it sufficient for the daily dinner, whether at the sixth or the ninth hour, that every table have two cooked dishes, on account of individual infirmities, so that he who for some reason cannot eat of the one may make his meal of the other.

—*Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 39

OR MORE THAN A YEAR NOW, IT SEEMED TO Blacktooth that he was always on the road. This time there was no coach to Valana. Eight men with sixteen horses rode the papal highway north. Several miles south of the side road which led to Shard's place and on into the mountains of New Jerusalem, Cardinal Brownpony stopped, called Blacktooth and Wooshin to his side, and announced a detour around that whole area.

Blacktooth protested. "M'Lord, the only one who needs to take a detour is me. I can ride east out into the scrub, travel a few miles north, and then catch up with you on the road before dark."

"No," said the cardinal. "I want no more than one of us to be seen. Wooshin, pick a man to ride past the glep guards and take a message to Magister Dion. The message is really for Shard as much as for the Mayor, but Shard will accept orders only from Dion."

"Why not send me?" Axe offered.

"No. Shard remembers you."

Nimmy said, "He may remember any or all of us. He went for his gun and came out shooting when we were on our way to the abbey last fall."

Axe went to consult the warrior monks. When he came back, he said, "I suggest Gai-See. He's the smallest target and rides the fastest horse. If he can't find a way around, he can wait until dark and gallop right up Scarecrow Alley. There's moon enough."

Brownpony nodded and beckoned to Gai-See, then instructed him to avoid any contact with the families that guarded the passage. "Tell this to Dion: 'On the east, open gates to the Wilddog and to the Grasshopper. On the west, send gifts to the Curia.' Now repeat that, please."

"On the east, open gates to the Wilddog and to the Grasshopper. On the west, send gifts to the Curia."

"Good! Then remind him of what Nimmy and I saw in the hand of the Hannegan. I sent him a message about it from the abbey. If he got it, he will know what has to be done. Afterward, he will provide you with a well-laden pack mule. Leave New Jerusalem from the west and come on to Valana as fast as you can."

Gai-See dismounted, bowed to the cardinal, and sat down beside the trail. "He'll wait until dark," said Axe. "I too think it's safer that way."

Brownpony looked at Blacktooth. "Why so disappointed?" he asked.

"It's nothing, m'Lord."

"You were hoping someone would be able to find out if Ædrea is in her father's house?"

"I know it's not practical. It would be dangerous."

"Never mind. Gai-See can ask the Mayor about her."

"And get the same kind of truth about her as he gave to me?"

Brownpony shrugged. "I can't tell Dion what to say or do, except with my own property."

It was the first time the cardinal had spoken of the arsenal as his own property, but that was not Blacktooth's concern.

"M'Lord, I wish Gai-See would not mention Ædrea to Dion."

"Why not?"

"Because he will be wondering about a spy or a traitor when Gai-See tells him about the gun we saw in Filpeo's hand. And Ædrea ran away from home during that time. We know where she went, but the Mayor may not believe her."

The cardinal looked down at Gai-See. "Did you hear and understand that?"

"Yes, m'Lord Cardinal. I'll be discreet."

"We'll see you in Valana. Now, let's ride a mile or so back into the juniper scrub."

Three days later, they camped in the scrub half a mile east of the papal highway on the evening of Monday, April 3rd. It would be the night of the Paschal full moon of Holy Week, but the sun was not yet set, and because their food supply was running short, Nimmy went forth in search of roots and edible greens that might be beginning to sprout, while Wooshin took the party's only firearm and went to hunt small game while the cardinal's warriors gathered wood and tended the fire. Brownpony himself, clearly exhausted from the long journey and developing a nasty cough, wrapped himself in blankets and with his head on a saddle, fell asleep before dark.

Blacktooth dug up a few bulbs of last year's wild onions from the bank of a half-frozen creekbed; they had little value except as seasoning, in case the Axe came back with meat. Of course it was a day of Lenten abstinence, but it was also an emergency, especially for the cardinal, who had never fully recovered from his ordeal in the breeding pit. Nimmy tried to keep track of his direction from camp by watching the sunset, the stars of twilight, and finally the glow of the campfire in the distance. He found yucca, and uprooted some skinny tubers from the hard ground with a sharp stick.

He heard two gunshots, and decided that they came from Wooshin's pistol, but they were closely followed by a third—too closely for the Axe to have reloaded. A horse galloped past along a creekbank at the foot of the hill, and he caught a glimpse of a Nomad rider. There was a burst of shouting from the direction of the camp, accompanied by one more gunshot, but he could make out only the voices of Foreman Jing and Woosoh-Loh in their native tongue, until he heard Axe shout a death threat in poor but understandable Wild-dog, and a weaker echo from the cardinal that the threat was real and enforceable.

Nimmy hurried back toward the firelight as quietly as possible. Two Nomad outlaws were sitting on the ground with their hands tied behind them, surrounded by Brownpony's guards. The cardinal himself was sitting up in his bedroll. A strange small horse was tied to a juniper, and two unfamiliar muskets were propped against a log.

"Nimmy, where are you?"

It was Brownpony's voice. Blacktooth hurried into the firelight and dumped the yucca and wild onions beside the body of a dead wilddog. The cardinal winced at the odor of the onions.

Wooshin explained. Three motherless ones with only one horse among them had tried to steal two horses from the cardinal. One had succeeded but the men who had dismounted to search and rob Brownpony had been surprised and captured by Axe and the others who had heard their approach.

The scruffy Nomads were looking around in terror at the strange warriors with their long blades.

"Nimmy, you tell them what the situation is," said Axe with a wink.

Blacktooth brushed the root dirt from his robe and went to stand behind his master. Facing them across the fire, he drew himself up, pointed at one of the men, and said in impeccable Grasshopper:

"I know you. You haunt this region. Now you have accosted the Vicar Apostolic to the hordes, to whom even the *Qæsach dri Vørdar* Ösle Høngan Chür comes for counsel, not to mention the Grasshopper sharf, Eltür Bråm. Your fellow bandit has just stolen the horse of the High Shaman of all Christendom, the next Sharf and Great Uncle of the Holy Roman Catholic Church. He has also been chosen by the Buzzard of Battle; the Weejus have announced it."

"Don't overdo it, Nimmy," said the cardinal in Churchspeak.

"Horse for horse!" said the bolder of the two. "You take this horse, Great Man. We even."

Nimmy ignored him and spoke again to the man he recognized. "You! It was Holy Madness himself, now Lord of the Hordes, that stopped you from raping Ædrea last year near Shard's place, not far from here."

The outlaw shrugged but seemed suddenly meek.

Brownpony picked himself up out of the bedroll and went to inspect the scruffy mustang. Having walked around the little mare, he faced them and said sternly in Wilddog, "She belongs to the *Høngin Fuijæ Vurn*. You dare to violate a mare of the Wild Horse Woman! Lord Ösle Høngan Chür would have you eviscerated and fed to the dogs. Wooshin, release the animal at once."

The Axe flipped his sword twice, once to slice the hackamore that made her fast to the limb, the second time to swat her behind with the flat of the blade. The mustang snorted, kicked, and clattered away into the night. Since Gai-See had not taken an extra mount on his gallop through Scarecrow Alley, they still had an extra horse per man, but neither Brownpony nor his aides were ready to let the matter lie.

"Who is your master?" the cardinal asked.

"His name is Mounts-Everybody."

"How far is his camp from here?"

"Almost a day's ride, Great Man."

"How many men in your band?"

The outlaw seemed to be counting on mental fingers for a moment. "Thirty-seven, I think."

"And women? Children?"

"Yesterday there were five captives. Today maybe more, maybe less."

"And how many bands like yours?"

"I don't know. Sometimes we encounter other no-family people. Sometimes we fight, sometimes we join together. There are many bachelors along the fringes of the Wilddog range, and to the south along the Nady Ann."

"Do you ever fight or rob farmers?"

"It is not a wise policy."

"Does it happen?"

"Sometimes."

"Would you like to be paid for fighting farmers?"

The captives looked at each other and shifted uncomfortably. Brownpony elaborated:

"There is a war between the Grasshopper and the Hannegan's farmers."

"We know, but we are at war with both."

"But suppose the Grasshopper accepted you as allies?"

"That they would never do, Great Man."

"Did the monk here tell you that I am the Christian shaman to all the hordes?"

"We don't know what that means."

"It means," said Blacktooth, "that the word of His Eminence has power with all three hordes."

"Would you fight against the Hannegan under Demon Light?"

"There is no possibility."

"What about a Jackrabbit sharf?"

The idea of a Jackrabbit sharf brought roaring laughter from the bound men.

"Let the cowards go," Brownpony ordered. "You whimpering wild puppies go tell your Mounts-Everybody to come and see me in Valana, unless he's a coward, and bring back the horse you stole. Otherwise, you will be driven south of the Nady Ann and east of the Bay Ghost. The Hannegan will know what to do with you. Now go."

Easter arrived before they reached Valana. Brownpony concelebrated the Mass of the Resurrection in a wayside Church with a circuit-riding mission priest who stumbled through the liturgy, too frightened by high rank to get anything quite right.

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Some days later a fast rider from Pobla, where they had spent the night, brought word of their coming to Valana, and Sorely Cardinal Nauwhat and the SEEC guard Elkin were waiting for them at the Venison House Tavern, where the cardinal had entertained Kindly Light the previous year. It was close to sundown, so they ordered dinner. The two prelates with their assistants sat together, while Wooshin and the Yellow Guard took an adjacent table. Sorely Nauwhat was a fast talker, and he had a lot to explain.

Before submitting his resignation, which Nauwhat, like Brownpony, regarded as revocable if not wholly invalid, Pope Amen had broken with a recent tradition and created new cardinals, as many as forty-nine of them, and had been induced to take the almost unprecedented action of stripping forty-nine others of their cardinalates. This shocked Brownpony, but it made the attempt at a conclave understandable, if not legal.

Amen Specklebird, who insisted that his resignation had been duly submitted to the Curia, had retired to his former residence, the old building which seemed to grow out of the side of a mountain and which had been at one time a root cellar, and before that a cave whose deeper recesses had never been explored, and which the old man had reopened "to let the mountain spirits come and go." Here the cardinals of the Curia came to consult him, to scold and beseech him, to no avail.

And there was news from Texark. Although the text of what purported to be Pope Amen's resignation had appeared there, by telegraph, the original signed copy of the document, if it existed, could not be found in Valana or anywhere else. One enterprising forger in the Empire's capital sold a clever counterfeit of the original to the Archdiocese of Texark for ten thousand pios, a sum paid after a police expert affirmed that the handwriting was that of Amen the Antipope. But afterward, another expert showed that the document contained egregious errors of the kind often occurring during transmission of text by a telegraph operator, including several pure operating codes, such as ZMF, meaning "break, more follows." The forger escaped into Jackrabbit country and was never seen again.

"As I told you, the Pope refuses to live in the palace," said Nauwhat, "and he has returned to his old home. He said Easter Mass at home, not at John-in-Exile. He will see anyone who comes to him, and cheerfully submits to any indignity. He has signed blank bulls, perhaps by the dozen. He will press his seal of approval into the wax of almost anything. I don't know if he always reads it first. Did he really appoint all these new cardinals, or was it done for him? I should know, but I don't. Because he found out about some guns at SEEC, and he thinks I am responsible."

"Well, I must confess to him on that—"

"No, don't do it. I *am* responsible now. His actions are those of a man who has lost his bearings, if not his sanity, but not his good humor. You, Elia, he speaks of constantly, and he will rejoice that you have returned. You must go to see him tomorrow. You and Brother Blacktooth as well."

"Of course. But what are the agenda, if not weapons?"

"It was he who placed your name in nomination as Pope. His only agendum, probably, will be to submit to you as Pontiff."

"I must set him straight on that."

"Well, you can try. But besides the new cardinals, the College is coming into town again in numbers. And some from the East are bringing the military officers and envoys you invited. They pass for bodyguards."

"In response to the same summons I got? Who was it wrote that foul thing?"

"Domidomi Cardinal Hoydok."

"Do I know him?"

"No. He's one of the new ones. He's from Texark, but Benefez excommunicated him for supporting Pope Amen, so the Pope created him cardinal. He is a civil lawyer, not a priest."

"How are the Easterners getting here?" Brownpony asked.

"Mostly through the Iowa country. There, the farmers seem to get along better with the Grasshopper."

They trade a lot. Only a few Texark patrols go north of the Misery River, and they wouldn't stop a cardinal there, even if they knew he was coming to conclave."

"Misery River?"

"The old name was 'Missouri,' m'Lord," Nimmy put in.

" 'Misery' better suits it now," said Sorely. "Before the occupation of the farmlands, it was a natural route to New Rome."

"Of course. My memory is slipping. The first thing I must do tomorrow is send a messenger to Holy Madness and Swimming Elk to come here for a conference, and to send a war party to New Jerusalem for the new weapons."

"Swimming Elk?"

"Sharf Eltür Brām, Hultor's brother. The Grasshopper sharf."

Dinner was brought to them. This time there was venison and a good red wine. They were nearly starved after the long Lenten trip on light rations. Nimmy wondered absently if he should confess to eating barbecued wilddog on abstinence days, even though the cardinal had granted dispensation in an emergency situation.

"How are things in Texark, by the way?" asked Cardinal Nauwhat.

"Well, the Province is seething with revolt. And of course there is sporadic fighting with the Grasshopper. In Hannegan City, little has changed, except they are importing some desert animals from Africa for warfare in dry country. And they know about our guns."

"Two bad omens."

"And one other thing." He glanced at the adjoining table and tapped Wooshin on the shoulder. "Axe, I think I forgot to tell you of one small change."

"M'Lord?"

Brownpony looked at Blacktooth. "You tell him."

"His Imperial Majesty the Mayor has replaced you with a mechanical head chopper, Axe."

Wooshin shrugged. "A man without shadow and form, when he chops heads, becomes a chopping machine. No change."

This caused a murmur, apparently not of approval, but perhaps of recognition, from the rest of the warriors present.

"A remarkable man," Sorely said with a shiver in his voice as Wooshin turned away again.

"One without shadow and form," Brownpony mused aloud.

Four weeks had passed since they last saw Gai-See, and they had just begun to fear that he had been shot down in Scarecrow Alley when he arrived, not with the well-laden pack mule with "gifts for the Curia" as in Brownpony's message, but with Mayor Dion, Ulad, eight heavy wagons, and a whole brigade of light-horse infantry, bristling with new and superior arms. The secret of New Jerusalem was no longer secret. Brownpony showed no surprise, and Nimmy realized that the message to Dion had been code.

There was no way Valana could accommodate both the influx of cardinals and a whole brigade of light horse, of whom the citizens of the city were quite frightened as the word was quickly passed around that these armed men were spooks. But Magister Dion had no intention of imposing. His troops immediately set about building a fortified encampment on a hill well outside the city. As soon as the wagons were unloaded, they were returned to New Jerusalem for more supplies. Regular convoys were planned to supply his men with food, ammunition, and other necessities of military life. They would sleep in tents, at first, but within four days, a permanent log structure was built, with a basement beneath it, to store ammunition and to reload brass cartridges. The reloading machines were simple and portable, so that they might follow an army in battle.

Seeking information about Ædrea, Nimmy had approached the gate of the newly constructed fort in the hope of obtaining an interview with the Magister, who was now in the role of commanding general. He was told politely to wait, and a guard left for the armory. He struck up a conversation with the other guards.

Blacktooth noticed that their rifles were similar to the pistols in having revolving cylinders, with six chambers instead of five. A guard showed him that the ammunition was of the same caliber as the handguns, and used the same brass; only the weight of the bullets and the weight of the powder charge differed. The pistol ammunition might be fired with safety from the rifles, with a lesser range, but it was unsafe to shoot the more powerful loads from the handguns. With copper being so scarce, it was essential that empty brass be saved after firing, even in battle.

After three hours of waiting, the guard returned. Nimmy was given a polite excuse from Magister Dion and turned away. He returned to the Red Deacon's own private mansion outside the city, where all of them were temporarily living.

Brownpony had obtained a list of new cardinals created by Pope Amen during their absence. He gave a copy of it to Blacktooth for his own information, along with two copies of a summons for all incoming cardinals to register at the Papal Palace with a clerk of the Secretariat of State, which again had been placed in the hands of Hilan Cardinal Bleze by Pope Amen after the interregnum. He told Nimmy to post one copy of the summons in John-in-Exile Square, then to hire a town crier immediately to shout aloud the text of the second copy at every intersection in Valana.

When he had finished these chores, Nimmy returned to his old residence, where he was rather mournfully greeted by Aberlott, who had fallen in love with the younger sister of the late Jæsis.

"It seems to me," said Aberlott with unusual gravity, "that those people in those mountains are just as intolerant of outsiders, as the outsiders have always been of spooks. They actually look down on us.

'Ædrea never did."

"I know. And she's under arrest."

"Oh my God! Did you see her?"

"No, I was not allowed."

"What are the charges?"

"She left without permission some months ago. That's all I know."

Through his employer's intervention, Blacktooth obtained an interview with Magister Dion. Dion listened politely to Nimmy's account of Ædrea's trip to Leibowitz Abbey, and thence to the Mesa of Last Resort, where she had given birth.

"And then she went home to her father's place," he finished. "That's all she did."

"And her father beat her and brought her to me. We can't have people leaving without permission."

"But she always had permission to come to Valana!"

"No, she had orders."

"But her father would have killed her babies."

"Babies?"

"Twins, old Benjamin said."

"Well, what you think you know, you got by hearsay. I'll consider it, but she will remain in custody for the time being. Think of it as protection from her own family. You are never going to see her again. Neither your cardinal nor I will allow it."

Blacktooth left the camp, fuming with anger at both the Mayor and Brownpony. On the way home, he meant to stop at the hillside home of Amen Specklebird and ask for his intervention, but there were at least forty people in a queue outside the door, many of them cardinals, and the Red Deacon himself was tenth in line. So he pretended not to see him, and went instead to a nearby Church to pray his anger away.

On the first day of May—normally a Nomad holy day—in response to Brownpony's call to a war council, Chür Høngan, his half-nephew Oxsho, Father Ombroz, and Demon Light with one of his lieutenants rode into town together. Brownpony was surprised to learn that Oxsho, in spite of his youth, had been chosen Wilddog sharf after Holy Madness was made judge and leader of all three hordes. The Wilddog leaders bowed and kissed the cardinal's ring. Eltür the Demon Light refrained, but offered a Nomad military salute.

From the south on the following day came Önmü Kun, cold sober, and wearing a leather helmet with



his family badge. He introduced himself as Jackrabbit Sharf. Knowing of Önmü's reputation, the others demanded documentation. He presented a roll of soft deerskin with Weejus beadwork depicting a manlike figure with the ears of a Jackrabbit. From his saddlebags, he produced a crest of buzzard feathers, also of obvious Weejus design; the sacred talisman was to be worn on the helmet of the sharf only in battle. After brief discussion, and some shaking of heads, his credentials were accepted by the others. Brownpony, who wished to honor them all, consulted with others of the Curia, then had the Nomad leadership housed in the Papal Palace, since the Pope had retired to his remodeled hillside cave and refused to return.

A military conference was scheduled for Thursday the 4th, at SEEC, and an invitation was sent to Commander Dion to come and bring his senior officers. Then a great embarrassment rode into town on the night of the third, and by the light of the full moon rode on through town and up to Brownpony's private estate, where he made a great clatter at the main entrance. Wooshin and Woosoh-Loh immediately rushed from the dining room to investigate the visitor, but then called for Blacktooth.

Nimmy stared out at the spectacle standing there in the moonlight. Three hundred pounds of muscle and black hair confronted them with folded arms and an angry glare. He uttered obscenities in bad Grasshopper and demanded to see "the Christian shaman who boasted to my men that he was married to the Burregun, and then called me a coward."

Blacktooth swallowed hard and went back to the dinner table. "There seems to be a motherless one at the door who wishes to speak to Your Eminence."

"Who?"

"I think they called him 'Mounts-Everybody.' Remember the outlaws you released? They spoke of their leader—"

The cardinal blotted gravy from his lips, got up, and strode to the entrance.

"Where is my horse?" he demanded of the burly outlaw.

"Tied to the gate, you damn grass-eater."

"Then come in and eat beef with us, you damn thief."

The man came in, surrounded by suspicious warriors with short swords in hand. Because of a foul odor about him, the cardinal had him seated at the foot of the table. Most of the others had finished eating. A servant carved him a few slices of roast beef and fetched him a hot baked potato and roasted onions from the kitchen. It was too early in the season for anything the Nomad would call "grass," but he grunted a few complaints about the lack of "inner meats" to go with the beef. Nimmy knew that Nomads usually ate virtually the whole animal, except for the hide, horns, hooves, and bones. It was the basis for the Venerable Boedullus's prescription for radiation sickness. The outlaw ate with his hands, wrapping slices of beef around bits of potato. The cardinal spoke.

"I thank you for returning my horse. But do you know that all the sharfs of the hordes and the *Qæsach dri Vørdar* himself are here in the city?"

Mounts-Everybody stopped eating and glowered. "You invited me here. They are enemies. You intend to have me killed?"

"No, all I wanted was my horse."

"You spoke to my men of fighting farmers. For money."

"I asked them questions."

"Which farmers are your enemies? Those nearby?"

"No, those are under the protection of the Bishop of Denver."

Blacktooth put in a word here. "His Eminence is trying to use your word for 'citizens,' and he means specifically the subjects of the Hannegan, and even more specifically the armed forces of Texark. He does not mean peaceful people who work the soil and grow crops. Many of them were formerly Nomads, including my own family."

"Thank you, Nimmy," said Brownpony with a trace of irritation, then to Mounts-Everybody: "Just how many fighting men could you muster, if you were inclined to do so."

Mounts-Everybody seemed to be doing mental arithmetic. "That depends on the pay. For gold, not many. We need good horses. The families kill us when we take wild ones. Offer us two good horses and

a woman for every man, and you get a small army."

"Horses, yes, but no women. How small an army?"

"Maybe four hundred warriors. But the Grasshopper is at war against the farmers in the east. We cannot fight beside them."

"I realize that. What about the Jackrabbit?"

Mounts-Everybody was suddenly suspicious. "Wormy-Face told me you threatened to drive us south of the Nady Ann into Texark lands."

"Gai-See, fetch one of the new rifles."

The small warrior stepped into the adjacent room and returned with one of the west-coast weapons.

"Load it and take him outside for a demonstration."

Brownpony and Blacktooth remained sitting at the dinner table while a servant cleaned up after the meal. There were six loud shots in as many seconds, followed by a frightened whinny and hoofbeats in the roadway.

Wooshin came back inside with the outlaw, who was holding the empty rifle and staring at it in awe. "I'm sorry. Your horse ran away," said the Axe.

"When they find him, give him to the sharf of the outlaws here, and also the rifle."

The burly guest stared at Brownpony in amazement. "I made you no promises!"

"I know. And you won't get the gifts until you do."

"No promises!"

"Well, all I want you to do is stay here all night, and most of tomorrow. You can't come to the meeting tomorrow, because I'm afraid someone would kill you. On your way into town, did you observe the fortress on the hilltop?"

"Yes. It is new."

"Tomorrow night, you will go to the fort and talk to Magister Dion and the Jackrabbit Önmü Kun. Any men you recruit will be under their command, as will you, and you will not be driven south of the Nady Ann. You will go there well armed and with other forces."

"I will think about it."

The cardinal looked away. "Axe, see that he takes a bath, cuts his hair and beard, and dress him as a mountain man. He can stay here until moonrise tomorrow."

Mounts-Everybody growled angrily and started to his feet, but six half-drawn swords had a calming effect. He allowed himself to be led away.

Brownpony looked questioningly at Blacktooth.

"M'Lord, those men live by murder and plunder."

"And that is war, is it not?"

Nimmy prayed earnestly for peace that night, but he feared the Virgin would not listen. If the cardinal came to be elected Pope, he would make the Virgin a commanding general of the hordes.

## CHAPTER 21

Whenever any important business has to be done in the monastery, let the Abbot call together the whole community and state the matter to be acted upon. . . . The reason we have said that all should be called for counsel is that the Lord often reveals to the younger what is best.

—*Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 3

IMMY SLEPT BADLY THAT NIGHT, AND AROSE twice from nightmares to pray before the crucifix. Once he had a visitor. Moonlight shining through the window fell on white bedsheets and he could see a dark figure in the doorway. By its bulk, he knew it could only be Mounts-Everybody. He came quickly to his feet, prepared to fight if the outlaw tried to live up to his name. But the hulk merely grunted and moved on. A few seconds later, another dark figure stole down the corridor behind the

motherless one. That would be one of the Yellow Guard, shadowing him. Probably he was only looking for a place to urinate.

Nimmy went back to bed. He dreaded the morrow, for he saw clearly the direction of recent events, and how Brownpony was moving them. It was not as if the Red Deacon had drawn a map of the future, but he was bent toward one goal; whatever happened he examined it to see if it might be useful as a means toward that goal. Nimmy was not opposed to the destruction of the Empire, or the reduction of its power and the restoration of the New Roman papacy. That was Brownpony's end. The means, in part, he might deem legitimate. There was such a thing as a just war; he did not doubt the ancient teaching. But Leibowitz had been a man of peace, had he not?—after a warlike youth—and he was still the Saint's willing follower, although a half-unwilling member of the Saint's present Order under abbots like Jarad and Olshuen. He had renounced the world, just as the abbots and his brethren had renounced it, but now he was in the midst of the world, and the renunciation seemed meaningless. He lay awake most of the night, remembering his devotion to Leibowitz and the Holy Virgin. When he did fall briefly asleep, he dreamed of Ædrea, woke up with an erection, and fought an urge to masturbate because it was dawn and people were moving in the hallway.

Almost unwillingly he accompanied the cardinal to conference in the Palace with the leaders of the hordes and of New Jerusalem. It would surely last most of the day. His employer noticed his reluctance, and said, "I'm sorry, Nimmy, but I'm going to need you. So will the Grasshopper."

Only four members of the Sacred College attended: Sorely Nauwhat, Chuntar Hadala, Elia Brownpony, and a new cardinal, one Hawken Chief Irrikawa, who was said to be king of his northeast forest nation, and who wore a feather sewed to his red hat. He claimed to outrank all princes of the Church except the Pope. Besides the four cardinals, several military people of nationalities both east of the Great River and west of the continental divide were here, and they had come to town with their cardinal electors. There was a roll call, a counting of noses, and many introductions. Mayor Dion was obviously still irked by Nimmy's petition on behalf of Ædrea and at first objected to his and Wooshin's presence.

Brownpony turned to Eltür Brâm, winked, and said, "Would you please give the commander an account of the battles that have happened between the Grasshopper and Texark since the death of your brother?"

The sharf smiled wryly and began to speak. After half a minute of it, Dion held up his hand.

"What is he saying?"

"I understand most of it," said the cardinal, "but I'm only good at Jackrabbit, and fair in Wilddog. Grasshopper is Brother Blacktooth's native dialect."

Dion looked at Nimmy and nodded.

"And Wooshin commands the Yellow Guard, who offer training in very efficient methods of weaponless combat."

The Mayor acquiesced, but as if to prove his impartiality, told Ulad and another of his own officers to warm the bench outside the doors. Blacktooth translated Sharf Demon Light's account of recent skirmishing between his warriors and the Texark cavalry, but it had been low-intensity warfare with few casualties and fewer deaths. Because of orders given by Holy Madness, the Grasshopper forces had not made any further raids on the protected farmlands. Brâm noted with irony that the unprotected farmlands north of the Misery had been free from raids since trading between farmers and Nomads had begun a generation or more ago.

Most of the principals had their own interpreters, and local dialects were translated into Churchspeak. It made for slow going. The focus of attention was usually a wall map of that part of the continent between the Rocky and the Appalotchan Mountains. The map was a problem for all the Nomads except Holy Madness, but Father Ombroz tried to assist them with explanations of correspondences between the Earth and the paper.

Nimmy found himself becoming the ears and the voice of the Grasshopper sharf, and was soon rebuking the others, especially Brownpony and Dion, for communicating between themselves in

Churchspeak or Ol'zark Valley dialect without waiting for his interpretation. Even Önmü Kun was trilingual, but if Demon Light understood anything but the Nomad dialects, he would not admit it; Nimmy noticed, however, that the sharf frowned when the monk interpreted "Red Beard" as "Your Eminence." His Eminence himself, though understanding a bit of Grasshopper, kept a straight face. Brām acknowledged nothing spoken to him in the form of a request or an order unless it came from the Lord Høngan Ösle Chür . Only to the *Qæsach dri Vørdar* did he even appear to defer. He was polite, if only to hide a natural arrogance.

Nimmy found himself admiring the Grasshopper leader. True, it was like the admiration a man might have for grizzly bear or a cougar, but he might, after all, be a distant relative to Demon Light. The sharf was not condescending or rude to the monk, although he knew well enough that Blacktooth's ancestors had deserted the horde to farm on lands owned by the Denver Archdiocese.

At one point during the meeting, he noticed Holy Madness looking up at one of the high windows. Blacktooth followed his gaze, and it was the same balcony window through which Amen Specklebird had been passed into the building at the last conclave. The window was open. A policeman and the young Sharf Oxsho, who had been conspicuous by his absence, at least to Blacktooth, were both gesturing. The Lord of the Hordes came to his feet.

"M'Lord Cardinal, Your Eminence, I must excuse myself and find out what they want." He pointed.

Brownpony looked at the window, nodded, and said, "We will discuss matters which would not much concern your realm while you're gone. If something's amiss, please let us know."

Chür Høngan (Blacktooth tried to remember the deferential name reversal when speaking to the man, but sometimes failed to think it correctly) was gone for a quarter hour, during which the talk was mostly with suppliers of military equipment from the west coast. When the Lord of the Hordes returned, his face was a storm cloud.

"A Texark spy has been listening to every word spoken here," he growled, staring at Brownpony.

"They caught him up there?"

"Yes. Our Sharf Oxsho was on watch."

"Are you sure he's from Texark?"

"Of course. I know him. So does Your Eminence." He paused, and his stare at Brownpony became a glare. "He is, or was, the husband of Potear Wetok. He's your Texark cavalry-tactics expert. You sent him to us, remember? I always suspected him."

Father Ombroz who was sitting nearby dropped his head in his hands. "Esitt Loyte!" he groaned.

Brownpony turned pale. "He is in custody now?"

"Oh, yes, m'Lord. Oxsho bound his hands and has him tethered."

Nimmy winced. He knew what Holy Madness meant by "tethered." Holes were punched in the captive's cheeks and a loop of rope or rawhide was passed through the holes.

"Shall I bring him in for you to question? I'll cut the tether, so he can use his tongue."

"No, have them keep him in the local jail. Let him rot there, for all I care."

"NO! He belongs to me and the Wetok family. When I leave here, he goes with me, dead or alive,"

Brownpony came to his feet and faced the angry Nomad lord. "Trusting him was my mistake," he said. "You are right to claim jurisdiction over him. But Lord Høngan Ösle Chür , as your Vicar Apostolic I forbid you in the name of God to kill him."

They stared at each other. The Nomad gave him a barely perceptible nod. The cardinal sat down.

Høngan left the room again. This time he was gone for nearly an hour. When he came back he faced Brownpony again.

"Is he in jail?"

"Most of him is in jail," said the *QCESCZC/Z dri Vørdar*. "The rest of him is here." On the table before his Vicar Apostolic, he emptied a bag of bloody parts. Nimmy could see a hand, two ears, the tip of a nose, and what was probably the captain's penis.

Sitting next to Blacktooth, Demon Light came to his feet with a deafening Grasshopper battle cry to announce his approval. Brownpony turned and vomited.

"You said not to kill him," Høngan said mildly.

The meeting was adjourned while servants cleaned the table and the floor. When they reconvened, Oxsho joined the other two sharfs in the meeting, and they sat with their Lord Høngan and Eltür's interpreter. Nimmy sat surrounded by four Nomads, and it seemed to him that the others took a different seating arrangement than before. No chair adjacent to a Nomad was occupied.

Magister Dion at first resisted the plan that Brownpony and the Nomads favored; he wanted to join forces with the Wilddog and the Grasshopper and move across the Plains north of the Nady Ann, then join forces with able-bodied gleps from the Watchitah Nation and attack Hannegan City from the north. Chuntar Cardinal Hadala, Vicar Apostolic to the Valley, was familiar with its military potential, once its people were armed, and he backed Dion in his plan for a combined army of spooks from the Suckamints and their glep relatives from Ol'zarkia. It was in expectation of this that the spook commander had brought his light-horse brigade here to Valana.

Brownpony, however, was opposed. Having made reconnaissance in the Province, he foresaw a war on three fronts. Present were military officers from four nation-states in the Appalotcha region, who were prepared to invade the Texark's puppet allies on the east bank of the Great River. Their aim would be less to conquer than to force Filpeo to send forces to the defense of the east-bank puppets, lest he lose control of the river. The plan would be to harass, skirmish, and retreat, and prevent these forces from returning until Hannegan City itself was directly endangered. The commander in chief of the armed forces of the King of the Tenesi was present, and he outlined the plans the eastern nations had made among themselves, with the participation of Hawken Irrikawa.

Most of the Nomads were pleased by this eastern plan. Lord Høngan Ösle Chür suggested that the Grasshopper sharf propose a temporary truce with Filpeo's forces, just before the attack on the east-bank states came.

"That way, he won't be so uneasy about sending forces across the river."

Sharf Demon Light smiled at his lord, and the smile said that the truce, if made, would be opportunely broken.

The role of the armies of New Jerusalem in this plan would be to join with the guerrilla forces of Önmü Kun, who were at present scattered throughout the hill country in the Province. The guerrillas would move in small groups into the disputed areas a few days' ride to the west of the town of Yellow, staying away at first from the well-patrolled, but narrow, telegraph right-of-way that led to the last station nearest Valana. Kun had taken a pointer to the map and used it to draw a circle around the country where the Bay Ghost and the Nady Ann were hardly more than creeks, except for small lakes where antiquity's crumbled dams left small waterfalls. It was outlaw country, to the east of the papal highway, and Blacktooth began to see why his employer wanted Mounts-Everybody among his allies, although the prospect for such a thing was not mentioned at all by the cardinal. The northern hordes would object to the motherless ones, but because of Texark protection, the Jackrabbit had been little bothered by these outlaw bands.

When the forces of Kun, Dion, and perhaps the outlaws themselves converged here under one command, the rearming of the Jackrabbit with the west-coast weaponry which Önmü had not previously been allowed to smuggle would quickly proceed. The complete destruction of the telegraph was contemplated; also the physical removal of the wire to New Jerusalem. Local Jackrabbit militias, already secretly armed, albeit with older weapons, would rise in revolt as Dion's and Kun's armies drove eastward, between the Red and Nady Ann Rivers.

While Texark's forces were thus engaged in the Province and beyond the Great River, the Wilddog and the Grasshopper would join forces and attack from the west, hoping to help arm any able-bodied gleps from the Watchitah Nation and mount a combined attack.

Eventually Magister Dion became convinced. He insisted that Valana should raise its own militia, and occupy the fort his men had built, where citizens might take sanctuary in case of raids by "infiltrators or outlaws," and the militia would be used to assist the police in apprehending disloyal citizens, especially those of Texark origin. He designated one of his two military aides, Major Elswitch J. Gleaver, a short keg of a man with a red face and long mustachios, as the right officer to command the militia. Blacktooth

expected his master to resist this usurpation, but he said nothing. Chuntar Cardinal Hadala broke the silence and said to Brownpony with a wink, "I'll keep a close eye on the Major for you, Cardinal. I'm staying in the fort."

No one raised a question about Valana's possible response to putting an outsider and a spook in charge.

When the meeting finally ended, it was nearly dark outside. Brownpony told the Nomads that the Palace, where they were residing, would be needed tomorrow for the beginning of conclave, and asked them to pack their belongings and move to his estate for the night. "Blacktooth will show you the way."

Then he beckoned to the monk and whispered, "Make sure they don't get there before moonrise. I'll speak privately with Dion now and tell him to expect that outlaw leader."

Nimmy nodded his understanding. He prevailed upon the sharfs and Holy Madness to eat dinner at the cardinal's expense at the Venison House. By the time they arrived at the estate, Mounts-Everybody had gone, presumably to meet with Dion. They greeted their host with minimum cordiality, still angry about the spy, and went at once to their rooms.

The food was gone from the dinner table, but Brownpony asked Nimmy to sit with them over a glass of wine. He asked what he felt about the day's events.

"I felt myself in the service of the hordes instead of you, m'Lord."

"That's quite natural. You were Brām's interpreter. What else?"

"I was both afraid and angry."

"Afraid of whom? Angry at whom?"

"You."

This brought a threatening grunt from Wooshin.

"I suppose that's natural too," said the cardinal. "Holy Madness and the sharfs were certainly angry at me, because of Esitt Loyte. And it rubbed off on you. Loyte was one of the few men I've ever completely misjudged. Well, tomorrow begins the conclave. You'll find that less rowdy than last year, and—" He broke off, noticing Blacktooth's expression. The Axe noticed it too, and was scowling, for his loyalty to his master was absolute.

"Oh, I can get along without you," the Red Deacon said. "I don't need a Grasshopper interpreter in conclave, and I can borrow a secretary from Cardinal Bleze or Nauwhat. Still angry?"

"No, m'Lord. Just very tired."

"It's been a tiring day. All right, then take a vacation until we have a new pope. The Nomads will be in town a few more days. They have things to talk over among themselves and with Dion's officers.

But remember Loyte, and remember last year's attack. Watch your back."

Early the next morning, while walking through the streets Blacktooth saw several cardinals and their servants on their way to conclave at the Palace. One of them was a woman, but she was not Cardinal Buldyrk. He had heard about her, but had not seen her before.

There was a small convent on the south bank of the Brave River where a community of barefoot nuns, Sisters of Amen Specklebird's *Ordo Dominae Desertarum Nostrae*, lived, worked, and prayed, and Mother Iridia Silentia had been created cardinal by Pope Amen, the second woman in the Sacred College. Blacktooth noticed that her conclavists wore the same religious garb that Ædrea had worn when she was serving as courier between SEEC and New Jerusalem. The same Order had last year held a temporary residence in Valana, and Nimmy had assumed that among these local nuns, Ædrea's friend, Sister Julian, had provided her with a habit for disguise. But the local nuns were gone now. He had a wild hunch, and it overcame his misgivings about approaching one of them in the street. He spoke to her in a low voice.

"Forgive me, Sister. I am a monk, not in very good standing, of Saint Leibowitz. A young woman wearing your habit used to come here sometimes from a mountain community. Her name was Ædrea. I was wondering if you might know . . ."

The Sister kept her eyes lowered and did not speak. Mother Iridia noticed her conclavist being accosted by a brash cleric of some sort, and she approached them wearing a frown. She and her nun exchanged murmurs in a foreign tongue. Mother Iridia inspected Blacktooth from head to toe, nodded, reached in her portfolio, and handed him a prayer card.

"God bless you, Brother Blacktooth," she said, making a tiny cross. "Pray for those in trouble." Then she gripped her helper's arm and led her fast away.

Blacktooth, amazed that she knew his name and therefore his sin, felt the heat of a blush in his face. He looked at the prayer card. It was thick, glossy, and heavily enameled, and probably blessed with holy water like many tiny sacramental placards sold by mendicant religious orders. Most were saccharine and sentimental, but this was not. On one side it bore a picture of a crucifix at the top, but the crucified one was a woman, and the name above it was Santa Librada. Beneath the cross was advice in ancient English, which he understood with small difficulty. The English said:

(Pray to Santa Librada in times of  
trouble with the police, the courts,  
and when freedom is not visible. She  
will help you, if you believe.)

*For Ædrea, freedom was certainly not visible!*

He wanted to run after the nuns and ask more questions, but that would be highly improper, and they would not answer. Instead, he resolved to write them a note of inquiry, and get one of Brownpony's housekeepers to deliver it.

He looked at the other side of the card. There was printed a prayer or poem which he had difficulty understanding, for although the language reminded him of Latin, it was not Latin:

Santa Librada del Mundo,  
Tengo ojos, no me miren;  
Tengo manos, no me tapen;  
Tengo pieses, no me alcansan.  
Con los angeles del 43,  
Con el manto de Maria estoy tapado.  
Con los pechos de Maria estoy rosado.

He thought of Aberlott, who was back in school at Saint Ston's, and turned to walk toward their old shared residence. The student might know someone at the school who could translate.

A crowd was gathering in John-in-Exile Square, but this was no mob like last year's raging rabble. There was no sickness in the city, and more fear than anger, and what anger there was, was directed at Texark and cardinals absent from the city. The people wanted Specklebird to remain as Pope, but his refusal they now seemed to accept as a sad reality. Brownpony was well known and popular, but not well revered; if he was lacking in holiness, he was also lacking in haughtiness, and he seemed to feel affection for the common people of the city.

On his way to Aberlott's, Blacktooth paused to watch some of the cardinals recently created by Pope Amen as they arrived and entered the assembly. He stood beside a young priest, who told him their names.

There was Abbot Joyo Cardinal Watchingdown, from Watchingdown Abbey, far east of the Great River.

And Wolfer Cardinal Poilyf, from the North Country, came still wearing his furs, although it was not a cold day.

Domidomi Cardinal Hoydok of Texark was excommunicated by Benefez for supporting Pope Amen, who then appointed him to the College. He was the one who had penned the angry summons to

conclave, and he seemed still angry as he stalked into the hall.

Then came Furi Cardinal Shirikane, quietly, almost slinking along; he was from the west coast, a priest who could also speak Wooshin's dialect, so the Axe had told him. His countenance also seemed to bear a trace of Asia in it.

And there was Abraha Cardinal Linkono, a schoolteacher from New Jerusalem, the only known spook in the College.

"And there is Hawken Chief Irrikawa," said the young priest.

"I know. I saw him yesterday."

"Did you know that it was Cardinal Buldyrk who suggested him to Pope Amen in the first place? The Abbey of N'ork is adjacent to Irrikawa's forest kingdom."

"I'm surprised," Nimmy told his informant. "Last year, the lady seemed to be leaning toward Cardinal Benefez."

"Hah! That was before Pope Amen ordained two women, and made another one cardinal," the priest said—rather stiffly, it seemed to Blacktooth.

"Irrikawa makes strange claims, says his family is as old as the continent itself. And that eagle feather! He doesn't want to be called 'Cardinal.' His servants call him 'Sire' and 'Majesty.' "

Two humbler men then went in the door: Buzi Cardinal Fudsow, a local plumbing contractor who had added a flush toilet of his own invention to Amen Specklebird's hillside retreat, and Leevit Lord Cardinal Baehovar, a merchant from the Utah country.

Then the new Bishop of Denver, Varley Cardinal Swineman, whose diocese included the whole of the Denver Freestate, except for Valana itself; his cathedral was two days' ride to the north at Danfer, a small community on the outskirts of an expanse of half-buried rubble which was once a city of Denver. Although a Bishop of Denver had mounted the throne of Peter a few years ago, the Denver diocesan chair was not traditionally occupied by a cardinal.

Blacktooth thanked the priest and picked his way through the crowd in the square again. The conclave, legitimate or illegitimate, was not yet officially locked and sealed. The doors and windows were all still open, and the crowd in the square was quiet because a loud voice could be heard from within addressing the prelates who had already arrived. It took a few moments for Nimmy to recognize the voice of his master, because there was anger in it:

"I am under a suspended sentence of death imposed by the Imperial Mayor. The Pope has been denounced as an impostor by the Hannegan, the Archbishop, and their allies. They are attempting to convene a General Council of the Church in New Rome, and this—as you know—cannot be done without the approval of the Pope, and if there is no Pope, it cannot be done at all. Texark has begun to wage an undeclared war against the Valanan papacy, and we are all in danger. While we all deplore the Grasshopper raid into the illegally occupied zone around New Rome, and the ensuing massacre of innocents, we find ourselves by necessity allied with the hordes against the Empire. You must protect yourselves. There are Texark spies in Valana. One was caught yesterday and severely mutilated, without my knowledge, by the Lord of the Three Hordes. He is receiving medical treatment in the local jail. As you must recall, assassins tried a year ago Easter to kill me and my secretary. There will be more attacks of this kind.

"Weapons are available—superior weapons—for the Papal Guard, and for any of you who wish them for yourselves or your servants. Valana is an open city. We do not have border guards, and you may be sure that the agents of the Hannegan come and go as they please. Sidearms for you and your servants will be provided ..."

Perhaps the anger he heard in the voice was rhetorical. The monk shook his head in wonder and moved on. He did not regret that Brownpony had chosen other conclavists this time, although he hoped his obvious reluctance to serve as one of them would be forgiven.

Aberlott was not at home. Meaning to copy the strange prayer and leave it on his table with a note, he tried the door but found it locked. He shrugged to himself and started to retrace his steps when a thought struck him: he still had not been able to see Amen Specklebird because of the crowds waiting outside his door. But people who were not at work were now forming the crowd in John-in-Exile



Square, and the cardinals were inside the Palace. So he turned around and started climbing the hill to Amen's home.

"I'll not translate it for you," said the old black Pope, holding Mother India's card. They were sitting together alone in the hillside house of stone. The rocks were cold, but there was a small fire on the hearth, and the room was chilly but not uncomfortable.

"It's more poem than prayer. It is not written in the language the Sisters speak today, but their speech does have more classical Spanish in it than Rockymount or Ol'zark has. This is old Spanish with a word or two of country dialect perhaps. I have seen it before. I know what it means to the Sisters. They think the crucified woman does not depict an event of history, but an event in the mind of Mary when she allowed herself to feel the crucifixion of her son."

"She wishes herself in his place on the cross?"

"Wishes? In her own heart, she's already there. *Librada del mundo* means set free from the world. But the next three lines seem to be spoken by the crucified. She has eyes, but doesn't see herself. With her hands nailed to the cross, she can't touch herself. With her feet nailed there too, she can't walk about. The line after that—'with the angels of number forty-three'—its meaning is lost. The last two lines might be spoken by the Christ child: 'Mary's blanket covers me. Mary's breasts turn me rosy.' The child is nursing. This is the Sisters' interpretation."

"What is yours?"

"I'm not an interpreter. You are, Blacktooth. You have eyes, hands, and feet. Can you see yourself, touch yourself, walk about?"

"I never doubted it before, but—" He paused. "But what I see in a mirror is not me, is it? I can touch my body, but is that me? My feet move, but who is walking?"

"If you have the right questions, why do you need answers? The answers are in the questions." He smiled a cat's smile. "I like your questions."

"Is there anything you can do for Ædrea?"

Specklebird was silent. "Not that question," Nimmy was afraid he would say. After a time he purred a cougar's purr. "Stay awhile and pray with me. We'll pray the silent prayer."

They prayed without words. Occasionally, Blacktooth arose to feed the fire. At dusk, they ate a simple meal, and prayed some more. In the morning, Brother Blacktooth chopped more wood, and Amen Specklebird hung out a sign that said, I PRAY—GO AWAY.

Nimmy stayed with him and prayed with him. The silence was like what the silence at the Abbey of Leibowitz should have been. On the fifth day, someone came and yelled "*Habemus Papam!*" three times before he went away. Specklebird seemed not to notice. The silence was unbroken by the event.

Blacktooth stayed for nine days, a novena of sorts. He learned more about his own soul during those nine days than he had learned during all his years at Leibowitz Abbey. Amen Specklebird was a teacher in silence. The soul of the student somehow began to resemble the soul of the teacher in silence. There was no explanation for it, for to explain would break the silence.

He might have stayed longer than nine days, but when he came out to chop wood on the tenth morning, a great cloud of smoke was arising from Valana. Was the whole city on fire?

Amen followed him most of the way down the hill, until they could see that it was only the Papal Palace and the police barracks burning. *Only!* That was Specklebird's word.

They embraced in silence, and parted in silence. Nimmy was vaguely worried about the old man. He had tried to remove himself entirely from the scene of the ecclesiastical and political struggle for supremacy, but how could he be free from it while men continued to bicker and battle about his quitclaim on the Apostolic See? Was he ever Pope? Was he still Pope? Where was his resignation? If someone had burned the original, Blacktooth felt the old man was not safe. And yet he knew it would be useless presumption to advise him to seek protection.

The fires had been preceded by explosions, the guard at the gate told him. But Cardinal Brownpony, now Pope Amen II, was not dead. He had only fled the city along with most of the Curia. Gone where? The guard could not say. Most of Mayor Dion's brigade had ridden south on the papal highway, leaving

a few men, with part of the Yellow Guard, to train the civilian militia in the fort the spooks had built. Several cardinals had taken refuge there. Perhaps the Holy Father had gone with Dion. The Texark spy had disappeared from the jail, and the guard reckoned there must have been as many as forty infiltrators to accomplish the jailbreak and blow up the Palace. "These bastards have been living among us for years—settlers from Texark. Most of them pretended to be fugitives."

The Nomads had returned to the Plains, he told Nimmy, and perhaps the Pope was with them, instead.

Blacktooth hurried first to Aberlott's. A note on the door said, "Gone to the fort. Help yourself." Blacktooth tried the latch. This time it was unlocked. Judging by the mess on the floor and the overturned furniture, someone had already helped himself, or else the student had been dragged to the fort after resisting.

He went to SEEC. The building was deserted, except for the covert wing. When he tried to enter there, he was quickly ejected. He went to Saint John-in-Exile. Only a curate was present. He told Blacktooth that the new Pope, after escaping from the burning building, had left the city in a coach belonging to the Grasshopper sharf, but they had indeed followed Dion south.

"Did the coach have 'I set fires' painted on the side?"

"Is that what it said? It was ancient English, I think."

Brām was going to take charge of a shipment of guns, Nimmy thought. He started walking to the fort. On the way, he was grabbed by the scruff of the neck and dragged to the fort. It was Ulad, who would not believe that he was going there of his own free will.

"You know I am a servant of Cardinal, uh, Pope Amen Two," he protested.

"If you still were, you would be with him. You are a soldier now, piss-robe," the giant said. "You are going to fight for the Holy City."

*Holy City?* Did he mean New Rome or New Jerusalem?

"Will I get to see Ædrea?"

"Not likely," growled the hulk.

Nimmy stopped struggling, but Ulad kept his long slender hand around his neck as they walked.

## CHAPTER 22

Let a good pound weight of bread suffice for the day, whether there be only one meal or both dinner and supper.

— *Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 39

LIA BROWNPONY—NOW POPE AMEN II—MISSED his Grasshopper interpreter; no one had seen Nimmy since the election. The new Pope was reluctant to believe that Blacktooth had deserted him; he had left messages with cardinals who remained in Valana. Now he rode with Sharf's Oxsho and Demon Light Brām in Brām's coach, while several cardinals came along behind, some in coaches, some on horseback. Wooshin, who was not fluent in any Nomad dialect, rode with the Pope's driver. Inside the coach, the young Wilddog sharf fawned on his Pontiff, somewhat to his Pontiff's annoyance, because Brām was still calling him "Red Beard," and every time Oxsho said "Your Holiness" or "Holy Father," the Grasshopper sharf grew surly. Brām mentioned Esitt Loyte more often than seemed polite. Oxsho argued that the spy had been caught before he could learn much more than the identities of the participants in the war council.

"And that's too much," Eltür snapped. "Once the Hannegan knows we have allies in the east, he will be less likely to send forces across the Great River. Isn't that so, Red Beard?"

Brownpony had been staring out the window at the scenery as if in deep reverie. Eltür was forced to repeat the question. Oxsho rephrased it in the Wilddog dialect, but Brownpony's response was indirect.

"The attack on the Palace was a complete surprise to me. I was too confused to think clearly for an hour or two. The agents who broke Loyte out of jail must have taken him straight to the telegraph terminal. We should have thought of that immediately and sent forces to capture it before he could get a message out. Now it will be captured in due course, but too late."

"So the Hannegan's forces will not cross the Great River!"

"We can't know that until you try to arrange a cease-fire, Sharf Brâm."

"You expect me to play the coward, Red Beard?"

"Of course not! You can seem unwilling. Let him know that Holy Madness demands it of you, that you would be delighted to resume hostilities if Texark turns you down."

Brownpony had the uneasy feeling that Eltür blamed him for twin Hultor's self-destructive behavior, but this feeling probably arose out of Father Steps-on-Snake's opinion that Hultor's murderous raid was meant to send a message to the cardinal who pampered Wilddog Christians and left the Grasshopper out of his councils.

"Your tribes and your warriors, and you yourself, Sharf Brâm, are the most powerful force we have against the Hannegan."

Eltür had trouble understanding. Oxsho tried to shift the dialect to Grasshopper, but the result was less than satisfactory.

"We are not your force, Red Beard," said the sharf.

They passed a dozen armed men from New Jerusalem along the way. The papal highway had been seized by, and was being patrolled by, Dion's forces. The guard drew itself up into formation and saluted as the Pope passed by. Soon they came to their destination. The road to Shard's place was no longer just a path through the bushes leading to Scarecrow Alley. Magister Dion's men were fast builders. The brush had been cleared. Fifty yards from the papal highway, a log barricade had been erected, and twin guardhouses flanked the improved road. A cloud of dust raised by men and horses hovered over the area. The ramshackle houses of the gleps had been razed. Barracks and other log buildings replaced them. Two trains of wagons were loaded and stood ready to move out, while the dust of a third train heading south was still visible—Önmu Kun, Brownpony thought.

Amen II was quickly surrounded by his Curia when he descended from Eltür's coach, and his leave-taking from the Nomad sharfs was perfunctory and less than cordial. Each of them was met by a band of warriors from his horde, and they were ready to move out within the hour. The secrets of the Suckamints were no longer secret, and the colony now was clearly at war.

The Mayor strode up to the group of cardinals, genuflected with military precision to the figure in white, and brushed the Pope's ring with his lips. He answered questions before they were asked.

"The telegraph station has been captured. According to the prisoners we took, Loyte had already been there and gone. Outlaw forces ambushed a cavalry troop in the outlaw lands. The ruffian you sent me brought over a hundred men to us, and they took no prisoners. Our light horse are riding hard toward the second station, and they are passing Jackrabbit guerrillas on their way to join us. Now what of our allies in the East?"

"Well, word has not reached them yet about what's happening here." Brownpony shrugged. "So we'll not know for some time." He gestured toward the mountains. "Is the way open to us?"

"Of course, Holy Father. The buildings are all of logs, but new, and it is your third Rome as long as you wish it to be." He beckoned to a young man with such long legs and short arms that one might have considered him a glep, except that Dion introduced him as his son, and he was both well-mannered and handsome.

"Slojon will be your guide as long as you need one. He will be in charge of my office while I am with the army."

The young man bowed and squinted closely at the Pope's ring without actually kissing it.

Brownpony continued to peer out at the scenery as if in deep thought while they rode upward into the mountains in a coach formerly belonging to the Mayor, who had ordered the door panels repainted with the papal tiara and the keys. This time Wooshin rode with him inside the coach, along with Dion's

Slojon, and Cardinals Hilan Bleze and Mother Iridia Silentia. With the latter, he had enjoyed a distant but enduring acquaintance, and she had thanked him for concurring in the first Amen's choosing her for the cardinalate. Brownpony admitted that he had in fact done no such thing, but he now applauded her appointment after the fact.

During the journey into the mountains, she brought up the subject of Ædrea's captivity, but Brownpony's respiratory weakness returned to him as they gained altitude, and he was unable to say anything to support her in her petition to Dion's Slojon, except to smile at her and gesture in the young man's direction. The gesture could have meant whatever each of them might want it to mean. Hilan Bleze changed the subject to curial matters.

By the time they arrived in the heart of the community, Pope Amen II needed to be carried by sedan chair to his new quarters. He asked the Secretary of State to send an urgent message to Blacktooth in Valana for a copy of a recipe by the Venerable Boedullus. Then he collapsed in a feather bed and slept for sixteen hours. Outside the building was a disappointed crowd of the faithful among these normal-looking "Children of the Pope," who had assembled in the hope of receiving the Apostolic Benediction from their special father. Secretary Hilan Cardinal Bleze blessed them himself, and told them to come back tomorrow.

Corporal Blacktooth St. George never received his Pontiff's urgent message, for when it arrived in Valana, it was routed to the fort and delivered to his commander, Major Elswitch J. Cleaver, who signed a receipt for it in Blacktooth's absence, but somehow forgot to give it to him later. He called Chuntar Cardinal Hadala's attention to the message. The cardinal opened and read it.

"Our new Holy Father must have become a gourmand since his election," said Hadala with a hint of contempt in his tone. "It's only a request for a recipe by a cook named Boedullus."

"Could it be a coded message?" suggested the florid major.

"I think not. If Corporal Blacktooth had any secret information, the Pope would just summon him directly."

"Well, I heard that His Holiness *had* sent for him."

"Where did you hear that?" the cardinal asked sharply.

"A rumor. He may have started it himself, but somebody said it came from Cardinal Nauwhat."

"Damn it! I'll have a talk with Sorely. You know Mayor Dion doesn't want that monk in New Jerusalem. There is his affair with that suspect girl, and the Pope, after all, is now too dependent on the Mayor to risk offending him. I'm sure that's why Elia hasn't summoned him. Besides, he won't need a Nomad interpreter in New Jerusalem, even if—" He broke off.

The Major looked at him and wondered if the distinction between interpreter and translator had stopped his line of thinking. As » to confirm this, Hadala continued:

"Besides, we are going to need someone to handle correspondence between ourselves and the Nomad sharfs. Sorely will surely need him too, for the same reason. That's why we proposed his promotion to corporal, and we want to keep him reasonably satisfied. I doubt any rumor about his going back into Brownpony's, uh, the Pope's service came from Nauwhat."

"Well, I can keep him busy until you need him," said Gleaver. "Right now, the police have him. And then he's on leave until after the funeral tomorrow."

"Better have him watched, lest he make a run for it. He can't be trusted. Brownpony learned that. And don't assign him duty in the city. He's probably too squeamish to shoot traitors."

A cleaning woman, who came on Mondays to scrub the former Pope's clothing, dishes, and floor, usually turned away when she saw his I PRAY—GO AWAY sign in place, but on the Monday in question, a brown stain from something that had leaked out under the door caught her attention. She knocked timidly, but there was no answer. She tried the latch, and the door swung inward. It was a quiet morning, and her scream echoed from the opposite hillside. A farmer and two shepherds responded. The decapitated body of Amen Specklebird had fallen sideways from the prie-dieu where he had obviously been kneeling before his altar when his killer struck. His head had bounced off the wall and rolled under a

table. He had been dead at least two days.

The manner of his death—by a single horizontal stroke of a sword—caused immediate suspicion to fall on the Yellow Guard, but neither Gai-See nor Woosoh-Loh had left the fort during the week of the murder, and the others, including Wooshin, had accompanied Pope Amen II to New Jerusalem.

Blacktooth had been one of the last people to see Pope Amen Specklebird alive, and the police questioned him closely, but in the presence of his lawyer-advocate, a priest appointed by one of the cardinals to look out for his interests. As it turned out, the police did not suspect him, but his advocate was of some help in explaining the religious relationship that developed between the Leibowitzian monk and the retired Pope during their nine days of silent prayer in Amen's residence just days before his murder. Nimmy blamed himself. He had failed to act on his intuition at the time of their parting: the feeling which had come to him that Specklebird was in imminent danger. He was distracted from this worry when Ulad had grabbed him by the neck and drafted him into the militia, but he had felt certainty that Specklebird would ignore a warning anyway.

The police were unconcerned by his guilty feelings; they had as yet no suspects, although the population of the city was being carefully screened, and any citizen who could not offer proof of his place of birth was sent to a detention camp adjacent to the fort. Fifteen known participants in the terrorist uprising had already been shot. The death sword could as plausibly have been a well-sharpened cavalry saber as one of the beautiful blades of the Asian warriors. Nimmy was allowed to go in peace, and his leave was extended to include the time of the old man's funeral. He wanted to run away to New Jerusalem, but he would surely be caught, and Brownpony might not welcome him if he did escape.

Amen Specklebird lay in state, his body illuminated by many candles on the high catafalque in the Cathedral of Saint John-in-Exile, and all the faithful who remained in Valana after the insurgency, the purge, and the flight came now to pay their respects and to pass in a slow line to view the body. There was less pomp and grandeur than if he had died as a reigning pontiff, and a certain amount of chaos, but that was more a result of the exodus to New Jerusalem than it was of his resignation and the previous transfer of papal power to Cardinal Brownpony. Investigators found, for example, that no official had taken from the old man the signet of his fisherman's ring and the two seals (one for wax, one for lead) of office upon his resignation; these seals were normally seized and broken by the Cardinal High Chamberlain during the interregnum after the death of the Pope. Had they been used after Brownpony had ascended? The ring was removed from his finger after death, but militiamen searched his home and found no seals. Stolen by his killer? These and other irregularities cast doubt upon many documents that emerged from the Specklebird pontificate, especially in cases where living witnesses could not be located.

After joining the slow line and awaiting his turn, Blacktooth passed the catafalque. He noticed that the undertaker had done a good job of concealing the fact that the head had been severed from the body, but otherwise the corpse looked more like a pope than Specklebird had ever looked while alive. The wild white hair was carefully combed, the deeper creases in his face were caulked, and his black skin lightened somewhat with a brown powder. The stink of the corpse, however, had begun to penetrate the background odors of incense in the Church. Nimmy choked with tears and hurried into the square.

There was a thin crowd. Many of Amen Specklebird's admirers had been fanatically devoted to the old holy man, and enough of them disputed the validity of his resignation, and therefore the validity of Brownpony's election, that some were heard to suggest that Brownpony himself had arranged the old man's murder in order to secure himself in office. Nimmy overheard two hill-dwellers giving voice to this theory, and he shouted at them, "You stupid oafs! That's exactly what Texark wants you to believe."

The men took umbrage, and Nimmy let himself be goaded into a fight. He won the fight, but lost self-respect, although he was now wearing the green uniform of a militiaman and not his brown monk's robe. He felt pats on the back, however, and heard cheers from Valanans who knew and liked the new Pope.

By the time of the funeral on the following day, Blacktooth smelled the stink of the corpse even through the haze of pinon pine incense that pervaded the cathedral; later witnesses for the cause of

canonizing Pope Amen I would testify of the heavenly perfume exhaled by the body. He knew all about the olfactory miracles performed by saintly corpses; Saint Leibowitz had smelled like ambrosial barbecue, his followers said. He too now tried to smell the miraculous perfume of Amen Specklebird, but his piety perhaps had been diminished by his sins, for the rotten odor persisted.

Suddenly, however, the body of Amen Specklebird sat up on the catafalque and pointed straight at Blacktooth. The whiskers of the cougar twitched, and fangs were bared. Nimmy closed his eyes to squeeze the tears out of them. When he opened them again, the corpse lay back down and never moved during the high funeral Mass, concelebrated by the six cardinals who had stayed in the region.

The purge of Valana's people continued, even during the funeral. When Nimmy emerged from the Church, he learned that the number of suspected conspirators who had been shot had risen to eighteen, and more than thirty citizens were imprisoned in the stockade next to the fort. Anyone unable to furnish proof of his place of birth, either by document or through testimony of witnesses, would, if no one appeared to testify of his participation in the terror, be sent into permanent exile. Any captive with an enemy or two in the city could expect a denunciation and testimony leading to his execution. Old scores were settled thus. The court trying the cases was neither civil nor ecclesiastical, but military. Nimmy guessed that most of the real villains had fled the city immediately after the crime, but the trials provided an outlet for revenge. In the murder of Amen Specklebird, however, the police had no suspects.

When Valana had been pacified and purged, there was no talk of disbanding the militia. That Chuntar Cardinal Hadala and his New Jerusalem officers had their own plan of battle in the war became clear when orders were posted to prepare the combined forces to move out from the city by the first of the month, when the moon was full. Messengers had been sent out to the Wilddog, and Sharf Oxsho replied by sending three guides and more than a hundred horses for those citizen soldiers of Valana who had none of their own. The guides were assigned to Blacktooth for interpretation. He found them ignorant of the fact that they were directly following the orders of Chuntar Hadala, Sorely Nauwhat, and Elswitch Gleaver instead of the Pope. He was afraid to mention it, because Nauwhat had always been close to Brownpony. Valanans were skeptical and complained a lot about leaving the vicinity of the city for a move away from the mountains, but there was as yet no talk of rebellion.

Then, on the first of July, when the militia was preparing to ride east with fourteen wagonloads of arms, a messenger of the Papal Guard rode into Valana and posted on the door of the Cathedral and the wall of the Papal Palace an eight-page document with the papal seal, then proceeded to the fort and posted another copy on the orderly room wall.

Its heading was thus: *Amen II Episcopus Romae servus servorum dei, omnibus electis domini ipsis fidelibus in una Ecclesia vera Catholica atque Apostolica credentibus, qui subsunt nobis secundum Petrum unicum pastorem . . .*

Blacktooth knew historians would call it by the first words of the text, *Scitote Tyrannum*, which followed. Newly returned after dark to the fort from furlough, he read by torchlight the first few paragraphs on the wall:

Amen II, Bishop of Rome, servant of the servants of God, to all the faithful believers in the one true Church, Catholic and Apostolic, to these chosen ones of the Lord, who are subject to Us as to Peter, the only shepherd appointed by Christ to become the head of His mystical body, sends greetings and the Apostolic Benediction.

YOU SHALL KNOW THAT THE TYRANT Filpeo of Texark [Tyrannum Phillipum Texarkanae] together with his uncle, the former Cardinal Archbishop of the City of Hannegans [Civitas Hanneganensis], having by their own acts [ipso facto] been excommunicated, as affirmed by Our predecessor of holy memory, Amen I, are hereby declared by Us to be enemies of God and His Holy Church, are cursed, condemned, cast out, cut off from the Body of Christ, apart from which there is no salvation. For crimes against humanity and the Church, including his own people and their clergy, We declare Filpeo Harq deposed from the office of Mayor; We absolve his former subjects from all oaths of obedience to him, We urge them to reconstitute a legitimate government in his place, and We enjoin all

Christians against serving or obeying him. As long as the tyrant remains in power, We encourage all Christian rulers of peoples throughout the continent to take up arms against him. They shall receive through Our venerable Brethren, their own Bishops, Our blessing upon their armies and their arms.

Moreover, whosoever among the faithful is fit to bear arms shall, upon undertaking to wage righteous war against this heretical tyrant and his uncle, receive from Us through his confessor a plenary indulgence for all his sins and remission of all temporal punishment which may be due either in this world or in Purgatory. Upon confession, his only penance shall be to wage war against the forces of the imperial tyrant, and should he die in battle, We, who hold the keys of the kingdom of Heaven, shall unlock the gate thereof that he may enter into the holy Presence . . .

### *A crusade!*

The word itself was not used, and had not been used since the twenty-third century, but all the characteristics were there. The Pope spoke of heroes marching behind a crucifer into battle. War was to be waged under the sign of the cross and the banner of the papacy. The Church in Hannegan City was laid under interdict. Ecclesiastical courts were ordered closed. Priests were forbidden to say Mass. All sacraments except last rites were withheld. Clergy and laity who ignored the interdict were automatically excommunicated. The sentence did not extend to the Province, except to those parishes which had refused obedience to Brownpony's former Vicariate and remained tied to the Hannegan City Archdiocese.

Upon Urion Benefez himself the Pope pronounced a sentence of "Anathema, from which he can be absolved only by the Roman Pontiff and at the point of death."

There was more, but Blacktooth left the furious document and returned to the barracks by full moonlight. They would be moving out tomorrow. His astonishment was due to the fact that such language came from his former employer, a man slow to anger.

"Why astonished?" Aberlott asked him. "Haven't you heard of a crusade before?"

"Yes, but not since the twenty-third century, and that one of the least holy wars ever fought. The bull or whatever it's called just doesn't sound like Cardinal Brownpony."

"Well, it isn't Cardinal Brownpony. It's Pope Amen II. Maybe his voice changed when it dropped on him."

"It sounds more like Domidomi Cardinal Hoydok."

Aberlott pondered for a moment. "And why not? Hoydok wouldn't dare go back to Hannegan City. He's not here. So he must be with the Pope. And who could better write a letter to anger the Mayor and the Archbishop? He's probably the Pope's secretary for urban affairs by now."

Nimmy's urge to run away to New Jerusalem had not entirely disappeared, because of Ædrea, but it had been diminished in urgency by the tone of the bull *Scitote Tyrannum*. He was not sure that he wanted to work for its author.

Early the following morning, most of the remaining population of Valana turned out to watch its young men ride off toward the Plains and to war under command of the spooks of New Jerusalem. Minor clergy, who had read *Scitote Tyrannum*, had donned vestments and now fell in with the riders. A priest bearing a crucifix marched ahead of Major Cleaver's horse. Blacktooth suspected that the support of clergy had been arranged by one of the cardinals. The show of religion in support of the militia prevented a public display of hostility toward the alien commanders who were leading local soldiery.

The sun was approaching the zenith when Cleaver called a halt for food, water, and a brief rest. When the formation fell in again, Ulad sent Blacktooth to the head of the column as interpreter. Only now that they were safely out of civilian earshot was Cleaver prepared to disclose the planned route to his Nomad guides. Even so, the major ordered that the details be kept secret from the men and from Nomads of either horde they might encounter during the journey.

"From here we ride southeast until we reach the Kensau River. We'll follow the river until it turns northeast, then continue east-southeast until we pick it up again at some of the old dams near Tulse, and on until we're within half-a-day's ride from the Texark patrol road. At that point we reconnoiter, and

send a patrol to infiltrate the Watchitah."

Blacktooth translated for the Nomad scouts, and Cleaver continued:

"The moon should be full again about the time we arrive. Our brothers beyond the border there can arrange incidents to distract the patrols while we try to drive the wagons past the border at night. With luck, we can arm the Valley people without a fight. If we have to fight to get them in, it will mean Hannegan has seen us coming. That means secrecy. Don't talk to any Nomads we meet about where we are going."

The Nomad warriors nodded their understanding, but Blacktooth heard them talking later about the troop being observed by motherless ones, who regularly sold news of Grasshopper movements to Texark agents. There would be a blue moon on the last day of July. By day or by night, a convoy of wagons escorted by light-horse infantry traveling east-southeast across the Plains toward Watchit-Ol'zarkia would not go unobserved. Nimmy and the Nomads expected a fight, but only Nimmy was committed to it, and his Ædrea was in jail.

The whole scheme seemed crazy. A week after the departure from Valana, Sorely Nauwhat caught up with them. He was weary from fast riding and immediately made a bed in one of the wagons. The horse he had been riding bore a brand which identified it as belonging to one of the Nomad messenger families, so it was clear that he had changed horses several times in catching up with them. Why Nauwhat? What was so important about this expedition that the head of SEEC joined the command? Previous to his appearance, Blacktooth had suspected that this feckless sortie of the Valanan militia was entirely Chuntar Hadala's project, and, impressed against his will, he wanted to desert. But Nauwhat had been Brownpony's closest friend and supporter in the Curia, and his presence seemed to confirm the legitimacy if not the sanity of the mission. Gai-See and Woosoh-Loh, now sergeants, had come with the expedition, and their loyalty to Brownpony was beyond suspicion. There would be no deserters with them looking on.

One morning early in mid-July, while passing the cardinals' tent, he overheard a murmur of conversation between these princes of the Church.

". . . peace, yes, but the peace of Christ!" Hadala was saying.

"Sure, Brownpony loves peace," Brownpony's friend answered. "He loves it so much he doesn't care who he kills to get it."

Blacktooth hurried away, but perhaps not before being seen; Sorely Nauwhat began avoiding him immediately afterward.

*O Santa Librada! Freedom is not visible!*

*Pray for us!*

That night he dreamed of a woman, a casualty of war. She was half buried in a hillside pocked by cannon fire.

Blood drained slowly in a thick stream from a hole at the edge of her breast. Half her body and her right arm was swallowed up by the landslide, while her left arm lay free and limp among the stones in sand. He touched her arm and felt for a pulse. He could find none, but the wound in her side continued to bleed. The flow of blood continued. It ran into the sand and between the stones and continued to run ten feet down the slide. He tore off a piece of his robe and tried to stanch the flow, but even after leaving it there while he counted to a thousand, the wound bled unchecked. He began trying to dig her out, but his work moved a critical stone, caused her body to shift, and caused several rocks to roll from above, as if the landslide had not finished its work.

Soon it became apparent that the flow of blood was increasing, until he saw that the blood could no longer be her blood but was coming through her from somewhere deep within the collapsed hill. But the blood was keeping her alive. After a while, she opened her eyes and looked at him.

For a moment, she was Ædrea. She raised her left hand toward his face, and he saw a torn palm with more blood.

*"Tengo ojos, no me miren.*

*"Tengo manos, no me tapen."*

She was Santa Librada now, deposed from the cross.



He backed away in fear. She hissed and turned red and tried to bite him. She was the bride of Brownpony, the Buzzard of Battle. A shadow fell over him, and he looked up. There stood Elia Brownpony in white vestments and wearing the tiara. He sprinkled the woman with holy water, and she shrieked in agony.

Blacktooth always had trouble sleeping under the stars.

## CHAPTER 23

Indeed at all seasons let the hour, whether for supper or for dinner, be so arranged that everything will be done by daylight.

—*Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 41

HE EMPEROR WAS A PART-TIME SCHOLAR.

With the help of a young political-science professor who was also a popular author, Filpeo Harq had written a book. It was a book Brownpony not surprisingly had sent to the Holy Office as soon as he saw it. The Holy Office duly added it to the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, although it bore the imprimatur of the Cardinal Archbishop of Texark, and carried an introduction by a monk of Saint Leibowitz, who, unfortunately for his career, happened to agree with the Imperial Mayor that the restoration of the *Magna Civitas* could only be accomplished by secular science and industry under the protection of a secular state against the resistance and hostility of religion. It was such a self-evidently wicked book that the Holy Office wrote neither an attack nor a commentary; the work was filed under "Anticlericalism." Its author was already so thoroughly anathematized that further curses from eternal Rome would seem petty.

But Filpeo was a scholar, and among other things, he had been able to restore several ancient pieces of music, including one of regional origin which seemed well suited to become the new national anthem for the Empire, and he published it in his book. The tune was now well known. Its ancient words were English, but the Ol'zark translation scanned well enough. It began: "The eyes of Texark are upon you." The Mayor wanted his subjects to feel well watched.

Every priest in the Empire who read the crusading bull *Scitote Tyrannum* aloud from the pulpit or who publicly observed the interdict imposed on the Texark Church by the Brownpony papacy—there were only thirteen of them—was arrested and charged with sedition. Two bishops who had suspended Masses and confessions in their dioceses in obedience to the bull joined the priests in jail. In six out of seven parishes throughout the Empire, however, the religious life went on as if Amen II had never spoken. After so many decades of a papacy in exile, the people of Hannegan City and even New Rome had lost sight of the Pope as a real player in their perceived world. He was distant, and his anger was like that of a player on the stage, except that the people only read the reviews without seeing the play. The communications media—mostly paper since the telegraph line to the west was down—kept them informed, but the media were deferentially kind to the relatively absolute ruler of the state.

*Scitote Tyrannum*, therefore—however binding it might be in Heaven—was the least of Filpeo's worries on Earth. The Antipope's forces were going to march, and the Antipope had used the treasures of the Church to arm the wild Nomads with superior weapons to be used against civilization. Filpeo always spoke of him as Antipope, although there was no competing Pope. Filpeo stood for the renewal of the *Magna Civitas*, and Brownpony the Antipope opposed it. It was that simple, from the Hannegan's point of view. Brownpony was the past waging war against the future. He armed the barbarians and would soon send them against civilization's holy places, if not against the City of Hannegans itself. Filpeo was confident he could defend the city until the new firearms were delivered, and after that his forces would be able to drive the spooks back to the Suckamints and herd the Jackrabbit into the southwest desert, push the Wilddog north of the Misery, and herd the Grasshopper into formerly Wilddog lands, so that the two northern hordes would be forced to fight each other for living space.

The Imperial Mayor hoped to win the Nomad outlaws over to his side, and he sent an ex-pirate to recruit them. Admiral eFondolai promised them Grasshopper lands in the aftermath of victory. Filpeo was amused to hear of it at first, but after giving the matter some thought, he decided that he would, if possible, honor the promise Carpy had so rashly made. If the motherless ones could marry farm women and be assigned enough land, they could raise fully domesticated cattle and live in fixed homes, and trade with the farmers and the cities. In such circumstances, they would not develop a society anything like the hordes. Very likely the taboo against capturing wild horses could not survive without the Weejus to enforce it, and the motherless ones, once they settled down, were not likely to restore the matrilineal inheritance of wild Nomads. They would acquire property and fight to defend it. In the Mayor's dream, in the wake of his certain victory, the Grasshopper and the Wilddog and the motherless ones would each be at war against the others, and the Jackrabbit would straggle back out of the desert to be arrested and put to work repairing war-damaged properties.

Filpeo was well pleased with his admiral, but not his general.

When General Goldæm went to the university and demanded Thon Hilbert's cooperation in teaching the troops how to contaminate wells in the Province and infect cattle with the new diseases, Thon Hilbert refused. General Goldæm went to the War Office and got him inducted into the Texark Army as a private. Then he ordered him to teach. Hilbert cursed the general personally, then cursed his Monarch. The general had the professor put in jail for sedition. The Hannegan summoned the general to his quarters, fired him, and retired him at half pay. He then put Admiral eFondolai, alias Carpios Robbery, in charge of the project. Because Hilbert's assistant at the university agreed to teach the military whatever was required, Hilbert remained in jail, pending an apology to the Hannegan. The apology was not immediately forthcoming.

Three months after he fired General Goldæm, Filpeo watched with delight as Admiral eFondolai's model strike force, led by Carpios himself on horseback, marched past his reviewing stand. The Imperial Mayor had never seen such a burly gang of cutthroats outside of a prison yard. They were armed with the several dozen repeating arms which had already been delivered by the gunsmiths, which was quite an investment, and one which Filpeo had been reluctant to make at first. Carpios made the point that for an effective assault force, firepower was everything, so the Emperor placed his most advanced weaponry in the hands of ruffians dressed in wolfskins and chewed leather. He watched them march under a banner that depicted a bird being roasted on a spit over a fire; the bird was branded with both the Weejus symbol for the Buzzard of Battle and with a pair of crossed keys. Filpeo laughed aloud at the sacrilege, called the old pirate back to the stand, and awarded him the ancient title of "Vaquero Supreme of the Plains," which had been claimed by the Hannegans since the time of their Nomad roots, but which dropped out of use after Hannegan IV fell off his horse.

Part of Filpeo's delight was at Carpios' expense, for the sight of the bearded pirate in admiral's white uniform riding at the head of three hundred bathless ruffians dressed in wilddog skins was hilarious. After the parade, Filpeo not only gave him the title of Vaquero but promoted him to field marshal—"so you can choose your own uniform" was the way the Emperor put it. But he made sure to let the old seaman know that when he finished the project, he would be made commander in chief of Texark forces. There was something oceanic about the Great Plains. The admiral sensed it too, and became enthusiastic about the wars that plainly lay ahead.

There was no clear Texark military doctrine for Nomad warfare, not since Hannegan IV fell off his horse, and the admiral's job was quickly to develop such a doctrine. The Plains resembled the ocean in that there was nowhere to hide, and no naturally defensive terrain in which to take refuge. Most land west of the last timber was equally accessible from all directions, and therefore as inhospitable as the storm-tossed sea. A cavalry battle there could be like an engagement between two ships of war—short, savage, and with only one surviving side.

The admiral thrice visited Thon Hilbert in jail. He informed his ruler of the visits, and affirmed their obvious purpose; he promised an account of the ultimate outcome, but declined to give a running report. The jailer told Filpeo that during the admiral's third visit, they played Old Zark chess and talked about nothing but the game. What came of the meetings was also nothing, but Carpy wanted the Mayor to let

the professor go anyway. Filpeo refused. He had no use for an apology, but apology or no apology, Hilbert would stay in jail until the university's cooperation with the military was satisfactory and assured.

"Thon Hilbert's disease is hindering them in the South," a field commander told him. "A few cases have appeared among Brownpony's armies, but it is becoming endemic only in the Province. Because of it, the spooks and the Jackrabbit rebels are exhausting their military energy for the time being. We can soon launch a counterattack."

"And no cases of the disease have appeared among our troops?"

"No, as I told you, as long as they drink Hilbert's preventative every day. It tastes bad, and they don't like it. But there is a standing order that any trooper who catches Hilbert's disease shall be immediately shot. To prevent further contagion is the stated reason."

The Mayor shifted restlessly. "That sounds unnecessarily cruel."

"Well, if carried out, of course. The threat is necessary to prevent contagion; it is only meant to insure the men drink the preventative."

The War Dog was a constellation in the Nomad night, but he was also the mythical pet of the Lord Empty Sky. That ancient hero had led even wilddogs into battle against the army of the Farmer King. Nomads had always sent their dogs against the enemy whenever practical, but Empty Sky's battle was unique in that his dogs were wild-dogs, and in that their elder Weejus bitches had elected Empty Sky to be sharf of the Horde of Wilddogs, while his sister thought the dogs were merely being loyal to the *Qædach dri Vørdar* to whom all loyalty was due. The fact that the Horde of Wilddogs had elected him as its own rival to the human Wilddog sharf suggested that the office was usually held by a dog. That this dog had an equal claim on human Wilddog loyalty and young Wilddog women was a Grasshopper conceit. It was a conceit that sometimes led to fighting between rival bands of drovers of the northern hordes.

But the War Dog was still a Nomad mythic reality, and Swimming Elk had begun his reign as sharf by ordering a return to the old practice of keeping attack dogs trained to accompany horsemen into battle against an unmounted enemy, and he awarded a monopoly on the training of war dogs to the family of his brother's wife. Which is a Nomad way of saying that he gave the job to a brother-in-law, Goat-Wind by name, who happened to be good at it. Goat-Wind persuaded all the adolescents of his extended family to organize parties for raiding lairs of wild bitches and stealing their puppies. He turned the management of puppy collections over to his sister, with an injunction against killing bitches except in self-defense, and another against taking pups younger than six weeks.

A Weejus minority held that stealing wild puppies was an offense like stealing wild colts, but Eltür's sister asked them scornfully, "Who are we offending? The *Høngin Fujæ Vurn* is not the Wild Bitch Woman. The dogs belong to Empty Sky, for whom the sharf speaks. We don't even punish the motherless ones for roasting wild puppy."

Demon Light wanted results within two months, so Goat-Wind collected every available dog with any experience at all as a working companion to a horseman. Even now in late July results were apparent. Thirty-five willing warriors had been given thirty-five dogs to work with, and eighty-one younger dogs were already in school.

There was no way to test dogs in the occasional skirmishes with Texark cavalry, for dogs could never effectively join one side in an encounter between mutually mounted war bands. The dogs could participate in a cavalry attack on infantry, but since Nomad wars were usually ceremonial conflicts between hordes, there had been no reason since the time of Høngan Ös to bear the expense of feeding a large war pack—until Eltür began contemplating battle against the standing armies of the Hannegan. The spirit of the dog-man-horse war entity was still alive in the tribes, however, and Demon Light's attempt to awaken it was immediately popular. It added Empty Sky's blessing to his leadership. But any Nomad-speaking Texark agent—and there must have been at least one—who learned about the training of dogs for war would know that dogs were only for fighting unmounted armies like the defenders of Empire. They would be useful for incursions into Texark space.

His brother Kindly Light, when he broke through Texark border defenses and rode all the way to

New Rome, had needed dogs. With dogs, Hultor might have lost only half as many men, even if it cost him all the dogs. A dog was a lethal loyal weapon, once the man and the dog and the horse became melded into a single spirit, which was then merged into a spirit of a pack. Man became more horselike and doglike. Dog and horse became more human, and more like each other. It was a spiritual unity, but probably the only outsider to notice it as such was that old Christian shaman of the Wilddog, Father Ombroz, a man Eltür much admired, although he begrudged his influence on the Wilddog shamans. The epiphany of the dog-horse-man unity was, when experienced, a Nomad sacrament—according to Ombroz. Monsignor Sanual had called it "*a* bestial form of diabolic possession," a remark which Eltür found flattering.

It was the issue of the War Dog that saved Chuntar Cardinal Hadala and his officers from death at the hands of a Grasshopper war party. The occasion of the issue being raised was a council called when the news of Hadala's invasion first came to the Grasshopper leadership. Demon Light became livid, and was quite ready to launch an immediate attack on the cardinal's forces. For negotiating purposes, it always behooved a Grasshopper sharf to take a harder line in council than he expected the grandmothers to approve. But it was his own sister who used the issue of the War Dog against him after Eltür proposed killing Hadala and anyone else who resisted a seizure of the militia's wagons.

"It is a complete betrayal, my sister," said Demon Light before he yielded. "Brownpony's plan was for the Suckamint spooks to attack in the Province, and the eastern allies to strike at the other shore of the Great River. The Grasshopper was to keep the peace until Hannegan took the forces which now face us to the defense of his allies. Now here comes this army of farmer clowns out of Valana tramping toward Glep Valley with guns! How is Filpeo Harq not to notice them coming? Every motherless one south of here has seen them and tried to sell the information to Texark. The first one who tried probably got paid."

"Yes, and I wonder," his sister said thoughtfully, "if the motherless one who told Texark about your war dogs was properly paid. And whether your dogs will affect Hannegan's temptation to weaken the forces that face us. No, I don't think Grasshopper justice demands killing the fools; it demands they turn back. You should let them choose: take their guns with them or surrender them to you. And that, my sharf, is the Weejus consensus."

Demon Light let his battle fury subside, as it usually did in the face of the Weejus consensus, if no Bear Spirit objection arose. After the council, Brām assembled a force of eighty warriors and led them south by east to intercept this mounted militia of townsmen from the mountains. His men had armed themselves with new five-shooters as well as traditional lances, but Eltür ordered ten repeating rifles brought along for killing officers at a distance if they met resistance from the townsmen.

Then he took an action which changed the course of the war. He sent for Black Eyes, who had been captured during Hultor's raid. The man had been imprisoned by the Hannegan and had met Cardinal Brownpony in jail, but he was released months later to carry a message from Filpeo to his horde. Both Demon Light and the Emperor knew Black Eyes was a double agent, but as such he could be useful to both.

"Tell your contacts about Hadala's expedition," said the sharf, "so they can mount a defense in that area. And tell them I told you to tell them. If they want to know why I let them know, explain that I want hostilities to cease between the Grasshopper and Texark."

"The farmers will be glad to hear it," said Black Eyes with a snicker; he left camp immediately for the frontier.

Demon Light was not really turning on his allies, because he was not convinced of his own complaint of betrayal by the Pope, for while Brownpony alone might be foolish enough to launch such a venture, Brownpony had good advisers on Nomad affairs. Some were sent to him by Holy Madness, Lord of the Hordes. And Eltür thought highly of one of the Pope's secretaries, the Nomadic interpreter monk Ny-inden, who spoke Grasshopper so well. None of these counselors would allow Brownpony to believe that Chuntar Hadala's incursion into Nomad country was acceptable to the Grasshopper, even were it not militarily stupid on the face of it. When his initial berserk reaction to the news of the advent subsided, Demon Light expected his war party to be confronted—not by a force of official crusaders

launched by a Pope, but by a motley parade put in motion by the lunacy of lesser men.

When Brownpony first learned about Hadala's mission, he himself cried betrayal, and his anger was stirred against his successor in the Secretariat of Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Concerns. The Pope could think of no reason why Sorely Nauwhat would betray him or lend support to a harebrained scheme to arm and assist such dubious allies as Hadala's flock of gleps in the Valley, at the cost of probable hardening by Texark of its western frontier. Hadala had gone crazy in the service of his flock, the Pope decided. He would think thus: If Brownpony can arm the Nomads, I can arm the real Children of the Pope—not the spooks in the Suckamints, but the gleps in the Watchitah and Ol'zarks. The Pope could understand Hadala's passion for his own people, but not Sorely Nauwhat's duplicity in the ridiculous undertaking.

The possibility that his old friend Nauwhat had simply gone over to the enemy never occurred to Brownpony until it was put to him by Abraha Cardinal Deacon Linkono, the New Jerusalemite schoolteacher who was invited to join the Curia because he knew everyone in this nation now playing host to the papacy.

"But what could Filpeo Harq possibly offer that would tempt Sorely Nauwhat to betray us?" Pope Amen II wanted to know.

"The papacy perhaps?" the schoolteacher guessed.

Stung by Linkono's speculation, Brownpony sent an immediate message to Valana ordering Cardinal Nauwhat and Brother St. George to appear before him. By including Blacktooth in his summons, the Pope hoped to alleviate suspicion in case Sorely really was guilty. Within two weeks, however, the messenger returned with the news that Blacktooth had gone with the Valanan Militia, and that Nauwhat had disappeared shortly after their departure. The news was very depressing to Brownpony. He called his Nomad messengers and instructed one of them to pursue Hadala's militia and order him to turn back. He deputized another as an Officer of the Curia to arrest Nauwhat on sight if found in Nomad country and to arrest Hadala if he disobeyed the order to retreat. He sent a third messenger to assure the Grasshopper sharf that Hadala's sortie was not authorized, for the Pope feared the wrath of Demon Light.

The Nomad messenger-service families, both Wilddog and Grasshopper, had for decades enjoyed a monopoly on a High Plains relay parcel delivery between Valana and New Rome. They kept fixed camps, and for this un-Nomadic practice they were not admired within their hordes. Sneering warriors would ask to see their "vegetable patches." But they had made money, and they used it to buy horses from outsiders, thus freeing themselves from family obligations incurred by both buyer and seller when the seller was a Nomad mare woman. Brownpony had always used the relay families for communicating with the sharfs and the tribal chiefs. Now he used them for keeping in touch with the *Qaesach dri Vørdar*, and he was encouraging the families to establish relay stations north of the Misery River and well beyond the reach of Texark patrols. He had already sent messages toward the King of the Tenesi and several other rulers beyond the Great River, and he was awaiting news from that front.

To New Jerusalem Brownpony had brought two Wilddog and two Grasshopper riders to open a branch office of the families' service. In the abrupt wake of Nauwhat's and Sorely's defection, he now found need for three of them. To one Grasshopper rider he gave a message for Demon Light. It "authorized" Brām to exercise the papal warrant for the arrest of two princes of the Church in his territory with authorization to imprison them humanely. Forgetting for a moment that the Pope understood their dialect, this Grasshopper rider said to his kinsman, "Our sharf will surely appreciate these new powers in his own realm."

"Your family must send us someone less sarcastic," Pope Amen said to him in half-decent Grasshopper. "You can pass your message on to the next Wilddog relay rider tomorrow. Then you can start riding home to tall-grass country. Your family can send us your replacement when you get there."

He stopped looking at the man and spoke to the Wilddog rider. "You can be home tomorrow, and relay my message to Hadala from there. It will get to him quicker that way. We can't give arrest powers to a Wilddog in Grasshopper country. We do deputize you to arrest Nauwhat anywhere else you may

find him. There will be a reward for him. Spread the word on that."

He turned to the second Grasshopper. "You must chase Hadala all the way to Ol'zarkia if you need to. Give him a copy of the same message. If he's not already obeying it and coming home by the time you catch up with him, you can read aloud to his men paragraph seven. It excommunicates all Hadala's followers who do not disband and desert at once. Arm yourself, but try to get help from your sharf in making the arrest." He then looked pointedly at the maker of the sarcastic remark.

"When you see a man you can't control about to take the law into his own hands, you might as well save yourself embarrassment and put the law in his hands yourself."

The man—having already been fired—answered back: "Nevertheless, Your Holiness will be embarrassed when I tell Sharf Eltür you said that."

Brownpony glared at him for a moment, then broke out laughing. "All right, you can come back here after you pass the message for Brâm to the relay. Someday we'll need an insolent rider with a gift for blackmail."

Grandmother Grasshopper raised insolent colts and children. "Maybe I'll come back, and maybe I won't," the relay rider said.

Chuntar Hadala's war party and ammunition train traveled faster than anyone expected. The moon was nearly full again in the late days of July, but when it left the world dark, setting before dawn, Blacktooth could see distant points of light on the eastern horizon. They looked like fires. Would farmers keep night fires burning? Nimmy knew that a relay messenger had come from the west with a message for Cardinal Hadala on the 28th. The messenger had seemed surprised to find Cardinal Nauwhat with the train. Of course, the Cardinal Secretary had left Valana two days late, and by night, so that no one in the city could be sure of his destination or whereabouts. The messenger left again, but the effect of the message on the cardinals was to command a forced march. The troop rode eastward until midnight.

The next morning, the sun arose above the distant hills where Nimmy had seen points of firelight in the night. Beyond those hills would lie the sprawling glep settlements of "the Valley." After a fast breakfast of biscuits and tea, the militia rode on toward them.

Two days later, near sundown, the Grasshopper sharf with a war band overtook them from the west. The militia had already camped for the night. After conferring with the cardinals, Major Gleaver ordered the wagons arranged in a defensive array and the men to take cover in expectation of an attack.

"This is crazy, Nimmy," Aberlott said. "They are allies."

"Just don't obey any order to shoot. I'll talk to them." Blacktooth walked out of the defensive position and went to meet the Grasshopper warriors as they approached. He could hear Major Gleaver yelling at him to come back, and he stopped once when a Nomad raised a rifle at him; Demon Light spoke a word, and the rifle was lowered. He recognized the monk and beckoned him on.

A bullet struck the ground near Blacktooth's feet. The report came from behind him. The Nomad who had lifted the rifle lifted it again and returned fire. Nimmy looked back in time to see one of the lieutenants standing beside Gleaver drop his pistol and fall to the ground.

"For God's sake, stop shooting, you fools!" Nimmy yelled.

"I'll try you and hang you!" the major yelled back.

Behind Gleaver stood Chuntar Hadala, looking grim.

Sharf Brâm lingered just beyond gunshot range, and he sat there for several minutes while the monk came up to him.

"You remember me?" Blacktooth asked.

Brâm nodded. "But what is the Pope's servant doing with these men?"

"I'm not the Pope's servant now. My master left Valana without me."

"Yes, I knew that. I took him south to meet Dion. He thought you abandoned him. Did you?"

"Not intentionally. I was not in the city when the Palace exploded. When I came back, he was gone and I was drafted into the militia."

"You seem not to have been told the news."

"What news is that, Sharf Brâm?"

Demon Light, unable to read for himself, handed the monk a letter. Blacktooth read it with mounting dismay, looked at Eltür, then back at the cardinals.

"This must be the same message Cardinal Hadala got."

"You go tell him what it says, and ask him. Then tell him if he continues east, I shall not arrest him if he travels alone."

"Alone? I don't understand. What about Cardinal Nauwhat?"

It was Eltür's turn to be surprised. "Is he here? Then they can travel east together. The rest of you will stay here."

"I don't understand. They seem to be expecting you to attack."

"They expect me to arrest them. Doesn't the message say that? What they don't know is that I already sent a messenger to the Texark border guard. The enemy knows you're coming, and he knows why. The only way Hadala can keep the guns from the Hannegan is to give them to us. And the only way the cardinals can escape from me is to surrender to the Hannegan's border guard. Then the rest of you go home. Remind them what Hõngan Ösle Chür did to Esitt Loyte. We can do as much for them, if we have to arrest them."

The letter Blacktooth had read said nothing about handing the cardinals over to the Hannegan, but he chose not to argue. When he returned to the camp, everyone was watching him and Ulad was waiting to seize him. At the last moment, he changed direction to put a group of recruits between himself and the spook sergeant. He spoke quickly to Aberlott:

"The sharf has orders from the Pope to arrest the cardinals. If we resist, we are all excommunicated. And the enemy is ready for us, because Brâm warned them we were coming. Tell the men, especially Sergeants Gai-See and Woosoh-Loh. Tell them to pray, and let Hadala see them praying."

He tried to get to the cardinals before Ulad got to him, but the giant was fast. He arrived in a headlock and was forced to his knees. Sorely Nauwhat since joining the expedition had seemed anxious to avoid Blacktooth, and he now hurried away. Chuntar Hadala bent over the monk. He was a glep himself, his skin dappled with various shades of brown—a common mutation—but he was a handsome man in spite of it, with a goatee and a long mustache that had once been golden.

"Well, Brother, tell us about your conversation with the Nomad warlord," said the Vicar Apostolic to the Watchitah Nation.

"Your Eminence won't shoot the messenger?"

"Nobody sent you as a messenger!" the cardinal snapped. "And the major may yet have you shot. Just tell us what you found out."

"Have you seen the fires in the east at night, m'Lord?"

"Yes, they are our people's beacons. They know we're here."

"So does Texark. The sharf warned them you were coming. The fires belong to the cavalry."

The lighter patches of the cardinal's skin drained of color. "They are supposed to be allies!" he gasped. "Why does he sell us out to the enemy?"

Blacktooth, under threat and afraid, decided not to mention the Pope's letter directly. Hadala already possessed a copy.

The monk resumed: "He says he will not arrest you and Cardinal Nauwhat if you surrender to the Texark troops. He orders the rest of us to surrender the weapons to him and get out of his country."

Hadala sputtered, and went in search of Nauwhat. Soon he came back with an order.

"Go see him again. Invite him here to parley. We will stay out in the open where his men can see us. If he comes alone, he may come armed. Do you think an oath by me that he will not be harmed or taken captive would help?"

Blacktooth thought about it for a moment. "No. He might find it insulting."

"Do the best you can without it, then."

The sharf was not reluctant. He borrowed a second pistol from a warrior, tied the leash of a heavily built war dog to his belt, grasped the monk by his uniform collar, and began walking toward Hadala's encampment with a gun to Nimmy's head.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

"I'm no good as a hostage, Sharf Bråm. They won't care if you kill me."

As they stopped before Hadala, Gleaver, and Hadala's Grasshopper guide, Eltür released Blacktooth, untied the dog's leash, and barked a single word at the animal, who began to growl and stare at the cardinal.

"If I'm shot, the dog kills you."

Hadala spat venom at Demon Light for trafficking with the enemy, and Blacktooth translated it.

The sharf ignored it. Bråm waved an arm toward the east and spoke in short sentences; between them Blacktooth translated:

"This eastward lane here will be kept open. It goes from your camp to the hills yonder and to sunrise. When an armed man steps into the lane, we shoot him. An unarmed man gets one warning shot. But you and the other Red Hat may pass, going east. Take with you any disarmed officers you wish. Red Beard ordered me to arrest and hold you. I am Sharf of the Grasshopper Horde. I give orders here. Empty Sky is my Pope. The Wild Horse Woman is my sister. Høngan Ösle is my Lord." Demon Light gestured broadly at the sky, at the earth, and again toward the northwest prairie where his Lord would be encamped. After a pause, he went on grandly. "I, the sharf of this country, offer you Grasshopper hospitality. You will be required to gather dry turds for the kitchen fires. And the women will make you shovel horseshit. They will tease you a lot, but you will not be hurt. When Red Beard sends for you, you must go to him. If you don't accept our hospitality, you just march east. Without arms and without men. The Hannegan's men will take you in. He may be glad to get you."

"Are you including Major Gleaver?" Hadala asked sourly.

Eltür grew impatient, and began talking in longer sentences. He knew nothing of Gleaver. He had already been told he could take unarmed officers. Bråm made scattered remarks about the cardinal's stupidity. Blacktooth waited for him to pause and then summarized.

"Let Major Gleaver cooperate in his own disarmament, he says. The sharf will leave him in command to hold the men together on the trek back home. He says the rabble will get out of his tall-grass country quicker if we are under command. But if Gleaver wants to surrender to Texark, Sharf Bråm will let him pass."

"He knows we outnumber his men nearly four to one. What makes him think . . ."

"He can stop us? Shall I ask?"

"Ask him if two of his men are equal to seven of ours."

The sharf chuckled as soon as Nimmy translated, then shared a few private jokes with his interpreter. Hadala became angry.

"What does he say? Stop having your own private conversation."

"He says seven-against-two would be fair, if you leave your wagons undefended. Your seven men with seven guns might chase his two men with two guns for several days, inconclusively, but you would lose the wagons. If we defend the wagons, we'll just be pinned down and starved out. And if you don't make up your minds soon, Texark will come out and get the wagons."

"Are those his words, or yours, Brother St. George? Be careful you don't go too far." After this admonition, Hadala began speaking slowly enough for Nimmy to translate simultaneously.

"Look, we are as worried as you are that the wagons will be intercepted by the patrol as we try to take them in. So why don't you help us? Your people have been well supplied with arms, and you don't need my wagons. The occupied territory ahead is just a narrow strip along the western frontier of the Watchitah Nation. It's hardly more than a double roadway. The outer road is patrolled by Texark troops; they look outward toward your country. The inner road is patrolled by the Valley Customs Service; they look inward at the Watchitah Nation, my people. I myself am on the Customs Service Board, for the Church. Their patrol will help us, once we're past the Texark troopers and the patrol sees who I am. If you could just help us hold back the Texark riders until we get the wagons through, we'll all cut and run afterward."

"You are another Christian war sharf? Another military genius in a red hat? There are so many of you." Blacktooth found himself unable to avoid echoing Bråm's sarcastic tone, although he could see that



the cardinal was beginning to seethe. "But what will stop the Texark cavalry from riding right straight into the heart of the Valley of the Gleps to take the wagons away from you?"

"Why, we hoped to cross over by night, unknown to them. But you ruined that by warning them. And the treaty between . . ."

Hadala's explanation was cut off by a Grasshopper war cry. Someone shouted that a large dust cloud and a probable party of horsemen was seen in the east.

"They've decided to come and get you themselves, glep priest, said Brām with a savage smile. "Now, we are going to get out of the way. Aren't you lucky? You can fight them instead of us."

All Nomads took immediately to horseback, and Blacktooth watched them ride away toward the northwest. He was tempted to mount up and ride after them, but Ulad had threatened to shoot him in the back for desertion if he again broke ranks.

Hadala looked at him for a moment. "Do you have an opinion, Brother Corporal St. George?" he demanded sternly.

"Those riders will be here in a few minutes. That is my opinion, Your Eminence." Blacktooth turned and broke into a trot toward the wagons. Sorely Nauwhat and the major had been standing there watching the meeting between Brām and Cardinal Hadala until the shouting started, but Nauwhat had faded from view.

"Cardinal Hadala's done with you, Private St. George!" Gleaver snapped at him. "Report to Sergeant Ulad. Get your arms buckled on, and get in the saddle."

Still wearing corporal's chevrons, Nimmy took note of his reduction in rank without openly acknowledging it. Earlier in the day, the major had been yelling at him about a court-martial and the gallows, so the demotion was a welcome commutation of sentence. When Ulad looked at him, however, he could still see a readiness to kill.

Having observed the Grasshopper withdrawal, the Texark commander halted his advance just beyond rifle range. The troopers dismounted. Some of them began digging.

Demon Light drew up his warriors in a half circle just out of range to the west of the Valanan brigade's position. Blacktooth had no doubt that they would fight to prevent the guns and ammunition from falling into the hands of the imperial forces, but they would not begin to fight until Hadala and his men were defeated by those forces. The Valanan light horse, untested troops and their spook commanders, were sandwiched between two superior war bands.

It was almost nightfall on Tuesday the 2nd of August. The moon rose an hour after sundown. During that hour, Sorely Nauwhat vanished, never to be seen again west of Texark frontiers.

"There is going to be a mutiny," Aberlott whispered to Blacktooth at the first opportunity, "unless the glep cardinal quits."

Nimmy shook his head. "These townsmen could mutiny in Valana, but not out here between two unfriendly armies."

Chuntar Hadala remained at the head of his command. Sergeant Ulad shot a deserter who made a break for Grasshopper lines during the night. When the body was dragged back to camp, it turned out to be the cardinal's Grasshopper guide, who was only quitting his job to return to his people.

Blacktooth told Aberlott: "He was the sharf's man, and here we all are in the sharf's jurisdiction—so look at the sergeant now." The monk was remembering how Ulad at their first meeting in Valana had expressed hate for all Nomads. But now that he had killed one, he showed in his face not satisfaction but an astonishing fright.

## CHAPTER 24

If a brother who through his own fault  
leaves the monastery should wish to return,  
let him first promise full reparation for his

having gone away; and then let him be received in the lowest place, as a test of his humility.

—*Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 29

RIGHT, THE MOTHER OF HATRED, POSSESSED the whole militia, but there was nowhere to run. Behind them, the Grasshopper; in front of them, the Emperor. Prowling among them were Chuntar Hadala, and two willing killers of conscripts: the major and Ulad. The flanks were faced with fires, but it was an unusually windless day. The fires had been set in the night, and no one was sure who set them, but because of the calm air nobody worried about them much. Before dawn, Ulad and three husky townsmen unloaded two cannon from the wagons and dragged them forward to face the foe to the east. Then they unloaded two more and aimed them toward the Nomads. The sharf watched them do it, then broke his forces into two equal groups. He moved one group north and one south; they halted so as to face the Valanans from the southwest and northwest. Ulad rearranged the cannon accordingly, but the Nomad movement spoke of no need for cannon. The way west was wide open, by invitation of the sharf. In Blacktooth's opinion, acceptance was the only sane thing to do, but Chuntar Cardinal Hadala was adamant.

"All you who repent your sins, I absolve you," he announced to the assembled troops at dawn, "*in nomine patris, filii, et spiritus sancti*. And if you die in battle for God's glory and the Holy Father's righteous cause, you will attain Heaven without purgatory's purifying pain. I now bless you . . ."

"This," Aberlott whispered, "from a man with the Holy Father's excommunication in his pocket."

Surprised that other conscripts were not jeering Hadala, Blacktooth asked, "Didn't you tell the others what I told you to?"

Aberlott was meekly silent. Nimmy looked him in the eye, then laughed bitterly. Everybody knew that Aberlott was an outrageous liar, not to be believed. Besides, where would he get the courage to accuse a cardinal behind the cardinal's back when every man would in the end point his finger right at Aberlott and say, "I heard it from him"? Well, Blacktooth would have to spread the word himself, or at least enlist one of the Yellow Guard. It was not easy to get close to them, however. They were close only to Cardinal Hadala, as they had always been to Brownpony.

Water was rationed. The supply of jerky was exhausted, and with no hunting possible, the men ate beans and biscuits. The enemy waited for Hadala to move. Hadala waited for gleps from the Valley to attack the enemy from the rear, but this seemed wishful thinking to Blacktooth. On the third day of the standoff, in plain view of the Valana forces, Sharf Brām sent a messenger under a flag of truce to the Texark commander. This further traffic with the enemy increased the cardinal's fury. At Cleaver's orders, several townsmen shot at the messenger, but he was riding beyond range for accurate rifle fire.

That night before the moon rose, fourteen Grasshopper warriors stole into camp, killed two sentries, and stole or drove away most of the horses. After the rise of the gibbous moon, a detachment of Texark cavalry, which had approached noiselessly in total darkness, mounted and rode through the camp screaming and killing with sabers and horse pistols. Several attackers were killed in turn by the well-armed militiamen. After dawn, eighteen bodies were buried, five of them wearing Texark uniforms. There were seven nonfatal casualties as well. Aberlott had lost his right ear to a Texark saber.

"You never left your bedroll, you bastard," he said to Nimmy.

"I guess I slept through it," Blacktooth lied.

The loss of the horses drove the Hadala over the edge. He ordered an infantry attack on the now entrenched Texark position. The cardinal took a cross and proceeded to march proudly with it at the head of the army, his red cap and sash making him a conspicuous target. Major Gleaver shot three men who refused to move out. Three companies of green troops with bayonets fixed to their excellent rifles moved forward behind sporadic covering fire from three cannon. Ulad, furious as usual, led the way behind the cardinal crucifer, but kept looking back to see that the others stayed in line. Terror whitened men's faces as they came into range and some of them began to fall from a crackle of fire by the enemy. Nimmy kept his eyes half closed and prayed to the Virgin. He was astonished that there was no artillery fire directed at them from the Texark rear.

When they had covered half the distance to the enemy lines, he could see that berms of earth and sod

had been thrown up. Imperial troops were firing at them from well-protected positions, and the effect was devastating. About a third of the men had fallen. Twice Ulad ordered the attackers to halt and fire, but each time the enemy's heads ducked behind the berms.

"Double-time march! Shoot while you run!"

In terms of accuracy, it was a waste of ammunition, but it kept the enemy's heads down. After five shots, it was necessary to slow to a walk in order to reload. Most men had brought two extra cylinders, already loaded, but while it was faster to change cylinders than to reload individual chambers, it was necessary to stop altogether to avoid dropping the pins. And to stop was to be shot by a spook officer.

"Look! They're clearing out. Run, damn it, run!"

Terror changed to a furious glee as the townsmen realized that the Texark rifle fire from the forward berm had ceased, although there was still shooting in the distance.

"*Pope's children! My people are there!*" Hadala was shouting back at them. He kept waving his cross like a club toward the foothills. "*They're attacking from the rear.*"

"That explains why cannonballs aren't raining down," Nimmy said toward Aberlott's bandaged ear. The message was not received above the sound of gunfire, but he added, "Maybe the gleps' cardinal is not as crazy as we thought."

The Texark army was not at all defeated. Forced by guerrillas from the Valley to defend their rear, they had retreated from the attack out of the west to defend their artillery from an attack out of the east. The retreat was limited. When militiamen climbed the first berm, three of them were shot down as they went over the top.

Gleaver called a halt. Obviously there were defenders of the second berm. But the attackers could use the enemy's first berm for their own shelter while they ate pocket rations and sipped from canteens.

Nimmy looked up to see Gai-See crawling toward him up a shallow gully. He was not hiding from the enemy, he was hiding from Hadala and the officers.

"Is it true?" asked the Asian warrior monk after taking a careful look around.

"Yes," Nimmy told him, "if you got it from Aberlott."

Gai-See nodded grimly and crawled away by the same route.

Now something would happen, he thought, but it did not happen immediately.

The sun was scorching in early August, but by midafternoon a light westerly breeze came up. Blacktooth noticed that the restless Grasshopper had moved again. The Nomads had re-formed and split into three groups, positioned to the north, west, and south of the wagons. They were still out of range, visible against a background of smoke, but the groups to the north and south were in place for a flanking attack against either the Hannegan or the cardinal.

The fires seemed to be moving slowly eastward. They marked the probable confines of the battleground and defined the possible lines of advance or retreat for the Nomad groups who had likely set them.

Soon afterward, during an assault on the second berm, while trying to shoot over a man's head Nimmy shot him down. Facing Blacktooth, the Texark trooper lay on his back on the sandbank just as he fell when shot. A glep, a glep in Texark uniform, with Hadala's dappled skin and the rather common hairy ears. He stared up at the former monk, trying to see him against the smoke-blurred orb of the sun. His hands were raised toward his face and they hung limply from the wrists; he looked like a puppy begging for a morsel. Why surrender with a ruined abdomen? He clenched his lids, waiting, hoping to be shot again. But Blacktooth dared not to waste ammunition on pity, or even take time to reload, because Ulad was watching him with deep suspicion. Every time he felt such tension, Wooshin's face and words came to his mind.

"Life is a dewdrop and a flash of lightning—that's the way to look at it, Nimmy."

Touching the point of the bayonet to the man's throat, Blacktooth severed the carotid artery. A blade of lightning, a drop of red dew. The drop became a spurting stream. He stepped back, looking around. His throat hurt and was dry; it was a hot day and the air was full of smoke from burning grass.

"Each man, each being is a world. There are innumerable worlds, my friend. Each world of this innumerable array contains and interpenetrates all the other worlds throughout the myriad cosmos, for there are no barriers between the worlds." Metaphysics from an executioner? For the Axe, religion was a martial art. He wanted to talk to Gai-See or Woosoh-Loh about it, but they were always with the cardinal and the officers, and he was made afraid by Gai-See's crawling to him in a ditch.

It's just that I have cut my own throat somehow, he thought, looking at the corpse. So murder feels like this to the murderer. Holy Mother of God, forgive me, but I don't feel very much.

Sergeant Ulad was still watching him from the left, shaking his head. He must be careful not to waver or hesitate. Ulad was suspicious of his piety. He could see two men beyond Ulad. Corporal Victros had climbed to the top of the berm. He motioned the attack party upward.

The sandbank flanked a scythed and well-hoed—but useless—firebreak. Blacktooth climbed the berm and cautiously peered beyond, but the patrol had fled. Why? It was the best place to stop and fight, unless they thought the Valanans' firepower overwhelming. Or, more likely, they might know that greater safety for them lay ahead, and that the glep guerrillas must be prevented from seizing their artillery. Standing atop the berm, he looked back toward the wagons. What had happened to the men guarding them? He could see Nomads in the distance, but no militiamen with the wagons. Without horses to draw them, they were lost anyway.

Somewhere to the north the tall grass was burning faster. They had been crosswind of the fire whose smoke veiled the foothills in the northeast, but they were almost downwind now and still the breeze was changing. He began to smell the smoke, and could see to the north distant horseback warriors moving west out of the fire's path. If the wind kept veering, the wagons would be in danger. He motioned to Ulad that the enemy had fled. They went over the sandbank and continued their cautious advance, camouflaged shadows flitting from knoll to knoll in the great ocean of grass.

Watching from a distance on a hillcrest south of the battle, the Grasshopper sharf could see some of the fight going on around the Texark artillery pieces. Texark was temporarily in trouble, and he was pleased. Demon Light hoped to influence the outcome of the battle by moving warriors about in a menacing way from time to time without actually exposing them to fire. His only intention at the moment was to keep the wagons from being captured by anyone except himself, although if he got them, the Grasshopper had no pressing need for extra ammunition, and the horde's arsenal was already wealthy in new guns. He was not opposed to giving the gleps guns, if it became possible. Now it seemed it might be possible. It was clear that the Texark force was being harassed from the rear. The fact surprised him as much as it did the Texarki.

Demon Light had warned them of Hadala's expedition, but they had trusted him only enough to send two companies of cavalry, two of light horse, and a few artillery pieces to the region where he told them the townsmen would try a border crossing. Surprising to Eltür was the fact that many of the Texark troops were gleps, drafted from the Valley. They had not expected a glep attack from the rear, and had not come well prepared. They would regret not having taken him seriously enough. Such regret might incline them to trust him more next time. When he sent them a message under a white flag, they had listened politely to the messenger as he laid claim to the contents of the wagons, and if this claim were honored, there would be no reason for hostilities. He had also warned the Texark commander that he was about to steal the townsmen's horses. About the wagons, the commander gave a polite but evasive answer, and he smiled on the horse-theft project. In this situation, Demon Light was reluctant to attack his hereditary enemies except to prevent seizure of munitions.

Nothing prevented his enjoyment of the conflict unfolding before him except a report by a scout from his southwest detachment that a band of motherless ones had approached but stopped a few minutes' ride away and occupied a hilltop there. To Brâm, they were a damn nuisance, and they too wanted the guns. He was aware that many of the motherless ones in the south part of the Wilddog lands had been armed by Dion and sent against the enemy in the Province, but these outlaws were far from that battle, and if they were able to get their hands on the new weapons, they were as likely to shoot at his people as at the Texarki, but they were even more likely to sell the fancy guns to the Hannegan, who had been slow

in getting them.

Though it would spoil his view of the fight for a time, he decided to withdraw his detachment from the north where the fire was beginning to crowd his rear, then to skirt around the townsmen's position and join all his forces together again between the militia and the outlaws. It would give other commanders something to wonder about, and the fires had become the Grasshopper's allies, as the Grasshopper sharp knew they would when he practiced his family motto and set them. As he rode between the Valanans and a group of his own men to the west, he noticed with approval that the horses stolen from the wagoneers were being kept out of sight beyond a ridge. None of his warriors' mounts were broken as draft horses, so seizing and keeping the grass-eaters' animals was essential to his plans. He sent a messenger to tell his cousin to the west of him to post enough men to guard the horses and join the rest of the detachment with Eltür's main force.

Sundown was approaching when the enemy resumed fire, and Cardinal Hadala was among the first to fall. Elswitch Gleaver rushed to his side, inspected his wound, which he seemed to find in the back, and turned to look around at the men. This time Blacktooth saw Gai-See lift his pistol again and shoot Major Gleaver in the forehead. At the same time, a high-pitched scream came from the rear. Ulad's voice. The blade of Woosoh-Loh's sword rose bloody into the air and fell again. Junior officers were shouting angrily.

Brother Blacktooth St. George threw away his rifle, picked up a pistol from the body of a slain officer, and ran south for his life. A bullet struck the ground near his feet, but he was unsure which of three sides was shooting at him.

As he ran around the bend near the crest of the ridge, he noticed a wide tunnel under a rock where something made its home. It was just big enough for him to slip into, and he dived for it, feet first, praying earnestly that the owner was absent. The tunnel sloped downward as he slid into it and it was somewhat deeper than expected. He braked his slide and found his face two feet from the sunlit opening. Between the straps of his sandals, he felt wiggling fur with his feet; something bit his big toe, tiny fangs but sharp. He kicked it off. Other mouths were chewing on his sandal straps. My God, I'm in a cougar's den, and I am going to die!

Today is like any other day in being the day of death. Today a war is going on and I am not a Daniel in this den, O Saint Leibowitz. Still, it's the only day I've got. Last week it was a thunderstorm, and the wet body of a lightning-struck warrior. Year before last a cyclone killed seventeen Jackrabbit peasants. Then the locusts, the locusts, the locusts, and the emaciated corpses found frozen last winter. Just like any other day, he noted, as a bullet ricocheted off the rock above his head. The spent lump of lead fell into his waist and he picked it up to inspect in the dim light. It was no bullet from a Grasshopper or Valanan weapon, but a musket ball from a Texark or an outlaw piece. The fact gave him a general idea of the direction of the enemy.

He felt around with his feet, kicking kittens away. Their teeth were needles. What was keeping their mother? Afraid of the fires, perhaps. He too feared them. "In here, we'll choke to death," he told the kittens.

While he was thus indulging himself in more fear and self-pity than was usual before he had so recently killed a man, something came and darkened the light from the end of the tunnel. He prepared to die.

*Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with thee . . .*

"Ho! Who is down there?" The language was Rockymount, but the accent was from Asia. Nimmy looked up to see a rifle aimed at his face.

"Don't shoot, it's Blacktooth. Is it safe to come out?"

"It's not safe anywhere yet," said Gai-See, "and the fire is getting too close. Give me your hand."

Nimmy shook a playful kitten loose from one trouser leg and crawled upward into the smoky light of late afternoon. The din of battle had subsided, except to the east where Texark troops were still holding off gleps trying to get at the weapons. The warrior and the monk climbed the ridge and lay on the ground

to look over the top. They could make out the bodies of Chuntar Hadala and Major Gleaver; both had been killed by Gai-See, who, like Wooshin, was prepared to execute anyone who betrayed his master.

"Where is Woosoh-Loh?"

"Ulad shot him when he saw me execute our master's enemies."

"But I saw—"

"My brother lived long enough to kill his killer."

Nimmy observed a detail of Grasshopper warriors hastily hitching three of the wagons to draft horses they had stolen, for the fire was coming closer. The wagons' defenders had scattered during the infantry skirmish. The Valana Militia had been destroyed, by death, desertion, and the absence of command. From the east, Texark cavalry was riding toward the scene, but warily, for behind the ridge to the south was the Demon Light's main force, and just to the north was the advancing wildfire. Half a mile from where they lay, a Texark trooper rode to the top of the ridge to observe the Grasshopper order of battle. Gai-See rolled over, lifted his rifle, aimed very high, and fired. The impossible shot fell close enough to frighten the trooper's horse, and alerted the Grasshopper, who joined Gai-See in firing on the scout. The scout retreated. Gai-See stood up and looked south. Eltür's warriors were watching. Evidently they were not shooting at militia uniforms.

"Look!" said Gai-See, pointing. "Somebody killed a big cat."

Blacktooth stood beside him, then went to investigate. The animal lay on the rocks twenty paces west of them. It was a female.

"Come on," he said to Gai-See, and went back down the ridge to the cougar's den. Soon they had recovered the kittens, but three Nomads rode up with drawn guns and spoke in Grasshopper.

"Drop your weapons at once, citizens! Surrender."

They complied, but Nimmy smiled at the polite word "citizens," and replied in the same language. "The troopers are riding toward the wagons, you know. We'll gladly surrender, but we'll need our weapons to get home again."

One warrior rode to the top of the ridge. The other dismounted and recovered the guns. As he unloaded them, he spoke to Blacktooth.

"You are the man who came out to parley with the sharf. He says you are a servant of the highest Christian shaman. Is that so?"

"It used to be so."

The warrior handed him back his unloaded pistol, then returned Gai-See's empty rifle.

"You are the man who killed the cardinal and the major, are you not?"

Gai-See nodded. The other warrior came down from the ridge and said, "We'd better tell Sharf Eltür it's time to attack. Let's go!"

They both rode away, leaving the two to follow on foot with empty firearms. As soon as the warriors returned to their command, the main party of Nomads split into two groups, one of which rode to the bottom of the ridge, dismounted, and climbed it on foot; they took prone positions on the crest as snipers. From the fact that heavy smoke was blowing south over the ridge, and that the snipers did not commence firing at once, Nimmy deduced that the fire was delaying the movement of the cavalry toward the wagons. Every time a trooper mounted the ridge to the east to reconnoiter, he was fired upon by the main Nomad party. The Texark commander probably wished to cross the ridge before riding west, but the Grasshopper made it impossible. At least some of the wagons were being pulled west by Valanan draft horses driven by Nomads. The rest would soon be caught by wildfire, if not captured first by Texark.

By sundown, the rest of the wagons had been swept up in the fire; some exploded, all burned. Burned too were the bodies of the slain, but the wind subsided at twilight and the blaze did not cross the ridge. Sharf Brâm had rounded up and fed all the militia survivors who surrendered their arms. The few who refused to give them up, mostly spook officers who feared revenge by Valanan conscripts, he ordered killed. He ordered his warriors to treat the prisoners of war with courtesy, but the Grasshopper fighters were too full of playful malice toward farmers for the farmers' comfort. Food was shared, but dipped in sand. One warrior lent Nimmy a leather pouch large enough for three cougar kittens, then

claimed the monk had stolen it. There were less than forty exhausted captives, but some other deserters had perhaps escaped capture by the Texarki or the Nomads.

When he saw Nimmy among the refugees, Demon Light called him to his side as interpreter. After laughing at the kittens, he returned the monk's pistol and ammunition. Nimmy immediately asked permission to turn the weapon over to Gai-See. "My eyes are too weak to hit anything. I killed a man by mistake, when I meant to miss him."

Eltür sent for Gai-See and after a brief conversation through Blacktooth concerning the warrior monk's continuing loyalty to Brownpony, the sharf gave him his weapons back. Then he looked at the smoky sky.

"Your Pope's wife has come. Look. The sister of the Day Maiden."

Overhead, a large bird was circling the battlefield. In the smoke and the light of the late sun, the buzzard appeared to be bright red. Other birds were gathering. They seemed small and dark by contrast, but perhaps they flew at higher altitude.

"It means the battle is over."

Nimmy and Gai-See were eerily silent.

"Tomorrow we leave for the tents of my tribe," Brām said. "The wounded can stay there until they heal. The rest of you will be taken west to be judged by the *Qaesach dri Vørdar*, Høngan Ösle Chür. Then I imagine you will be escorted back to Valana, or in your case, Nyinden, to your Brownpony. Tell this to the others. Tell them they must travel with us, or they will fall into the hands of the motherless ones. We have recaptured enough of Hadala's horses for you to ride."

Demon Light seemed quite friendly, and Nimmy dared ask, "Are you satisfied with today's outcome, Sharf Brām?"

"The Burregun will not eat Grasshopper bodies; I lost no men," said the Nomad leader. "We captured five wagonloads of rifles and pistols before the fire or the motherless got to them. The ammunition wagons exploded. The Texarki must have got about four loads of weapons that went through the fire. Those guns were ruined."

"Ruined as weapons, maybe, but not as patterns for Texark to copy," Nimmy said.

"You think so? And how long will that take?"

"I don't know. Months, probably."

"There is one other matter I do find troublesome, Nyinden," said Eltür. "Do you know that there were many gleps among the Texarki?"

Nimmy frowned. "The man I killed was a glep! That surprised me. It seems that the Emperor is either impressing able-bodied gleps from the Valley, or hiring them as mercenaries. It suggests he is short of manpower."

"Or, he is sending some of his main force to the east of the Great River, as we hoped. There was dissent in the Texark ranks. My messengers told me so. Do you understand why?"

"I think so. Cardinal Hadala was expecting a force from the Valley to strike the troopers' rear. When they did so, the glep troopers probably refused to fight. Maybe that's why they retreated from us."

Eltür snorted. "You townsmen make good corpses but not good killers. It had to be the reason. Now, tomorrow we must go to a messenger family and send today's news to the Lord of the Hordes and your Pope. You may, if you wish, write to Brownpony yourself, so long as you tell me what you say to him."

"Of course! You may read it."

Demon Light laughed scornfully and departed. Blacktooth's face burned. He had forgotten that the sharf was without letters.

Blacktooth was prepared to write his letter on cowhide with ink made of blood and soot, but the messenger family to which Brām brought him the following afternoon kept paper and pens for such emergencies, although they themselves were barely literate. He wrote hurriedly, because the sharf was impatient to return to his family and tribe.

I understand that Sharf Eltür Brām is sending you an oral account of the battle fought here, and to his

words I would add nothing. While most of the weapons were recaptured by the Grasshopper war party, Texark troops found a number of them that passed through fire and are probably unfit for use, but the Mayor's gunsmiths may learn much from studying the design.

I am ashamed, Holy Father, that I was not present in your time of peril. I was staying with the late Pope when you departed from Valana, and then I fell into the hands of your betrayers. Sorely Cardinal Nauwhat has sought asylum in Texark. Chuntar Cardinal Hadala was executed by Brother Gai-See when he learned of his treason against Your Holiness. Many townsmen died in this futile battle. My body was unharmed, but my soul is a casualty, for I killed a man.

I have been invited to stay with my distant Grasshopper relatives (yes, the Sharf knows who they are) of his tribe until I receive orders from Your Holiness, Abbot Olshuen, or the Secretariat concerning my future duties and destination. Meanwhile, Sharf Brām wants me to be tutor to his nephews. I would find this work congenial, but with no books and no proper writing materials it will be difficult.

Again, I beg your forgiveness for my absence without leave in your time of need, and shall gratefully accept and perform any penance it may please Your Holiness to impose.

Your unworthy servant,  
Nyinden (Blacktooth) St. George,  
A.O.L.

The relay horses of the messenger families were fast and frequently changed. In late August, the moon was waxing, permitting them to ride by night. Still, Nimmy was astonished by the speed of Brownpony's reply. It was very simple. "Honor the slaughtering festival, then come at once," said Amen II, only three weeks later.

His cousins had been teasing him unmercifully about joining the fourteen-year-olds who would be undergoing the rites of passage to manhood at the festival, which normally occurred during a period of several days around the last full moon of summer, before the autumnal equinox. "They will stop calling you 'Nimmy,' if you endure the rite," the great-granddaughter of his own great-great-grandmother told him.

"Thank you, but the first man to call me 'Nimmy' was Holy Madness, the Lord of the Hordes, and he intended no insult. I am not a warrior, I am not a Nomad."

This was the same festival which had been declared a movable feast last year when its usual time coincided with the funeral of Granduncle Brokenfoot. The farmers celebrated a harvest festival at about the same date, but for the Nomads it marked the beginning of the time of killing off old cattle and weaklings who could not survive the winter. Women culled out the horses not fit for war or breeding, and sold them to farmers north of the Misery River, or had them butchered and barbecued. Many of the slaughtered animals were converted into jerky for the time of deep snow when the wild herds were hard to reach.

It was a time for dancing, for drums, for gluttony, smoking keneb, drinking farmers' wine, for fighting by firelight, and for celebrating the ravishing by Empty Sky of the Wild Horse Woman. Young men crawled into the tents of sweethearts, and Blacktooth was visited in the night by the dark form of a woman who would not reveal her name, but began removing his clothes. He was careful to do nothing that might offend her, and it turned out to be a hot and sweaty night.

The following morning, one of his female cousins smiled whenever she caught his glance. Her name was Pretty Dances, and she was chubby as a pig, but cute and comely. He thought of Ædrea and avoided her glance as much as possible.

He had established his honor by fighting several young men his own size, and did well enough to avoid further teasing, but they still called him Nimmy more often than Nyinden.

On the day before his departure from the lands of his ancestors, the Grasshopper double agent Black Eyes brought him a book he had obtained in a transaction with Texark soldiers. Black Eyes had occupied the cage across the aisle when he and Brownpony were prisoners in the Emperor's zoo, and he still admired Blacktooth for an alleged attempt to kill Filpeo.



"The book cost me seven steers," he told the monk. "The sharf thinks it might help you teach his nephews, because the soldiers said it is written in our own tongue. I don't understand how a book can have a tongue."

Nimmy looked at the Nomadic title and felt a rush of grief and shame. *The Book of Beginnings: Volume One*, by Verus Sarquus Boedullus. The Texark publisher had done a good job of duplicating Blacktooth's pan-Nomadic orthography, with the new vowels which permitted any Nomad of any horde to hear the words as pronounced in his own dialect. In the front matter, there was an acknowledgment that the translation had come from Leibowitz Abbey, but there was of course no mention of the translator's name. Blacktooth had not included it in the original.

The face of the late Abbot Jarad loomed large in his mind, and Jarad's voice spoke to him as before, saying, "All right, Brother St. George, now think—think of the thousands of wild young Nomads, or ex-Nomads, just like you were then. Your relatives, your friends. Now, I want to know: what could possibly be more fulfilling to you than to pass along to your people some of the religion, the civilization, the culture, that you've found for yourself here at San Leibowitz Abbey?"

"Why are you crying, Nyinden?" asked Black Eyes. "Is it the wrong book for Nomads?"

## CHAPTER 25

If a pilgrim monk coming from a distant region wants to live as a guest of the monastery, let him be received for as long a time as he desires, provided he is content with the customs of the place as he finds them and does not disturb the monastery by superfluous demands, but is simply content with what he finds.

—*Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 61

URING THE TWO MONTHS MOTHER IRIDIA Silentia spent at the court of Pope Amen II in New Jerusalem, one of the Pope's informants called it to his attention that this Princess of the Church and Bride of Christ visited Shard's Ædrea in her house of arrest three times a week, every week. He hesitated to inquire into this, for it was assumed by anybody who noticed or cared that Mother Iridia was either practicing spiritual therapy or teaching the girl the latest edition of the catechism as rewritten and promoted by Pope Amen I—the edition already condemned as heretical by several eastern bishops. Soon it became clear to her jailer that the girl wished to join Iridia's religious community. This caused no alarm, and only Brownpony stirred and became restless. Prisoners often converted to religion in jail.

Mayor Dion, as commander in chief of the insurgent forces in the Province, was gone most of the time, and Slojon's only interest in religion was as a tool to be used in the governance of men. When Ædrea took her simple vows as a nun of the Order of Our Lady of the Desert on Saturday the 12th of August, Mother Iridia visited the Pope and complained that the secular government of New Jerusalem was keeping one of her nuns in prison. Brownpony smiled and sent for Slojon.

"You are holding Sister Clare-of-Assisi in detention for unspecified offenses," said Amen II. "Messér, must I tell you that you have no jurisdiction over religious?"

"I don't even know a Sister Clare-of-Assisi, Holy Father!"

"You know her as Shard's Ædrea," said Brownpony. "She became a nun on the Feast of Saint Clare last week, and so Mother Iridia named her Clare, which is what she will be called in her cloister."

Slojon sputtered. "Her offenses are *not* unspecified. She violated the law by leaving the community without a permit from the Mayor's office. And she is suspected of espionage."

"She is innocent of espionage against this realm, to my certain knowledge," Brownpony growled. "As for your other complaint against her, the Church does teach obedience to legitimately constituted government, such as yours. Since she admits her guilt in disobeying the law while it was in force, I promise you she will be appropriately sentenced for that offense by me. I must take note, however, that you are no longer enforcing the law that she broke. That is your affair. Sister Clare is our affair. You shall release her immediately to an ecclesiastical court. You well know the sanctions incurred for usurping

Church jurisdiction. My predecessor of beloved memory excommunicated the Emperor of Texark himself for jailing me and my secretary."

"So that's the trick! Well, it won't work with me." Slojon turned and walked away from the papal audience with minimum courtesy.

Brownpony immediately drafted a letter to all clergy throughout the Suckamints commanding that the sacraments be withheld from the Mayor's son until he obeyed the order to release Sister Ædrea St. Clare into the custody of the Curia. The Pope knew that Slojon would not give any weight to such a sanction, except for the humiliating effect of the bad publicity when the letter was prominently posted for all to read in every Church in the mountains.

Still, Slojon would not budge until his father returned from battle a week later. Dion conferred with the Pope. First they discussed the war in the Province, which had stalled around the 98th meridian. Then they discussed Ædrea. Whatever he might believe privately, Dion was a public Catholic. After the conference, he released Sister Clare into the custody of Mother Iridia Silentia, O.D.D., who became her defense counsel. The sanctions against the Mayor's son were lifted. In an unusual move, the Pope permitted Slojon to assist the schoolteacher Abraha Cardinal Linkono as inquisitor and prosecutor.

The outcome was inevitable, and the only point in dispute became the sentence to be imposed upon the nun by the Supreme Pontiff.

Brownpony noticed that the beauty of the barefoot Sister who stood before him had not been diminished by motherhood, or completely obscured by her coarse habit. She was radiant, smiling at him faintly, and her eyes were attentive and unafraid. That was bad. It implied that there was a conspiracy, and it had worked. Slojon already knew he had been duped, but—he noticed the faint smile.

Thus spoke Amen II, with some attempt at sternness: "Sister Ædrea St. Clare-of-Assisi, you are remanded into the permanent custody of Cardinal Silentia. For your offense against the laws of New Jerusalem, a legitimate secular authority, we sentence you to cross the Brave River and spend the rest of your life in exile there, or until your sentence is commuted by the Holy See. Should you cross the river again from south to north, you incur excommunication by the very act of doing so."

Ædrea's smile did not change. The sentence imposed was not different from that which her vows imposed. She came slowly forward and knelt to kiss her judge's ring. "Where is Blacktooth?" she whispered.

Brownpony suppressed a chuckle at her audacity, and whispered back, "I have no idea."

Thus it came to pass that the lady cardinal departed from New Jerusalem with Sister Ædrea St. Clare and the three nuns who had been her conclavists in Valana. A coach was provided, and four mounted soldiers were appointed to escort them all the way to the Brave River. At the last minute, Iridia paid the Pope another visit and sweetly asked his permission to make a rest stop at Leibowitz Abbey, a detour which would add no more than a few days to their journey.

Brownpony gazed at her in surprise. Cardinal Silentia was almost his own age, still gauntly beautiful and full of charm if not grace, but now he saw that she was being charmed by Ædrea.

"She wants to know if Blacktooth has gone back to the abbey," the Pontiff sighed.

"That had occurred to me, Holy Father. But the guesthouse there is adequate and secure. The Brothers and my Sisters will see each other only in Church, if at all."

"Very well, but if you lose her, you are both in trouble," he told her. His permission was based on his belief that neither Blacktooth nor Abbot Olshuen wanted to see the other ever again. "However, if you meet Brother St. George anywhere, tell him I require his presence here immediately."

Iridia knelt and withdrew. That was three weeks before Nimmy's letter came to him from a battleground on the eastern Plains. Brownpony found the letter irritating, and said to the messenger, "Tell him to honor the butchering festival, and then deliver me his butt."

But as soon as he said it, there came to Pope Amen II a flash vision of Blacktooth's future—in shock upon learning of Ædrea's sudden calling to religion, and of the Pope's sentence passed upon her. Shock and maybe fury. He resolved not to see the monk immediately upon his arrival. Let him hear about it from Qum-Do, Jing-U-Wan, Wooshin, and the two Oriental secretaries he inherited from Cardinal Ri. They understood his motives and his necessity. Brother St. George would eventually apply his religious thing to

his fury, and then it would be safe for the Pope to see him.

Late September came, and Blacktooth had still not arrived at Pope Amen II's log-cabin Vatican. His Holiness gulped the rest of his brandy, put his heels on the table, leaned back, and smiled at his elderly bodyguard. A single candle lighted Brownpony's private office in the Papal Palace with its log walls and fired-clay floor, but there was an exceptionally bright full moon shining through the big southern windows, and everything seemed to glow in its light, including the faces of the Pope and the warrior.

"Axe, do you know what tomorrow is?"

"Thursday, the twenty-ninth, 'Oliness."

"It is a feast of Saint Michael, the commander in chief of the heavenly hordes."

"I thought it was the 'heavenly hosts.' "

"No, no! All angels are Nomads and there are hordes of them."

"So what of it, 'Oliness?"

"Axe, the Cathedral of Saint Michael Angel-of-Battle is in Hannegan City, and belongs to Urion Benefez. For him tomorrow is a day of pomp and High Masses. And I shall offer the same Mass in a quiet way. The Gospel for the day is the first ten verses of Matthew Thirteen, and at first glance it seems unrelated to the Archangel Michael. In it, Jesus calls a little child to him, and tells how we must all become little children again before we can enter Heaven. Isn't that strange?"

"No, to the children the angel's sword gives life."

Brownpony paused. He knew what Axe meant, but what an odd way to say it.

"An old Jew once told me that this, our angel of battle, is the defender of the Synagogue, just as we see him as defender of the Church. And of course of her children. That explains the choice of the Gospel, I think. But do you know that a bunch of old Nomad women married me off to the Burregun, the Buzzard of Battle?"

"I believe you have mentioned it several times, 'Oliness. I hope it is a happy marriage."

"Oh, it is, it is! We're winning the war, I think." The Pope poured himself another glass of brandy. "But I feel strange praying to Michael now. I hope the commander of the angelic armies forgives me. It was a forced marriage. Must I apologize for imagining Benefez's Angel of Battle pitted against my supernatural bird-wife?"

"No."

"Oh, you have an opinion! It was a rhetorical question, Axe, but why do you say 'no'?"

"Because the angel and the buzzard are the same."

"I wish you had said they are on the same side. You'll never be a Christian, will you Wooshin? And yet you have certain shocking insights. Tell me about Mankiller again sometime."

"Again? I don't remember telling you about him a first time, 'Oliness."

"No, I just heard part of what you were telling Blacktooth one day. Who is Mankiller?"

"The Compassionate One." His capital letters were audible.

Brownpony stared at him by moonlight and wondered.

Wooshin added: "An ancient saying among my people goes: 'The sword that kills is the same sword that gives life.' "

"Have another glass of this good mountain brandy. But to whom has a sword ever given life?"

The Axe declined the brandy. "Whenever there is a fight, the sword gives death to one man and life to the other. And life to his family, his retainers, and lord."

"Yes, I suppose your sword has given me life once or twice. The saying is less than profound, though. Some things you say make a lot of people think you confuse God and the Devil, Wooshin."

"I hope Y'roliness is not among them."

"No, but what do you say to the charge?"

"I deny it. How can I confuse them? I see they are not two."

Brownpony laughed. "Axe, did you ever take paradox lessons from Pope Amen Specklebird?"

"No, but he kindly spoke to me a few times. You say I'll never be a Christian. Foreman Jing says the same. But if I could have been Saint Specklebird's student, I might have become one."

"You just canonized him. That's my job. Are you an atheist?"

"Oh no, I honor all the gods."

"How many belong to that *all*?"

"Countless. And *one*."

"How meaningless!"

"'Oliness, let me hear you count to one."

"One."

"Point at that *one*."

Brownpony stirred restlessly. Finally he tapped his index finger against his temple.

Wooshin laughed quietly. "Wrong. You had to think about it too long. And you didn't count *to* one. You counted *from* one and stopped. The *one* is countless."

The Pope changed the subject. He was no mystic, but he seemed to attract mystics. Specklebird, Blacktooth, and Wooshin—they all had a streak of it, and they were all quite different. He was fascinated, but he did not understand.

In Hannegan City in mid-September, the Emperor called together his generals and waxed gleeful about the captured weapons; fire had not ruined them for study, only for use. Stocks and grips were burned, some cylinders had exploded, and some barrels were bent by the heat and by bursting kegs of powder. Filpeo handled them lovingly, and his hands were black with soot. According to his gunsmiths, it would be possible to begin duplicating this west-coast weapon as soon as they could tool up, produce the right kinds of steel, find copper for making brass for cartridges—if his forces could hold out that long.

Meanwhile Admiral eFondolai, Carpios Robbery, was already equipped with several dozen of the repeating weapons. Soon he and Esitt Loyte (he whom the troops called "Wooden-Nose") would begin their raids from north of the Misery. The wolf-skinned Texark forces, disguised as motherless outlaws, would wreak enough havoc on the Nomad women and horses left behind to draw off the left flank of the Antipope's crusade.

"Admiral?" protested General Goldæm. "I thought Carpy had been made a field marshal."

"Admiral for now," Filpeo answered. "An admiral is a pirate with a uniform, and a pirate doesn't think in terms of capturing territory. His method of warfare is perfectly suited to the ocean of grass that is the Nomad homeland."

Time as well as terror was on the Emperor's side. The opposing armies of Pope and Empire, Church and State, were dug in on opposite banks of the Washita, and it was easier for Filpeo to feed his men than for Amen II to feed his. Moreover, Brownpony was counting on forces he did not control.

"The Antipope thinks he holds the undying allegiance of the Wilddog Horde, but I am not so sure," Filpeo told his generals. "They say Sharf Oxsho licks the false Pope's footprints, but Høngan Ösle Chür seems to have risen above his Wilddog partisanship to become the Sharf of Sharfs, so to speak, of all three hordes. Even Sharf Demon Light pays respect to his lord, and we know how the Jackrabbit leaped into his arms and arose against us. No doubt, Eltür is as much our enemy as his brother Hultor, but he is cautious, he is clever, he is reasonable. And unlike Høngan, he is no Christian. We may be able to negotiate."

"I'm not sure you mean what you seem to be saying, Sire," said Father Colonel Pottscar. "You speak as if Christianity demands submission to a false pope."

"No, Pottsy. It just means Sharf Eltür, with no Christianity, cares nothing about disputes internal to the Church. Therefore he is free to negotiate."

A few days later, the glee of Filpeo Harq surpassed all bounds, and he danced a three-second jig in his private quarters when his uncle Urion came to him with the news that Sorely Cardinal Nauwhat had defected from the service of the false Pope. His jig-dancing stopped when he realized that he should have heard the news about Nauwhat before his uncle heard it.

"Why didn't the commander who accepted his defection report it to me?" he demanded.

"I made arrangement with Sorely while he was still in Valana, and I made the border guard honor it. I

had advance knowledge he was coming, because he agreed to cross over only if my archdiocese granted him sanctuary."

"Bastards! You subvert my own military. Heads are going to roll. And he wants sanctuary from whom, *me*?" Filpeo barked.

"Of course. And I don't think you'll take Father Colonel Pottscar's head or mine."

"Damn! Why, with me the cardinal is completely safe. I'd give him a state dinner."

"That's what he's afraid of. And from you, he would be safe from harm, but not from interrogation."

"What has he got to hide?"

"Everything! He is here to separate himself from this maniac in the western mountains, not to betray him. He will give no aid and comfort to either side. He is neutral, but only under my protection."

The Emperor tugged at his nervous earlobe and paced for a time. "By God!" he said at last. "When this is all over and you elect a real pope, who to choose?—who better than a cardinal who remained principled but neutral?" He turned to watch the Archbishop's face, and immediately laughed. "Uncle Urion, you stand accused of too many bad habits to be the next Pope. I'm sure the accusations are false, but—" He shrugged.

"Yes," said Benefez. "I suppose Sorely has thought about Hoydok's slander."

"Treat him well, Uncle, even if you fear his ambition. And let me visit him in your palace. Invite us both to dine with you."

"Not unless he is comfortable with the idea. If he is comfortable with it, I'll invite you. Otherwise you won't even get an explanation."

The invitation to dine at the Archdiocesan Palace came to Filpeo after only three days. The Emperor eagerly accepted, and warmly welcomed the dissident Nauwhat to Hannegan City. But he began to question him as soon as his uncle briefly excused himself after a whispered message from the subdeacon Torrido.

"Brownpony is under a suspended death sentence throughout the Empire," Filpeo told the Oregonian as soon as Benefez was out of earshot. "His election itself was an act of war by the Valanan Church against Texark. If he is caught, he will go to the chopping machine. He should not blame you for turning your back on him."

"No, Sire. But you call his election an act of war by the Valana clergy, and I helped elect him. I did not—we did not—think of it as declaring war on you, I can tell you that."

"The Valana *clergy* elected him, you say? Not the Sacred College?"

"Sire, in exile, the Valana clergy is the clergy of Rome. The Sacred College is the clergy of Rome only because each member maintains a Roman or Valanan Church. But in an emergency situation, the clergy of the Roman diocese elects its own bishop. The College was a later development in Church history."

"Oh, I wondered how you justified that so-called conclave!"

"I believe it was justified. But afterward, it was Brownpony who abandoned the Curia. You may think of this war as his alone, although others *do* claim it and *do* pursue it. I was in Valana, and was not consulted before he proclaimed a crusade. I am not even sure his war is just, let alone holy."

"And yet I am told that there was a council of war before the election, and that you attended. And how is it that you joined Chuntar Hadala's attempt to bring arms to the Valley?"

"I merely accompanied him across the Plains, Sire. I left him before the battle started."

"Yes, well, tell me this. How long ago did Brownpony begin to pile up an arsenal in the Suckamint Range?"

"Did Cardinal Benefez not tell you that I would give no reply to questions about military matters? I am not a spy."

Archbishop Benefez returned to the table and, having heard the last exchange, began berating his nephew for breaking his promise not to badger the cardinal from Oregonia.

Nevertheless, the Emperor went away happy that night. The defection of Sorely Cardinal Nauwhat, now a guest in the episcopal palace of his uncle, added respectability to Filpeo's cause. Even though

Nauwhat declined to be interviewed by intelligence, and made it plain that he considered himself the equal of his host, the Emperor was delighted at the prospect of establishing good relations with the Oregonians, who were Nauwhat's people. It was the odd move of a knight on the continental chessboard: two squares west and one north. Oregonia was not far from what the Emperor had concluded to be the west-coast source of Brownpony's arms. The man owned land there, and received revenue from it. Filpeo would bestow gifts upon the Oregonian ruler as soon after victory as possible, whoever that ruler by then might be.

To the east, while Hadala was preparing his expedition from Valana, before the time of harvest, the King of the Tenesi had taken advantage of the Mayor's problems with the Grasshopper and with Brownpony's army in the Province. He attacked the Texark puppet state of Timberlen on the east bank of the Great River. Filpeo Harq sent his regulars across the Great River to drive back the Tenesi from his burned and looted ally. But the Tenesi were expecting them; they retreated into impenetrable mountains, which the Texark general then decided to penetrate.

Brownpony in due course learned about these battalions, which constituted a regiment of cunning mountain fighters; the Pope sent a courier to express his wish that the Tenesi might encourage the Texark troops to extend their stay in the east until spring, by a minimum of necessary hostile engagements. The courier carried the message as a coded tattoo in his crotch, and he was too fat to lean over far enough even to see it himself without a mirror, and he did not have the key to the code anyway. Brownpony did not worry about him; there seemed to be no point in torturing the messenger. Nevertheless, agents from Imperial Intelligence caught and tormented him into revealing that the tattoo was a message to the Tenesi, and tormented him some more to establish his ignorance of the code. The I.I. men decided not to kill him, but they strapped him to an operating table and removed the message with a skinning knife. He was then free to go, but could not walk because of the pain between his legs. They salted the skin, tacked it to a board to dry, and sent it to Hannegan City for study. The skinning knife had not been sterilized, and the Pope's fat courier died of septicemia.

Upon learning of his messenger's fate, Brownpony could only heap more ecclesiastical sanctions upon an already excommunicated and anathematized Filpeo Harq Hannegan and his uncle, the apostle of Platonic friendship and other deviations from orthodoxy.

Wooshin did his best to console his master. "It seems to me, 'Oliness, that the Tenesi will be doing what you asked them to do anyway."

"So my message needlessly sacrificed the messenger?"

Wooshin was silent, remembering that his master, even if he did share the warrior's indifference to life and death, would never allow himself to realize it.

"How simpler it must have been to manage a war with the methods of communication of the *Magna Civitas*! Our generals receive our commands—if at all—weeks after we send them, and by then the situation has usually changed!"

"Yes, 'Oliness, and that is why, in my people's tradition, a general in the field is obliged to consider his Emperor's commands only as fatherly advice, unless he is fighting very close to the imperial court. As for the *Magna Civitas*, Brother St. George told me that generals in those days complained bitterly because commands from the rulers were so numerous and came so quickly that the war was mismanaged by politicians. Look what happened to the *Magna Civitas*!"

"I should not try to tell the Tenesi what to do?"

Wooshin was silent again, and Brownpony smiled. "Axe, if it were up to me, you would be the commander of the operation in the Province instead of Magister Dion."

"I have no ambition to command an army, 'Oliness."

• • •

It was November before Blacktooth came limping into the snowy mountains with a sore toe and in the company of Aberlott and a glep cougar kitten with one blue ear and a half-bald skull. He had been

robbed of his mount by outlaws after his Wilddog escort left him on the papal highway, and then Aberlott—who had returned first to Valana and then taken the highway south in the hope of seeing the sister of Jæsis again—found him moaning and half-conscious, with a ravenous kitten sucking at his bloody big toe. When they arrived at the military checkpoint at Arch Hollow, Blacktooth's name was found to be on the guards' list of admissible persons, but Aberlott's name was not.

"He was here with me last year, and we were both here as emissaries from the Secretariat in Valana."

"There is no 'Aberlott' on the list. And I don't think he is one of us."

"Neither am I."

The guard stared oddly at the monk. "No? I could have sworn—"

Aberlott broke out laughing. "You're a spook, Nimmy. I've known it since Ædrea told Anala you were."

Blacktooth sputtered. To the guard, he said, "I'll vouch for the idiot."

The guard called an officer. Blacktooth was made to sign a guarantee as Aberlott's custodian.

"If he breaks any laws, you'll take his punishment."

"What a wonderful opportunity for me!" said Aberlott. "When I'm naughty, you'll get whacked!"

"And you'll get shot!" the officer snapped.

But as soon as they arrived at the new and temporary Holy City, they found themselves in the polite custody of Wooshin, Qum-Do, and Foreman Jing, and for the second time Nimmy had to inform them of the death of a comrade serving their common master. They expressed concern about Gai-See's continued absence.

"I think Sharf Demon Light is keeping him for a while as a teacher of his arts to young Jackrabbit warriors. He wanted to keep me to teach them to read. Now, when may I see His Holiness?"

He found himself looking at Aberlott and three—*uh-oh!*—expressionless yellow faces.

## CHAPTER 26

It happens all too often that the constituting of a Prior gives rise to grave scandals in monasteries. For there are some who become inflated with the evil spirit of pride and consider themselves second Abbots.

—Saint *Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 65

HEN THEY TOLD BLACKTOOTH WHAT HAD BEEN done to Ædrea, they were prepared to restrain him and tie him down until he listened to the whole story, including their master's promise to commute her sentence as soon as the Pope could leave New Jerusalem. Instead Nimmy listened in silence, wept a little, but in the end said, "Good! But what about Gai-See? Has he come back yet?"

"We have heard nothing," Axe told him.

Nimmy wanted an audience with the Pope, but Axe convinced him the time was not right. They waited five more days for the warrior's return. Then Blacktooth said to Foreman Jing, "Come with me to Arch Hollow."

"Why?"

"Because I am no longer the Pope's servant. Nor was Gai-See when he started obeying Hadala and Nauwhat. The guards will not answer my questions. They may talk to you."

Jing agreed. They left the municipal area in the early morning and were back to their servants' quarters before sundown. Blacktooth allowed Jing to tell Wooshin the bad news.

"Gai-See arrived at Arch Hollow a few days after Blacktooth and Aberlott. The guards there seized him, charged him with murder, and escorted him straight up through the mountain passes. They took him to Slojon's court in the central square. There he was indicted, and thence he was sent to the cage. Slojon went directly to the Pope and informed him of the action. They met alone with no witnesses."

"I remember that meeting!" said Axe. "I did not know what it was about."

"Of course," said Qum-Do. "You were there too," he said to Jing.

"So, why aren't *you* looking angry, Axe?" Blacktooth asked.

"At whom?"

"At the Holy Father, of course! For approving Gai-See's arrest."

So unthinkable was the suggestion, so irreverent to their master, that they all glared at him.

"Well, false friends, *I am* going to see the Pope about Gai-See!" said Blacktooth.

"No you're not," said Wooshin, laying a hand on his arm. "His Holiness is not ready—"

Having called him a false friend without provoking him, Blacktooth slapped him. So unexpected was the event that Axe failed to evade the blow. Nimmy stepped back defensively.

"You'll have to kill me to stop me, Axe, and your master won't like that."

"But you're not supposed to crash in without—"

"That's not for you to say. I am going to see the Pope. Come along if you want, all of you." He glanced at Ri's warriors. Qum-Do and Foreman Jing were standing at hand-on-sword alert. Either of them would abandon Gai-See to his fate without protest, if their master so much as frowned at him. So would Axe.

Nimmy turned his back on them and walked out of the house. He could hear them coming behind him. He had recovered from the beating he had taken from the outlaws. The earth felt good under his feet again. However briefly, he had visited his ancestors. While with them he had seen something within himself as in a mirror. The earth, any earth, was his to walk on now. Moreover he had seen the Nomad wife of the Pontiff, red as the sunset, soaring over the corpse-strewn landscape. Gai-See was only the beginning of what he wanted to see the Pope about. Blacktooth was vaguely conscious of casting aside his vow of obedience, but felt no qualms about it this time. Ædrea was in his mind like a vision, but he had nothing to say about her.

At the entrance to the audience room, a member of the Papal Guard armed with a halberd blocked the doorway. Blacktooth stamped the guard's slipper with his heel, seized the halberd, and rammed his stomach with the butt of it to get inside the door. His Oriental companions watched the fight without comment. Once inside the doors, he was seized by Cardinal Linkono and the Grand Cardinal Penitentiary. Axe stepped in to assist them now, but Brownpony called out from the throne.

"Let him in. Let them all in."

Blacktooth strode up to the dais and fell to his knees before his Pontiff. The Pope reached down to lift him up, but the monk evaded his hands and stood erect. Brownpony regarded him with faint amusement.

"Is this so urgent, Brother St. George? We were discussing policy with our eminent brethren. About Ædrea—"

"It's not about Ædrea. Who do you see here besides your eminent brethren?"

"Why, I see an unhappy monk, and three of my personal guards."

"Why not *four* of your personal guards, Holy Father?"

"Oh. I did not know that you and Gai-See were close. It is unfortunate."

"We were not close at all, and your betrayal is worse than unfortunate."

Brownpony frowned as if not quite believing his ears.

"I see it is possible for a Pope to do evil."

Against these insulting words to the master, swords were drawn.

Nimmy turned his back on the Pope and faced his companions. "If your master wills my death, cowards, why do you hesitate? Hit!"

Immediately he turned to Brownpony again. "Can't you see what you've done? Right here before you, they're ready to do what Gai-See did. Except that Gai-See thought he was right and they know they are wrong. And Your Holiness accepts this kind of loyalty in good conscience?"

Brownpony was watching his former Nomadic secretary in apparent fascination. Blacktooth heard one sword return to its sheath. That would be Foreman Jing, he guessed. Wooshin would kill him without the Pope's nod if he thought the Pope's best interest would be served by the killing.

"Blacktooth, you were always a quick study, but this is a new role, isn't it?"

"Holy Father, as a Catholic, I have to believe that what you bind on Earth is bound also in Heaven, and I have to believe that when you are speaking about faith and morals, the Holy Ghost prevents you



from speaking any error."

"You *have* to believe, but *do* you?"

"I have a question. Is a declaration of war an assertion about faith and morals? Ever? Even if you call it a holy war? Father Suarez taught—and he was extending Saint Augustine's teaching—that a war to convert the heathen can never be just. Can a war against heretical Christians be holy, if a war against the heathen is unjust?"

"The war is against neither heathens nor heretical Christians. It is against a tyrant who usurps the apostolic power and oppresses the whole world."

"But it's heathens and Christians who are killed, while the tyrant still lives and the apostle is still in power."

Brownpony seemed to swear under his breath for a moment, then recovered. "You wrote me that you killed a man in battle, Nimmy. Is that what's wrong with you now?"

Blacktooth nodded and spoke slowly. "The man in a Texark uniform was a child of yours, Holiness: a glep from the Valley. I meant to miss him. My aim was bad, and I hit him in the belly. What he wanted from me then was a bullet in the brain, but I cut his throat instead, because a sergeant was watching. Yes, I think that is what's wrong with me, Holy Father. Eltūr Brām, because I had already killed, would have made me a Nomad warrior with only the initiation, without the ordeal of battle. Then they would stop calling me 'Nimmy,' he said, and stop laughing about it. I don't mind the name or the laughter. I want never to kill again. But I don't want to see Gai-See punished. He saw Hadala as a fugitive from your commands. He couldn't arrest him or Gleaver; he did what he thought was necessary."

"He had no license from me."

"You accepted his services as a warrior. Did you really withhold from him the license that he assumed was his?"

Pope Amen frowned and called out for everyone but Blacktooth and one guard to leave the room. It was the guard with the sore stomach who stayed, and who sealed the doors after the others were outside.

"Go on, finish what you have to say."

Blacktooth looked around to make sure Cardinal Linkono was gone. "For one thing, Gai-See is a member of a religious order, and—"

"I see," Brownpony interrupted. "I claimed jurisdiction in Ædrea's case, why not in Gai-See's? Because no pope has yet recognized the Order to which Ri's men say they belong, that's why. I meant to do it sooner or later, but I can't do it just to free Gai-See. It's too transparent. But go on, if you have more to say."

"I cannot, Your Holiness, speak to the Vicar of Christ on Earth as freely as I did to my former employer, the Secretary for Extraordinary Ecclesiastic Concerns. I don't know the Vicar of Christ."

"It seems to me you've been speaking freely enough. But suppose I just take off my zucchetto and tell you that the Vicar of Christ has taken the day off. I am still Elia Brownpony—the bastard son of a lesbian nomad and a Texark rapist. So, Nyinden, farmboy Nomad, sometime monk, sometime lover, speak your mind. I may throw you out, but I won't throw you in a dungeon."

"Then release Gai-See from a dungeon."

"I didn't imprison Gai-See. Cardinal Linkono did."

"Without your permission?"

"You don't understand the situation here, Blacktooth. We are the guests of the city. I won't say we're captives here—until I try to return to Valana and see if they let me go. Cardinal Linkono informed me of Gai-See's arrest. Chuntar Hadala played bishop to these people, because he was bishop to the Valley whence they came. Slojon and everybody here knows that I sent men to arrest Hadala, and, well—"

"Oh. So when Gai-See killed him, they thought *you* ordered the execution."

"Not yet, but they will certainly suspect it if I secure his release now. He killed a bishop, and prince of the Church. Cardinal Hadala was popular here."

"I was there when it happened, Holy Father. All along, Gleaver and his officers had been shooting those of us who wavered or held back. In that light, Gai-See shot in self-defense and the defense of us

all. But first he crawled up to me under fire. He asked if it was true that Cardinal Hadala was defying your orders, and betraying you. I told him it was so. I knew what he might do when I told him that, and I hoped he would do it. So I am the one who sentenced the cardinal to death. Have them arrest me too, Holy Father."

"I'll see what I can do," Brownpony said darkly, and beckoned to the guard and breathed a quiet order. The guard with the sore stomach seized Blacktooth's arm, led him straight to jail, and put him in Gai-See's cell. Gai-See embraced him. During the embrace, the guard reached through the bars and punched Blacktooth hard in the kidney with the butt of the halberd.

"I'll be back for you soon," he said with a sweet grin.

Gai-See was not alone in jail. Two men who claimed to be political refugees from the Empire and who now sought asylum in New Jerusalem were imprisoned there until their claims were thoroughly investigated. One was Urik Thon Yordin, S.I., the Ignatzian who was also a professor of history at the secular university at Texark, and whom Brownpony had suspected of hiring the thugs who tried to kill them on Easter before the last conclave. How desperate the man must be to escape Texark, that he should come here for asylum! He glanced at Blacktooth once, but neglected to recognize him.

The other man was Torrildo.

"Blacktooth, my God! You can't imagine what that beast Benefez did to me!"

Nimmy sat down on Gai-See's bed and fell to questioning the warrior. He tried to ignore Torrildo's confession of the intimately brutal sins the Archbishop of Texark had perpetrated upon his person.

According to Gai-See, Yordin and Torrildo were refugees, not from a terrible Emperor, but from a furious Archbishop who had suddenly been made to realize that he could never be Pope, even if his nephew conquered all of his enemies. At the university, Yordin had made the mistake of saying openly that Benefez was now *non papabilis*, and Torrildo himself was part of the Archbishop's problem which insured that he would never wear the tiara. In each fugitive's case, it was his own confessor who, after hearing the rumbles from the top of the mountain, advised his penitent to do his penance in some land far from the reach of the Imperium and the Diocesan Ordinary. So there they sat in a New Jerusalem jail, hoping to be of some value to a Pope who had the power to set them free. Blacktooth found this interesting and ironic, but decided not to concern himself with their fate.

After a while, the guard came back for him and they returned to the throne room. He asked Wooshin in a whisper if he knew about Yordin and Torrildo, but the Axe ignored him.

"Is Gai-See sick?" Brownpony wanted to know. "Is he mistreated or badly fed?"

"He is sick at heart. Keeping him caged is mistreatment, and so is the food."

"If you had not been hiding out with Amen Specklebird when they blew up the Palace, none of this would have happened," Brownpony told him. "You would have come here with me. Now you are furious, as if it were my intent that you fight or kill in battle."

"I was *not* 'hiding out' with the Pope."

"Just praying?"

"Not quite. We talked. One thing we spoke of was war, and I made the traditional mention of 'the Church Militant on Earth, the Church Suffering in Purgatory, and the Church Triumphant in Heaven.' But the Pope said to me, 'There is no Church Triumphant in Heaven, although I have heard that foolishness before.' I asked him why he said that, in disagreement with all the elders, and he told me, 'John says it. Chapter Twenty-one, Apocalypse, "And I saw no temple therein." In the presence of God, the Church is a discarded crutch.'

"What I am saying to you, Holy Father, is that if the Church Militant on Earth does not produce members of a Church Triumphant in Heaven, then its militancy is not . . ."

"Stop. I bow to all the words of my predecessor, but not to *your* explanation of them. Especially not on the subject of war."

Nimmy fell silent, feeling stupid.

"It wasn't murder, when you accidentally shot that man. You don't need absolution for it—but I can shrive you if you like." The Pope stared at Blacktooth's face for a time, and began to frown. "I think you

would *not accept* absolution from me if I gave it to you!"

"You have already given me a plenary indulgence and a passport to paradise in *Scitote Tyrannum*, Holy Father. What more could I ask?"

Brownpony reddened at the sarcasm, but Blacktooth persisted in standing there with his hands spread wide as if to receive gifts. In reality, he was frozen in fright by what he had said.

"Get out of here!" Brownpony erupted. "Go visit your patron saint at the priory. I don't want to hear this."

"May I be excused now?" Stupid again!

"Yes. Go."

Blacktooth glanced at the Pope's hand. Brownpony did not lift his ring, and Blacktooth did not reach. He made a fast genuflection and beat a faster retreat. He did not see Brownpony again during that winter.

He took residence at the Priory of Saint Leibowitz-in-the-Cottonwoods, where Prior Singing Cow St. Martha assigned him work in exchange for room and board. He was not required to assist in the Divine Office, but he was not forbidden either. So he added his voice to the choir, took dictation and penned letters for the prior, washed dishes and took his turn as cook. The brothers were kinder to him here than at the abbey, although they were the same monks; he had known them all at the monastery in the desert. They were all specialists. Brother Jonan, who used to wake Blacktooth every morning for Lauds, was a mathematician. Brother Elwen, who had been Torrildo's lover and went over the wall, had come back repentant and become skilled in his previous studies: mechanics and engineering. Old Brother Tudlen, whom Blacktooth had barely known because he had been on leave from the abbey for so many years at sea, was a naval architect, astronomer, and navigator; he seemed somehow out of place this far from the ocean, but Brownpony, like Filpeo, had ambitions. Tudlen had built a schooner in old Tampa Bay, and it was supposedly the property of the Order; here in the mountains where the air was thin and clear, he was grinding a telescope mirror. The others were specialists in Church history, in political and military history, and in the work of Boedullus among other authorities on the *Magna Civitas* and its catastrophic collapse.

Persuading Mayor Dion to permit the opening of the Leibowitzian priory in New Jerusalem had been no small undertaking. Singing Cow had only high praise for the Pope as a persuader and as a devotee of their patron saint. "His Holiness convinced Dion that we would be of educational value to the community here. But so far, no schools have called on us; Linkono runs them. These spooks don't want their superbabies growing up to be monks. There are two layers of religion here: Catholic above ground, and New Adventist below ground. They're out to save the world. Hadala was typical."

"The old Jew Benjamin told me about them," said Blacktooth, "but he kept mumbling, 'It's still not him, still not him,' and I don't know what he meant."

Singing Cow smiled as if he knew but said nothing.

He confessed to Father Prior "Mooo," as the Brethren sometimes called him. As one ex-Grasshopper farm kid to another, it proved a strange experience for them both.

"Were you taken into the Nomad war cult, my son?" Father St. Martha asked, in connection with Blacktooth's confession of killing a man in battle.

"No, Father. The Grasshopper people treated me with kindness, as they would a boy who had not yet passed through the ordeal. I did not intend to shoot the man."

"Of course not, but you intended to cut his throat, did you not?"

"I thought he was begging me to. I still think so."

Singing Cow, who sometimes liked to think of himself as a Nomad, mentioned that the Church frowned upon assisting a suicide, but that he would probably have done the same; still it was an act to be repented.

Nimmy failed to mention disobedience among his many sins. Singing Cow did not remind him. Absolution was forthcoming, and the penance was mild: pray five mysteries of the rosary and begin singing for his supper.

One cold night he and the Cow were walking home through the snow after singing Compline in the neighborhood Church which they shared with the local pastor and his small flock. Compline was the night prayer of the Church, concerned with sleep and wakefulness, life and death, sinning and receiving grace. But it was no lullaby, and left him feeling lonely.

"I can tell you something I think you'll want to hear, Father."

"Tell away," said Singing Cow.

"Remember when we ran away and tried to join the Grasshopper? They fed us, let us rest two days, and then drove us out of the camp with whips in a snow like this. Were you as bitter as I was?"

"Those rope whips! Listen, I still don't know what we did to offend them. I used to think that you or Wren must have made a pass at a girl. Because our parents farmed? Was that why? Yes, I was bitter, and Grasshopper Nomads still make me uncomfortable."

"If we had fought back, we might have had a chance; instead, we just cringed and ran. There is a Grasshopper Weeju there who thinks she remembers three wandering orphans at about the time we visited their tents. She explained to me why they offered us no more than food, water, and two nights' sleep."

"Explaining cruelty doesn't absolve it."

"Perhaps not. But I'll try to repeat what she told me as best I remember. 'Who wants to adopt a teenage nimmy,' she said, 'no matter how he was raised? A Weeju spends four or five years feeding him, clothing him, and teaching him the horses. In exchange for what? Unskilled and lazy labor. He's horny and he gets in fights. He starts trouble with other families. Maybe she catches him coupling with one of her own daughters, but they can't be married under the breeding rules. Or worse, he runs off to marry a daughter of her horse-breeding rival! A family that mourns a dead son would be better off adopting a young cougar than another boy.'"

Singing Cow laughed. "She knew about your kitten?"

"I was carrying Librada when I visited her. She herself had adopted a pubescent orphan girl. But among Nomads, when a girl grows up she stays with her mother. A boy grows up and leaves her and her whole family when he marries. Motherless boys are as welcome as leprosy there, unless they can fight and join the war cult."

"Rope whips." Cow was ruminating on it.

"That was more than twenty years ago, Father. This year, the sharf himself wanted me to stay and tutor his nephews. I would have been adopted, at my age."

"Well, I'm glad you told me *why* they were cruel. Charity's rarely convenient; sometimes it's completely impractical." Singing Cow thought for a moment. "The sharf's grandmother probably believed your vow of chastity protected all of the daughters," he added.

Blacktooth looked away and blushed. "You're supposed to forget what I tell you in confession!" he complained as they entered the monks' dormitory.

At the small priory, each man took his turn at cooking or menial labor. Blacktooth had been told by the Axe that the Pope had wanted his recipe for summonabish stew, and when his turn came to cook, he asked Father Moo's permission to prepare the dish for all the Brothers, who needed permission to eat meat. When permission was granted, Blacktooth bought the ingredients from a local butcher, prepared the feast, and sent a quart of it to the Papal Palace. The lack of a response seemed an indicator of the Pope's disfavor. Librada consumed the leftovers with gusto. She had caught a mouse on her first day, thus insuring her room and board.

"Why did you name her Librada? What does it mean?" Cow asked.

"It was Spanish, and means 'set-free.' Because that's what she'll be, before she's much bigger and eats one of us."

The winter of '45-'46 was the mildest in memory. Most of the Wilddog Horde moved their cattle south as usual. Hannegan's agents among the motherless outlaw bands observed the migration, but saw nothing unusual to report until March, when all the warriors of the horde assembled as an army under

Lord Høngan himself, with Oxsho second-in-command. They rode swiftly eastward for several days, then south to the river. Before Filpeo Harq learned about the movement, the Nomad horsemen had forded the Nady Ann and attacked from the rear those Texark forces dug-in along the east bank of the Washita. With them they brought three Grasshopper dog trainers and nearly a hundred dogs who would kill any unmounted man who did not smell like a Nomad. At least six of Sharf Oxsho's warriors were bitten for not having the usual Grasshopper aroma; by the light of the full Pascal moon the dogs tore out the throats of Texark soldiers in the trenches along with some of their reluctant Jackrabbit allies who ate too many onions to smell friendly. The dogs' attack on the night of Holy Saturday enabled the forces of Önmü Kun to cross the Washita without coming under fire until they charged the fortifications with fixed bayonets. By Easter's sunrise, the trainers had regained control of ravening dogs and the battle was won without further Jackrabbit casualties, and Mayor Dion's well-rested men crossed the river to carry the war eastward on horseback.

After the fray, Høngan Ösle Chür met with Önmü Kun in the middle of a battlefield at dawn; he then rode with the Jackrabbit's forces without taking command. This was his reason for defying his shamans. The Jackrabbit were lacking in respect for Önmü the smuggler. Their respect for the Lord of the Hordes was enhanced by the fact that he was not Jackrabbit. Such was the self-contempt of a conquered people.

Father Steps-on-Snake had recently come to the vicinity and he now celebrated the Mass of the Resurrection at noon on March 25th—the earliest Easter in many years—and gave the Eucharist to Lord Høngan Ösle together with Sharf's Oxsho Xon and Önmü Kun in the sight of all the warriors and the Jackrabbit population of the region. Thus did the faithful rejoice in the victory of the Nomad over tyranny at the same time as the victory of the Christ over death. Never in the memory of old Steps-on-Snake had the subject people expressed such jubilation on this highest feast day.

Holy Madness spent nearly a week building up the Jackrabbit's esteem for the Jackrabbit sharf by accompanying him everywhere, listening to Önmü address the rebel fighters and civilian groups, then reinforcing the sharf's words with a few of his own, bringing on rousing cheers from the multitude.

There were about seven hundred unwounded prisoners. Jackrabbit warriors had begun to maim them until Holy Madness put a stop to it. That Nomad custom had been abandoned soon after the Texark conquest, except for captured spies and saboteurs, but the Jackrabbit was only trying to honor the custom, for they had been told by Önmü what Høngan had done to Esitt Loyte.

But the forces of the Hannegan were rushing westward to rejoin the battle against the Jackrabbit rebels, and Önmü's gathering army now marched to meet them following Dion's light horse. Having destroyed the enemy forces in the immediate vicinity and inspired the Jackrabbit fighters with a new enthusiasm for battle, Høngan and Oxsho withdrew the Wilddog horsemen from the area by crossing the Washita and riding westward to cross the Nady Ann at a point where their movement would not be observed by Texark scouts.

When the warriors rejoined the rest of the Wilddog Horde at their wintering grounds, Høngan Ösle first sent messengers with an account of the battle to Sharf Bråm and Pope Amen. Then he summoned Father Ombroz as well as his senior Bear Spirit shaman and his own Weejus mother; he told them to prepare immediately to accompany him to New Jerusalem and the Court of Amen II.

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The Lord of the Hordes and his party arrived in New Jerusalem at the end of April. They were greeted by the Pope and the Mayor—Dion was briefly home from the wars—with high ceremony. The Major General Quigler Durod was already in town as plenipotentiary from the King of the Tenesi. Durod had taken the trouble to learn a Nomad dialect (Jackrabbit, because in his youth he had served in the Province as a Texark mercenary), and he made friends quickly with Høngan Ösle. Besides Durod, armorers had come from the west coast, bringing samples of their latest model firearms.

Although Høngan Ösle as *Qæsach dri Vørdar* spoke for all three hordes, Brownpony expressed regret that Sharf's Bråm and Önmü Kun were unable to attend the council of war. Three days later, an

angry Grasshopper emissary rode up from Arch Hollow to confront the Pope.

The Grasshopper messenger was not a Christian. He stood defiantly before Amen II and six members of the Curia to voice the demands of his sharf. "Unless you release Nyinden and the swordsman Gai-See into my custody, the Grasshopper will make war not against your enemies, but against you!"

"Perhaps your sharf has been lied to by someone," the Pope said. "Nyinden is staying at the priory with the other monks. If he wants to go with you, there is nothing to stop him."

"And the yellow warrior? Where is he?"

"He's in the city's jail. I did not put him there. The only man in this room with any voice in city affairs is Cardinal Linkono, who grew up here. Your Eminence, would you please?" He beckoned to a short man with a white beard who looked like a gnome wearing a red skullcap. Then he said to the messenger, "I think your sharf would want his message to go to the right man. I am the wrong man, and His Eminence Abraha is not the right man either, but he can take you to the right man."

"Are you not the most powerful man in this awful place—not Pope Redbeard, the Lord of the Christian Horde?" the Nomad demanded.

"Not really Lord as you understand it. You might think of my office as that of a high priest."

Linkono limped up to stand beside the Nomad, facing him, and spoke in a voice surprisingly deep for so small a man. His Nomadic was heavily accented but understandable.

"Young man, why is this an 'awful place'?"

Brownpony himself explained: "The Nomads say evil spirits come down from the mountains, especially the Old Zarks, and inhabit wombs. The belief explains why a Nomad woman sometimes gives birth to a glep baby."

"I see. Well, young man, compare our Pope to your oldest Bear Spirit shaman. Neither he nor your sharf has to obey the other. The sharf in this place is Mayor Dion. But he just left here to go back to the war. His son takes his place. This, the Church, is like the Bear Spirit Council. There is nothing we can do for you here, my nephew, except pray."

Linkono was smart enough not to say "my son" to a Nomad, but this Nomad did not like "nephew" either.

"My *only* uncle is Demon Light, gray runt. My name is Blue Lightning, and I am the *eldest* son of his eldest sister. We both witnessed Hadala's crimes."

"Surely you mean the crime against Cardinal Hadala!"

"I mean Hadala's crimes, for which he was executed."

The gnome's jaw fell. "Crimes under what law? Nomad law?"

"The Treaty of the Sacred Mare. He violated it by bringing an army into our lands. Hadala violated the law and defied our sharf. By his order, his officers killed his own men. If Nyinden and the yellow warrior hadn't put him to death, my uncle would have done it."

"I had not thought of it in that way before," Brownpony said. "He's right, you know, Abra. Hadala clearly violated the Treaty."

"Holy Father, I can't believe what I'm hearing!"

Blue Lightning grabbed the small cardinal by the shoulders and shook him. "I can make war or peace, little man. My words are my uncle's words. Perhaps we cannot bring war to you here in your evil mountains, but we can join the war against your men who fight south of the Nady Ann. Take me to the man who jails the victim instead of the criminal."

Linkono limped toward the exit as fast as he could move, with the burly Nomad crowding his heels. When they were gone, Brownpony turned to his personal guard. "Axe, go with them, and take Jing and Qum-Do. Keep that Nomad out of trouble, and make sure Slojon has to look you in the face when he talks about Gai-See." Then, to the Cardinal Penitentiary who was also his personal confessor, he said, "Go to the guests' quarters, please, and tell Høngan Ösle Chür what has happened here. Blue Lightning does not realize that his *Qæsach dri Vørdar* is in town."

In the administration building, Slojon haughtily dismissed the Nomad's claim. The Nomad grabbed him by the ears and hauled him, squeaking in pain, across the desk. A sergeant drew a pistol, and

instantly three swords were in the air.

"Drop it, or lose your head," said Axe. The sergeant dropped it.

Eltür's nephew now stood behind Slojon with his arm in a hammerlock and a knife held to his throat. He pushed him toward the door. "This fart is going to jail," said the Nomad.

Slojon screamed as he felt his own blood running down his chest.

"Stop him, Wooshin! Stop him!"

"Only you can stop him, Messér. Take him to the jail in peace."

"Brownpony is behind this!"

"No, the Pope is not! The man behind it is also behind you, right now. You did violate the Treaty, Messér."

"All right, we'll go to the jail."

The trip to jail was halted by the sudden entrance of Høngan Ösle Chür and his two shamans. Blue Lightning took one look at him, gasped, and released the Mayor's son. He made a sweeping *kokai* to the chosen one of the Day Maiden, Husband of the Prairies, then fell silent to await orders.

The Lord of the Hordes asked for an explanation of the problem. Blue Lightning spoke first, then Slojon and Axe. Then the *Qæsach dri Vørdar* told the Mayor's son that he, Høngan Ösle Chür, ruled in favor of the Grasshopper claim and made the same threat to Slojon that Blue Lightning had made. The hordes would turn against New Jerusalem for breaking the Treaty, and might even carry the conflict into these feared mountains. The Jackrabbit would turn on the spooks in battle and kill Slojon's father as well.

Thus it came about that the charges were dropped and Gai-See was released into the protective custody of Blue Lightning. Because the Nomad claimed plenipotentiary power to speak for his uncle, Brownpony invited him to attend the council of war, which had all but ended upon the departure of Dion, but was now renewed in the presence of the Grasshopper. The Pope dispatched a message to Bråm through the Nomad relay network to assure the sharf that Gai-See and Nyinden were free. He also thanked him for sending Blue Lightning, who added to the document his initials—Blacktooth had taught him to draw them—and peace was restored among the allies.

After his harsh beginning, Blue Lightning proved a well-rounded diplomat. In spite of his initial threat to abandon the alliance and join the other side, he brought intelligence gathered from several sources. On balance, the news was good, but there were things to worry about. Filpeo had new repeating arms now, but not yet enough of them to turn the outcome of any foreseeable battle. The countryside surrounding New Rome was by no means demilitarized, but the occupation forces there were thinned out by the withdrawal of troops being sent to the Province to halt the eastward advance of the armies of Önmü Kun and Mayor Dion. Sharf Bråm estimated that no more than seven hundred men, Texark cavalry and glep mercenaries, remained to block access to the gates of New Rome.

And there was trouble in the Valley. Texark recruiters had been ambushed and killed. "I wonder who could be doing that?" Quigler Durod asked innocently, provoking laughter. Everyone present knew that Tenesi agents disguised as gleps had crossed the Great River and infiltrated the Watchitah-Ol'zark region. Further recruiting in the Valley of the Misborn was inhibited, if not halted.

"If we don't strike now," Høngan said, "the Emperor's firepower will increase rapidly. We will lose the advantage the Pope's weapons have given us."

Blue Lightning murmured assent. General Durod wanted to know if it was possible to use the Nomad relay network to contact his men in the Valley.

"If you have a secure cipher, maybe," said Blue Lightning. "There is a risk of a messenger being caught. He must not know what your message is."

Pope Amen came to a sudden decision. "We shall mount an expedition to capture New Rome, and do it as soon as possible, unless one of you disagrees."

Nobody objected. After so many decades in exile, the Holy See was going home.

Pentecost came on May 14th in 3246, and Blacktooth had known for a week that Holy Madness and other important guests were in town to consult with the Pope, but the consultations were private and

he was as ignorant as any local citizen of what happened behind the closed doors. Prior Cow wanted all eight of them to attend the Pontifical High Mass in the Pope's log-and-stone cathedral, but Nimmy begged off. Instead, he attended Mass at their usual neighborhood Church, sang the *Veni Creator Spiritus* with the small choir, and assisted the priest in distributing the Eucharist to local spooks and their beautiful children.

Singing Cow found him sitting in the garden, trying to extract a still fluttering pigeon from the jaws of his growling glep cougar. Librada slashed his hand and clamped down on the bird. Nimmy gave up. "I think it's about time for Librada to be *librada*," he said to the prior.

"We'll take care of it, Nimmy. You're going to be too busy."

"It's up to me, Father. I brought her here. She ought to be let go as far as possible from humans. She's not afraid of anybody. And why do you say I'll be too busy?"

"I think you will be. The Pope wants to see you right now. He's going away."

"Away?"

"To New Rome—as a conqueror, I believe. Now go bandage your hand and run over to the Palace."

As soon as he saw that Gai-See had been set free, Blacktooth felt shame for his earlier impudence toward his Pope, and he looked for an opportunity to apologize. But Axe had assigned him to a place in the baggage train in the rear, and the procession had been in motion for three days before he found an opportunity to approach his former employer. They were both on horseback.

"Don't thank me, thank God and the Grasshopper," said the Pope after waving aside Blacktooth's apology.

"I don't understand, Holy Father."

"You don't have to!" Brownpony snapped, and after a pause relented. "Somebody told Sharf Bråm that you and Gai-See were both in jail for killing Cardinal Hadala. Hadala was violating the Sacred Mare Treaty by bringing an army onto Nomad land. The sharf would have killed him if Gai-See hadn't. I don't know what made him think you helped kill him."

"I did help, Holy Father. I told Gai-See that Hadala was defying you, and I knew what I was doing when I told him. Eltür knew this."

"I see. Well, he became quite angry and sent his nephew with an oral message to Gai-See's jailer."

"Which nephew was this?"

"Stützil Bråm—Blue Lightning. He's up ahead with Høngan Ösle's party. At first he thought I was the jailer. He told everybody that unless you were released at once, he would make peace with the Hannegan and attack Dion's forces wherever he found them. Høngan Ösle stepped in at that point and took over; he even threatened to hit New Jerusalem. So you can thank the Nomads, not me. I'm only bringing you along to satisfy Eltür Bråm."

"So that's why!"

"That and your prowess as a soldier," said Brownpony, and spurred his horse to get away from the conversation.

## CHAPTER 27

Except the sick who are very weak, let all abstain entirely from eating the flesh of four-footed animals.

—*Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 39

HIEF HAWKEN CARDINAL IRRIKAWA, WHO HAD departed Valana for his own country some months ago, returned suddenly to rejoin the Curia's wagon train. He explained that his road home north of the Misery River was temporarily blocked by the presence of Texark troops in the region. The lands beyond the Misery were considered open range, and both Grasshopper and Wilddog peoples drove



cattle there in season, although the campsites were not permanent and there were no breeding pits. If Texark troops were in the area, it was in violation of the Treaty of the Sacred Mare. The Pope was alarmed at first. But those who questioned the cardinal closely concluded that what he had encountered was a band of well-dressed and well-armed outlaws, imitating Texark cavalry maneuvers. It was strange, but only Sharf Oxsho seemed worried. "Too many outlaws on the move," he said softly to Father Ombroz. "Too many to believe."

The Pope's train gradually gathered a multitude as it moved east. Parties of ten or twenty warriors converged with the growing army every few hours. While passing through Wilddog country, the legion grew to sixteen hundred horsemen and their animals. Sometimes when the moon was bright in June, nocturnal riders thundered into camp with obscene war cries followed by laughter as sleepy men scrambled out of their bedrolls. There was talk of victory in the air, talk of spoils and of farmers' women. And rebuke for such talk from Sharf Oxsho's lieutenants.

Blacktooth rode in the back of the hoodlum wagon with Librada, his cougar. He had made a rawhide collar and kept her on a short leash. A sickness of the spirit had come over him. He was unable to pray except to God in his cat.

That was the summer of the Year of Our Lord 3246. On the eve of the solstice the moon was pink and full over the western horizon when dawn broke on the Plains. As Blacktooth crawled from under the hoodlum wagon, he could see that breakfast fires were already being extinguished here and there about the militant horizon. Groups of armed men, horses, cattle, and cannon as far as the eye could see: it was seething, but not yet boiling, this pot.

The Hannegan knows we are coming. When will he respond?

There was no haste to resume the journey, probably because today was a special day. Blacktooth could not be certain, for he was out of touch with those in command. A tripod with the remains of a slaughtered cow hung near the wagon. He scraped some raw meat from the bone with the hood's stolen bayonet. A monk of Leibowitz never ate such meat without the abbot's permission, which was rarely given, except on high holy days, or to the gravely ill. I am gravely ill, he said to Jarad breathing over his shoulder. The hood handed him a pancake, a cup of tea, and the usual morning insult. The hood was a Wilddog Nomad, whose name was Bitten Dog, drafted by the Pope's chef as cook's helper, and Blacktooth was supposed to be the Bitten Dog's helper, but diarrhea and deep sadness made him useless. His only work became the gathering of dry manure for fuel during stops, and the polishing of kitchen implements during days in the wagon.

As it turned out, the day was indeed a special day. The Nomads ordinarily celebrated the Nomad Feast of the Bonfires at the solstice; and the Church once had observed on the twentieth of June the Feast of Pope Saint Silverius, the son of Pope Hormisdas. Silverius had offended the Empress Theodora, and she exiled him—a punishment which led to his suffering and death in 538 A.D., and therefore to his being called a martyr. Pope Amen Specklebird had borrowed his feast day (which had been borrowed twice previously) for the observances of Our Lady of the Desert, patroness of his Order. But now it was not Specklebird's feast that Brownpony chose to celebrate, but the Mass of a Sovereign Pontiff, *Si diligis me*; for to consecrate a bishop was his aim, during an early Mass that day in the midst of his armies on the hot and arid plain.

Amen II gathered about him the eight cardinals who accompanied the train. He called it a consistory, and made the intended announcements. He and Wolfer Poilyf, Bishop from the North Country, together with Bishop Varley Swineman of Denver, consecrated Father Jopo e'Laiden Ombroz, S.I., as Archbishop of the ancient but moribund diocese of Canterbury, and then made him Vicar Apostolic to the Nomads—including of course the Jackrabbit Nomads, whose present clergy was now fleeing from the advancing Crusaders of the Western Church. The reluctant Bishop Ombroz was obedient to Brownpony, but less than elated by his own elevation. The Pope made him a cardinal as well, as announced in consistory. The elders of the Bear Spirit would, Ombroz said, laugh at his finery, and he would be called Cardinal Cannibal in Texark. Ombroz was now the ninth cardinal accompanying the main army of the crusade, and Brownpony confided in him and in Wooshin that he would be naming a

tenth cardinal soon; he did not mention a name.

From what little Blacktooth saw of the Pope from a distance, it seemed to him that Brownpony looked more ethereal and spiritual than before. Maybe closeness had made him miss something in the man. The change, however, was not necessarily good. Brownpony looked at the sky a lot, other observers said. He always seemed to be looking for something in the clouds or on the horizon, and gave little attention to those around him.

Blacktooth wondered who had suggested to Brownpony the motto he had inscribed upon his new coat of arms as Amen II. It said LIKE HELL YOU WILL in ancient English, instead of the usual Latin. He understood it, but he wondered if the Pope really did. When Brownpony's coach overtook Eltür Brām's coach one day, Jopo Cardinal Ombroz was the only member of the College who knew enough ancient English to laugh at the juxtaposition of their mottos.

It was to celebrate Ombroz's ascension to the Sacred College that Önmü Kun had traveled north with Father Steps-on-Snake and a party of thirty Jackrabbit warriors. They arrived well before the event, and brought with them disease, although none fell ill until days after their arrival. Blacktooth, already ill, was one of the first to get sick after Önmü came up from the south to meet the train; he heard talk of epidemic in the Province. At first they blamed the water, but a week later three of the warriors and several Grasshopper children fell ill, and then Blacktooth St. George, who already had the runs.

As Önmü explained it, the crusaders in the south at first attributed the affliction to poisoned wells left by retreating Texark forces, but the cattle that drank from the wells were not so afflicted. And the disease seemed to spread from the men who had drunk of the wells to men who had not. So far, the enemy was not affected by the plague, if such it was. The disease, whose symptoms were something like those suffered in Valana before the election of Pope Amen I, was not yet epidemic. To contain it, certain fighting units were quarantined.

Blacktooth did not attend the Mass of a Sovereign Pontiff or Father Ombroz's consecration, but watched from a distant hilltop while squatting in the grass, taking a long painful dump. Blacktooth had given himself over to the Devil. He had stopped praying the Divine Office, except when it came to him in snatches. He listened to himself fart and said amen. He had ceased to meditate, except for an occasional rosary in honor of the Virgin—but then his mind dwelled on Ædrea in the role of God's mother.

He assumed that he would never see her again, for she was now a nun. He had not, and would not, ask Brownpony for assurance that he had done what he had said he would do as soon as they were gone from New Jerusalem, that is, commute her sentence from permanent exile. He had no evidence for believing that the Pope had remembered or kept the promise, and he could not ask. He knew he was going mad; the origin of his cosmic madness was his inflamed bowel, which was caused by his guilt, which was driving him crazy during this summer of the Year of Our Lord 3246, the year of the Reconquest, not the previous year when he had killed a pitiful, drafted glep, for that had not been a year of diarrhea and fever.

His days of madness made him reclusive. Only the responsibility he felt for Librada, the duty to return her to the country of her birth, kept him from abandoning all hope and fleeing. Father Steps-on-Snake was available to him, but he did not confess. The idea of confession seemed to make his diarrhea worse. He had made himself a stranger to his master by his insolence. The journey was misery, and every few days he had a day of delirium and uncontrollable behavior.

But it was on such a bad day that the dead Pope Amen came to comfort him.

"Your Christ is the true man of no identity," Amen Specklebird told him while he took a dump at sundown, "the one not wearing a mask; he comes and goes through your face, where your mask is. He comes and goes as he likes, fore and aft, and your mask sees him not.

A mask sees self only in a mirror. But the true Jesus without a mask is alive and well; austere he sits in solitude under the bridge where the Christ sleeps, and takes a dump."

"Are not all sins, in themselves, their own punishment?" Blacktooth asked, impertinently. He thought he remembered Specklebird saying something like that during the nine days of prayer they had shared.

"Punishment like your congress with old Shard's daughter?" the Pope replied with a grin, and disappeared before Nimmy could say *that was not* a mortal sin.

Besides his illness of body and spirit, another factor discouraged flight. Just out of sight beyond the southern horizon another train was traveling eastward on a parallel course, and another might be coming behind it. There was too much chance of being caught. Dust from the other train was usually visible by day, and the glow of its wagoners' fires by night. A rare glimpse of the wagons and riders occurred when the train mounted a low hill in the distance. Some of the wagons flashed in the sunlight as if they were covered with metal, but with the heat and the distance even the hills seemed to be made of red-hot metal in the late light. The Nomad riders stayed clear of the mysterious train; they had been so ordered. No one to whom the monk talked knew much about it, except that it had departed from New Jerusalem after the Pope's train, and that someone who knew someone who knew Wooshin said that it carried secret weapons, and that it was under the command of Magister Dion.

A few days later, Blacktooth became aware that they had penetrated into tall-grass country. He knew it without looking up from where he lay on the feed sacks in the back of the bouncing hoodlum wagon. He knew because the bands of incoming warriors were beginning to speak the dialect of the Grasshopper, and their animals began to include dogs. The dogs were not immediately friendly to Wilddog Nomads, and were noisily hostile toward Churchmen and New Jerusalemites. Because of the dogs, Blacktooth began sleeping inside the cramped hoodlum wagon instead of under it.

Pursued by a pack of the wolfish beasts, a screaming man leaped upon the tailgate of the hoodlum wagon one morning, and Blacktooth helped haul him inside. A snarling dog refused to let go of his shin. Librada shrieked. Cat and monk lunged for the dog at the same time. The man's shin was well wrapped in military leggings, but he kept screaming until Blacktooth beat the dog off with a fagot and restrained the cat.

"Thank God! And thank you, Nimmy. I didn't know you were with us."

"Aberlott! What in hell are you doing here?"

"I'm just here for the crusade. Wooshin let me join the team. Damn, it's bleeding. Your cat did that."

"You've been on the train all along?"

"Sure, but this is the first day I've had free."

Blacktooth thought for a moment. When the Pope's party of Churchmen had left New Jerusalem, they brought with them seventeen wagons and an "elite" fighting team from the Suckamints, men whose only loyalty to the Pope was guaranteed by their frightened respect for Wooshin, their sergeant general—a rank created for the occasion by the reigning Pontiff in a moment of whimsy. The wizened old warrior wore gold chevrons and a star on his plaid tunic, which Amen II had given him. That he had accepted Aberlott among his so-called crack troops strained Nimmy's credulity, but the student swore it was true. Blacktooth was glad for the company, at least for a day.

"Are you ready to run away again?" the student asked. "Like last year?"

Nimmy snorted. "Last year, one mad cardinal was leading a crowd of amateurs. This year, the Vicar of Christ is leading three hordes of warriors and two small armies."

"Two? Where's army number two?"

"It's moving south of us."

"Oh, you mean the tanks. That's different. That's something I'm not supposed to talk about, if I know anything, which I don't."

"Tanks? Secret weapons?"

"Water tanks for all I know. We'll need a lot of water."

While they marched across Grasshopper country and the Pope watched the sky, the Burregun flew over the procession so often that it became a Nomad joke. During this time, Pope Amen I appeared to Blacktooth more than once, and warned him against continuing his rebellion against his master. When he answered the old black cougar, Bitten Dog the hood accused him of talking to himself, and he sent a

message to Wooshin saying that the monk needed a witch doctor. The doctor who came turned out to be the Pope's personal physician, although the patient had never seen him before, and was unable to guess to which of several schools of medicine the doctor belonged. He wore Nomad leathers and he swore Nomad oaths under his breath, but he carried a black bag full of pipes, needles, pincers, and charms, like a member of the ancient and mystical school of allopaths.

The doctor told him that the Pope was also not well, although he had not yet contracted the four-day fever, as it was being called. His symptoms reminded Blacktooth of Meldown. Blacktooth described the Venerable Boedullus's summonabisch stew. The doctor immediately claimed it was an old Nomad dish, and became enthusiastic when he learned that Brownpony had thrived on it. When he left Blacktooth, he went to see the cook. The reinstitution of summonabisch stew as a foundation of the papal diet was thus probably responsible for Blacktooth's elevation to the cardinalate when the Pope had another whimsical moment.

Because the movement of armies of horsemen was also a religious procession, each day must be begun with a sunrise Mass, and the Christians among the Nomads must be fed the bread of Heaven before the march resumed for the day. Out of deference to his Lord Høngan, Eltūr Brām put up with this sanctimony for a whole week before he went over his lord's head and asked the Pope's leave to lead his warriors on ahead as skirmishers. It was a bad idea only if one assumed the worst of the Grasshopper sharf. Brownpony had done his best to see the man without assumptions. The Pope took the sharf by the arm and led him into the tent of the *Qæsach dri Vørdar*.

Høngan Ösle Chür opposed the Grasshopper's request at first, but the Pope said, "There is merit in moving to separate a strong striking force from liturgical encumbrance, especially as we grow closer to the enemy. That enemy knows very well we are coming."

"That is true," said Holy Madness. "And what worries me most is that we don't see him doing anything about it. But I am not ready to relinquish my command to Sharf Brām. With Holy Father's permission, I will take the sharf and as many of his warriors as he wants to bring, along with an equal number of Wilddog warriors under my command, and we shall advance as skirmishers toward the frontier."

The Pope turned to Wooshin, who quickly endorsed the plan, but added, "The Lord Høngan is right to worry. We must find out soon where the Texark force is massed, but skirmishers should avoid battle until our main force arrives."

"It is possible that they are embattled in the east," Brownpony suggested. "They dare not lose control of the Great River."

"If it is so," Axe said, "New Rome may not show much defense. Hannegan City will have the defense."

It was agreed then. At least six hundred warriors, part from each horde, stacked their arms for the Pope's later blessing and knelt beside the wagon tracks to pray at their last Mass before battle. Sharf Brām and perhaps two hundred active disbelievers, both Grasshopper and Wilddog, waited on a distant hilltop for the Mass to end. The two forces then united and rode east.

Holding court in a field of sunflowers in the heart of Grasshopper country, the Pope mentioned the name of the next candidate for a papal battlefield promotion to the Sacred College, whereupon Wooshin went into a waking trance, while Jopo Cardinal Ombroz blinked and walked away uttering mysteries. The fall from grace by Blacktooth Brother St. George ended with a thud when the Pope—in a recurrence of the whimsy which had moved him to create the rank of sergeant general for his bodyguard—created Blacktooth St. George a Cardinal Deacon of Brownpony's old Roman Church, Saint Maisie's.

The monk was not immediately informed of this signal honor, for such announcements normally emerged from a full consistory, but he got wind of it in small whiffs, as when Aberlott first addressed him as "Your Eminence." Nimmy correctly attributed this to sarcasm. He therefore blamed Aberlott again

when Wooshin rode back to the hoodlum wagon on the Pope's white stallion and used the same form of address.

"The Holy Father sends me to thank you for the special stew, and to ask about Your Eminence's health," said Axe.

Blacktooth glared quickly at Aberlott and responded, "I shit sixteen times a day, Axe. I'm weak. Every fourth day I have fits and Bitten Dog ties me up. Except for that, I'm very well, thank the Holy Father."

"I'll tell him you're dying," Wooshin grunted, and left. The physician returned that afternoon to check him over again.

"You have the Hannegan's science to thank for your illness," he told the monk. "Jackrabbit warriors brought the curse up to us from the south."

Sometimes the physician spoke Rockymount with a Grasshopper accent, and sometimes he spoke Grasshopper with a Rockymount accent. He made Nimmy eat bits of charcoal from a mostly dung fire and drink a slurry of its ashes. He put Blacktooth on a diet of meal boiled in milk, and gave him some bitter bark to chew. These measures could be either Nomad medicine or allopath remedy, but he blew *keneb* smoke toward the four quarters, mumbled a litany, and prescribed *keneb* to be smoked on Blacktooth's crazy days. The Pope apparently liked this medicine man, and Blacktooth was grateful to Brownpony for his care.

Before he left, the physician gave him a small package. "The Pope sent you this. I almost forgot."

Blacktooth neglected opening it. A gift from his former master would make him feel more guilt.

Sometimes he wanted to go to the Pope and prostrate himself as he had often done in his early years before Jarad and his brethren to obtain their forgiveness for putting a lizard in Singing Cow's bed, or for yodeling in choir; but that was within a brotherhood of equals under the Equalissimus. His present *laesae majestatis culpa* seemed much less forgivable. But that, of course, was before he opened the package and found the red hat. It was not the big red hat that was customarily nailed to the cathedral ceiling after the first wearing, but only an extra scarlet zucchetto borrowed from Chief Hawken Cardinal Irrikawa; it was identifiable by the hole in the brim through which the cardinal monarch inserted his feather.

"Now we shall have to ordain you deacon of Saint Maisie's," said Brownpony's note.

The Pope gave him three days to recover before summoning him to the head of the papal caravan. Blacktooth refused the honor. The Pope refused his refusal. "Put on the red cap," he said. "It means you get to vote for the next Pope. It is not a reward for holiness or good behavior."

"Then for the stew?"

"Not even for the stew of many blessings, Nimmy."

"A punishment for sin, then?" Blacktooth wondered.

"Ah! Symmetry. Either punishment or reward. You were always a symmetrical dualist, Nimmy."

"A symmetrical duelist?" asked the *Qæsach dri Vørdar*. "What is that, Holy Father?"

"Ambidextrous swordplay," the Axe told him in an aside.

Blacktooth was still holding the hat between thumb and forefinger as if it were dripping slime.

"Grab him, Axe," said the Pope.

Wooshin seized his shoulders. Brownpony took the zucchetto from his hand and centered it carefully upon his stubby tonsure, then patted it down. When the sergeant general released him, his hand darted toward his head, but the Pope grabbed it and laughed.

"Do I have to wear it all the time?" asked Blacktooth Cardinal St. George, Deacon of Saint Maisie's.

When news of the war finally came, it came from the rear. Texark cavalry had descended mysteriously out of nowhere to fall upon the Wilddog families in the west. They were dressed like motherless ones, and they made a great slaughter of the Weejus women and their breeding stock, the messenger said. At one family compound—that of Wetok Enar—there was a complete massacre, apparently to eliminate witnesses, but two daughters nevertheless survived, and one described a cavalry colonel with a wooden nose and long hair that covered his ears. The other, Potear Wetok, lived long enough to name her former husband, Colonel Esitt-of-Wetok Loyte, as the commander of the troop of

Texark marauders. She had watched them shoot her whole family before he, full of hate, personally shot her in the lower spine so that her death was slow.

The Texarki seemed to know just which horses to kill among the breeding stock in order to ruin every Weejeus as a breeder. Between murderous raids on family encampments the marauders were observed doing something to the Nomad cattle whenever they had made camp for the night.

When all this was reported to Brownpony, the Pope became sad but was not surprised. He looked at Hawken Irrikawa and said, "Your Majesty was right. They were Texarki you encountered in the north, although I'm surprised they made it that far west without encountering the Wilddog."

He turned to Sharf Oxsho and said, "You'll have to take care of it." To Blacktooth, it sounded like neither a command nor a suggestion, but simply an observation about Oxsho's fate, or perhaps his own.

Sharf Oxsho called together the Wilddog warriors who had not ridden on ahead with the skirmishers. "There is a difference between being a shepherd to the Lord's sheep and a cowherd to Christ's wild cattle," Brownpony said mildly, as he watched a fourth of his army prepare to advance to the rear. He sent the Wilddog messenger on eastward to report the raids to the Lord Høngan Ösle.

Three days later Høngan returned to confer with the Pope and Wooshin. He brought no news from the east. No Texark patrols had been encountered, and even the motherless bandits were staying clear of the hordes as they advanced in battle array. The Grasshopper sharf had sent patrols toward Texark, but they had not yet returned when Høngin left the skirmish line to come here.

They took a census of the forces remaining to them after the homeward departure of Oxsho and his warriors. Their strength had diminished by a quarter. All leaders conferred, and were joined in conference by the spook commander from the secretive train to the south. There could be no change in the master plan. The strongest force would be directed southeast toward Hannegan City, as before, and only the force of the assault on the "protectors" of New Rome would be diminished.

But tonight the Pope determined that for a few hours, at least, there would be no more talk of war. Since leaving New Jerusalem, the same group of people always gathered around the Pope after supper on the trail. The summer nights were hot, and everyone sat well back from the fire, but close enough to hear and be heard. In the beginning the cardinals had wanted to say Compline at this time of evening, followed by religious silence. But the Pope objected to this as an imposition on non-Christian Nomad leaders who were part of his court, and he called this his "Curia Noctis," and encouraged the telling of stories. Tonight, he had determined that the subject would be saints and holy men, although anything but talk of war might be permitted.

Because Holy Madness was still with him, he sent for Cardinal Blacktooth to join them at the fire. The monk was too weak to walk alone. Axe gave him a shoulder to lean on, but at last carried him on his back to the Pope's vicinity.

"Where is your red hat?" Brownpony demanded.

"It was stolen by a holy man, Holy Father," said Blacktooth.

"Really? Who's the holy man, Your Eminence?"

"Your predecessor, Holy Father."

"You have been visited by Amen Specklebird, Brother St. George?"

"He comes to see me every fourth day."

"If so, he should have cured you. Tell him we need miracles to canonize."

"I don't think he wants to be made a saint."

"Why, Blacktooth! Nobody makes a saint. He is already a saint, or he isn't. And that is up to us to decide."

"Of course, Holy Father."

"Well, make him give you your hat back. Don't come back here without it."

Blacktooth confided in Wooshin. "Tomorrow is my crazy day. I already feel queer. Don't let me do anything disgraceful."

Some of the cardinals seemed to be dozing. There was a long silence at first. The Pope looked at Wooshin. The Axe cleared his throat, then offered a few words to open the session. "I admire the saints.

You may not think so, Lords and Eminent Fathers, because I myself am not religious, but my people do honor holy men, and one of them was called Butsa. When he had squeezed his way out from his mother's gateway at birth, he stood erect. He pointed upward with one hand, down with the other, and said, 'Sky above, ground below, and I alone am the honored guest.' "

Ombroz laughed. "Every squealing baby says that before I baptize it. That's exactly what the kid's howling about. He is all too much the honored guest."

Sitting cross-legged, Axe smiled as if his point was made. He closed his eyes and became a sixteen-foot golden body, weighing seventeen tons. Then he vanished and became a blade of grass. Blacktooth noticed that Pope Amen I, having come earlier than expected, was standing in the fringes of the firelight. He had stopped there to piss. Having retucked his long black member into his robes, he slowly approached the fire—but he cautioned Nimmy by touching a finger to his quiet smile. It was plain that nobody else could see him. Blacktooth could even smell him, and he smelled like death.

Made nervous by the smiling Specklebird spirit, Blacktooth broke the silence.

"Saint Leibowitz spoke at birth too, you know," said the monk. "He stuck his head out of the birth canal and asked the midwife, 'Now what?'"

"The midwife answered, 'For ninety-nine years, a great waste.' "

"Ag!" It was a low grunt from the Axe.

"Saint Isaac said, 'Begone!'"

"She vanished. He lived ninety-nine years, you know."

The Pope smiled wryly. "Saint Leibowitz had the Devil for a midwife, then? Does this story come from the basement of Leibowitz Abbey?"

"You can find strange legends down there, Holy Father," Blacktooth admitted. "The earliest 'Life of Saint Leibowitz' was anonymous. A man could be hanged for writing a book. We have no bylines from those decades. But that's not the only story that connects Leibowitz with the Devil."

"Tell another," said the Pope.

"I can't, really. Did you ever hear of Faust, Holy Father?"

"I think not."

"It's about a pact with the Devil. We have only pieces of the story. I can't tell you why the Venerable Boedullus thought Faust was Leibowitz."

"Didn't the simpletons think he made a pact with the Devil?"

"Yes, but the Venerable Boedullus was no simpleton."

Amen II laughed. The word "simpleton" had come to be a polite form of address, and Nimmy had just asserted that Boedullus was no gentleman.

"I mean, he was not a Simplifier, who thought the Devil inspired all books except Scripture."

"And the Venerable Boedullus didn't think so?"

The questions were making Blacktooth dizzy. He watched Pope Amen II, who slowly and in a serpentine manner was becoming the sixteen-foot golden body of the idol Baal. Blacktooth after a moment of dizzy indecision lurched up to smash the Pope idol, until Wooshin objected. They took him to the hoodlum wagon bloody but unbowed, and they helped Bitten Dog tie him down. It was another day of the plague, and the war that disappeared only at the Curia Noctis.

During his dementia, the cougar Librada ran away.

## CHAPTER 28

In time of famine, when the garden fails, when the brothers are eating yucca roots, cactus paddles, chaparral cocks, snakes, and the laying hens, and yet are near to starving, "let the Abbot pray for Saint Benedict's blessing and allow them to eat the four-footed livestock, unless there be able hunters among them to stalk the wild blue-head goats.

*Rule of Saint Leibowitz, Deviations 17*

BBOTS WERE NOT ALL ALIKE JEROME OF Pecos, abbot before the Conquest in the time of Pope Benedict XXII and Mayor Hannegan II, had thrown open the monastery gates to the world, and had allowed his sons to listen to natural philosophy lectures by practical atheists and play with electricity machines in the basement. What had happened to the religious vocation in that time, Abbot Olshuen could only wonder. The monks of Leibowitz Abbey under his guidance had kept themselves as unaware as possible of the changing world, including the controversial pontificates of the two Amens. Without offending the Pope, such isolation had not been possible under Abbot Jarad, who was also a cardinal, but Dom Abiquiu had discontinued Jarad's policy of letting the monks know about Church affairs outside the monastery. Always conservative in his interpretation of the *Rule of Saint Leibowitz*, the abbot withheld most news, including ecclesiastical news, of the outside world from his cloistered flock; the only monks he had told about the bull *Scitote Tyrannum* were the abbey's business manager and those Brothers native to Texark or the Province whose families were in the path of war, and these were told to keep silent.

But Amen II, when he marched out of New Jerusalem to conquer New Rome, sent Olshuen two letters. The first told him that he, the Servant of the Servants of God, was undertaking a Crusade to correct the errors of his beloved son, the Emperor, and that the S.o.S.o.G. needed the prayers of all the monks of Leibowitz to support this holy cause. The second letter ordered him to grant sanctuary at the abbey to a certain Sister Clare-of-Assisi in case she chose to avail herself of the Pope's clemency and return from her exile at the Monastery of the Nuns of Our Lady of San Pancho Villa of Cockroach Mountain south of the Brave River. Brownpony did not mention that Sister Clare was formerly Blacktooth's lover, but the abbot knew this anyway. Iridia Cardinal Silentia had visited Leibowitz Abbey on her way south. Olshuen had been startled to observe that the young Sister accompanying her was the same girl who had impudently flashed herself at him from the roadway the previous season before she followed the old Jew to the Mesa. He stirred unhappily at the memory, but the command to grant her a temporary refuge was the Pope's.

Olshuen was strict in matters of the rule, but he was neither a rebel nor an especially brave man. If he must lead his congregation in prayers for the Pope's intentions, he felt he must tell them about the Crusade. And if he must grant sanctuary anytime soon to a barefoot whore in an O.D.D. habit, he must begin construction immediately of a special extra cell.

The messenger who brought the Pope's letters to Olshuen had ridden as fast as possible to Leibowitz Abbey from New Jerusalem, and the next day he had to ride on south as fast as possible to San Pancho Villa Nunnery, evidently with a message of clemency for the girl.

Upon receipt of the Pope's letters, the abbot immediately sent a message of his own to New Jerusalem summoning Singing Cow home from his priory. This too was irregular. But the abbot needed to know how the departure of the Pope from his Suckamint Mountain sanctuary might affect the relations between the government of New Jerusalem and the monks of the Priory of Saint Leibowitz-in-the-Cottonwoods, a mission of the Order.

The special extra cell was a lean-to against the north wall of the guesthouse, but there was no door between them. Compared with the monks' cells, the whore-hut (as Olshuen thought of it) was luxurious, having its own running water, a charcoal stove for cooking or heating, a wooden tub for bathing, and an adjacent one-hole privy only three paces from a side door. Like the monks' cells, it had a cot with a straw mattress, one chair, one table for writing or eating, one prie-dieu for praying, and one crucifix before which to pray. A missal, a psalter, and a copy of the *Rule of Saint Leibowitz* were on the bookshelf. If the cook brought her food, the trollop would not need to leave the guest accommodations even for meals, unless she came to Mass, which the abbot considered unlikely.

The abbey had two guests already. One was Snow Ghost, a younger brother of Sharf Oxsho, who wanted to become a postulant. The other was Thon Elmofier Santalot, Sc.D., Vaq. Ord., who, besides being an associate professor at the Texark university, was a major in the Reserve Cavalry. His unit had been called to active duty, but he was on a leave to pursue his studies at the abbey, where he spent all his time in the vaults and the clerestory reading room, joining the monks only at meals and at Sunday's Mass. No one, not even the abbot, knew the purpose of his study at the abbey. Seventy-two years ago, Abbot



Jerome would have begged him to tell them all. Now Dom Abiquiu begged him not to discuss anything with the monks.

Snow Ghost spoke no Ol'zark. Santalot spoke no Wilddog, although he had learned a little Jackrabbit while serving in the Province. Both of them knew a little Churchspeak. They had trouble communicating, but since they were enemies, this was just as well. Snow Ghost was already attending Mass and chanting the hours with the other monks in choir, although his habit was still being tailored for him. The abbot had warned him sternly against discussing politics with the Texark scholar, but the warning proved unnecessary. Snow Ghost seemed thoroughly afraid of the man.

Thon Santalot, whose life seemed to be driven by curiosity, became curious at this time as to why the extra cell was being built when the guesthouse was nearly empty. Snow Ghost could tell him nothing; Brother Carpenter said it was for a special visitor, and that was all he knew.

The expected trollop was never to occupy the extra cell, however. In late June, the old Jew who never died came out of the east and collapsed outside the gates. The abbot ordered him carried to the guesthouse, but when he began raving in Hebrew, Thon Santalot became frightened of him, and so Dom Abiquiu housed him in the whore-hut and fed him bread and boiled goat's milk.

Brother Medic was unable to diagnose the ancient hermit's illness, which seemed to abate on the day following his arrival. He insisted on going back to his mesa, but on the fourth day, before he got under way, he went wild again and had to be restrained. When he recovered temporarily from his fever, he insisted to Olshuen that he was a danger to the community, and exacted a promise of sanitary measures. He said he had caught the disease while traveling behind the lines in the Province, where he had sold military weather to both sides. He insisted that to prevent spreading the contagion, the doors and windows of his cell were to be covered with cloth to exclude insects. Knowing that old Benjamin had medical experience, the abbot readily consented.

When Elmofire Santalot heard of the nature of old Benjamin's illness, and where he caught it, the scholar went straight to the abbot's office. The abbot was out, so he gave the abbot's secretary a bottle of pills, explaining that he had needed them to avoid catching Hilbert's disease from the troops in the Province. The scholar was having a late breakfast in the refectory the following morning when Dom Abiquiu sat down beside him, placing the bottle of pills on the oak table.

"If you take one pill a day, it's a preventative," said the scholar. "Take twelve a day, for five days, it's a cure. You should have enough to give two pills to any monk who had contact with him."

"And you want me to give the rest to Benjamin?"

"If you want to save his life. It is not usually lethal, but he is so old and feeble . . ."

"Old yes, feeble no. But I don't understand how you happened to have these with you. You called it Hilbert's disease?"

Thon Santalot looked around the empty refectory. It was almost time for lunch. Beside the abbot, only Brother Cook and Brother Reconciliator were listening. "Thon Hilbert's disease is no longer a secret, really, I suppose. Our forces have prophylaxis—these pills—and the invaders don't."

"Go about your business," said the abbot to the other monks. When they were gone, he asked Santalot, "Are you saying that Hannegan's military is deliberately spreading the disease in the Province?"

"Certainly. Those who wage war have always used disease, Domne. Pestilence is one of the horsemen of the Apocalypse, is it not?"

Olshuen shook his head. "No. Well, there are various interpretations."

"You must remember that a sexual disease was one of the weapons used in the so-called Flame Deluge. A disease was used by Hannegan Two on the Plains back in the last century."

"But Hannegan's was a plague of cattle, not human beings."

"Well, yes, it is being used again on cattle. Horses too. That was part of Hilbert's work. He isolated the microorganisms. Today, we can infect the Nomad's animals directly, without driving diseased herds among them."

"How is that done?"

"I'm not sure. The cavalry carries it around in bottles. It can be sprayed from upwind, I think."

"You called it Hilbert's disease," murmured the abbot, who often became quiet when astonished.

"Who is Hilbert?"

"Thon Brandio Hilbert is, or was, a brilliant epidemiologist, formerly occupying the Chair of Life Science at Hannegan University."

"Was? Formerly? Is he dead?"

"No, he's alive, but he's in jail. He conscientiously objected to the military use of his work. Well, here they come for lunch, Domne, and I must return to my research. Thank you, Brother Cook, for feeding me at this odd hour."

As they left the refectory, the abbot knelt to pray at the feet of the wooden figure of another conscientious objector who had founded the Order. Olshuen managed to pray for the Pope's soul and the Pope's beloved son errant, the Emperor, without mentioning victory in battle. He prayed only briefly, then returned to the refectory with his flock to consume his daily bread, red beans, and milk. Afterward, he took the pills to the old Jew.

The cure was effective. A week later, the patient returned to his mesa after leaving instructions for decontamination of the cell he had occupied. The procedure involved burning sulfur and leaving the cell vacant for several months, during which time it could not serve its designed purpose, if and when the need for a whore-hut arose.

If Singing Cow resented the abbot's midsummer summons, he kept it to himself, but his return from New Jerusalem did not seem a happy homecoming for him. Olshuen suppressed his eagerness for news of Brownpony's Crusade, for Cow seemed half-dead of heat exhaustion, and he let him rest for a day before interrogation. But on the following day, the prior of Saint Leibowitz-in-the-Cottonwoods claimed ignorance of the doings of the Papal Court. Further, said Father Moo, the relations between his priory and the government of Magister Dion could not be affected by the Crusade, because no such relations existed, by Brownpony's design. When Olshuen wanted to discuss Sister Clare-of-Assisi, Singing Cow knew her only as Blacktooth's Ædrea; and since this knowledge had come to him through the confessional he would say nothing about her, nor would he listen patiently to the abbot's gentle slanders.

The abbey had accepted seven Jackrabbit refugees as postulants that season, so Singing Cow's old cell was occupied. The abbot put him in the guesthouse with the Wilddog postulant and Thon Elmofier Santalot after telling him what Santalot had said about Hilbert's disease. Father Moo remained expressionless. Dom Abiquiu went away with a faint smile. He had not asked Singing Cow to question the scholar.

Three weeks elapsed, and no one else at the abbey became infected. Singing Cow requested permission to return to Leibowitz-in-the-Cottonwoods. Olshuen realized that it had been a minor mistake to summon him, but he was reluctant to let him go without putting him to good use first.

"I want you to go over all the work that Brother St. George left behind, not only the Boedullaria, but also the Duren manuscripts, and see if you can make a glossary..."

A cloud of dust arose far to the south of Sanly Bowitts. At the time, three novices happened to be standing on the parapet wall, where they were recording the altitude and azimuth of the sun for comparison with an ephemeris; the purpose was to reset the monastery's clock. A coach escorted by two men on horseback emerged from the distant dust and entered the village, then reappeared a few minutes later on the road toward the monastery. The novices watched, transfixed, as the richly decorated coach stopped outside the gate and the two uniformed soldiers of the Laredan King opened the doors, whence emerged Sister Clare-of-Assisi, an unknown Sister, and the cardinal herself, Mother Iridia Silentia, O.D.D.

"Five for the guesthouse," someone called out.

It was after the evening meal and almost time for Compline. Iridia Silentia appeared at the abbot's office, but seemed reluctant at first to sit down. She seemed nervous but full of enthusiasm.

"Sister Clare is a vessel of the Holy Spirit, Domne. I am certain of it. The reason I am certain is that

she cannot command this talent, and she will not pretend to heal when she can't. She is deeply sympathetic, and in some cases it might be helpful to pretend to be healing someone whose ailment is partly emotional. But she will not pretend."

"Does she attribute it to God?"

"I think it would not be prudent to ask her that," the cardinal said sharply, and Dom Abiquiu reddened. Iridia finally sat down. "If she said yes, she would become a problem for the Church. If she said no, she would become a problem for the Church. This is why we cannot accept such a treasure in our community. She has taken our vows, walked on our stones with her bare feet, prayed with us, eaten God's Body with us, and we quickly came to love her. But she is a treasure, and she has to be released."

"Did Brother St. George know about this talent?"

"She told me she had teased him. I think she meant she showed him her gift, in minor ways. You can see how we cannot have anyone special in our midst except the Lord."

"So you have brought her to me."

It was the cardinal's turn to blush. "Because the Pope told me to ... No, not quite. The Pope told me to send her here if she wished to leave us. I decided she should go, and I helped her to wish it, and I brought her myself. If I sent her, I would not be able to tell you about her."

"You could have written a letter."

"I could not have written a letter, nor can you put anything at all about her in writing unless you want to destroy her. Don't you see?"

Dom Abiquiu was briefly silent. "Like asking her if her gift is from God or not?"

The cardinal smiled warmly, causing the abbot's heart to squirm.

"She needs to go home, if the Mayor's son will let her. You need keep her here only until the Holy Father can arrange it."

"You are aware that the Holy Father is otherwise occupied?"

Silentia ignored Olshuen's irony. "I'll tell Sister Clare that she must avoid talking to anyone outside the guesthouse."

"There is one of our postulants in the guesthouse."

"Then she must—"

"But I'll get him out. Who is the other Sister?"

"My assistant. She will return with me to San Pancho."

Brother Liveryman appeared in the doorway, caught the abbot's eye, and in response to the abbot's nod asked: "Domne, did you tell our guests to choose their own rooms?"

"Yes, of course. Is there a problem?"

"Only that one of the nuns chose the, uh, isolation cell."

"You must get her out of there! It's not safe yet."

"She said it was built for her. I don't know what she meant."

The cardinal studied the abbot's expression for a moment and said, "I think I know." She arose.

"Well, Domne. I am very tired and would like to retire. If I may be excused, I shall say Compline alone in my room. I'll speak to my student. I do thank you for all."

Student? The word lingered in the abbot's office behind her.

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That evening, Sister Clare abandoned the abbot's whore-hut for a cell in the guesthouse with the others, saying that she knew it had been meant for her originally, but that she had been unaware of the quarantine. Singing Cow suppressed his curiosity about her and said nothing.

Three nuns, two soldiers, a scholar from Texark, a Nomad who was a possible postulant, and Father Singing Cow now shared the guesthouse. Ædrea stayed in her cell except when they all went to the refectory or to Mass together. The cardinal, her assistant, and the Wilddog Nomad Snow Ghost were often absent from the building, presumably singing the Divine Office with the Brothers. Singing Cow was busy in the Scriptorium making a glossary from the work of Brother Blacktooth, and Thon Elmofier

Santalot was usually busy searching the bookshelves in the basement, or reading and making notes in the clerestory. The Laredan soldiers were left alone most of the time, with Ædrea staying behind a closed door. One of the soldiers rode into Sanly Bowitts on the second day and brought back a jug of local hooch. When the soldiers were both solemnly drunk, the bolder of them knocked upon the pretty nun's door and offered her a drink.

Ædrea opened the door, took the proffered jug, tilted it, and swallowed mightily.

"Thank you, Corporal Browka," she said with a smile, then closed the door and clicked the latch.

Browka knocked again, but there was no answer. "You saw her smile at me?"

Father Moo and the Nomad youth returned from Church, and soon after, Santalot came in. The soldiers offered everyone a drink, but there was little left in the jug and no one accepted. The cardinal came in and sat down in the reading room for a moment before retiring. The soldiers hid the jug and pretended to be sleeping.

"We shall leave here after Lauds in the morning," said Mother Iridia. "We must all thank the monks for their hospitality." She was speaking Churchspeak, which was the only common language among the monastery's guests. The soldiers spoke it poorly, but as soldiers they were very curious about the military campaigns of the present Pope, and had many questions, asked and unasked. In two days at the abbey, they had learned very little.

In the morning, after a last conference with the abbot, Mother Iridia bade her student a tearful goodbye and she and her servants departed. Ædrea cried in her cell for an hour after they were gone. She shared the guesthouse now with Singing Cow, Snow Ghost, and Elmofier Santalot the scholar. Abbot Olshuen told Snow Ghost he could now move to a cell in the dormitory, but Snow Ghost resisted, saying he was not yet quite ready for silence and solitude. Surprised, the abbot glanced quickly at Ædrea, as if he wondered whether the Nomad was not quite ready for chastity either, but he did not press it. Nomad vocations were rare, and except when Singing Cow was present, Brother Wren, the abbey's cook, had no one to talk to in his own tongue or a related dialect.

It was during the Feast of Saint Clare, one year after her taking her vows, from which she was now released, that Ædrea Sister Clare-of-Assisi performed a miracle in the guesthouse of Leibowitz Abbey.

In late August Brother Wren got permission to visit Singing Cow in the guesthouse, and Ædrea Sister Clare-of-Assisi became aware that Brother Cook had a cancer eating his throat. His voice had diminished to a hoarse whisper. He called his cancer Brother Crab, and joked about it. Ædrea came up behind him as he sat and talked with his old friend, Moo. He started up as she touched him, but then settled back in his chair with a smile and let her hands explore his throat. He started again when she pressed down hard with her fingertips below his Adam's apple.

"Relax, Brother. Does it hurt?"

"Not much," Wren whispered. "What have you done? Something popped."

She continued caressing his throat for a while, then left him and went to her cell. Father Moo crossed himself. Brother Wren noticed and followed suit.

"Better not tell anyone," Singing Cow said.

Within three days, Wren began to get his voice back. Word got around. Within a week, Sister Clare had healed infected blisters, a hernia, an abscessed tooth, and a probable case of gonorrhea of the eye. All this might have passed unnoticed, but when she cured the old librarian, Brother Obohl, of his myopia and he got a look at the beautiful woman who had laid hands on his eyes, his squawk of astonishment was followed by the joyful noise of his thanksgiving, and this fell upon the ears of Dom Abiquiu.

Singing Cow was present in the guesthouse when the abbot strode to the closed door of Ædrea's cell.

"I told you not to mix with the monks."

"I have not mixed with the monks."

"Cardinal Silentia forbade you to practice your healing tricks."

Sister Clare opened her door. "Beg pardon, Domne, but she did not. I do not have any healing tricks."

"You argue with me! Where is your religious training?"

"You prefer Brother Librarian half blind?"

"It was my fault, Domne," put in Father Moo. He ventured a lie: "I sent him to her."

"What?" Olshuen gasped and paused for self-control. "You are not to lay hands on anyone else while you are here. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Domne."

"Will you obey?"

"Yes, Domne."

The abbot glared at Singing Cow. "I think it is about time you returned home."

"Thank you, Domne." As soon as Dom Abiquiu was gone, he said, "Alleluia!"

Sister Clare smiled. "Will you carry a message to my family and the Mayor when you go?" she asked.

But Singing Cow had not yet departed when her wounds began to appear. When Ædrea went to Mass, she knelt in the back of the Church behind a pillar where she was not visible to the monks in the choir. Thus she always left the Church first. Following her back to the guesthouse, Singing Cow noticed dark spots in the prints of her bare feet in the sand. When she walked across the guesthouse floor, the blood was even more apparent. He called out to her, asking how she had hurt her feet.

The young nun stopped, pulled up the skirt of her habit, and looked down. She stared, then looked back at Father Moo. When she lifted her hand to her face, he saw that the palm was bloody. She seemed very confused.

"Who hurt you, Sister?"

Her voice trembled. "I don't know. It was dark. I think it was the Devil. He was wearing a robe like yours."

"What? Someone actually attacked you?"

"It's like a dream. There was a hammer—" She stopped, looked at him wildly, then bolted into her cell and latched the door. Singing Cow could hear her praying. He went to look for Dom Abiquiu, whom he found praying before the wooden Leibowitz in the corridor.

"She said it was like a dream," Father Moo told him. "But she thinks somebody with a hammer, maybe the Devil—"

"Was she raped?"

"She didn't say anything about it."

"Let's go. Did you tell Brother Pharmacist?"

"He is on his way."

The pharmacist had already arrived when they entered the guesthouse. The door to Ædrea's cell was open, and she was lying on her cot. As they started to enter, the pharmacist pushed them back outside, joining them and closing the door behind him.

"Her wounds?" the abbot whispered.

"The wounds of Christ," the medic answered softly.

"What are you talking about?"

"The wounds of the nails. The wound of the spear."

"The stigmata? You're saying the female, the, uh, Sister, has the stigmata?"

"Yes, she does. The cut in her side is clean. The wounds in her hands and feet have bruised blue edges. She speaks of a hammer."

"Devil!" It was as close as Olshuen ever came to swearing. He turned and walked out of the guesthouse with Singing Cow at his heels.

"Retaliation!" he spat. "Retribution!"

"Excuse me? What do you mean, Domne?"

"I forbade her to use healing powers. This is her answer."

Singing Cow was silent for several moments as they walked toward the convent, then he shook his head. "Domne, I am leaving tomorrow for home."

Abbot Olshuen stopped. "Without asking permission?"

"You already gave it, remember?"

"Of course." The abbot turned on his heel and walked away, alone.

A few hours later, when Brother Wren St. Mary came to inquire about a change in the diet for the sick, he found Abiquiu Olshuen lying on the floor of his office. He could not move his right leg. When he tried to speak, he squawked.

Brother Pharmacist came directly to the infirmary where Wren had carried Olshuen.

"Is it a stroke, Brother?" Wren asked.

"Yes, I'm afraid it is."

The abbey had its own prior again, and Father Devendy was immediately summoned, along with Singing Cow. Wren went back to the kitchen.

Prior Devendy turned to Prior Singing Cow. "Can you get the Sister who heals to come?"

"You know about her?"

"Dom Abiquiu told me what Mother Iridia told him. I know he was alarmed, but—he may die, you know."

"I'll go ask her. She was, uh, injured, you know. Did Brother Medic tell you?"

"No," put in the pharmacist.

"Describe the wounds to Father Devendy," Father Moo told him, "but don't interpret them."

"I understand. Make sure she wears shoes of some kind and doesn't walk on the bandages."

Singing Cow glanced at the abbot. Dom Abiquiu was shaking his head from side to side with his eyes closed. It meant nothing, Moo decided.

Cow found a small pair of sandals in the storeroom. They were very old and might once have belonged to him or to some other adolescent Nomad whose feet had not finished growing. He took them to Sister Clare and told her they might once have been Blacktooth's. She said nothing to that, and put them on without protest.

"Where are we going, Father?"

"To see Dom Abiquiu. He needs you."

Ædrea had become accustomed to obedience, and came without asking why she was needed. When she limped into the infirmary and approached the bed, Dom Abiquiu groaned mightily and shrank back from her, his eyes wide and his face a mask of dread. He used his left hand to shield his eyes from her. Ædrea stopped and stared.

"Oh, pigs!" she said abruptly, and crossed herself with a bandaged hand. "There is nothing I can do for him."

"What do you mean?" asked Prior Devendy.

"I mean I can't do it tonight. And he told me not to do it again anyway." She turned and started to leave the room.

"Sister Clare, please, he may be dying," said Singing Cow.

She crossed herself again, but walked on down the corridor without looking back.

The next day, she was missing from the guesthouse, and her small traveling bag was not in her cell. No one had seen her leave, but there was a note on her bed: *I'm sorry about your abbot. Thank you for your hospitality. God bless.*

No one knew where she had gone. On his way back to New Jerusalem, Singing Cow stopped in the village of Sanly Bowitts to ask about her. She had been seen going toward the Mesa of Last Resort. He followed the trail to the foot of the cliff. Once he found a spot of blood on a stone, but no other sign of her. She was with Benjamin, then. Father Moo was certain the old Jew would cure her of the Lord's stigmata. Feeling a little guilty for abandoning her and Dom Abiquiu, he steered his mule toward the papal highway leading north. It was already September and he traveled by the dark of the moon.

## CHAPTER 29

Just as there is an evil zeal of bitterness which separates from God and leads to hell, so there is a good zeal which separates from vices and leads to God,  
—*Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 72

LACKTOOTH CARDINAL ST. GEORGE, DEACON OF Saint Maisie's, was on the hillside taking a long and painful dump, his first of many for the day, when he heard the *pop pop pop* of repeating guns. It was coming from the main encampment, in the wooded bend of a wide, shallow creek back over the hill.

Blacktooth couldn't see the camp from where he was standing, or rather, squatting. For his morning ritual, which was the only one he found the leisure to perform in privacy, he preferred the western slope of the little bluff, a hill so small that it barely cleared the trees. Truth was, Blacktooth was homesick. Not for a particular place; he had never had anything even approximating a home except for Leibowitz Abbey, and while he sometimes (indeed, fairly often) missed the companionship of the Brothers and the security of the routine and the Rule, he never missed the abbey itself. He was homesick for the desert, the grasslands, the country of Empty Sky.

Even though he could see nothing to the west but more trees, Blacktooth knew there was open land beyond—rolling plains that went on and on, treeless and townless like Eternity itself. And the sky seemed definitely bigger to the west.

Unsmiling, unspeaking, unlimited.

From here I greet you, Empty Sky.

*Pop pop pop.*

Blacktooth stumbled as he stood up, hurriedly wiping himself with a wad of grass—then slowed, no longer alarmed, recognizing the sound. It was celebratory, ceremonial, not real; not a firefight. The Grasshopper sharf's warriors, disciplined for firing the precious brass cartridges but bored by the lack of military action, had perfected the art of imitating the sound of the new repeating "Pope rifles." As with everything the Nomads tried, they had quickly learned to do it well.

Blacktooth had first noticed it in the outriders returning from a scouting mission a few days before; he had remarked to his boss, Bitten Dog, that the warriors were mimicking the sound of the brass shell-firing guns from across the sea. "Imitate the sound of pots being scoured, Your Eminence," Bitten Dog had growled.

The *pop pop pop* was joined by the sound of dogs. It was not barking but the alarming half-howl, half-growl of war dogs being brought up on leash. All this was coming from the camp of the Pope's armies down at the edge of the trees, in the bend of the creek called Troublesome or Trouble Some. Attempting to shade his eyes from the early-morning, late-September sun, tying his habit back around him with his booklegger's cord, Blacktooth crossed the crest of the hill and started down toward the camp. He took off his sandals and carried them, so that he could walk barefoot in the pleasantly wet grass. Through the trees, he could see horses milling and stomping, warily watching the dogs that circled them like a dust devil.

The *pop pop pop* was punctuated by whoops and cries, and Blacktooth could see the Grasshoppers now, painted up, pumping their weapons into the air. More than a small party, too.

Something was afoot; or rather, a-horse.

Blacktooth was almost glad. For several weeks now, on the final approach to New Rome, the tension had been growing among the Nomad warriors that had attached themselves to the Pontiff's crusade. As the twelve-hundred-strong party, now fully a day's march long, crawled east, the arms of trees extending out into the prairies had become more numerous, longer and thicker, until it had changed—in a day, and Blacktooth remembered the day—into arms of prairie extending into trees. It was like an optical illusion; one thing turning, with a trick of the eye, into its opposite.

As they left the tall-grass country and began to penetrate the woodlands, the warriors had expected resistance from the Texark troops Hannegan II had—supposedly—left behind to guard the approaches to the Holy City. There had been none. The warriors had expected resistance from the semi-settled Grasshopper farmers, and the settlers Filpeo had sent to live among them. There had been none.

Foraging horsemen had found nothing but abandoned farms, barns burned or burning, cattle killed or driven away, leaving behind only their footprints or their still-soft droppings. The log homesteads were burned or looted, sad-looking little homes bereft of even doors or window glass. The Grasshoppers in particular had looked forward to breaking glass, and this made them even more impatient. The contemptible grass-eaters had either broken or taken their windows with them.

The new cardinal was as firmly attached to the hood wagon as the old monk had been, but several times Blacktooth had deserted his pots and pans and explored one or two of the abandoned houses, hoping perhaps—although he never admitted this to himself—to find signs of Librada, his glep cougar that had freed herself before he could set her free. But Librada didn't eat carrion and the few farmers and farm families Blacktooth had found had been mostly carrion. Several times he had watched as parties of the Nomad horsemen, singing death songs and seated well forward on their ponies, had gone out into the trees—nervously at first and then with growing confidence, finally with boredom. The countryside around New Rome had been stripped of its people. There were no warriors to fight, no women to rape or even to be restrained from raping. Nothing but trees, dumber than horses and stiller than grass. The farmers—many of them of Grasshopper origin—had deserted their farms, and whatever troops Hannegan II had left in the region to defend the city were gone as well.

In fact, some said it was the troops that had driven the farmers away. An old man found wounded on his barn floor, and brought back to the camp to die, had told the Pope and his Curia that it was the Texark soldiers who had shattered his window glass and torched his fields, and his neighbors' as well, but Blacktooth thought he was lying. Or at least partially lying. Truth was as rare as beauty in wartime. It occurred by accident, in unexpected places; like the glint of sun off a button on a corpse.

*Pop pop pop.*

And now, some action at last. Blacktooth felt like two men: one who dreaded the excitement, and one who desired it; one Brother who slipped eagerly down the hillside toward the milling horses, and one who held back, heels digging into soft dirt. He valued the hilltop because it carried him above, or almost above, the trees. Descending into them was like descending into a prison.

*Pop pop pop.* One of the shots, at least, sounded real. Perhaps the Texark main force had been located by a scouting party, and a battle was planned for the day. It would have to be to the east. As he half slipped and half walked down the hill, Blacktooth squinted out across the sun-bright ranks of trees. Beyond them was New Rome, within a day's ride at most. And beyond the city, also unseen, was the Great River—the Misspee, the grass-eaters called it. Blacktooth had dreaded the Crusade's arrival for months but now he looked forward to it, even if it meant a battle. Much to his eternal regret, Blacktooth knew battle; and he knew that even worse than the fighting was the long waiting, the constant tension, and the heavy smells of men on the move.

The camp smelled like shit and smoke. It smelled like Hilbert's fever, the bowel-emptying sickness that Blacktooth shared with at least a third of the men, Nomad and Christian alike. The smell had thickened as the tall grass had turned to trees, as the world of Empty Sky had given way to a world folded in branches, hedged by trees. Darkness and mud and stumps and shit—in greater and greater profusion as the Pope's Crusade approached New Rome. The Mother Church was coming home.

*Pop pop pop!*

Down in the camp, the huge night fire had been rekindled. Logs as big as corpses smoldered and smoked, as reluctant as corpses to flame back into life. Everything here in the woodlands was damp. The edge of his habit wet from the long grass, Blacktooth joined the milling crowd around the fire pit at the center of the camp. Horses and people and dogs made an uneasy mix. More warriors came from the smaller Wilddog and Grasshopper campfires, joined by the *Qaesach dri Vørdar* and his personal guard. Nomad warriors were spitting into the fire and stomping, and firing their imaginary shots toward the impenetrable gray of the sky. It looked like rain again; it had threatened rain now for a week.

The Grasshopper sharf, Eltür Bråm, came out of the trees, holding up his repeating rifle, joined by a squat shaman in an intricate hat riding a white mule.

*Pop pop pop.*



Brownpony was conspicuously absent, but a small contingent of his Papal Guard joined the party, leading uncomfortable-looking horses. Their rifles were identical to the ones the Wilddog warriors carried. Blacktooth was surprised to see Aberlott among them.

"Don't look so sad, Your Eminence," said the pudgy Valana student, holding a repeating rifle anything but sheepishly.

"Where are you going?" Blacktooth asked, ignoring his old friend's sarcasm.

"To get a biscuit." Aberlott gestured toward the morning wagon, where there was a line, all Wilddog and Grasshopper; or rather, all men with guns. "Come."

Wooshin, the Axe, was in the morning-wagon line and he let Aberlott and Blacktooth in beside him. This was, Blacktooth knew, acceptable practice among the Nomads, who regarded every man as an extension of his friends and family. If a man was in line, his connections were in line as well.

"Morning, Axe."

"Good morning, Cardinal Nimmy. Why so sad?"

Do I really look so sad? Blacktooth wondered. He shrugged. Perhaps it was the sickness. It seemed he had been sick for years, although he knew by the marks he had made on the inside of the hood wagon that it was only two weeks.

"Maybe it is war," he said. "War makes men sad."

"Some men," said Aberlott. He reached up under his long hair and touched, as if for luck, the little knob of gristle where his right ear had been sliced off by Texark cavalry.

"All men," said Axe.

The line crept forward, feet sucking in the mud which seemed to be always laying in wait, even under what looked like dry grass.

"Perhaps His Eminence is mooning over his little lost cat," said Aberlott to Axe.

"She's not so little," said Blacktooth, "and I wish you would stop calling me His Eminence."

"Sorry, Cardinal," said Aberlott. It was his turn. He took two biscuits and gave one to Blacktooth. Apparently they were distributing extra biscuits only to the men with rifles. Blacktooth took it grudgingly. Life was difficult enough without Aberlott's continual sarcasm.

He followed Axe and Aberlott back to the fire, which was now blazing.

"It's a war party," said Aberlott. "The early patrols, Wilddog I think, entered the city yesterday. There was no resistance. Today we go in with Eltür Brâm and his shaman." He nodded toward the old man on the white mule. "Maybe we'll get to see the basilica of Saint Peter's."

"You're going?" Blacktooth asked.

"With permission. Along with most of the Pope's Guard," said Aberlott, glancing toward Wooshin, the Pope's sergeant general, who shrugged. Wooshin was staying behind with his master.

Aberlott held up his rifle, pumping it toward the sky as the Nomad warriors did. "Pop pop pop," he said, but not convincingly. He smiled, showing Blacktooth his bad teeth, and opened his hand, showing three brass shells. "His Greatness the Sharf didn't want to take us but His Holiness, Pope Amen II, insisted. We are his eyes and ears."

"And rifles," Blacktooth said.

"That too."

It was looking more and more like rain. Blacktooth secured his cardinal hat under the cover of the hood wagon—he was afraid the red would run if it did rain—and gathered up the morning pots and pans that had been left for him by Bitten Dog. His elevation as the Crusade's tenth cardinal had not released him from his duties as assistant to the assistant potscrubber. Nor had it reduced the intensity or frequency of the fevers that raged through his body.

A third of the camp, almost a thousand men, were sick. The rich smell of human excrement mixed with the usual camp smells of horse and smoke. The overall feeling was one of gloom. Maybe it will rain, Blacktooth thought, as loaded down with pots and pans he stepped over and around the ubiquitous dog turds. Better rain than threatening rain. Impermeable to almost every kind of adversity, the Nomads seemed to fold up in the rain.

He finished the pots, scrubbing them with sand in the feeder creek that ran from under a slab, out of a thousand-year-old drain. He took the long way back to the hood wagon, between the Pope's carriage ("LIKE HELL YOU WILL") and the gleaming metal wagons of Magister Dion's caravan, which had joined them two days before, where the long arms of the door prairies were merging into one narrower and narrower grassy swale, interrupted by pitches of shattered concrete and stone.

This morning was the first time Blacktooth had seen Dion's wagons up close, in the daylight. They looked like stoves on wheels. "Tanks," Aberlott had called them, but who would carry water from the dry plains to the rainy east? They were clearly weapons of some kind.

A glep was dozing on the seat of one of the wagons. When he saw Blacktooth he smiled an idiot smile and crossed himself, laughing. Blacktooth thought the man was mocking him, until he saw Brownpony standing with Dion, almost out of sight behind one of the metal wagons. They seemed to be arguing and Dion seemed to be getting the worst of it. Blacktooth couldn't see Brownpony's face but he recognized the slow hand movements of lawyerly persuasion passing into papal compulsion. The monk, now cardinal, turned away and hurried on toward the center of the campsite. He knew that he would be in trouble if Brownpony saw him without his zucchetto.

It was late afternoon before the rain finally came. The clouds that had been massing in the northwest all day, like riders on a hilltop, descended just when the Grasshopper sharps party was returning. There was no *pop pop pop* this time, no strutting horses. The warriors looked gloomy and damp. One of the horses carried double, and the white mule carried a corpse tied on like a pack and left uncovered in the rain. The side of the mule was pink with rain and blood.

"The sharf's shaman," Aberlott said to Blacktooth, who was helping him dismount. He tried to hand the monk his rifle but Blacktooth wouldn't take it.

"Texark troops?"

Aberlott shrugged. "Snipers," he said. "They fired on us from the great houses."

"Great houses?"

"Piles of stone, really, although some of them still have windows. We have the better guns but we couldn't see them. We never saw any Texark troops."

Four women untied the shaman and carried him away. The dogs were howling, straining at their leashes and jumping up to sniff the side of the white mule that was smeared with blood.

"They must have been Texark troops," said Blacktooth.

"I don't think so. There was a lot of fire but they only hit two men, and we were all in the open. I was right behind the shaman when he fell. He was singing some Weejus song, and they shot him through the throat. I think it was a lucky shot."

"Lucky?" said Blacktooth.

"Lucky for someone; not so lucky for him." Aberlott showed Blacktooth three empty cartridges, nestled in his palm like little empty eggshells. "I fired all three of my shots, though. I liked that part. Not like you." He was referring to Blacktooth's depression after killing the glep warrior in the battle two days' march behind, at the edge of the grasslands, almost a year before. "I fired all three, pop pop pop."

It was Blacktooth's turn to shrug.

"I liked that part," Aberlott insisted.

Aberlott had been more impressed with the city than with the fighting. The city of New Rome wasn't a hole in the ground like Danfer, he said, or a collection of shacks like Valana. It was mostly stone, grown over with weeds and trees. "The center of the city is all great houses. They mine them for stone and steel. They don't care about defending them either. What is there to defend? What can you carry off? You can't fight men who won't fight."

"They fought you," said Blacktooth.

"That wasn't fighting," said Aberlott. "There wasn't that much firing, even. They are hiding in the city, taking pot shots at us."

"Did you find the cathedral?"

Aberlott shook his head. "We rode out behind the sharf. Who will burn them out, he says, and toss

their livers to the dogs." He smiled sardonically, gesturing behind him to the center of the camp where the dismounted Nomads were milling angrily, confused, ashamed. A wail came up from the women tending the wounded man. The wounded man was dying. He had been shot in the side with a gun that fired stones.

Blacktooth left Aberlott for the medicine wagon where the wounded man was being bandaged. He was wondering if the Texarks had managed to duplicate the repeating weapons yet, and he imagined that he might be able to tell from the man's wound. But the wound was just a wound and not a sign; it did not speak. The ugly welt cut through the Nomad's flesh and hair like a road ripped heedlessly through grassland. In the back of the wagon the Grasshopper shaman's body was being prepared for burial. The old man's neck wound was already stuffed with clay the color of shaman skin.

*Ashes to ashes, dirt to dirt.* Both men would be carried out of the trees for burial under the haughty uncaring glare of Empty Sky. But not until the rain had ended.

The women and the medicine men shooed Cardinal Blacktooth away, even though he was wearing his zucchetto.

The next day a smaller party went out, while the Grasshopper war sharf met with the *Qaesach* and the Pontiff. As a member of the Curia, Blacktooth was invited to take part in the discussion, after he had finished the pots and pans, of course, and freed Bitten Dog for a day of drinking mare wine and playing bones. Brownpony's suspicion that the Emperor had withdrawn all his regular forces from the Holy City was confirmed when the rear guard of Eltür Brâm's war party came back with its only live captive, a farmer armed with a stone-firing musket. He had been dragged from one of the "great houses," along with two of his colleagues who had not survived the ten-mile trip back to the Crusade's war camp. Under questioning the grass-eater revealed that he and the other farmers had been driven from their homesteads into the city by the Texark regulars, then armed with leftover weapons and stationed in the tallest ruins. They had been told that if they surrendered they would be cruelly tortured by the Anti-pope's Wilddog, Grasshopper, and Jackrabbit fanatics; but that if they held out they would be rescued by returning Texark reinforcements from Hannegan City.

Brownpony doubted that the last part of this was true; so did the rest of his Curia. As for the torture, the farmer died before he could be convinced that it was propaganda.

Aberlott thought it was a trap. "But you think everything is a trap," Blacktooth reminded his friend. The two were sitting on the side of a wagon, in the unfamiliar sunshine, listening to the interminable martial speeches of the Nomads. Even though the speeches decided nothing, they had to be suffered by the Pope and his Curia.

"Everything *is*," whispered the former Valana student. His long hair was smeared with grease, and tied back to show his missing ear: a badge of honor. He held his repeating rifle between his legs. Though he was, technically at least, a member of the Papal Guard, he wore the bone earrings and hair bracelets of a Wilddog horseman. He looked, Blacktooth thought, like a man who had avoided the trap of the Mother Church only to fall into the trap of war.

"We can wait them out," Brownpony was saying. His Nomadic had gotten better and he no longer needed Blacktooth as translator. "If they were driven into the city, chances are they don't have enough food to last through the winter."

"The winter?" said the Grasshopper sharf. "The winter is far away. Our women are far behind, and like the Wilddogs they are threatened by the motherless ones who strike from above the Misery. Without the Weejus our medicine is weak but our war power is strong. We must strike now while we can. We can take them with just a few men. We can burn them out."

Grunts of pleasure and assent greeted these words. Wettened fingers were held up, as if to confirm that the prevailing winds were from the west. The fingers were also, for the Nomads, a signal of impending fire; of their willingness to watch the world burn.

Amen II stood, looking unusually ethereal and spiritual. When Blacktooth had seen him the day before, he had not realized how sick he looked. Brownpony's hair was mostly gone. His face looked like

something drawn on an egg; a bad egg. "This is the Holy City of New Rome," he said in measured Churchspeak. "It is sacred to the Mother Church. There will be no burning. We are here to take the city, not destroy it."

He sat back down. There was grumbling as his words were translated into Grasshopper and Wilddog. The grumbling fell silent as the *Qæsach dri Vørdar*, the War Sharf of the Three Hordes, stood to speak.

"We were going to feint south for Hannegan City," said Chür Høngan Ösle. "There is the heart of the Empire, not New Rome, which is nothing but a ruin. We will still head south. But now instead of feinting we can actually *strike* south. Now that we know there are few defenders in New Rome, we have more men to strike south at Hannegan City. The war will be over sooner. We can return to our women and our winter pastures." He spoke in Wilddog with only a few words of Rockymount and none of Churchspeak. Blacktooth thought it was ominous. The Crusade was becoming less of a crusade, and more a depredation of the Three Hordes.

There were grunts and clicks of approval from the Nomads as the *Qæsach* sat down. He had a boy behind him to arrange his robes when he sat; another watched the feathers on his headdress in case of wind. The numbers of the Nomads had increased, so that now men (and a few women and children as well) stood on all sides of the wagon on which Blacktooth was sitting. It had turned from a meeting of the Curia to a public meeting attended by warriors and drivers and hangers on. That, too, seemed ominous. Cardinal Blacktooth St. George was feeling trapped. His bowels were grumbling like the crowd, and he began to look for an avenue of escape.

"A few hundred men left here will be enough to drive the farmers out of New Rome!" said Eltür Bråm.

Wooshin was shaking his head but, as usual, remained silent. Brownpony stood up to answer the sharfs. He stumbled as he stood, and Blacktooth was surprised and a little shocked to see that he was wearing an empty shoulder holster over his cassock, under his robe.

Holding on to the side of a wagon, Pope Amen II made one last plea.

"We need the fighters here," he said. "With a show of strength we can force the farmers out of the city without much fighting." Blacktooth knew that Brownpony was trying to avoid a battle. He wondered if it were to save lives, or to avoid damage to the city and Saint Peter's. As soon as he asked himself the question, he knew the answer. Lives were cheap.

The Pope sat down, seemingly unnoticed. There was no grumbling; he was not even granted the honor of dissent. The power Blacktooth had watched him exercise over the conclave in Valana was gone. Perhaps it was the Meldown, or perhaps his rhetoric was useless with the war sharfs and their warriors, who excelled at oratory when they wanted, but were not in the mood for talk these days.

Or perhaps it was the trees. They seemed almost evil, there were so many of them crowding in on every side. Blacktooth touched the cross that rode under his habit and called up, as he did when he was panicked, the image of Saint Leibowitz. But instead of the dubious smile of Saint Isaac Edward he saw the harsh glare of the desert sun, and he felt a sudden wave of homesickness so powerful it almost knocked him off the wagon bed.

"What's the matter?" whispered Aberlott. "Are you OK?"

"Are you?" answered Blacktooth. The warriors on the edge of the crowd were starting to make the *pop pop pop*. They were tired of waiting around for battle. Neither did they wish to ride into a city where the defenders were shooting at them from the windows of "great houses."

"They're going to burn them out, no matter what His Holiness says," said Aberlott. "Where you going?"

Eltür Bråm had risen to speak again. Blacktooth slipped away through the crowd toward the main trench, which was, even at this hour, even with all the excitement of the debate, busy with grunting men.

When he got back to the campfire, it was too crowded to get close. The Grasshopper sharf was still speaking. Blacktooth's fever was raging and he felt weak. He dragged himself off to the back of the hood wagon and rolled up in a blanket and went to sleep. In the distance he could hear drumming, and the martial, celebratory *pop pop pop*.

That night, while Blacktooth slept, Amen I came to visit him for the first time in over a week. The old man had the face of a cougar. Had he always had the face of a cougar? Blacktooth wondered in his dream; but of course! And Ædrea was there. She was sitting beside Specklebird, smiling, riding a white horse like the *Fujæ Go*; but no, her robe was open, and what he had thought was a white horse was the light coming from the gateway he had once—

Someone was shaking him, pulling his foot. It was Aberlott. "We are leaving," he said.

"Leaving? Who is leaving?" Blacktooth groaned and sat up. Aberlott was outside the wagon, leaning in. His face was painted. His greasy hair was pinned back. Beyond him Blacktooth could see the sky, a metal gray. He could hear horses stamping and men cursing and laughing. In the near distance, dogs.

"They've been up all night," said Aberlott. "After you went to bed there was another conference. But this was among the sharfs. The Pope was sent away."

"Sent away?"

"Wooshin was allowed to listen, but he was thrown out when he disagreed."

Blacktooth was amazed. No one threw Axe out of anything. "Thrown out?" Blacktooth was still woozy, half in and half out of his cougar dream. As he sat up, he realized with a sudden and unusual moment of clarity that his entire life since leaving the abbey, since he had met Brownpony in fact, had had the quality of a dream. So why was it that Specklebird, instead of Brownpony, came to him in his dreams? Brownpony was in the real dream.

Aberlott grinned and shrugged. "Not exactly thrown out, then, but asked to leave."

Blacktooth got out of the wagon. The rain clouds that had rode across the sky for days had disappeared, and the camp was almost as bright as day even though the sun hadn't yet risen.

"They are leaving only a few men from each horde, about three hundred in all," Aberlott said, too loudly. "The rest are heading south with the *Qæsach dri Vørdar* to take Hannegan City. I'm going with them!"

"But you are in the Papal Guard!"

"The Pope's Guard is going, all except Wooshin. Besides—the Pope didn't give me these!" Aberlott opened his hand. In his palm, where three empty shell casings had nested the night before, now there were six, and each was filled; each had a dark bullet peeping out of one end as though eager to be on its way.

"Goodbye then!" Blacktooth said angrily. Wrapping his robe around him against the morning chill, he half walked, half ran toward the latrine trench. As he squatted, through the bushes he could see hundreds of men stirring, grumbling, dressing, farting, laughing. *Pop pop pop!* Some were pulling at dogs, some at horses. The pall that had fallen over the camp in the last few days, the pall of rain and forest, was lifting even as the skies brightened toward the east. Almost a thousand warriors were crossing the creek, many of them slapping the sides of the metal wagons to hear them ring.

"He's taking all the healthy men," Blacktooth muttered to himself.

"There aren't that many healthy men," said the man at the trench beside him, who sounded and smelled very unhealthy. "And I'm not that healthy and I'm going."

He spoke in Wilddog. Before Blacktooth could answer, he was off and running, barely wiping.

Through the shrubs that cloaked the latrine, Blacktooth watched the horses cross the creek, and then crawled back into his bed. It would be an hour or so before breakfast and he wanted to get some rest. He searched for Ædrea and Amen through his dream, but it was like prowling through an abandoned house, empty even of furniture. When he woke again his fever was back. He sat up, dazed. He could see by the sun on the wagon's hood that it was almost noon.

"Your Eminence," said Bitten Dog. "His Holiness and whatever, His Eminence the Pope wants to see you."

"Brownpony?"

"He wants your butt in his Pope wagon right away."

Brownpony had stopped shaving but it had hardly changed his appearance. There wasn't much left of

his beard, just a few wisps of hair on his chin. Some were dark and some were light, giving him the look of a sketch that had been abandoned. He was finishing his breakfast of horsemeat jerky and plums when Blacktooth found him, at a small table that had been set in the shade of the papal wagon. "Nimmy," he said, "where is your zucchetto? I have a commission for you."

"As a soldier?" Blacktooth answered. He was ready to refuse.

"As an ambassador," Brownpony said, ignoring the novice cardinal's sarcasm. "As the papal legate to the farmers. They are all that is left in the city. Hannegan's troops have abandoned the place and left them there to fight. We could have avoided the fight altogether by peacefully slipping a thousand men into New Rome."

"A thousand Nomads are not peaceful, Your Holiness," replied Blacktooth. "And besides, the farmers have shown an inclination to fight."

"True. Perhaps you're right," Brownpony said. "Perhaps this is all for the best. We have only three hundred men anyway, mostly the Grasshopper." The Pope waved an astonishingly skinny arm around at the camp, which looked deserted in the harsh daylight, like a dream only half-remembered. Brownpony looked weaker than Blacktooth had ever seen him. Surely, he thought, it was the Meldown. *Nunshân* the Night Hag was claiming her husband, calling him to her cold bed.

"The War Sharf of the Three Hordes, the *Qæsach dri Vørdar*, our old friend and companion Chür Ösle Høngan, has taken almost a thousand of my crusaders south, to Hannegan City. Even Magister Dion and the New Jerusalemites have gone with him. They intend to join the Jackrabbit warriors and the gleps that are preparing to besiege the city, and instead of a siege we will have a battle." Brownpony sat down wearily. "Perhaps it is all for the best."

"Not so," said Wooshin.

"My sergeant general disapproves," said Brownpony. "But what does it matter? It is done." The Pope's hands fluttered in the air, like two birds. Blacktooth watched, intrigued; with that motion, this most worldly of men suddenly reminded him of Amen I.

"I'm sick anyway," Blacktooth said.

"We're all sick," said Brownpony. "Except for Wooshin, of course. Where is your hat, Nimmy?"

"Here." Blacktooth pulled his red cardinal's zucchetto from his robe. "I don't wear it around the camp. It might blow off my head and fall into the dogshit."

"No wind here," said Wooshin, who disapproved of Blacktooth's attitude toward his master.

"Oh yes, the dogs," said the Pope distractedly. "We get to keep the dogs. The *Qæsach* didn't want to take them on the campaign south. We have been left with three hundred men and almost as many dogs. And the Grasshopper sharf, of course. The farmers don't know this, not yet. What I want you to do is go into the city, Nimmy, and make them an offer of peace. Extend to them my offer of peace. The Pope's hand in peace."

"Before they discover your numbers have been reduced," Blacktooth said, scornfully.

"Why, yes. Wear your hat and your robes. I will give you a papal seal to carry."

"They will shoot me before they see it."

"Put it on a stick," said Wooshin. Blacktooth could see from the yellow warrior's eyes that he wasn't going to be allowed to refuse the mission. He resigned himself to it. He was curious to see the city anyway, and sick to death of pots and pans. So what if he got killed? Wasn't that bound to happen sooner or later anyway?

"You look very sick, Cardinal Nimmy," said Wooshin, his voice almost gentle. "Tell the farmers that we wish them no harm. We want to settle things peacefully. The Empire has deserted them but not the Vicar of Christ."

"And don't mention that the Vicar of Christ is down to three hundred men and as many dogs," Blacktooth said.

"I will overlook your insolence since it has never been an impediment to your vocation. Indeed, Nimmy, sometimes I think it is your staff. I hope for your sake it is not your crutch. Better get going, though. This has to be done today, or at least attempted."

"I have to walk?"

"Eltür Brâm has a white mule you can use," said Brownpony. "And God go with you, Nimmy." He made the sign of the cross and allowed Blacktooth to kiss his ring.

The grassy swale had been a highway a thousand years before, and now it was a highway again. The muddy tracks of wagons crisscrossed in the grass. Who knew how many years this "door prairie" had pointed like an arrow from the plains into the forest and then to the city—or, Blacktooth thought, the other way? Though the monk had never thought much of the Pope's plans to return the papacy to New Rome, lately the Holy City had been appearing to him in his dreams. It had arrived with the fever. In the dreams it beckoned on the distant horizon, like small, steep mountains. How different was the reality! There was no horizon at all. The road ran straight between trees and low ruins that were just mounds of earth, some with openings where they were mined, others barricaded where some pitiful creature had chosen an intact basement or a mined-out room as a cave. The farmsteads were smaller here, close to the city, usually just a weedy vegetable patch and a ruined building or two; perhaps a shed emptied of pigs and chickens.

Just when Blacktooth had given up all hope of seeing New Rome, just when he least expected it, the road topped a small rise, and there it was—just as it had always been in his dream.

"Whoa." Blacktooth needn't have bothered; the white mule only moved when he got on and only stopped when he got off. He slid down and the mule stopped to nose at skunk cabbages beside the road. They were at a turn: the road went at an angle down the last hill before the valley of the Great River, or Misspee as it was called locally.

Blacktooth couldn't see the river but he could see the distant towers of what once had been a bridge; and he could see a low line of tree-covered bluffs on the other side, like a mirror image of the hill he was on. And in between, a few miles away, were steep brush-covered stumps of towers, like low steep mountains, just as he had seen them in his dream. New Rome.

But it was already afternoon, and there was no time to enjoy the view—even if it was the first horizon Blacktooth had seen in almost a month. He got back on the shaman's white mule and it started down the hill, and soon they were in the trees again.

There was more concrete and asphalt here, mixed with the grass. It would have made for treacherous passage on a horse, but the mule seemed unbothered. There were fewer farmsteads and more houses, even though the houses were just sheds attached to the sides of the ruins. Blacktooth even saw smoke coming from one or two, and shadowy shapes that could have been children playing or their parents hiding.

"Gee up," he said to the mule, just to hear his own voice and to let whoever might be watching know that he was in control and on a mission. He wished now he had bothered to learn the mule's name.

It was late afternoon before he passed the gates of the city, a low barricade now abandoned. A couple of corpses in the sentry box showed how the Nomads had avenged their murdered shaman, and how little the grass-eaters cared about their dead.

Of course, the corpses might have been Texark soldiers. Two pigs were rooting at the door, seemingly eager to find out.

"Gee up!" The white mule stepped over the rubble and Blacktooth rode on through, holding up Amen II's papal seal. It was made of parchment stretched over sticks like a kite, and held aloft on a spear decorated with feathers and the cryptic symbols of the Three Hordes. An amalgam of the sacred and the profane, the civilized and the barbaric. Like Brownpony's papacy itself.

There were more pigs on the street here, though there were no bodies. New Rome seemed deserted. The streets were straight and wide. The "great houses" Blacktooth had seen from the horizon were less impressive up close, but more oppressive somehow, dark ruins shot full of holes. There was no movement. Blacktooth knew he was being watched, though. He could feel it; he could feel more and more eyes on him as it got darker and darker.

"Whoa," he said, but the mule didn't stop.

Ahead Blacktooth saw a single figure in the center of the street. It was a man carrying a rifle.

"Gee up!" Blacktooth kicked his mule but the mule walked at the same slow pace, whether kicked or

not.

"Wait," Blacktooth shouted at the man, but the man backed slowly into the shadows.

"I have a message . . ." Blacktooth shouted, just as the man knelt and fired.

Blacktooth slid off the mule, which was the only way to stop it.

He waited behind the mule for another shot. The silence was excruciating.

The man was gone.

The dialogue was too one-sided. His only chance, Blacktooth saw, was to push on toward the center of the city and hope that he came across someone with either some sense or some authority, and preferably both, before he got shot.

He got back on the mule.

"Gee up."

It was dark when they shot the mule out from under him. Blacktooth was almost in the center of the city, under the biggest of the "great houses." It must have been a long shot, because the animal went down before Blacktooth heard the shot; the *crack* came rolling through just as he was falling on his side, under the mule, which fell as heavily as an abbot having a stroke.

Blacktooth scrambled to his feet, looking for the papal seal-on-a-stick, which had snapped and was lying half under the mule. He was tensed through his shoulders, waiting for the next shot, which he knew he wouldn't hear and might not even feel. It never came.

With the papal seal, he ran back into the rubble of the "great house," where he hid under a stone slab. From here, he could see down the street both ways. It was almost dark; the sky was a salmon pink turning to rose in the west, and a darker blue ahead, in the east.

The mule was on its side, braying violently. It wasn't bleeding much, but clearly it was done for. Its front legs were kicking but the rear legs were still; maybe spine shot. Blacktooth felt his fever growing and then a fit of diarrhea hit him, and he squatted behind the stone slab. Should he hold the papal seal aloft, or did it just make him a better target? "Not now," he prayed aloud. "Not like this."

Finished, and still not shot, he decided to continue on with his mission. He had to find someone, and soon, before it got dark. Otherwise, he would be sleeping alone in the dark in one of these great piles of stone. Holding the papal seal aloft, he started walking. He knew he was still feverish, because he could sense Amen I beside him, his cougar face composed and quiet; free of concern as well as anxiety. Amen had nothing to say; lately he had had little to say.

The problem was, the mule wouldn't shut up. It kept braying louder and louder, the farther Blacktooth walked away from it.

"I have to go back," he said to Amen. He knew the old man couldn't, wouldn't, answer, but he wanted to hear the sound of a human voice, even if it was just his own.

"I'll do for him what I did for the glep soldier," he said aloud. "It'll be a sin, too, just the same." A sin but he had to do it. Wasn't that what a sin was? Something you had to do?

No, *that's duty*, replied Specklebird, with his unquiet, ambiguous smile. *You have often confused them.*

It was a long way back to the white mule, and Blacktooth's legs were getting wobbly. He walked backward, holding the seal high, his shoulders tensed against the shot he expected. The mule was almost quiet by the time he got to it; the brays had turned to hoarse, honking moans. The front legs were still kicking rhythmically. The big eyes looked at Blacktooth with neither curiosity nor fear. Blacktooth knelt and said a prayer, a made-up one, as he put his knife to the creature's throat, and said a second prayer as he pulled it across.

It was like pulling a string and watching the grain flow out of a bag. The mule sank into a sudden quiet restfulness.

Blacktooth wiped his knife on the mule's coat. He was about to stand when he felt the knife on his own throat. "Stand," said a voice, and he did what he had been about to do anyway. He started to drop his knife when a hand took it from his.

*Grass-eater*, he thought, but perhaps he said it aloud, for someone hit him from behind, almost



knocking him down. There was the smell; the grass-eater smell. There were too many hands—he thought perhaps it was a glep—and then realized that it was two men who held him, and a third who picked up his papal seal from the ground where he had laid it before taking out his knife to cut the mule's throat.

They marched him back down the street, the steps he had retraced to kill the mule. He felt a gun prodding him through his cassock. As he passed the corner where he had turned back, he thought, Why hadn't they taken him here? Had they been waiting for him to come back?

"I have a message for your leader," he said. "From His Holiness, Amen Two. I am his papal ..."

"Shut up," said one of the men, in a tongue Blacktooth recognized as a variant of Grasshopper.

He was taken into a basement room that reminded him of the library at the abbey. It was lit by oil lamps, and several men were inside, armed with iron swords and old rifles. Most of them were dressed in rags but one wore the jacket of Hannegan's Texark cavalry. He spoke to Blacktooth in Churchspeak.

"Are you sick?" was his first question. "You smell bad."

"I come from His Holiness the Pope with a message for your leader," said Blacktooth. "We are all sick. We all smell bad. There are thousands of sick, bad-smelling warriors, bloodthirsty Nomads, on the outlying reaches of the city, preparing to strike. I am here to give you a chance to . . ."

"Shut up," said the Texark soldier. He nodded at one of the other men, a farmer, who handed Blacktooth a cup of water and a handful of brown pills that looked like rabbit pellets. "Take one," the soldier said.

Blacktooth smelled the pills. He shook his head.

"Take one." A gun prodded him in his back.

Blacktooth took one.

"I am here to give you a chance to surrender the Holy City peacefully," he said. "The Empire is finished. The papacy is returning to New Rome. The Pope, His Holiness Amen Two, wants only to occupy his rightful place in the ..."

"Shut up. I know who you are."

"I am the His Holiness Amen Two's—"

"We know who you are. The Archbishop sent us word to look for you," the Texark soldier said. He unrolled a scroll that had already been untied. "Are you not Blacktooth St. George, Secretary to the Antipope, and banished under sentence of death to the far reaches of the Bay Ghost and the Nady Ann?"

Blacktooth was at a loss for a reply.

A gun prodded him in his back. "Say 'I am.' And what's that hat? Military?"

"I am a cardinal," Blacktooth said. Suddenly the seriousness and the ridiculousness of it all struck him, simultaneously. The enterprise had been foolish. Perhaps even the Crusade. Now here he was, back in the Hannegans' zoo. "A joke, really. Cardinal. Pope. Soldier."

The pill was making him dizzy. He wondered if he should take another.

"We have orders to shoot you," said the Texark officer, rolling the scroll back up tightly and tying it with a ribbon. "But first you should get some rest. The pills will help you sleep. Take him to the death cells."

It was cool under the street. By standing on tiptoe, through a barred window, Blacktooth could see an alleyway and an occasional dog or pig, the pigs wearing medallions that identified, Blacktooth presumed, their owners. One pig was especially friendly; it kept coming back and sticking its nose into the bars, perhaps for the coolness of the iron.

As darkness fell, Blacktooth felt his fever subside, like a stream sinking into the sand. The chamber pot in the corner of his cell waited, empty, like the pig. The guard came just after midnight with a jug of water but no food. Blacktooth took another pill. This time they were going to shoot him, and he had little doubt that they would keep their promise. Somehow, the thought of it made him drowsy.

That night, again, he dreamed of Ædrea. She was waiting for him under the waterfall while his old friend, the white mule, grazed on the rocks outside. There was no grass but it sprung up as the mule ate. It had a hole in its throat like a wound, and Ædrea had wounds too; she showed her wounds to Blacktooth.

"Where have you been?" she asked in Churchspeak. "Where are you going?" Since he knew she didn't speak Churchspeak, he knew, in the dream, that he was dreaming.

## CHAPTER 30

In the reception of the poor and of pilgrims the greatest care and solicitude should be shown, because it is especially in them that Christ is received; for as far as the rich are concerned, the very fear which they inspire wins respect for them.

—*Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 50

HAT NIGHT WHILE BLACKTOOTH WAS dreaming, a small party of farmers mounted their horses, most of them draft plugs, and rode toward the camp of the Pope's Crusade. These were the farmers who had survived after seeing their families and livestock killed by the Texark soldiers. Now they wanted revenge and the only one they could get it on was the Antipope, whose armies their scouts had told them were heading south, toward Hannegan City and the Red River. They knew that Blacktooth was lying. They had seen only one party of raiders, had wounded one and killed another. They wanted what the Grasshopper and Wilddog Nomads wanted: they wanted blood and revenge. It was late September and there was no moon. They left, forty riders in all, soon after dark, counting on the starlight and their knowledge of the road. It was after all the road they had ridden in on; it was the road that led to their abandoned and ruined farms.

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The Pope, meanwhile, was beginning to lose all hope for peace. The Grasshopper warriors were excited and eager for blood, after the long and loud funeral for the shaman. Many of them were drunk, and though the ceremony had been hidden from his eyes, Brown-pony suspected many more had fed on the shaman's liver and lights.

"You must understand, my emissary has ridden into the city to make peace," he said to Eltür Bråm.

"You mean Nyinden. Nimmy."

"My cardinal," said Brownpony. "A member of my Curia."

"Cardinal Nimmy, then," said the Grasshopper sharf. He sat on the tailgate of the Pope's wagon beside His Holiness, watching the whooping, weeping warriors around the main campfire. It was a novelty to the Nomads, unlimited firewood, even if it was damp. The blaze grew bigger and bigger.

"They seek revenge," said Eltür Bråm. "Can you blame them? Can I deny them? They need it; it is like grass for ponies."

"The victory of the Church will be their revenge," said Brownpony, but even as he said it, he knew he didn't believe it himself. The muddy ground was crowded with moving shadows; the sky was scratched with trees. Brownpony yearned for the harsh outlines and open horizons of the grasslands and the desert. Here in the forest the noises and smells were too close.

*Pop pop pop.* The warriors pointed their rifles at the sky, barely visible as a smattering of stars behind the trees. The Grasshopper sharf had managed to keep only two shells apiece for them, but he knew that Brownpony had more, left with him as a concession from the stores in Magister Dion's wagon train.

"You must give the men the rest of the brass bullets—Your Holiness," Demon Light added, with a faint smile.

Amen II shook his head. "They must wait until my emissary comes back. Then your warriors can ride in, in triumph." In fact, Brownpony was already worried. He knew that if Blacktooth had not returned by morning it would mean he had probably been killed; perhaps even hanged under the interdict they had both signed when they had been released from the zoo in Hannegan City.

"Tomorrow, then," said Eltür Brâm. He looked up at the tree-hedged, moonless sky.

The Pope took the sharf's arm. "And you must control them!" he said. Across the clearing, in the firelight's gleam, he could see the sharf's carriage, with I SET FIRES painted on the door. "There will be no fires, Demon Light. The farmers will surrender when they see your force. They may have already surrendered to Nimmy."

"I think not—Your Holiness."

"I want no fires in New Rome. I am here to restore the city, not to destroy it." The Pope twisted the sharf's arm. It was like arm-wrestling; the point was not to defeat him but simply to show that he knew and understood Nomad ways. "No fires, understood?"

"Understood," said Eltür Brâm, pulling his arm loose and stalking off to join his warriors at the fire.

"I have unleashed a storm that I cannot control," said the Pope, retiring into the wagon and arranging his robes for sleep.

He was speaking to Wooshin, who stood in the shadows beside the wagon. The Yellow Warrior shrugged. That was, as far as he was concerned, the nature of all storms and all wars.

The Pope was asleep when the farmers came. They had dismounted and were leading their horses across the creek when the dogs awoke, and awoke the warriors who were sleeping it off around the dying campfires. The fighting was brief and vicious, and except for the screams and the splashing, almost silent. The Grasshoppers were reluctant to use their few bullets but eager to try the knives and clubs that slept by their sides, where women might have been.

When dawn came, the water was still bloody in the little pools along the shore. Death by the knife is a messy, lingering business; some of the farmers still flopped like fish. Four of them were captive, uninjured except for the rawhide cord passed through their cheeks. They sat tethered in the shade of the food wagon, one whimpering, the others waiting stolidly for whatever awaited them.

The Pontiff awakened to find his camp almost deserted. The Grasshopper warriors were gone; so were their horses and the dogs. "You said you were going to wait!" he complained, finding Eltür Brâm by his fire, eating breakfast.

"They gave us no choice." The war sharf shrugged. "They tried to steal our horses."

Brownpony kicked the fire. "They were only a few fools. You could have chased them off."

Eltür Brâm shrugged again. "The dogs followed them. My men had to follow the dogs. They are under orders not to burn the city, though."

Brownpony didn't believe him. And before noon the smoke was rising over the wall of trees to the east, from the city he had never seen.

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The pig came in the morning, but the jailer didn't. She stuck her snout between the cool bars and sat, staring down at Blacktooth, who was trying unsuccessfully to pray.

As the morning dragged on, Blacktooth heard shots in the distance, shouts closer, the scuffling of feet in the narrow street outside. He still had six of the little pills but nothing to take them with. He was afraid of the warm water in the bucket by the door, so he took one with the last of his own spit. Toward noon, he drank the water.

Already hungry when he was locked in the cell, he grew hungrier. It was hard to tell time because there was no sun and it was raining, a gentle shower that spattered onto the alleyway all day, muddling the footsteps of the occasional passerby, always a dog, never a human.

The pig came again in the afternoon, or what seemed to be the afternoon.

Blacktooth kept the pills in his cardinal hat, which his captors had allowed him to keep, along with his cross and rosary. The zucchetto kept the little brown pills dry. They seemed to work. The fever was gone, and Blacktooth didn't miss the cramps and the runs that had kept him busy, especially in the mornings, for days. But he felt lonely without the visions of Ædrea and Amen, the companions who had walked by his side and accompanied him not only through his dreams but through the interminable waking dream that seemed, lately, to be his life.

Blacktooth had never felt so alone. He remembered with a certain affection Brownpony and the prison-zoo in Hannegan City, when they had been spied on by the Wilddog prisoner and observed by the amused citizens. He remembered brooding, taciturn Wooshin. He remembered the insolent, chubby Aberlott, failed contemplative and lover of cities. He missed them all; he missed even Singing Cow. From his solitary basement cell, Blacktooth looked back on the life at the Abbey of Saint Leibowitz and wondered at the cunning and perfect mix of solitude and companionship that was the monastic life. Some men were made for solitude, but not most; and certainly not he. Specklebird had loved his solitude because he filled it with spirit. He was never alone. Ædrea's solitude had been spook-solitude: accepted by none, scorned by all.

Desired by one.

The two of them in their solitude had kept Blacktooth company. But then, he thought, I don't require much in the way of company. "Right?" he asked the pig when she stuck her head between the bars again. And like Ædrea, like Amen, she returned no answer.

By afternoon no food had come and the rain had stopped. Was there to be no last meal? To die seemed bad enough, and to die hungry seemed the final, the ultimate insult. Would he then be hungry forever?

Shocked at his own impiety, Blacktooth fell to his knees and prayed for forgiveness.

The door was heavy wood, probably oak. It seemed more substantial than the black iron bars on the little high window. Blacktooth knocked on the door, then kicked it, timidly at first, then harder and harder. There was no response. He couldn't tell if anyone was out there or not. And what was out there—a hallway? He couldn't remember. It had been dark when he was brought in. That had been only a day ago—hadn't it? Blacktooth wished now that he had made marks on the whitewashed stone walls, as the previous occupants had done.

There was nothing in his little cell but the bed, which was two boards laid over stone blocks, a coarse wool blanket, a stool, and two buckets: one by the door and one in a corner. The bucket of warm water by the door was still almost full; the bucket in the corner was still empty. The room had apparently been used as a prison by the Texarki before; the walls were filled with intricate but illiterate scratchings—faces, smiles and frowns, a sun, various interpretations of the male and female body. The wall looked to Blacktooth like the surface of a monk's brain, the scratchings on the soul that a man learns to live with and, usually, hopefully, eventually, to ignore.

He sat on the bed. He lay on the bed. He stood at the window. He stood on the stool and looked out the window. He saw a narrow deserted alley with a ruined step against a wall where there was no door. There were bloodstains on the wall above the step. While Blacktooth watched a dog came and sniffed at the stain, then walked away. Was this the end of it, then? The killing place? The stairs that went nowhere, the wall without a door . . . He shivered. He was very hungry.

In the distance the street opened onto another, busier street, and Blacktooth could see people passing, carrying mysterious packages, or occasionally, guns. The ones with guns walked in twos and threes. Closer at hand, another dog sniffed at the stained steps in the alley, then trotted away.

"That's where they *execute*."

Blacktooth turned and saw that the door to his cell had opened silently; beyond it was an indeterminate darkness. For such a huge door it swung on silent hinges. An unfamiliar farmer/guard stood in the doorway with a bucket. Young, in his rude twenties; redheaded, a grass-eater. "You're not supposed to be up there," he said.

"I'm praying."

"What about your hat?" The zucchetto was on the bed.

"We don't wear the hat to pray."

The guard crossed to the corner and picked up the bucket; he set it down again when he felt that it was empty. He carefully avoided looking into it.

"I'm supposed to empty this," he said. It was a reproach.

"I suppose that means I'm supposed to fill it," Blacktooth said. "But aren't you supposed to bring me

food? I had no supper, and now no breakfast."

The farmer/guard shrugged. He wore leather pants and a canvas vest, probably taken from some soldier's locker. Or body. His teeth were gone bad already. "They didn't tell me anything about food. They only told me to empty this. And bring the water."

"Are they going to—shoot me?" asked Blacktooth. He felt dizzy; he had to step down off the stool. When he looked up, feet on the cold stone floor, the guard was gone, almost as if he had been an apparition. The door closed, then a bolt slammed shut. Loudly.

"Bless you, my son," said Blacktooth, making the sign of the cross. "I'll go back to my prayers." He stood back up on the stool and looked out at the world, or what little of it he could see from his tiny window. Prayers indeed. But what else was prayer but an attempt to look out of the tiny window of the soul? Perhaps he would try to pray later, as it got closer to the time for his execution.

Would it hurt? he wondered. It seemed to be the wrong question, but he couldn't think of the right one.

Another dog came by and sniffed at the dark stain on the step—also praying? In the distance an old woman and a child poked through rubbish with a stick. When the woman turned up something, the child would lean down to get it. Blacktooth couldn't tell what they were collecting.

There were more shots in the distance, then a strange and yet familiar wild smell. Even before Blacktooth realized what it was, his heart was pounding.

Smoke.

"You told your men to set the fires," the Pope, Amen II, said to Eltür Bråm. Demon Light denied it but Brownpony knew better. *The Grasshopper is always at war... I set fires...* And what did it matter if he denied or affirmed it? It was done.

Brownpony and the sharf were sitting on the bed of a wagon, watching the returning warriors thunder across the creek. It was beginning to rain again. Brownpony couldn't see the sky, but he knew from his Curia—half of whom were sick, and spent time at the secondary latrine halfway up the hill—that a curtain of smoke hung over the city a few hours' ride to the east.

"Fires just happen," said Eltür Bråm. "No man can prevent them. No man should."

Dogs barked. Horses neighed. The Nomads were straggling back in twos and threes, calling to the women to prepare bandages and food, and replenish the firewood stacks. They were shouting triumphantly, but in truth they had had few encounters with the mysterious enemy. The few wounded had been injured when their horses had stumbled in the unfamiliar streets, or had burned themselves setting fires.

None knew, still, how many defenders the city had, or even if it was being defended at all. And Blacktooth had never returned. It was almost sunset. "Perhaps he has found the peace you robed ones always say you are looking for," said Eltür Bråm.

"Perhaps," replied Brownpony, choosing to ignore the Nomad's sarcasm. But he doubted it.

Smoke. It was getting dark; or was it? The few people Blacktooth could see at the end of the street were running.

He got down from the window and banged on the oak door. He put his ear to the wood, but he couldn't hear footsteps or voices. It was a strange place, this room at the end of Blacktooth's life. It reversed normal life, which we go through always looking backward. Now it was the past that was the mystery. Blacktooth could see clearly into the future. Too clearly. He could smell it. It filled the air—like smoke.

He was afraid he would panic, and he did. It wasn't the fear of fire, or even the fear of dying. It was just panic, pure animal panic. It filled him, rushing in unbidden, with no thought or emotion intervening. As sudden and as irresistible as lust (which he had grown to know so well), it both comforted and terrified him with its intensity. Like the faith he had searched for but never found, it replaced all doubt with certainty.

Blacktooth let it rage, kicking and beating on the door, shouting first "Fire!" then "Help!"; then, "For

the love of God!"

It brought no peace. The pain of his bruised fist and his own screams brought him back to a different reality; a more monklike reality. He stopped screaming, surprised at how easy it was to stop, and knelt by the bed with his rosary. The smoke was thicker, but the air was still breathable. Blacktooth was no longer hungry. The water in the water bucket was dancing, and in the distance he could hear dull booms—buildings falling or bombs going off. . . .

He must have fallen asleep. He sat up and saw that it was still dark outside the window. In the distance he could hear shooting. The farmer/guard was standing in the open door with the bucket. He wore a scarf over his face. For the smoke? It seemed to have diminished.

Blacktooth started coughing. "Excuse me," he said when he had stopped. The guard/farmer still stood in the doorway. "What's happening?" Blacktooth asked.

"They are fighting. Your Antipope is burning the city."

"Ah."

Then he was gone. He never returned. Whether he was killed or not, Blacktooth never knew. The shooting never got closer and it eventually faded away.

When dawn came it was a strange dawn that seemed to come from inside the cell, rather than outside, filling the tiny basement room with an eerie light. The city was on fire. The wind was scouring the alley, picking up bits of straw and grass and dust and scraps of ash and paper.

Blacktooth banged on the door, but he didn't scream this time. He didn't expect anyone to come and no one did. The fire seemed to be getting closer; the wind was hot, as if it were pulled through one fire on the way to feed another. Blacktooth stood as long as he could at the bars, and felt his face burning—then realized he had forgotten the pills. There were four left, folded in the hat. He took one and poured the last of his water over his head. Death by fire. He could smell fuel oil. He recognized the smell from when he was a novice, handling the abbey's relics for the first and last time. . . .

*Beatus Leibowitz ora pro me!*

He heard footsteps in the alley. "Help," he called out, but no one came. Not even the pig, who had probably been eaten. Blacktooth said his rosary, then put on his zucchetto and lay down on the narrow plank bed, on top of the jail blanket. Better to just wait, he thought. Sooner or later the end will come. "A dewdrop, a flash of lightning," Amen had said. "Ash, dust . . ."

He must have fallen asleep, for soon he was back at the waterfall with Ædrea. The water had stopped falling, though. It stood like a sheet in the sun. She was standing in it, in the sun, very wonderfully beautifully perfectly naked. "Hey," she was shouting.

"Hey!"

Blacktooth sat up. Someone was at the bars. He thought at first it was the pig, but it was a woman with a child.

"Are you a priest?"

No.

"So what's the hat?" It was the old woman he had seen with the stick, going through the trash piles.

"I'm a cardinal," he said, taking it off.

"What's a carnidal?" she asked, reversing the syllables as simple people sometimes did. "Is that like a priest?"

"Sort of," Blacktooth said. "Help me out of here. I'm afraid I got myself trapped."

"I can't do that," the old woman said. "Will you baptize my son?"

She pushed a face to the window. The boy looked too young to be her son, and too old at the same time. He was bald and his wrinkled forehead was blue. A glep.

"I can't do that," Blacktooth said. "I'm not a real priest."

"He's not my real son," the old woman cackled. "I bought him."

"Bought me!" said the glep boy. "I commensurate the deception. Am."

"What?" A bell was ringing somewhere, faster and faster. Then Blacktooth heard the spray of shots. It was being rung with bullets.

"He's very strong," said the woman.

"Strong," said the glep. "Accurate am I the exception."

"He says all you have to do is move this brick."

"What brick?"

The woman stood up and made a scraping noise with her stick. With a fierce demented grin, the boy pulled a bar loose, then another. "Strong!" He threw both bars into the cell at Blacktooth, who ducked. They rang on the floor with the sound of bells.

"Hey!"

Blacktooth flattened himself against the wall. Had the bars been loose all along? The jail was like the abbey; all he had to do was walk out and he was free.

He waited until he was sure the old woman and the glep boy were gone; then he pushed his zucchetto and the jail blanket through the bars, and climbed after them into the alley.

The air was thick with smoke, and he held his sleeve over his nose. It had been easier to breathe in the basement jail. At one end of the street he saw the woman and the boy, poking through garbage unconcernedly, as if the world were not on fire. They seemed to have forgotten him. "Bless you, my son," he whispered—and walked quickly the other way.

## CHAPTER 31

On the day they return, let them lie prostrate on the floor of the oratory and beg the prayers of all on account of any faults that may have surprised them on the road.

—*Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 67

LACKTOOTH HAD SEEN ONLY TWO CITIES IN HIS day: Valana, built of wood and stone, and Hannegan City, made of wood and mud. The Holy City, New Rome, was a city built of old pieces of old cities; it was a mixture of old and new, more like an abbey than a city, with piles of brick and stone built upon piles of brick and stone, all mixed and leavened with wood and grass and straw. All flammable, all tinder, and, it seemed to Blacktooth, all burning.

He was on a wide, straight street with mounds of rubble and stumps of towers, the "great houses," on both sides. At first he was alone, but as he walked farther east, into the rising sun and away from the fire, the street became more and more crowded with frightened, silent people. Blacktooth felt an unexpected, unwanted kinship with these frightened grass-eaters who were suddenly emerging from basements and the stumps of buildings (just as he had), dragging their pitiful rags and remnants and pots and animals and children with them. Everyone was leaving the city.

In the distance behind him, he heard shots, rare and ragged. If there were any fighting Nomads in the city, they didn't show themselves. No fighting horses, only mules and old nags. Only stray dogs.

The fleeing people were weirdly silent. Shouts or cries would have been welcome, but Blacktooth heard neither; it was as if the window from his basement cell had led him into a world where only children cried or complained. The adults were glumly silent, stumbling forward. Perhaps they thought their accents would give them away, or perhaps there was just nothing left to say.

New Rome was burning.

Blacktooth had prepared himself for execution, and now even his hunger was gone. A hand plucked at his sleeve—a child's hand—and he found himself, through some process he neither understood nor fully noted, part of a small group dragging a frightened mule up the steps from a basement room. How it had gotten there, who it belonged to, and who wanted it—these were questions that belonged to another reality. All that was present was the need to help coax the terrified, braying beast up the narrow steps.

Then it was gone into the gathering, streaming crowd, its owner—and the child—chasing it; and Blacktooth was half walking, half running after them. The wind had risen and now there was a wall of flame directly behind, to the west.

Four men and four women, all naked and holding hands, snaked through the crowd, singing hysterically. Blacktooth tried to look away from the women's breasts but couldn't. It wasn't desire he felt but some other, almost forgotten feeling: hunger, or hope. Two men in uniform with repeating rifles ran past, then two more, all running in step. It was almost comical. Blacktooth pulled off his zucchetto and hid it under his habit. A fallen mule in the traces of a cart was screaming pitifully, trying to rise. One haunch was smeared with blood.

The fire was either closer, or hotter, or both. At the end of the street it was a wall of flame, taller than the "great houses." Blacktooth now had two shadows, one that walked before him and one behind.

"I set fires," thought Blacktooth, remembering the blue and gold inscription on the Grasshopper sharf's carriage.

A farmer leaned over the injured mule and drew his knife. Blacktooth stopped him, with a hand on his arm. "Let him live," he said in Churchspeak.

"Huh?" The farmer stared at Blacktooth's robes, and then cut the traces. The mule limped off, whickering, and the farmer stuck the knife back into his belt.

"I will help with the wagon," said Blacktooth, in Grasshopper. He put his hat back on and pushed.

It was a two-wheeled cart of vaguely Grasshopper design, loaded with household goods and junk—including an ancient, tiny black-skinned old woman with two kittens, which she was kissing, first one and then the other. Blacktooth pushed and the farmer pulled, then two more men joined in, throwing their possessions in the back along with the old grandmother. They all spoke Grasshopper, mixed with a little Churchspeak and smatterings of Ol'zark. They fled on east, toward the Great River.

Blacktooth stayed with the farmer with the cart all day. Hair-Puller was his name; or it might have been a description, or even a confession. The man was bald. He was so solicitous, sharing his food and water, that Blacktooth assumed he was a Christian; until he realized that the farmer thought Blacktooth's red zucchetto meant that he was a soldier. Though he lived in the Holy City, he had never heard of the Church. To the farmer there were only two types of people, farmers and Texark soldiers. Though he was of them by blood, the Grasshopper Nomads, "the people," coming in from the plain "where the trees do not go," were less than human, or more, perhaps. An elemental like a herd or a storm.

Even after escaping from his basement jail, Blacktooth still felt imprisoned, between the fire to the west and the still unseen river to the east. By noon the smoke had eaten the sun itself, and a terrifying red darkness fell over the streets like a pall. The stream of refugees grew to a flood, all heading east. The streets grew wider, and at the same time more choked with refugees, all farmers. The "great houses" to the east were even greater, and there were no trees; Blacktooth had never imagined he would miss them.

It was late afternoon when they reached the river. Blacktooth didn't know what it was at first. The crowd piled up on itself, then started milling, turning. There was fire to the west, and fire to the north as well. There was a scuffle, a swift panic, and Hair-Puller was lost in the crowd. Once Blacktooth thought he heard the familiar creak of the wagon, then lost it again. Luckily he had managed to save his jail blanket.

It was getting dark. Except for a few children crying, the refugees were silent again, milling in place, making decisions through some sort of slow, visceral process, like a worm. The main stream turned south, following the bank of the river out of the city. Suspecting what it was that had turned them, Blacktooth climbed a low stone wall. A few others, like himself, stood on top, looking at the Great River.

Blacktooth had never seen, or even imagined, so much water before. It was a different substance than the water he had known in the mountains or on the Plains. It didn't dance, or swirl, or fall. It lay like a sheet of muddy glass, half brown and half silver. It was a plain of water. He thought he could walk across it, but he knew better.

Squeezing past the others, Blacktooth walked along the top of the wall to a fallen pier at the water's edge. Boats were standing off shore. He hadn't seen many boats before, just the flat-bottomed ferries on



the Red, but he knew what they were. These were barges, some with sheds built with chimneys and window glass, and long sweeps that turned them and moved them on the water. People on the decks and roofs watched the city burn. The boats made small circles in the current, watching the fire, perhaps waiting to move in later to loot. A few farmer refugees tried to swim or wade out to the boats, but they were beaten away with the sweeps.

A few shots were fired. The people on the barges were dressed in rags, the same as the farmers, but Blacktooth assumed they were from the other shore.

The fire was getting closer. From the water, it was almost beautiful: fire, loveliest of the four elements of the world, and yet an element too in Hell. Blacktooth found a spot at the end of the pier, and wrapped himself in his jail blanket; paradoxically, it kept him cool. Beneath the wall of smoke and flame, he could see the stream of refugees heading south along the riverbank.

"So many," Blacktooth muttered. The man standing beside him grunted what sounded like assent. He was holding a long gun, but not a repeater. It was the type that fired stones through a thick iron barrel. For some reason, Blacktooth felt safe beside him. He had no desire to rejoin the refugees and head south.

"They could have defended the city," Blacktooth whispered, and the man grunted again. They could have, Blacktooth thought, but they hadn't wanted to. New Rome wasn't their city. They had been driven there by the Texark soldiers and then driven out by the flames. Few were armed, and those with very ancient weapons, of the kind that had killed the shaman.

Perhaps the man standing beside him had fired the shot.

The howling wind was whipping the water into whitecaps. It was blowing from the east, sucked into the city by the flames. As night fell the flood of refugees lessened to a stream, and then to a trickle, all turning south along the riverbank, heading toward Texarkana, as if drawn by some ancient, instinctive urge. Late that night their fires could be seen in the low line of wooded bluffs to the south. By then Blacktooth was asleep. He slept for hours, alone at the end of the pier. By daylight the fire had almost died away.

And the Holy City of New Rome was burned.

The smell of food awakened him. Blacktooth had slept wrapped in his jail blanket, propped against a wooden upright at the end of the pier. If the fire had kept coming it would have followed the pier to him, and consumed him along with the rest of the world. But he had been spared. He had taken off his boots and hidden them under his blanket; they were still there, as was his zucchetto, with three pills left. As soon as he sat up, he felt Hilbert's fever returning. But couldn't it be hunger? He hadn't eaten in days.

He smelled fish cooking. At the end of the pier, a boat was tied up on the muddy bank. A group of men were gathered around a small fire. Blacktooth stood up, pulling the blanket around him to hide his monk's robes. These boatmen were probably less Christianized even than the Grasshopper farmers, who were themselves barely Christian at all. And he remembered his jailer's remark, that the Antipope was burning the city.

Something in the shape of the group, their stance or the tone of their voices, told Blacktooth that he could join them safely. Still, he edged in cautiously, walking slowly along the edge of the wooden pier.

A body floated by, buoyed by its own gases. A woman's face smiled upward toward a scrim of smoke and sky. Blacktooth looked away and stepped onto the mud. Someone passed him a piece of fish, wrapped in big soft leaves. The smell of it was so overpowering, so delicious, that he had to sit down to eat it. No one paid any attention to him or asked him any questions. The men by the fire seemed united by a sort of rough charity; they were boatmen, and spoke a version of Ol'zark that Blacktooth could barely make out. The outsiders, two or three stragglers like himself, spoke not at all. Their silence seemed to be essential to the rough peace that prevailed.

After he had finished the fish, Blacktooth looked around. Now that the smoke had cleared he could see the big towers of the ancient bridge. He could make out low bluffs on the far side. The water was impossibly wide. The Great River, the Misspee, flowed into the sea; how big, then, must the sea be? Already this was more water than Blacktooth had ever imagined.

"The Nomads coming," said one of the boatmen. The word for Nomad in their dialect was "horsepeople." The implication was, so *we ourselves must flee!*

There were no women among the boatmen; but even as Blacktooth was noticing this, several women walked down the bank, trudging from rock to rocky step, tracking ash and carrying armloads of what looked like rags onto the barge and into the shed/cabin. They were followed by other women with bags that clinked; perhaps crockery?

Someone passed Blacktooth another piece of fish, followed by a pot of warm water which seemed to be some kind of weak tea. "The Nomads are coming," said another woman, arriving at a run. The "horsepeople."

There was a shout, and Blacktooth and the other "guests" stood back while one of the boatmen scattered the fire with a stick. Before Blacktooth realized what was happening, the barge was spinning off in the current. The other "guests" by the dead fire quickly scattered—and Blacktooth found himself holding the boatmen's water pot, alone again. It was just as well. For the first time in days, he felt his bowels calling, so it was with pleasure that he found a hidden place by the water's edge under the pier and took a dump, and then cleansed himself and went into the city.

Blacktooth assumed that the Grasshopper warriors would arrive as soon as the fire burned out, and begin looting and raping, and with them would come Brownpony and the Curia. But it was noon and the streets were still empty. He had rolled up his jail blanket, and now he felt exposed and vulnerable in his habit and zucchetto as he walked the right angles of the streets waiting for the Nomads to find him and take him to Brownpony.

No one came. It was as if the Holy City had been cleansed. Even the corpses in the street, blackened like cinders, seemed cleansed somehow, as if the fire had swept away their corruptions leaving only a purified husk.

There wasn't much to loot. The fire had consumed everything but the brick and stone, reducing the city back to the rubble it must have been before the Harq-Hannegans had rebuilt it. How many times had these bricks fallen? Blacktooth wondered. How many conquerors had passed under this lintel, this stone? The Holy City with its grid of streets between blackened piles of rubble and shells of burned buildings was like a palimpsest of civilization and misery, all intermixed and intermingled, one age falling onto the other like leaves; like cottonwood trash, the debris of centuries good only for a twenty-minute or a twenty-hour fire.

No Nomads came—no howling barbarians to pick through the ruined and smoking center of all Christendom. No shots, no shouts, no neighing horses, no mad laughter or cries of delight or screams of dismay. A great fire brings with it a truce in the natural order of things, a still center; and there weren't even scavengers in the streets. The occasional corpses, one every block or so, lay in quiet dignity as Blacktooth walked around them. There were only the buzzards gathering high overhead, like fly ash.

Saint Peter's was not hard to find. The roof had burned and fallen, but the smoke-stained dome still stood over the ruins. Most of the interior was destroyed. Blacktooth sat in the back in one of the long pews that had survived the lottery of destruction. It was curious, he thought, what was left and what was consumed, by time as well as fire. There were a few memories left of his childhood—the hard months among the Nomads, the early days at the abbey. But whole years were gone, leaving nothing but ash, like the long rows of gray ash marking where the clean-burning oak pews had been. Where a pew was gone, its footstool might be left behind. It was like the remnants of the *Magna Civitas*, burned to the ground more than a thousand years ago. Parts of it stood almost intact, like the Church; other parts were not even remembered.

For the first time in months, Blacktooth closed his eyes and prayed; not under duress but because he wanted to. He stayed on his knees when he finished. He could feel Hilbert's fever returning, like an old friend. He welcomed it—for there was Ædrea again, in the waterfall that had no water where water did not fall. And there was Amen Specklebird.

Amen I with his cougar smile—

Amen was shaking him by the shoulder. But it was Amen II. "Nimmy, is it really you? We thought

you were dead!"

"So here you see my Church," said Brownpony. His hair was gone and his eyes stared out of dark hollows. Even the red beard of the Red Deacon was mostly white. All around the basilica, the great empty windows looked out on ruins. The deserted streets were quiet and only the howling of dogs could be heard, far off in the distance.

"Oh, God, the Grasshopper!" Brownpony knelt and blackened his hands in the ashes, and held them up toward the smoke-stained dome. "What a fool I have been, Nimmy. To trust the Grasshopper!"

"Holy Madness trusted them too, Holy Father," Blacktooth replied. "And so did Axe!"

"I trusted Brām to fight well," said Wooshin. "He did that, before the desertions."

"It may be," said the Pope, "that he could not control his warriors, once they felt the battle fury—drawn down from Empty Sky, as they say." He wiped his hands on his dirty white cassock; over it he wore a repeating pistol in a shoulder holster. "And the Grasshopper warriors have no love for the Church hereabouts."

Wooshin stood by, still wearing the plaid tunic and sergeant general's stripes Brownpony had made for him. He seemed depressed. Blacktooth was not surprised. All Wooshin's friends, the Yellow Guard, were either dead or gone south with Magister Dion and the *Qæsach dri Vørdar*. His master, Brownpony, seemed weaker than ever; and ruined.

"Nimmy," Brownpony was saying. "Look what I have done to my Church. It wasn't for myself that I wanted this throne. And now look at it."

"It wasn't you . . ." Blacktooth started. But he couldn't finish. Who else had done it? It was Brownpony who had assembled the Three Hordes, who had armed them with repeating weapons, who had set them in motion across the sea of grass toward New Rome—and who had then told them not to set fires.

I SET FIRES, Eltūr Brām's carriage was inscribed. He had made no secret of it. LIKE HELL YOU WILL, the Pope had answered.

*Like Hell*—and now, look around.

Brownpony laid his hand on Blacktooth's brow, leaving a smear of ash. "Your fever seems better, Nimmy," he said.

"I got over it," said Blacktooth. "They captured me and gave me some pills, the same pills the Texark are using south of the Nady Ann. But they are almost gone."

"You don't feel feverish."

"I can feel it," said Blacktooth. "I can see it coming. When I am feverish I see the girl, Ædrea. And the old Pope, Amen Specklebird. They were with me just now, before you came in." He saw no point in lying to Brownpony; not anymore. "I was glad to see them."

"Do you see them now?" Brownpony asked.

"No, of course not. The fever is not that bad."

"The fever is not that bad," repeated Brownpony. He seemed more distracted than ever. Then suddenly he drew the pistol from his shoulder holster. "Do you hear that, Nimmy?"

"Hear what, your—"

"Shhhh!—"

Wooshin drew his short sword from his belt; he left his long sword in its steel scabbard. Seconds later, Blacktooth heard what the old warrior and Brownpony had heard. Hooves on the paving stones, and then on steps, and then on wood—clattering "inside" the cathedral.

It was Black Eyes, the Nomad double agent who had briefly been imprisoned across from Brownpony and Blacktooth in the Hannegan City zoo. He was dressed in the full regalia of a Wilddog warrior, riding a sorrel pony. "Your Holiness," he said sarcastically. He nodded at Nimmy and avoided Wooshin's eye—and sword—altogether.

"Put it away," said Brownpony, softly—although he still held the repeating pistol in his hand. Wooshin put the short sword away, but kept his hand on the hilt of the long one.

"What are you doing here? I thought you were with the Emperor in Hannegan City." Brownpony stood straighter, tried to look regal. Black Eyes didn't seem impressed.

"As a spy," the Nomad said. "When the Lord of the Three Hordes came south, with the tanks and the glep army, I crossed the Red River to join them. But the battle is lost. The Hannegan's guns spoke too loudly, and too fast. The gleps have run back to their valley, the spooks are on their way back to the Suckamints, and the War Sharf of the Three Hordes is on his way home."

"Høngan Ösle?" Brownpony looked stricken. "The *Qæsach dri Vørdar* is going home?"

"The Weejus are calling," said the Nomad. His pony was dancing in and out of the pew ashes, ruining their straight lines. "The Texark Wooden-Nose is burning our lodges, killing our women, stealing our horses. We ride for the short grass. I am only here to make sure that none of the children of the Big Sky Woman are left in the city when the grass-eaters arrive. You should leave also. You are also her child and she is also your mother, begging your pardon, Holiness. The Texark cavalry is on its way."

"From the south?" The Pope pointed with the pistol. "From Hannegan City?"

"From the north as well. From the sea of grass. We will leave their city to them. Good luck, Your Holiness."

He rode off loudly, hooves clattering, and Brownpony fell to his knees, cursing his fate. "*Vexilla regis inferni prodeunt!*"

"What's he saying?" Wooshin whispered.

"Forth come the banners of the King of Hell," said Blacktooth.

"It is not their city," Brownpony muttered. "They never wanted it!" He looked up toward the sky and saw only the blackened ruined dome. He tossed his pistol into the ashes.

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In the center of the ruined sanctuary, the throne of Saint Peter's had been miraculously spared. Behind it was a painted wooden statue of the Holy Virgin, also spared. Blacktooth and Wooshin silently followed Brownpony as he crossed toward the throne, picking his way through the litter. Brownpony paused in front of the throne and studied it before smoothing his cassock and sitting down. His freckled skin was drawn and thin strands of gray hair showed at the edges of his dirty white skullcap. He still wore his empty shoulder holster.

"Here."

Wooshin tried to hand him the papal tiara, but Brownpony shook his head, so the Yellow Warrior placed it in the ashes at the foot of the throne. It was getting dark. Blacktooth had no difficulty finding a live ember with which to light a few candles. Set behind the throne, they hardly illuminated anything except the face of the Virgin, and that only barely.

Brownpony's eyes were shut as if in prayer, and Blacktooth was glad. Looking into them had been like looking in the window of a burning house.

Wooshin squatted beside the throne of Saint Peter, kneeling back on his heels, balanced on the scabbard of his long sword he still wore at his side. Though limber, he was also, Blacktooth saw, an old man. He moved without joy or ease.

The truce the fire had created was ended. Outside in the street Blacktooth saw a dog chase away a buzzard, to pull at a blackened body; then it was chased away in turn by a pig. His old friend? Another dog stopped at the huge open door and looked into the basilica in the dying light. It sniffed the smoky air, pissed on the bronze door, and trotted off into the gathering darkness.

A riderless horse wandered past, part of a severed human leg hanging from the stirrup.

"Glory to God in the highest." It was the weak, tired voice of Elia Amen II Papa Brownpony, speaking as if Job's wife had told him to curse God and die, and he was wearily complying. "I think I hear the Texark cavalry coming. Blacktooth, do be sensible and run for your life."

"It was only a riderless horse," Blacktooth said. But he cocked his ears and heard something in the distance. He could feel it as much as hear it: a low, indistinct rumbling that might have been faraway

thunder.

"There's nothing to keep them out of the city now," Wooshin said.

"But you, m'Lord—" Blacktooth was confused. "Where will you go?"

If Brownpony heard him he gave no sign. Blacktooth looked at the statue of the Holy Virgin behind the throne of Saint Peter's. She stuck out her tongue. It was black, and forked.

The fever's coming back, Blacktooth thought. He looked around for Specklebird and Ædrea, the companions of his delirium, but they were nowhere to be seen.

Brownpony turned and looked up at the Virgin. His eyes grew bright. "So it's you, after all."

"Huh?" Blacktooth and Wooshin both asked at once.

"Mother, Mother of the night and the mares of night, the dreams."

"M'Lord?" Blacktooth took the Pope's arm.

"Look! Look at her!" Brownpony jerked his arm loose and pointed at the Virgin. The dark spot crawled out of her lower lip.

"A-a w-worm," Blacktooth stuttered.

"The Night Hag! My real Mother!" Brownpony said. "Blacktooth, escape while there's time. Loyalty to me stops here. Obey me: go!"

Blacktooth stepped back. "Why should I start keeping my vows by obeying you now?"

Brownpony laughed weakly, but repeated: "Go. Go be a hermit and teach those who come to you about God. Be yourself. That is His calling to you."

Faintly Blacktooth could hear distant hoofbeats, getting louder.

"Go!"

Wooshin was still hunkered down beside the throne, his narrow eyes closed as if in prayer. Behind the throne the Virgin's face glowed in the flickering candlelight. Blacktooth walked under her, circling slowly toward the still-standing back wall of the cathedral. There was definitely a worm on her lip. Or a tongue that moved. Forked, black. Maybe it was a shadow from a candle. *Ora pro nobis nunc et in hora mortis nostrae!*

There was a door in the back. Halfway there, Blacktooth heard a sharp *hissssss* like an intake of breath. He recognized the sound of Wooshin's sword being drawn from its scabbard. Then he heard the murmur of Latin. To Blacktooth's surprise, this least orthodox of Popes was reciting the creed. In spite of himself, Blacktooth stopped and listened. It began as the creed of Nicaea: "I believe in one God, the almighty Father, maker of the earth and the sky, and of all things seen and unseen, and in one Lord Christ Jesus . . ." but before Brownpony was done, the creed of Athanasius crept in and took over, saying, "and in One Holy Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church outside of which there is neither salvation nor remission of sins—*unam sanctam Ecclesiam Romanum etiam Apostolicam, extra quam neque sa-lus est neque remissio peccatorum*—"

"Now?" It was the voice of the Axe.

Blacktooth paused, afraid to look around, and heard the rustle of silk. There was a faint affirmative grunt as Elia Brownpony, Amen II, fell to his knees at the foot of the throne. The whisper of the sword cutting the air ended in the chunk of flesh and bone, and the thump of the head, and the splashing of gushing fluid on the littered floor.

Blacktooth ran toward the exit as fast as he could. He had almost reached the doorway when Wooshin's quavering voice called after him. "Help me, before you go, please!"

He stopped again, and turned this time. He saw Axe sitting on the floor beside the corpse. Wooshin had taken out his other sword, the short one, and held it pressed against his belly. While he pressed slowly with one hand, with the other he picked up the bloodstained long sword from the floor, and tossed it toward the monk. It fell short, ringing like a bell on the stone floor.

Blacktooth stepped over it, shaking his head. With long steps he strode to the warrior's side. "No!" he said fiercely. "Would you now abandon your master?"

Wooshin looked at the heap of bloody silk beside him, glared up at Blacktooth, and pressed the blade into his belly until the blood came. He groaned and stopped and looked up at Blacktooth again, pleading.

Nimmy picked up the long sword. But instead of lifting it for a strike, he leaned on it as if it were a cane. "Your master's enemy still lives," he said. "Cut open your belly if you want to, Wooshin, but I want to hear you say 'Long live Filpeo Harq!' before I help you die."

Wooshin removed the blade from his flesh, and said something in a strange tongue, clearly a curse. Blacktooth knelt down and looked at the wound. It was bleeding profusely, but it seemed not to have penetrated far, if at all, into the abdominal cavity. He helped the aged warrior to his feet, then knelt down and tore off a piece of the Pope's white silk cassock. He gave it to Axe to hold against his wound.

Wooshin picked up Brownpony's head and placed it next to his body; then he covered both with the jail blanket, perhaps forgetting that it was Blacktooth's.

"Shouldn't we bury him?"

Wooshin shook his head. "This was the way he wanted it. 'Leave me for the Burregan, the Buzzard of Battle.'"

"His bride," said Blacktooth. He looked for the Night Hag, but she was gone. The Virgin was back, with her glowing baby and gentle smile. Looking down at Brownpony, dead under the blanket, a still form, Blacktooth felt strangely unmoved. So much of his life since leaving the abbey had been in service to this worldly man. But who or what was Brownpony in service to? Do any of us know, ultimately, what it is we serve? Blacktooth wondered. Then he felt immediately ashamed. Was he not a brother of the Albertian Order of Saint Leibowitz? Why had he wanted so long to be released from his vows, if the vows meant nothing?

The hoofbeats were closer now, rattling in the square outside the front of the cathedral, then on the low, wide steps. For a moment Blacktooth thought of stepping out into the street and offering himself up for capture. Then would he be given the pills he needed; and perhaps the death.

But no. Wooshin recovered and sheathed his long sword. Blacktooth followed him out the back door of the cathedral. There was nothing more in Saint Peter's to do. The dogs were wandering back into the city, smelling new blood and death. Where was it written? *And the dogs ate Jezebel in the field of Jezrahel . . .*

As he followed Wooshin down the alley toward the river, Blacktooth could hear horses' hooves inside the cathedral of Saint Peter's; then raised voices over the dead body of Amen II.

## CHAPTER 32

They are able now, with no help save from God, to fight single-handed against the vices of the flesh and their own evil thoughts.

—*Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter I

IT RAINED THE NEXT DAY, AND THE NEXT. THE sky was close and heavy, not like the bright Empty Sky of the grasslands, and Blacktooth felt bent by it, even more than by the rain, which was little more than a persistent drizzle. He followed Wooshin, and the Axe followed a small train of wagons and livestock headed for the Watchitah Nation. It was an informal attachment but it seemed better than traveling alone. The farmers spoke a degraded form of Grasshopper mixed with Ol'zark larded with old English Churchspeak, a dialect Blacktooth assumed was confined to the environs of New Rome. He had trouble understanding it at first but his talent for languages rescued him, and he was surprised to find a dialect so rich in sources and influences, so poor in subtlety and nuance, though it may have been his understanding that was poor; or perhaps it was the farmers themselves.

There were few women among them. The apparent leader of the train was a spook (Blacktooth suspected) named Pfarfen. He had a daughter, beautiful except for her huge glep ears, and her hands, which she kept mysteriously covered with rags. Pfarfen kept her in the wagon where she sewed and sang all day, and (Blacktooth was alarmed to discover) entertained her father sexually at night, when the wagon was pulled up with the others alongside the muddy road.

The Holy City was far behind them now, still burning, a smudge on the northeast horizon that was

seen only when the low clouds broke. The army that had gone south with Høngan Ösle had been routed, and the thinning stream of refugees heading south was mixed with a thickening stream of refugees heading north, giving the impression at the narrow stretches of highway of a great milling herd heading nowhere. At these points the traffic left the roads for the still-green fields, which were quickly churned into quagmires by wheels and hooves and feet. Though they all spoke versions of Grasshopper, it was not difficult to tell the Nomad warriors from the Hannegan's semi-civilized farmers: many of the refugees heading north were wounded, and most were still armed. A few had even kept their horses, and several times these looked at Blacktooth's clerical garb with an alarming anger.

"Come on, Nimmy," said Axe, whenever Blacktooth showed signs of wanting to ask about the *Qaesach's* campaign. He was in a hurry to reach Hannegan City. Since Blacktooth had refused to act as his *keisaku* and help disembowel him, the wizened old warrior had rediscovered his own purpose. Blacktooth suspected, but didn't want to ask, what it was. Axe had the peculiar ability to go for days without food and never look malnourished. This was not true for Blacktooth, who had a monk's love of dinner; but because he helped with the wagons when they were stuck, he was welcome at the meager dinner and breakfast fires.

The river was only a memory, somewhere to the east. Now there were the bottomland streams, at least two to cross every day, almost too deep to ford. At each crossing there were piles of abandoned, unburied bodies, stacked in grotesque positions as if they were in the process of composing themselves from the earth, rather than the reverse. The refugees walked by them pretending not to notice and commanding their children to look away. But children have always understood war better than adults. Death only mildly interests them; it holds neither the horror nor fascination it has for adults, who can almost hear the wings.

Overhead the sky was black with circling dots.

The faithful Burregun.

The spook-farmers with whom Blacktooth and Axe were traveling were tolerant of Blacktooth's tonsure and habit, even the zucchetto which he carried over his back without wearing. Still, he worried. He remained under the Hannegan's death sentence, as far as he knew. It was the death sentence that had given him Hilbert's pills, which were almost gone. Leaving New Rome with three, he had cut his dose to one a day, taken in the morning with his corn gruel. There were two left the day Blacktooth saw three brother monks, crucified by the side of the road, but whether by the Texark soldiers or by angry Nomads routed from their promised looting of Hannegan City, it was impossible to say. The Burregun had feasted and the bodies were too far gone.

"Come," said Axe, and after a hasty prayer, Blacktooth hurried to catch up with his companions. He wanted to bury the dead but he didn't want to join them yet. Above all, he didn't want to be alone.

The next day he took his next-to-last pill. That afternoon he came across a second group of two clerics, hung from poles by a muddy roadside. It appeared that they had been hung up and then stoned and shot with arrows, a merciful death overall. Their faces looked almost peaceful, as if they had only just entered the doorway into death. Blacktooth studied them for a long time. They looked familiar; it was not their faces, although in truth all men look alike, and looked increasingly alike to his Most Reverend Cardinal Blacktooth St. George, Deacon of Saint Maisie's, in these days in what he was beginning more and more to think of as the twilight of his life (even though it turned out to be a long twilight). They looked to him as monks all looked, hung on the cross of life. This was not their world. There was something almost inspiring in it.

"Come," said Axe.

"Go ahead," said Blacktooth. "I'll catch up." *Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, bury the dead.* He borrowed Wooshin's short sword and used it to bury the two by the side of the road, using stones and sticks to complete the work. When he finished, it was dark. Not wanting to travel alone at night, he slept in a shallow dirt cave by the side of the road, using his mud-stained zucchetto for a pillow.

The next morning he took his last pill, and under the clear sky he was almost overcome by terror. He hurried all day, hoping to catch up with the spook-farmers and the Axe. The few refugees he saw on the road eyed him curiously but left him alone. But he kept remembering the crucified Churchmen, and he

was afraid. He hid the red hat under a bush, and later that day saw a chance to get rid of his habit, trading it for the leggings and tunic of a farmer who had been laid out beside the road, almost tenderly, a corpse not too old. The monk buried him and took his clothes. *Bury the dead, clothe the naked.*

It had been easy to toss the zucchetto, but leaving behind the coarse brown Leibowitzian habit was not so easy. After a few moments of hesitation, Blacktooth rolled it up like a bundle and carried it with him. He felt like a pilgrim, or a booklegger again.

Under a clear sky speckled with buzzards, he pushed on south and west.

Hilbert's fever traveled with him. Blacktooth had no hunger, and after a few days no diarrhea, but no strength either. There were fewer and fewer travelers on the road, and those Blacktooth saw spoke in Ol'zark, or not at all. The stream of refugees had diminished to a trickle. Some had crossed the Great River, counting on the water to protect them from the depredations of Filpeo's soldiers and their Nomad adversaries, still thought of as the Antipope's army. Others had just disappeared into the forests to hide, to die, to wait for neighbor or kin.

Blacktooth never caught up with the wagons. He had lost Brownpony; now he lost Axe. When the road forked west he followed it, putting the morning sun at his back, even though he knew that Wooshin must be heading south for Hannegan City. Blacktooth was hungry for Empty Sky. The fever was like a companion, another consciousness. Often it took on a human form, as when he was crossing a small creek (the creeks got smaller and smaller, the farther west he went) and he saw Specklebird waiting on the far bank. Eagerly, Blacktooth waded across, but when he reached the bank the old black man with the cougar face was gone. Another time he saw Ædrea standing in the doorway of an abandoned hut. The illusion, if it was illusion, was so perfect that he could hear her singing as he climbed the hill toward her. But in the hut he found only an old man, dead, with a crying baby in his arms.

He waited for the baby to die before burying them both together. *Bury the dead.*

It would be dry and hot for days, and then the rain would come, announced by lightning, attended by thunder, falling in sheets and turning the roads to mud. Hilbert's fever was handy, enabling Blacktooth to go for miles without eating. The long feverish days reminded him of his Lenten fast as a novice, when he had been seeking his vocation and thought he had found it among the Albertian book-leggers of Saint Leibowitz. And hadn't he? He missed the abbey and the Brothers, now that he had the freedom he had sought. He had even been released from his vows by the Pope himself; or had he simply been bound in new chains?

*Go, and be a hermit.*

• • •

The day Blacktooth saw Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman, he had been traveling all morning over open grasslands between wooded draws. He was worried about outlaws because he had seen several campfires near the road, still smoldering, yet never saw anyone. He considered putting his habit back on, but decided against it. Even those who didn't hate the Church for what it had supposedly done to their world, often thought it was rich, and even a poor monk could be a target for highwaymen.

By midday he had the distinct feeling someone was following him. He looked back every time he crossed a high spot—the road was empty and he saw only buzzards, flyspecks to the south and east. Blacktooth was glad to see that he had crossed that shifting boundary where the forest begins to give way to the grass; but the feeling of being followed wouldn't go away. It became so real that when he crossed the next creek, he hid on the far bank behind the corpse-colored trunk of a fallen sycamore, to watch.

Sure enough, a white mule with red ears came through the trees and down the muddy bank. At first he thought the woman on the beast's back was Ædrea, with the twins she had gotten by him under the waterfall. But it was the *Fujæ Go*, the Day Maiden herself. Far beyond Ædrea in beauty, she carried an infant in each arm, one white and one black, both nursing at her full breasts. Even as she rode the mule down the muddy bank and into the water, they sucked on.

Then she dropped the reins. The mule stopped in the center of the sluggish stream. Its black eyes



were looking straight at Blacktooth; no, *through* him.

He stood up, no longer trying to hide. As he stepped over the log, he realized that what he was seeing was not in his world and not for him to touch. He knew with certainty that if he spoke, she would not hear him, and that even if she looked straight at him, she would not see him. He felt that he had changed places with one of his own fever dreams, and that it was they, and not he, that were real.

That he was the dream.

It was then Saint Leibowitz stepped out of the bushes and took the rope halter. Blacktooth knew him from Brother Fingo's twenty-sixth-century wooden statue in the corridor outside the abbot's office; he recognized the curious smile and dubious eyes. That the Saint was no vision, Blacktooth knew from the faint, sweet fuel-oil smell that hung in the air as he passed. It was Blacktooth who was the dream.

As she rode past, the *Fujæ Go* gazed up toward the sky. Blacktooth hadn't noticed how majestic the little oaks could be, a filigree of branches against a pale sky. One baby was blinding, albino white; the other was as black as Specklebird. Both had their eyes squeezed shut like tiny fists fending off the world. The mule looked straight through Blacktooth, like the Day Maiden. Only Leibowitz, in his burlap robes with his rope over his shoulder, looked directly at the monk as if to say, like Axe, "Come."

Then he winked and walked on.

*Sancte Isaac Eduarde, ora pro me!*

Blacktooth followed; Blacktooth had always followed where Leibowitz had led. But now he was weak and he fell twice climbing the bank. By the time he got to the top, the two (the three? the five?) were far down the narrow trail, almost lost in the dappled shadows. He hurried after them but he was feverish, and even though they were not walking fast, he gradually fell behind. He had to stop again, and he must have fallen asleep, for when he woke it was almost dark and they were impossibly far away, like a speck in the eye, an iota shimmering in the distance.

But something was wrong.

The sun was setting behind his right shoulder. Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman were not heading west into the sea of grass, but south, toward Hannegan City. The *Høngin Fujæ Vurn* always chose the victor as her Lord, and the Hannegan had won the war. By choosing a husband, she chooses a King, and she was Filpeo's now. Leibowitz was taking her to him.

Blacktooth wandered on, hoping to find Texark soldiers who would give him pills. The winter was coming; it was the winter of 3246. The Empire and its borders were being redrawn and the few travelers Blacktooth passed were wary. Every few days he buried a corpse as he walked west, no longer a cardinal, no longer even a monk. *Go and be a hermit.*

It no longer rained. The trees thinned out into shadows in the draws, and the road led higher and higher into a world all grass under a dome of sky. Blacktooth's fever had become a small fire that both weakened and sustained him. The morning he left the last of the trees behind, he saw a great bird circling far above. It was a Red Buzzard, the Pope's bird. Ahead by the road something or someone had fallen. Two smaller black buzzards pulled at it, but the meat was not yet ripe enough for their beaks. Nimmy stopped to watch as the Burregun, the Pope's bride (as he thought of it), swooped down. Awed by her size, the smaller buzzards stepped back, black heads bobbing; but she ignored them, and they soon joined her at the attempted feast. The Red Buzzard was stronger and had a little better luck, but still the carcass was too fresh for easy eating.

From where he sat on a hummock of grass, Blacktooth could not tell if the corpse was human. "Feed the hungry, nurse the sick, visit the prisoner," he said aloud, reciting the corporal works of mercy.

*Bury the dead.*

He tossed a rock. The birds stopped and eyed him with funereal solemnity, then strutted and preened and resumed eating. He tossed another rock and they ignored it. He still carried Wooshin's short sword, but he could not summon the resolve to quarrel with the queen of the buzzards.

Then he watched as a bald eagle came, driving them all away, even the Burregun, the Buzzard of

Battle. The bald eagle was Filpeo's National Bird. It nosed at the corpse, then lost interest and left, riding a thermal straight up into the china blue sky.

Blacktooth St. George got to his feet and went to see what it was he had been left to bury. He hoped it was not another child.

## CHAPTER 33

Let all things be done with moderation, however, for the sake of the faint-hearted.

—*Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 48

IT WAS A GOOD YEAR FOR THE BUZZARDS. THEY followed Blacktooth all the way back to the Abbey of Saint Leibowitz, little dots like eyespecks against the expanse of Empty Sky. Blacktooth gave up on finding Hilbert's pills, and the disease gradually gave up on him, burning down to embers. If he had a fever it was the same fever that had plagued him all his life, the burning that Amen and Brownpony had noticed, each from his own particular perspective.

There was no longer a safe route across the grasslands. One could no longer evade the Empire by traveling north of the Nady Ann, or avoid the hordes by traveling to the south. Both groups had interpenetrated, and the contended territories on both sides of the Nady Ann were passable, and yet uncertain. South of the Brave, the Kingdom of Laredo had collapsed in on itself.

The grass itself seemed to be shrinking back into the earth.

There were stretches of sand and dust that took half a day to cross. The Empty Sky seemed even more of an emptiness than before. Blacktooth wore his habit again, and said his rosary as he walked. But had he eaten? And where had he found water? The few people he saw were on horses, on the horizons.

One day there was rain. But it was a swift dry rain, the kind that comes to the high plains and barely reaches the ground, darkening the dust and throwing it up in great splotches, and then evaporating suddenly in the flashes of sun that showed, like slow lightning, after the clouds had ridden away on their long ponies.

Empty Sky.

There was no road, and then no trail. Blacktooth followed the setting sun. Wagon tracks braided across the dry rivercourses, running in every direction. The few people Blacktooth met were peaceful and shared their food; the bodies he found he buried, using the short sword he had borrowed from the Axe.

He walked alone most of the time, accompanied only by his shadow striding before him in the morning, and falling behind by evening. Only at noon, in the heat, would it desert him altogether. Reduced to its essentials, sky and earth, the world seemed more intricate and complex than ever.

Blacktooth missed the little glep cougar with its blue ears. He wondered what had become of Aberlott, who had so loved the little brass cartridges of war. Had he become one of the motherless ones? Or found his final home under the prairie soil?

Other such thoughts came, one with each step . . . arriving and departing without speaking, like birds. At other times Blacktooth walked with an empty mind, a gift, like Empty Sky, in which each step was a prayer.

It was a good year for the buzzards. Blacktooth could tell by how easily they were chased away. There were always other feasts waiting, just over the next hill.

Dom Abiquiu Olshuen had died after another stroke, and Prior Devendy was taking his place until a new abbot could be elected according to the time-honored Benedictine rule. Once he had arrived, Blacktooth had little desire to stay at the monastery, even though most of his good memories (as well as many of his bad ones) were set amid those ancient adobe walls. The stories of Ædrea's stay as Sister Clare had become almost legend, and Blacktooth heard several versions. They were linked with the

apparition some of the Brothers claimed to have seen of the Holy Virgin in the eastern sky.

"That's the Night Hag," said Blacktooth. "She means war and death, not peace and hope." He could tell by the way Brother Wren and the others crossed themselves that they didn't want to hear it— even though they were preparing for war in their own way. They had sealed the holy relics in their original chamber and dusted off the Jackrabbit smuggler's cannon. Brother Carpenter was in the basement, planing boards for a heavier door. The defeat of Brownpony's plans for a new order signaled the beginning of a new age of darkness. Somehow Blacktooth no longer feared it, or even thought about it. Blood and screams were the water in which humankind swam.

Four children had been brought in from the village. Two of them had already died. It seemed there were new diseases abroad in the desert.

After visiting Jarad's grave, Blacktooth stood looking into the empty one that was always kept waiting. The straw around the open maw was hardly necessary, as there had been even less rain this year than usual, Prior Devendy explained. The grave was so deep that it seemed to Blacktooth that he could see all the way to the bottom of, of ...

He swayed and almost fell. "Gerard's affliction," the Brothers called it after the beloved fainting monk of almost a thousand years ago.

"You seem a little woozy," said Prior Devendy. "Come."

He led Blacktooth through the crowded dayroom of the monastery, under the old familiar *vigas*, into Olshuen's office. Using a key that hung from a cord around his neck, Devendy opened a drawer, and took from it another key, with which he opened a cabinet of dusty bottles. He poured a glass of brandy. Blacktooth almost waved it away until he saw that Devendy was pouring one for himself as well.

"Oregon," he said. "It was left here as a gift for Brownpony when he became Pope Amen Two. He took the papacy to New Jerusalem and never drank it."

"And now he is dead," Blacktooth said. He had told no one about the scene in the basilica of Saint Peter's—only that the Pope was dead.

"He made you a cardinal," said Devendy. "Where is your hat?"

"My zucchetto. I put all that behind me. I suspect whoever is made Pope will undo all Brownpony's cardinals anyway."

"You don't need to be a cardinal here," said Devendy. He smiled tentatively. "Only a priest."

"Only a what?" Blacktooth looked at the old priest warily.

"The Brothers want to elect you Abbot. For that you will have to be ordained."

"That's not possible," said Blacktooth. "*Non accepto.*"

"My thoughts exactly," said Devendy, looking relieved. "But I promised I would ask."

"I have no vocation for it," said Blacktooth. "I was given my vocation by Pope Amen Two. I will stay a couple of nights and then go."

"To the Mesa of Last Resort?"

"I thought I might go that way."

"That's where she went," said Prior Devendy. "She was, uh, injured, you know, and she stayed with the old Jew after she left here. But I'm sure she must be gone."

Blacktooth looked out the window toward the Mesa. It shimmered in the distance like a mirage of rock.

"Is the old Jew still there?"

The old Jew was still there. Blacktooth left the abbey the next morning with the gifts of a blanket and breviary, a canteen and a loaf of bread. He was greeted with a rattle of stones halfway up the trail that led to the top of the Mesa. He ignored them; they were only pebbles. He wedged himself up through the last crack onto the top, and there was Benjamin Eleazar bar Joshua, looking no older than he had looked ten years before, or a hundred years before that for all Blacktooth knew.

"You," said the old man. "I suspected it might be you."

"Brownpony is dead," Blacktooth said.

"He was not the one" was all old Benjamin had replied. He told Blacktooth that Ædrea had stayed with him several months, until her sores had healed, and then had left without revealing her plans.

Had he found her much changed?

"Changed?" The old Jew only smiled and shook his head, apparently misunderstanding. "It never was any better, it never will be any better. It will only be richer or poorer, sadder but not wiser, until the very last day."

Irritated, weary of oracles and parables, Blacktooth wrapped himself in his blanket and went straight to sleep. He stayed with Benjamin two nights, sleeping in the tent where Ædrea had slept. The old tent-maker himself never stayed in a tent if he could help it. Blacktooth was awakened by rain on the tent every night, a few great splattering drops. Or was that a dream sent to advertise his tentmaking and rain-making skills? There was dry lightning off to the east each night: the Horse Woman, admonishing her children on the Plains.

He left on the third day. The old Jew filled his canteen from a pool hidden under a rock. The water was cold and clear, and Blacktooth was surprised to find that it lasted him all the way to New Jerusalem.

"Even if she had come," Prior Singing Cow told Blacktooth at Saint Leibowitz-in-the-Cottonwoods, "I would have turned her away. You heard what had happened to her."

"Yes."

Blacktooth had followed the papal road north, then cut off at Arch Hollow, into the Suckamints. The settlement at New Jerusalem was much diminished. Magister Dion had not made it back from the "Antipope's war" (as even the spooks were calling it), and no one knew of Shard's Ædrea, except that she had left for Laredo under interdiction. No one believed Blacktooth when he told them that the interdiction had been lifted by the Pope who was not a pope, at New Rome which was no longer New Rome.

Nor was she to be found in Valana.

But Aberlott was, working as a secular scribe in the square of Saint John's, under the walls of the Great Hall of Saint Ston's and next door to the old Papal Palace where Amen had delivered his now-legendary seventeen-hour acceptance speech. The air of Valana was rich with the familiar urban smells of horse dung, food, and smoke. The streets were bustling; after the Crusade's defeat, many of the Nomads had come to settle in the narrow strip of farmland watered by the mountains. They bought and sold horses and cattle, changing their ways to suit their world's changing ways.

"I got tired of being a soldier," Aberlott said. "Did you tire of being a cardinal, Your Excellency?"

"I'm not a cardinal anymore," Blacktooth said, finding his old companion's sarcasm as tiresome as ever. Aberlott had a long scar under one eye, which he said he had "earned" outside the gates of Hannegan City when the Texark troops had outflanked and ambushed Høngan Ösle's warriors. It went well with his missing ear.

"I almost bled to death," Aberlott said. "I ended up in Hannegan City. Once the fighting was over, the Empire just folded us in, like raisins into a cake. Many of the *Qoesach dri Vørdar's* Nomads are now part of the Emperor's guard. I wandered around for a few weeks, then got a spot as secretary to a N'Ork Churchman who arrived for the conclave, and couldn't speak Ol'zark."

"Conclave?"

"Oh, yes," Aberlott said. "Sorely Nauwhat called a conclave and had himself made Pope, or perhaps we might say Filpeo had him made Pope. Urion Benefez was bitter; still is, I imagine. Without Brownpony to resist and stall and prevaricate, the bishops and archbishops drifted in, and Sorely nullified all the nullifications of the Amen Two, and then Wooshin nullified Filpeo."

"The Axe."

"Indeed," said Aberlott. "Stopped his carriage in the street. Sliced off his head when Filpeo stuck it out the window to see what was going on. The Hannegan's guard showered your yellow man with bullets but he welcomed them, he bared his throat and chest and belly to them. I saw it."

When Blacktooth closed his eyes he could see Wooshin's disapproving narrow eyes. "I would be dead now if it were not for him."

"Wouldn't we both? Anyway, you are no longer a cardinal. The papacy has been removed to Hannegan City, which is ruled by Benefez, as regent for several of Filpeo's sons, who will settle it among themselves, in typically bloody fashion, I imagine, when they come of age. In the meanwhile, a rough peace reigns."

Aberlott had married Anala, the sister of Jæsis, bringing her and two small children to Valana from New Jerusalem. He offered Blacktooth a place to stay, but the house was small and Blacktooth discovered he had no taste for domestic life. "I have been a monk too long," he told Aberlott, bidding him farewell and heading out toward the south.

It was a very good year for the buzzards. The younger generation waxed strong, soared high and far on black wings, waiting for the fruitful earth to yield up her bountiful carrion. One night, Blacktooth awakened in a cold sweat and thought that his fever was back. Then he looked north and saw the sky filled with *Nunshân*, the Night Hag, huge and ugly. He could see stars through her upraised arms. "Who is dying?" he asked aloud; he found out later it was his old friend Chür Ösle Høngan. Brownpony's plan had been a disaster for the Nomads. After the defeat, the Three Hordes had turned their backs on one another. The Treaty of the Sacred Mare no longer held, and the Plains were littered with bodies thrown down by drought, by famine, and by the motherless ones.

Blacktooth traveled south across the Nady Ann, the Bay Ghost, and at last the Brave. No longer a cardinal, he expected to be turned away at Mother Iridia's convent of San Pancho Villa of Cockroach Mountain, but she welcomed him almost as an old friend. She had no news, though, of Sister Clare-of-Assisi. She suspected Ædrea was somewhere with her own people.

"Her own people?" Blacktooth protested. "I was at New Jerusalem, and they knew nothing of her."

"The gleps," said Mother Iridia. "The spooks. The Valley of the Misborn."

The Jackrabbit country had always been harsh, but after two dry summers it had become even harsher. The wet years were over. Sand was taking the grass. Hannegan City was prospering, though. The Empire had turned east, and was looking toward the woodlands and the growing commerce up the Red from the Great River.

Blacktooth worked several days in the marketplace as a scribe before he was summoned to a papal audience. The summoner surprised him even more than the summons, for it was Torrildo, wearing a curate's gown, complete with feather.

"I told His Excellency you were here," the still handsome young man told Blacktooth. "You should be more careful; you are still under interdiction."

"I don't see why. If he took away my cardinalship, why couldn't he take away my interdiction?"

"It's Benefez," Torrildo said. "He thinks you had a hand in killing Filpeo."

I did, thought Blacktooth.

"He probably thanks you for it," said Torrildo. "But he doesn't particularly want you *around*."

Sorely Nauwhat was most respectful and even curious to hear of Blacktooth's adventures. He was especially interested in the situation on the Plains, but he knew more than Blacktooth. The apparition of the Night Hag had been seen all over the High Plains. The Weejus women were not pleased. When the *Qæsach dri Vørdar* returned from the South, he was called before them and put to death. After the funeral feast his bones were buried in three widely separated locations, decided by each of the three hordes.

"Why is he telling me this?" Blacktooth wondered as the plump, grave Pope rattled on, seemingly unconcerned about the time. *He is burying Brownpony's dreams.* Filpeo's were buried next: the Pope, who had been in the Emperor's carriage, described in gruesome detail how Wooshin had done his work. Filpeo's guard were equipped with the first copies of the repeaters, and several misfired. Axe had removed the head of the seventh Hannegan in a single stroke, then laid down his sword and knelt to receive the bullets chasing into his chest like bees into a hive.

*Dominus ex deo.*

The audience lasted all afternoon, and was exhausting. After the lengthy and bloody assassination,

Pope Sorely described the imperial situation in great detail. The repeating weapons were decisive. With them, Texarkana at last controlled the Plains. The old way of life was dying, and those who could not see the end coming could hear it keening in the wind. Even the grass was going. Crescent-shaped hills of sand marched slowly from west to east. The Empire that had secured its western frontiers now looked more and more to the east. New Rome smoldered for years but was never rebuilt. . . .

"My son—"

Blacktooth had fallen asleep. The Pope didn't seem insulted. When he left the log Papal Palace, Blacktooth was given a small sack of gold coins at the door. Pay for listening, he thought; and then on reflection realized it was travel money. He was to make himself scarce.

That had been his intention all along. Hannegan City, like Valana, was in turmoil. The streets were crowded with horses and men. The army was being decommissioned, new legates were piling out for the west, and the Grasshopper lands to the north were being opened up to the motherless ones and also to those among the Hannegan's former enemies who wanted to celebrate the new peace by raising cattle and grass.

Leaving was easy. Blacktooth was weary of cities and old friends and enemies. He was weary of mankind, so using the Pope's money he bought himself an ass, or to be precise, a mule, and headed north along the ragged edge where the forest meets the plains.

Grass. It stretched unbroken to one horizon, and meandered among the low, dark trees on the other. The little mountains called Winding Stare were lit with fires, whether of celebration or mourning, Blacktooth couldn't tell.

He rode unchallenged past the first log outposts of the gleps. He hoped the Valley of the Misborn would take him in, and it did. The Valley, or the Watchitah Nation as it was now called, had grown to be a network of valleys, up and down the low mountains called the Old Zarks. Blacktooth wandered until he found a little community of bookleggers and memorizers, called Post Cedar. He traded his mule for a g'tara much like the one his father had given him, and lived on the mountainside above the abbey, swapping his services as a scribe and a tutor for food.

He found shelter in a rockhouse cave, very like the cave where Amen had lived, except that these eastern caves were broad and open, like a mouth. They provide protection against the rain, and some against the cold; but none against the years.

And so, Blacktooth St. George grew old, reciting the Divine Office and meditating on *The Rule of Saint Leibowitz*, which enjoined him to the humility he was surprised to discover had been waiting for him all along. It was a sister to the deep loneliness he treasured, a loneliness he no longer wished filled. It was an emptiness as tangible as love. Some nights, though, he found himself praying to whatever might answer such a prayer that Ædrea would come to him. He had heard that a blond spook who wore a nun's robe practiced medicine in the next valley. The local priest called her a witch; sometimes she healed minds the priest had cursed, and because of this, the priest feared her.

Blacktooth needed his mind healed, but that was not what he feared in her. He feared the gateway beneath the clitoris, torn open by the black god and the white god he had seen riding with the Day Maiden on her rubriauricular white mule. Or had the old Jew done that to her? It was just over the hill waiting for him, the world gateway of the Lord Jesus and of all the saints, and he was a coward. Sometimes he stroked himself into a moment's ecstasy thinking about it, and he did not hide his shame from the Holy Mother Day Maiden *Fujæ Go* who watched him from the corner of the hut of his mind. Neither did he mention it in his annual confession to the Leibowitzian priest who visited him every Maundy Thursday. The priest always wanted to wash Nimmy's feet on behalf of the abbot on that occasion, but the hermit refused.

"You won't acknowledge your poverty? Isn't that your pride?"

Blacktooth signed and let the man wash his feet and give him communion.

He had given up Jesus several times, as Amen Specklebird had advised, when the Savior became an occasion of sin for him: but he always came back, and so, it seemed to him, did the Savior. *Well, how have you been doing lately, Lord?*

For three hours every weekday, he taught thirteen children of various ages how to read and write their own dialect; he also taught them a little music, and taught them—sometimes to their parents' disbelief—a few things about the geography of the continent, and as much as he knew about the history of the world and the fall of the *Magna Civitas*. Some of the children believed him, and others believed their parents; but the laughing parents brought him food in payment for their urchins' literacy, and they mended his clothes, furnished him blankets, and occasionally brought him a hemina of wine for his weakness.

When he was alone, he opened himself. Sometimes the ecstasy of God came through the opening, but more often it did not. He decided to stop leaving an opening for God. That was what Meister Eckhart advised: to be so poor that he had no place for God to come into. When God had no place to come into, He was in every place. There was nothing else.

But Blacktooth did not consider himself a religious man. He did not know if God was the Father, or the maker of Heaven and Earth, and of all things visible and invisible. He couldn't see that it mattered, since God Himself, when He became manifest as a whirlwind bush, never bothered to tell him; never said, "Blacktooth, I am your Almighty Father, and I made this Earth you're kneeling on and the sky you are kneeling under."

## CHAPTER 34

Let those who receive new clothes always give back the old ones at once, to be put away in the wardrobe for the poor.

—*Saint Benedict's Rule*, Chapter 55

UST OVER THE MOUNTAIN FROM POST CEDAR was a convent, where there lived a nun known as Sister Clare. She awakened one morning with one of her "feelings," and knew that the hermit who lived in the next valley was dead. She had known of him for years but had elected to leave him in peace, knowing the difficulty of the journey he was on. No one told her he was dead; no one besides herself knew it yet, and she only knew because of the feeling, not unlike joy and yet not unlike sorrow either, that wouldn't leave her. She welcomed the feeling. The hermit had few enough left in this world to miss him.

With the abbess's permission, Sister Clare packed a loaf of bread, a little cheese, and then, as an afterthought, a freshly dead mouse from the trap in the kitchen. She walked over the steep and little-used trail to Post Cedar. On the far side of the valley, across from the monastery, she found the narrow path to the dry cave, just where she knew it would be.

The old man hadn't been dead long. It was not his death but his age that filled Sister Clare's eyes with tears. She had expected somehow to find a handsome young man, even though she was herself an old woman, bent and spotted with years.

Blacktooth was sitting against a stone with the head of a small cougar in his lap. The animal lifted its blue head when she approached. It was Librada. Ædrea waited but the cougar wouldn't leave, and finally had to be coaxed away with the mouse so that she could bury Blacktooth and place at the head of his grave the little cross she had carried with her all these years.

The rosary that was clutched in his hand, and the crude g'tara he had left leaning against the back wall of the cave, she took with her.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Walter M. Miller, Jr., grew up in the American South and enlisted in the Army Air Corps a month after Pearl Harbor. He spent most of World War II as a radio operator and tail gunner, participating in more than fifty-five combat sorties, among them the controversial destruction of the Benedictine abbey at

Monte Cassino, the oldest monastery in the Western world. Fifteen years later he wrote *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. The sequel, *Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman*, followed after nearly forty years.

(From the Dust Jacket)

It has been nearly forty years since Walter M. Miller, Jr., shocked and dazzled readers with his provocative bestseller and enduring classic, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. Now, in one of the most eagerly awaited publishing events of our time, here is Miller's masterpiece, an epic intellectual and emotional tour de force that will stand beside 1984, *Brave New World*, and *A Canticle for Leibowitz*.

## SAINT LEIBOWITZ AND THE WILD HORSE WOMAN

In a world struggling to transcend a terrifying legacy of darkness—a world torn between love and violence, good and evil—one man undertakes an odyssey of adventure and discovery that promises to alter not only his destiny but the destiny of humankind as well...

Millennia have passed since the Flame Deluge, yet society remains fragmented, pockets of civilization besieged by barbarians. The Church is in turmoil, the exiled papacy struggling to survive in its Rocky Mountain refuge. To the south, tyranny is on the march. Imperial Texark troops, bent on conquest, are headed north into the lands of the nomads, spreading terror in their wake.

Meanwhile, isolated in Leibowitz Abbey, Brother Blacktooth St. George suffers a crisis of faith. Torn between his vows and his Nomad upbringing, between the Holy Virgin and visions of the Wild Horse Woman of his people, he stands at the brink of disgrace and expulsion from his order. But he is offered an escape—of sorts: a new assignment as a translator for Cardinal Brownpony, which will take him to the contentious election of a new pope and then on a pilgrimage to the city of New Rome. Journeying across a continent divided by nature, politics, and war, Blacktooth is drawn into Brownpony's intrigues and conspiracies. He bears witness to rebellion, assassination, and human sacrifice. And he is introduced to the sins that monastery life has long held at bay.

This introduction comes in the form of Ædrea, a beautiful but forbidden "genny" living among the deformed and mutant castouts in Texark's most hostile terrain. As Blacktooth encounters her again and again on his travels—in the flesh, in rumors of miraculous deeds, and in the delirium of fever—he begins to wonder if Ædrea is a she-devil, the Holy Mother, or the Wild Horse Woman herself.

Picaresque and passionate, magnificent, dark, and compellingly real, *Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman* is a brutal, brilliant, thrilling tale of mystery, mysticism, and divine madness, a classic that will long endure in every reader's memory.

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**Short Fiction**



In alphabetical order, here are the shorter works.

## Anybody Else Like Me?

QUIET MISERY IN a darkened room. The clock spoke nine times with a cold brass voice. She stood motionless, leaning against the drapes by the window, alone. The night was black, the house empty and silent.

*"Come, Lisa!"* she told herself. *"You're not dying!"*

She was thirty-four, still lovely, with a slender white body and a short, rich thatch of warm red hair. She had a good dependable husband, three children, and security. She had friends, hobbies, social activities. She painted mediocre pictures for her own amusement, played the piano rather well, and wrote fair poetry for the University's literary quarterly. She was well-read, well-rounded, well-informed. She loved and was loved.

Then why this quiet misery?

Wanting something, expecting nothing, she stared out into the darkness of the stone-walled garden. The night was too quiet. A distant street lamp played in the branches of the elm, and the elm threw its shadow across another wing of the house. She watched the shadow's wandering for a time. A lone car purred past in the street and was gone. A horn sounded raucously in the distance.

What was wrong? A thousand times since childhood she had felt this uneasy stirring, this crawling of the mind that called out for some unfound expression. It had been particularly strong in recent weeks.

She tried to analyze. What was different about recent weeks? Events: Frank's job had sent him on the road for a month; the children were at Mother's; the city council had recommended a bond issue; she had fired her maid; a drunk had strangled his wife; the University had opened its new psycho-physics lab; her art class had adjourned for the summer.

Nothing there. No clue to the unreasoning, goalless urge that called like a voice crying in mental wilderness: *"Come, share, satisfy, express it to the fullest!"*

Express what? Satisfy what? How?

A baby, deserted at birth and dying of starvation, would feel terrible hunger. But if it had never tasted milk, it could not know the meaning of the hunger nor how to ease it.

*"I need to relate this thing to something else, to something in my own experience or in the experience of others."* She had tried to satisfy the urge with the goals of other hungers: her children, her husband's lovemaking, food, drink, art, friendship. But the craving was something else, crying for its pound of unknown flesh, and there was no fulfillment.

*"How am I different from others?"* she asked herself. But she was different only in the normal ways that every human being is different from the exact Average. Her intelligence was high, short of genius, but superior. To a limited extent, she felt the call of creativity. Physically, she was delicately beautiful. The only peculiarities that she knew about seemed ridiculously irrelevant: a dark birth-mark on her thigh, a soft fontanel in the top of her long narrow head, like the soft spot in an infant's cranium. Silly little differences!

One big difference: the quiet misery of the unfed hunger.

A scattering of big raindrops suddenly whispered on the walk and in the grass and through the foliage of the elm. A few drops splattered on the screen, spraying her face and arms with faint points of coolness. It had been oppressively hot. Now there was a chill breath in the night.

Reluctantly she closed the window. The oppression of the warm and empty house increased. She walked to the door opening into the walled garden.

Ready for a lonely bed, she was wearing a negligee over nothing. Vaguely, idly, her hand fumbled at the waist-knot, loosened it. The robe parted, and the fine spray of rain was delightfully cool on her skin.

The garden was dark, the shadows inky, the nearest neighbor a block away. The wall screened it

from prying eyes. She brushed her hands over her shoulders; the sleeves slipped down her arms. Peeled clean, feeling like a freed animal, she pressed open the screen and stepped out under the eaves to stand on the warm stone walk.

The rain was rattling in the hedge and roaring softly all about her, splashing coldness about her slender calves. She hugged herself and stepped into it. The drench of icy fingers stroked her with pleasant lashes; she laughed and ran along the walk toward the elm. The drops stung her breasts, rivered her face, and coursed coldly down her sides and legs.

She exulted in the rain, tried to dance and laughed at herself. She ran. Then, tired, she threw herself down on the crisp wet lawn, stretching her arms and legs and roll-ing slowly on the grass. Eyes closed, drenched and languorous, she laughed softly and played imagining games with the rain.

The drops were steel-jacketed wasps, zipping down out of the blackness, but she melted them with her mind, made them soft and cool and caressing. The drops took impersonal liberties with her body, and she rolled de-murely to lie face down in the rainsoft grass.

*"I am still a pale beast," she thought happily, "still kin of my grandmother the ape who danced in the tree and chattered when it rained. How utterly barren life would be, if I were not a pale beast!"*

She dug her fingers into the sodden turf, bared her teeth, pressed her forehead against the ground, and growled a little animal growl. It amused her, and she laughed again. Crouching, she came up on her hands and knees, hunching low, teeth still bared. Like a cat, she hissed—and pounced upon a sleeping bird, caught it and shook it to death.

Again she lay laughing in the grass.

*"If Frank were to see me like this," she thought, "he would put me to bed with a couple of sleeping pills, and call that smug Dr. Mensley to have a look at my mind. And Dr. Mensley would check my ambivalences and my repressions and my narcissistic, voyeuristic, masochistic impulses. He would tighten my screws and readjust me to reality, fit me into a comfortable groove, and take the pale beast out of me to make me a talking doll."*

He had done it several times before. Thinking of Dr. Mensley, Lisa searched her vocabulary for the most savage word she could remember. She growled it aloud and felt better.

The rain was slowly subsiding. A siren was wailing in the distance. The police. She giggled and imagined a headline in tomorrow's paper: PROMINENT SOCIALITE JAILED FOR INDECENT EXPOSURE. And the story would go on: "Mrs. Lisa Waverly was taken into custody by the police after neighbors reported that she was running around stark naked in her back yard. Said Mrs. Heinehoffer who called the law: 'It was just terrible. Looked lo me like she was having fits.' Mr. Heinehoffer, when asked for comment, simply closed his eyes and smiled ecstatically."

Lisa sighed wearily. The siren had gone away. The rain had stopped, except for drippings out of the elm. She was tired, emotionally spent, yet strangely melan-choly. She sat up slowly in the grass and hugged her shins.

The feeling came over her gradually.

*"Someone has been watching me!"*

She stiffened slowly, but remained in place, letting her eyes probe about her in the shadows. If only the drippings would stop so she could listen! She peered along the hedge, and along the shadows by the garden wall, toward the dark windows of the house, up toward the low-hanging mist faintly illuminated from below by street lights. She saw nothing, heard nothing. There was no movement in the night. Yet the feeling lingered, even though she scoffed.

*"If anyone is here," she thought, "I'll call them gently, and if anyone appears, I'll scream so loud that Mrs. Heine-hoffer will hear me."*

"Hey!" she said in a low voice, but loud enough to pene-trate any of the nearby shadows.

There was no answer. She folded her arms behind her head and spoke again, quietly, sensually.

*"Come and get me."*

No black monster slithered from behind the hedge to devour her. No panther sprang from the elm. No succubus congealed out of wet darkness. She giggled.

"Come have a bite."

No bull-ape came to crush her in ravenous jaws.

She had only imagined the eyes upon her. She stretched lazily and picked herself up, pausing to brush off the leaves of grass pasted to her wet skin. It was over, the strange worship in the rain, and she was weary. She walked slowly toward the house.

Then she heard it—a faint crackling sound, intermittent, distant. She stood poised in the black shadow of the house, listening. The crackle of paper . . . then a small pop . . . then crisp fragments dropped in the street. It was repeated at short intervals.

Taking nervous, shallow breaths, she tiptoed quietly toward the stone wall of the garden. It was six feet high, but there was a concrete bench under the trellis. The sound was coming from over the wall. She stood crouch-ing on the bench; then, hiding her face behind the vines, she lifted her head to peer.

The street lamp was half a block away, but she could see dimly. A man was standing across the street in the shadows, apparently waiting for a bus. He was eating peanuts out of a paper bag, tossing the shells in the street. That explained the crackling sound.

She glared at him balefully from behind the trellis. *"I'll claw your eyes out,"* she thought, *"if you came and peeped over my wall."*

"Hi!" the man said.

Lisa stiffened and remained motionless. It was impos-sible that he could see her. She was in shadow, against a dark background. Had he heard her foolish babbling a moment ago?

More likely, he had only cleared his throat.

"Hi!" he said again.

Her face was hidden in the dripping vines, and she could not move without rustling. She froze in place, star-ing. She could see little of him. Dark raincoat, dark hat, slender shadow. Was he looking toward her? She was desperately frightened.

Suddenly the man chucked the paper hag in the gutter, stepped off the curb, and came sauntering across the street toward the wall. He removed his hat, and crisp blond hair glinted in the distant streetlight. He stopped three yards away, smiling uncertainly at the vines.

Lisa stood trembling and frozen, staring at him in horror. Strange sensations, utterly alien, passed over her in waves. There was no describing them, no understanding them.

"I—I found you," he stammered sheepishly. "Do you know what it is?"

*"I know you,"* she thought. *"You have a small scar on the back of your neck, and a mole between your toes. Your eyes are blue, and you have an impacted wisdom tooth, and your feet are hurting you because you walked all the way out here from the University, and I'm almost old enough to be your mother. But I can't know you, because I've never seen you before!"*

"Strange, isn't it?" he said uncertainly. He was holding his hat in his hand and cocking his head politely.

"What?" she whispered.

He shuffled his feet and stared at them. "It must be some sort of palpable biophysical energy form, analyti-cally definable—if we had enough data. Lord knows, I'm no mystic. If it exists, it's got to be mathematically definable. But why us?"

Horried curiosity made her step aside and lean her arms on the wall to stare down at him. He looked up bashfully, and his eyes widened slightly.

"Oh!"

"Oh what?" she demanded, putting on a terrible frown.

"You're beautiful!"

"What do you want?" she asked icily. "Go away!"

"I—" He paused and closed his mouth slowly. He stared at her with narrowed eyes, and touched one hand to his temple as if concentrating.

For an instant, she was no longer herself. She was looking up at her own shadowy face from down in

the street, looking through the eyes of a stranger who was not a stranger. She was feeling the fatigue in the weary ankles, and the nasal ache of a slight head cold, and the strange sadness in a curious heart—a sadness too akin to her own.

She rocked dizzily. It was like being in two places at once, like wearing someone else's body for a moment.

The feeling passed. "*It didn't happen!*" she told herself.

"No use denying it," he said quietly. "I tried to make it go away, too, but apparently we've got something unique. It would be interesting to study. Do you suppose we're related?"

"Who are you?" she choked, only half-hearing his ques-tion.

"You know my name," he said, "if you'll just take the trouble to think about it. Yours is Lisa—Lisa O'Brien, or Lisa Waverly—I'm never sure which. Sometimes it comes to me one way, sometimes the other."

She swallowed hard. Her maiden name had been O'Brien.

"I don't know you," she snapped.

His name was trying to form in her mind. She refused to allow it. The young man sighed.

"I'm Kenneth Grearly, if you really don't know." He stepped back a pace and lifted his hat toward his head. "I—I guess I better go. I see this disturbs you. I had hoped we could talk about it, but—well, good night, Mrs. Waverly."

He turned and started away.

"Wait!" she called out against her will. He stopped again. "Yes?"

"Were—were you watching me—while it was raining?"

He opened his mouth and stared thoughtfully down the street toward the light. "You mean watching visually? You really are repressing this thing, aren't you? I thought you understood." He looked at her sharply, forlornly. "They say the failure to communicate is the basis of all tragedy. Do you suppose in our case ... ?"

"What?"

"Nothing." He shifted restlessly for a moment. "Good night."

"Good night," she whispered many seconds after he was gone.

Her bedroom was hot and lonely, and she tossed in growing restlessness. If only Frank were home! But he would be gone for two more weeks. The children would be back on Monday, but that was three whole days away. Crazy! It was just stark raving crazy!

Had the man really existed—what was his name?—Ken-neth Grearly? Or was he only a phantasm invented by a mind that was failing—her mind? Dancing naked in the rain! Calling out to shadow shapes in the brush! Talking to a specter in the street! Schizophrenic syndrome- dream-world stuff. It could not be otherwise, for unless she had invented Kenneth Grearly, how could she know he had sore feet, an impacted wisdom tooth, and a head cold. Not only did she know about those things, but she felt them!

She buried her face in the dusty pillow and sobbed. Tomorrow she would have to call Dr. Mensley.

But fearing the specter's return, she arose a few min-utes later and locked all the doors in the house. When she returned to bed, she tried to pray but it was as if the prayer were being watched. Someone was listening, eavesdropping from outside.

Kenneth Grearly appeared in her dreams, stood half-shrouded in a slowly swirling fog. He stared at her with his head cocked aside, smiling slightly, holding his hat respectfully in his hands.

"Don't you realize, Mrs. Waverly, that we are mutants perhaps?" he asked politely.

"No!" she screamed. "I'm happily married and I have three children and a place in society! Don't come near me!"

He melted slowly into the fog. But echoes came monot-onously from invisible cliffs: *mutant mutant mutant mutant mutant ...*

Dawn came, splashing pink paint across the eastern sky. The light woke her to a dry and empty consciousness, to a headachy awareness full of dull anxiety. She arose wearily and trudged to the kitchen for a pot of coffee.

Lord! Couldn't it all be only a bad dream?

In the cold light of early morning, the things of the past night looked somehow detached, unreal. She tried to ana-lyze objectively.

That sense of sharing a mind, a consciousness, with the stranger who came out of the shadows—what crazy thing had he called it?—"some sort of palpable biophysical energyform, analytically definable."

"If I invented the stranger," she thought, "I must have also invented the words."

But where had she heard such words before?

Lisa went to the telephone and thumbed through the directory. No Grearly was listed. If he existed at all, he probably lived in a rooming house. The University—last night she had thought that he had something to do with the University. She lifted the phone and dialed.

"University Station; number please," the operator said.

"I—uh—don't know the extension number. Could you tell me if there is a Kenneth Grearly connected with the school?"

"Student or faculty, Madam?"

"I don't know."

"Give me your number, please, and I'll call you back." "Lawrence 4750. Thanks, Operator."

She sat down to wait. Almost immediately it rang again. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Waverly, you were calling me?" A man's voice. His voice!

"The operator found you rather quickly." It was the only thing she could think of saying.

"No, no. I knew you were calling. In fact, I hoped you into it."

"Hoped me? Now look here, Mr. Grearly, I—"

"You were trying to explain our phenomenon in terms of insanity rather than telepathy. I didn't want you to do that, and so I hoped you into calling me."

Lisa was coldly speechless.

"What phenomenon are you talking about?" she asked after a few dazed seconds.

"Still repressing it? Listen, I can share your mind any time I want to, now that I understand where and who you are. You might as well face the fact. And it can work both ways, if you let it. Up to now, you've been—well, keeping your mind's eye closed, so to speak."

Her scalp was crawling. The whole thing had become intensely disgusting to her.

"I don't know what you're up to, Mr. Grearly, but I wish you'd stop it. I admit something strange is going on, but your explanation is ridiculous—offensive, even."

He was silent for a long time, then "I wonder if the first man-ape found his prehensile thumb ridiculous. I wonder if he thought using his hands for grasping was offensive."

"What are you trying to say?"

"That I think we're mutants. We're not the first ones. I had this same experience when I was in Boston once. There must be one of us there, too, but suddenly I got the feeling that he had committed suicide. I never saw him. We're probably the first ones to discover each other."

"Boston? If what you say is true, what would distance have to do with it?"

"Well, if telepathy exists, it certainly involves transfer of energy from one point to another. What *kind* of en-ergy, I don't know. Possibly electromagnetic in character. Out it seems likely that it would obey the inverse square law, like radiant energy forms. I came to town about three weeks ago. I didn't feel you until I got close."

"*There is a connection,*" she thought. She had been wondering about the increased anxiety of the past three weeks.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she evaded icily, though. "I'm no mutant. I don't believe in telepathy. I'm not insane. Now let me alone."

She slammed the telephone in its cradle and started to walk away.

Evidently he was angry, for she was suddenly communi-cating with him again.

She reeled dizzily and clutched at the wall, because she was in two places at once, and the two

settings merged in her mind to become a blur, like a double exposure. She was in her own hallway, and she was also in an office, looking at a calculator keyboard, hearing glassware rattling from across a corridor, aware of the smell of formaldehyde. There was a chart on the wall behind the desk and it was covered with strange tracery—schematics of some neural arcs. The office of the psychophysics lab. She closed her eyes, and her own hallway disappeared.

She felt anger—his anger.

*"We've got to face this thing. If this is a new direction for human evolution, then we'd better study it and see what to do about it. I knew I was different and I became a psychophysicist to find out why. I haven't been able to measure much, but now with Lisa's help ..."*

She tried to shut him out. She opened her eyes and summoned her strength and tried to force him away. She stared at the bright doorway, but the tracery of neural arcs still remained. She fought him, but his mind lingered in hers.

*"... perhaps we can get to the bottom of it. I know my encephalograph recordings are abnormal, and now I can check them against hers. A few correlations will help. I'm glad to know about her soft fontanel. I wondered about mine. Now I think that underneath that fontanel lies a pattern of specialized neural—"*

She sagged to the floor of the hall and babbled aloud "Hickory Dickory Dock, the mouse ran up the clock. The clock struck one—"

Slowly he withdrew. The laboratory office faded from her vision. His thoughts left her. She lay there panting for a time.

Had she won?

No, there was no sense in claiming victory. She had not driven him away. He had withdrawn of his own volition when he felt her babbling. She knew his withdrawal was free, because she had felt his parting state of mind: sadness. He had stopped the forced contact because he pitied her, and there was a trace of contempt in the pity.

She climbed slowly to her feet, looking around wildly, touching the walls and the door-frame to reassure herself that she was still in her own home. She staggered into the parlor and sat shivering on the sofa.

Last night! That *crazy* running around in the rain! He was responsible for that. He had hoped her into doing it, or maybe he had just wondered what she looked like undressed, and she had subconsciously satisfied his curiosity. He had planted the suggestion—innocently, perhaps—and she had unknowingly taken the cue.

He could be with her whenever he wanted to! He had been with her while she frolicked insanely in the rain-sodden grass! Perhaps he was with her now.

Whom could she talk to? Where could she seek help? Dr. Mensley? He would immediately chalk it up as a delusion, and probably call for a sanity hearing if she wouldn't voluntarily enter a psychoward for observation.

The police? "Sergeant, I want to report a telepathic prowler. A man is burglarizing my mind."

A clergyman? He would shudder and refer her to a psychiatrist.

All roads led to the booby-hatch, it seemed. Frank wouldn't believe her. No one would believe her.

Lisa wandered through the day like a caged animal. She put on her brightest summer frock and a pert straw hat and went downtown. She wandered through the crowds in the business district, window-shopping. But she was alone. The herds of people about her brushed past and wandered on. A man whistled at her in front of a cigar store. A policeman waved her back to the curb when she started across an intersection.

"Wake up, lady!" he called irritably.

People all about her, but she could not tell them, explain to them, and so she was alone. She caught a taxi and went to visit a friend, the wife of an English teacher, and drank a glass of iced tea in the friend's parlor, and talked of small things, and admitted that she was tired when the friend suggested that she looked that way. When she went back home, the sun was sinking in the west.

She called long distance and talked to her mother, then spoke to her children, asked them if they were ready to come home, but they wanted to stay another week. They begged, and her mother begged, and she reluctantly con-sented. It had been a mistake to call. Now the kids would be gone even longer.

She tried to call Frank in St. Louis, but the hotel clerk reported that he had just checked out. Lisa knew this meant he was on the road again.

*"Maybe I ought to go join the kids at Mother's,"* she thought. But Frank had wanted her to stay home. He was expecting a registered letter from Chicago, and it was ap-parently important, and she had to take care of it.

*"I'll invite somebody over,"* she thought. But the wives were home with their husbands, and it was a so-cial mistake to invite a couple when her husband was gone. It always wound up with two women yammering at each other while the lone male sat and glowered in uneasy isolation, occasionally disagreeing with his wife, just to let her know he was there and he was annoyed and bored and why didn't they go home? It was different if the business-widow called on a couple. Then the lone male could retire to some other part of the house to escape the yammering.

But she decided it wasn't company she wanted; she wanted help. And there was no place to get it.

When she allowed her thoughts to drift toward Ken-neth Grearly, it was almost like tuning in a radio station. He was eating early dinner in the University cafeteria with a bedraggled, bespectacled brunette from the laboratory. Lisa closed her eyes and let herself sift gingerly into his thoughts. His attention was on the conversation and on the food, and he failed to realize Lisa's presence. That knowledge gave her courage.

He was eating Swiss steak and hashed brown potatoes, and the flavors formed perceptions in her mind. She heard the rattle of silverware, the low murmur of voices, and smelled the food. She marveled at it. The strange ability had apparently been brought into focus by learn-ing what it was and how to use it.

"Our work has been too empirical," he was saying. "We've studied phenomena, gathered data, looked for correlations. But that method has limitations. We should try to find a way to approach psychology from below. Like the invariantive approach to physics."

The girl shook her head. "The nervous system is too complicated for writing theoretical equations about it. Empirical equations are the best we can do."

"They aren't good enough, Sarah. You can predict results with them, inside the limits of their accuracy. But you can't extrapolate them very well, and they won't stack up together into a single integrated structure. And when you're investigating a new field, they no longer apply. We need a broad mathematical theory, covering all hypothetically possible neural arrangements. It would let us predict not only results, but also predict patterns of possible order."

"Seems to me the possible patterns are infinite."

"No, Sarah. They're limited by the nature of the build-ing blocks—neurons, synaptic connections, and, so forth. With limited materials, you have structural limitations. You don't build skyscrapers out of modeling clay. And there is only a finite number of ways you can build atoms out of electrons, protons and neutrons. Similarly, brains are confined to the limitations of the things they're made of. We need a broad theory for defining the limits."

"Why?"

"Because . . ." He paused. Lisa felt his urge to explain his urgency, felt him suppress it, felt for a moment his loneliness in the awareness of his uniqueness and the way it isolated him from humanity.

"You must be doing new work," the girl offered, "if you feel the lack of such a theoretical approach. I just can't imagine an invariantive approach to psychology—or an all defining set of laws for it, either. Why do you need such a psychological 'Relativity'?"

He hesitated, frowning down at his plate, watching a fly crawl around its rim. "I'm interested in—in the quantitative aspects of nerve impulses. I—I suspect that there is such a thing as neural resonance."

She laughed politely and shook her head. "I'll stick to my empirical data-gathering, thank you."

I ha felt him thinking:

*'She could understand, if I could show her data. But my data is all subjective, experimental, personal. I share it with that Waverly woman, but she is only a social thinker, analytically shallow, refusing even to recognize facts. Why did it have to be her? She's flighty, emotional, and in a cultural rut. If she doesn't conform, she thinks she's nuts. But then at least she's a woman—and if this is really a mutation, we'll have to arrange for some children ...*

Lisa gasped and sat bolt upright. Her shock revealed her presence to him, and he dropped his fork with a clatter.

*"Lisa!"*

She wrenched herself free of him abruptly. She angrily stalked about the house, slamming doors and muttering her rage. The nerve! The maddening, presumptuous, ill-mannered, self-centered, overly educated boor!

Arrange for some children indeed! An impossible situation!

As her anger gathered momentum, she contacted him again—like a snake striking. Thought was thunder out of a dark cloud.

*"I'm decent and I'm respectable, Mr. Grearly! I have a husband and three fine children and I love them, and you can go to hell! I never want to see you again or have you prowling around my mind. Get out and STAY out. And if you ever bother me again—I'll—I'll kill you."*

He was outdoors, striding across the campus alone. She saw the gray buildings, immersed in twilight, felt the wind on his face, hated him. He was thinking nothing, letting himself follow her angry flow of thought. When she finished, his thoughts began like the passionate pleading of a poem.

He was imagining a human race with telepathic abilities, in near-perfect communication with one another. So many of the world's troubles could be traced to im-perfect communication of ideas, to misunderstandings.

Then he thought briefly of Sarah—the nondescript laboratory girl he had taken to dinner—and Lisa realized he was in love with Sarah. There were sadness and resentment here. He couldn't have Sarah now, not if he were to be certain of perpetuating the mutant character-istic. The Waverly woman ought to be good for three or four children yet, before she reached middle age.

Lisa stood transfixed by shock. Then he was thinking directly to her.

*"I'm sorry. You're a beautiful, intelligent woman—but I don't love you. We're not alike. But I'm stuck with you and you're stuck with me, because I've decided it's going to be that way. I can't convince you since your thinking habits are already fixed, so I won't even try. I'm sorry it has to be against your will, but in any event it has to be. And now that I know what you're like, I don't dare wait—for fear you'll do something to mess things up."*

*"No!"* she screamed, watching the scenery that moved past his field of vision.

He had left the campus and was walking up the street—toward her neighborhood. He was walking with the briskness of purpose. He was coming to her house.

*"Call the police!"* she thought, and tried to dissolve him out of her mind.

But this time he followed, clung to her thoughts, would not let her go. It was like two flashlight beams playing over a wall, one trying to escape, the other following its frantic circle of brightness.

She staggered, groped her way toward the hall, which was confused with a superimposed image of a sidewalk and a street. A phantom automobile came out of the hall wall, drove through her and vanished. Double exposures. He stared at a street light and it blinded her. At last she found the phone, but he was laughing at her.

*"Eight seven six five twenty-one Mary had a little lamb seven seven sixty-seven yesterday was May March April..."*

He was deliberately filling her mind with confusion. She fumbled at the directory, trying to find the police, but he thought a confused jumble of numbers and sym-bols, and they scampered across the page, blurring the lines.

She whimpered and groped at the phone-dial, trying to get the operator, but he was doing something with his fingertips, and she couldn't get the feel of the dial.



On her third try, it finally worked.

"Information," said a pleasant impersonal voice.

She had to get the police! She had to say

*"Pease porridge hot, pease porridge cold, pease porridge in the pot, nine days pretty pony parrot played peacefully plentiwise pease porridge . . ."*

He was jamming her speech centers with gibberish, and she blurted nonsense syllables into the mouthpiece.

"You'll have to speak more distinctly, madam. I can't understand you."

"Poress, Policer ..."

"The police? Just a moment."

A series of jumbled sounds and visions clouded her mind. Then a masculine voice rumbled, "Desk, Sergeant Harris."

She found a clear path through the confusion and gasped, "Three-oh-oh-three Willow Drive—'mergency come quick—man going to—"

"Three-oh-oh-three Willow. Check. We'll have a car right over there."

She hung up quickly—or tried to—but she couldn't find the cradle. Then her vision cleared, and she screamed. She wasn't in the hall at all!

The telephone was an eggbeater!

His voice came through her trapped panic.

*You might as well give in,"* he told her with a note of sadness. *"I know how to mess you up like that, you see. And you haven't learned to retaliate yet. We're go-ing to cooperate with this evolutionary trend, whether you like it or not—but it would be more pleasant if you agree to it."*

*"No!"*

*"All right, but I'm coming anyway. I hoped it wouldn't be like this. I wanted to convince you gradually. Now I know that it's impossible."*

He was still ten blocks away. She had a few minutes in which to escape. She bolted for the door. A black shadow-shape loomed up in the twilight, flung its arms wide, and emitted an apelike roar.

She yelped and darted back, fleeing frantically for the front. A boa constrictor lay coiled in the hall; it slithered toward her. She screamed again and raced to-ward the stairway.

She made it to the top and looked back. The living room was filling slowly with murky water. She rushed shrieking into the bedroom and bolted the door.

She smelled smoke. Her dress was on fire! The flames licked up, searing her skin.

She tore at it madly, and got it off, but her slip was afire. She ripped it away, scooped up the flaming cloth-ing on a transom hook, opened the screen, and dropped them out the window. Flames still licked about her, and she rolled up in the bed-clothing to snuff them out.

Quiet laughter.

*"New syndrome,"* he called to her pleasantly. *"The patient confuses someone else's fantasy with her own reality. Not schizophrenia—duophrenia, maybe?"*

She lay sobbing in hysterical desperation. He was just down the street now, coming rapidly up the walk. A car whisked slowly past. He felt her terrified despair and pitied her. The torment ceased.

She stayed there, panting for a moment, summoning spirit. He was nearing the intersection just two blocks south, and she could hear the rapid traffic with his ears.

Suddenly she clenched her eyes closed and gritted her teeth. He was stepping off the curb, walking across—

She imagined a fire engine thundering toward her like a juggernaut, rumbling and wailing. She imagined another car racing out into the intersection, with herself caught in the crossfire. She imagined a woman screaming, "Look out, Mister!"

And then she was caught in his own responding fright, and it was easier to imagine. He was bolting for the other corner. She conjured a third car from another direction, brought it lunging at him to avoid the impend-ing wreck. He staggered away from the phantom cars and screamed.

A real car confused the scene.

She echoed his scream. There was a moment of rend-ing pain, and then the vision was gone. Brakes were still yowling two blocks away. Someone was running down the sidewalk. A part of her mind had heard the crashing thud. She was desperately sick.

And a sudden sense of complete aloneness told her that Grearly was dead. A siren was approaching out of the distance.

VOICES from the sidewalk: ". . . just threw a fit in the middle of the street . . . running around like crazy and hollering . . . it was a delivery truck . . . crushed his skull . . . nobody else hurt ..."

After the street returned to normal, she arose and went to get a drink of water. But she stood staring at her sick white face in the mirror. There were crow's feet forming at the corners of her eyes, and her skin was growing tired, almost middle-aged.

It was funny that she should notice that now, at this strange moment. She had just killed a man in self-defense. And no one would believe it if she told the truth. There was no cause for guilt.

Was there?

Frank would be back soon, and everything would be the same again: peace, security, nice kids, nice home, nice husband. Just the way it always had been.

But something was already different. An emptiness. A loneliness of the mind that she had never before felt. She kept looking around to see if the lights hadn't gone dim, or the clock stopped ticking, or the faucet stopped dripping.

It was none of those things. The awful silence was within her.

Gingerly, she touched the soft spot in the top of her head and felt an utter aloneness. She closed her eyes and thought a hopeless plea to the Universe:

*"Is there anybody else like me? Can anybody hear me?"*

There was only complete silence, the silence of the voiceless void.

And for the first time in her life she felt the confine-ment of total isolation and knew it for what it was.

## The Big Hunger

I AM BLIND, yet I know the road to the stars. Space is my harp, and I touch it lightly with fingers of steel. Space sings. Its music quivers in the flux patterns, comes creep-ing along the twitch of a positron stream, comes to whis-per in glass ears. I hear. Alec! Though I am without eyes, I see the stars tangled in their field-webs, tangled into One. I am the spider who runs over the web. I am the spider who spins, spinning a space where no stars are.

And I am Harpist to a pale, proud Master.

He builds me, and feeds me the fuel I eat, and leads me riding through the space I make, to the glare of another sun. And when he is done with me, I lie rusting in the rain. My metal rots with ages, and the sea comes washing over land to take me while I sleep. The Master forgets. The Master chips flint from a stone, leaving a stone-ax. He busies himself with drums and bloody altars; he dances with a writhing snake in his mouth, conjuring the rain.

Then—after a long time—he remembers. He builds an-other of me, and I am the same, for like the Soul of him who builds me, my principle lies beyond particular flesh. When my principle is clothed in steel, we go wandering again. I the minstrel, with Man the king.

Hear the song of his hunger, the song of his endless thirst.

There was a man named Abe Jolie, and he leaned against me idly with one hand in the gloom while he spoke quietly and laughed with a female of his species.

"It's finished, Junebug. We got it made," he said.

And the girl looked her green eyes over me while the crickets sang beyond the wall, and while the shuttling of their feet echoed faintly in the great hangar.

"Finished," she murmured. "It's your success, Abe." "Mine, and a lot of others. And the government's money."

She toyed with the lapel of his coveralls, grinned, and said, "Let's steal it and run away."

"Sssh!" He looked around nervously, but there were no guards in sight. "They can shoot you for less than that," he warned. "The S.P. doesn't have a sense of humor."

"Abe—"

"What?"

"Kiss me."

He kissed her.

"When is that going to be illegal, too?" she whispered. He looked at her grimly, and she answered her own question.

"As soon as the eugenics laws are passed, Abe. Abe Jolie, who built the spacedrive, a genetic undesirable." "*Don't!*"

They stood there breathing quietly, and there was hate in their throats.

"Well?"

He looked around again, and whispered, "Meet me here at eleven o'clock, Junebug."

They parted to the sound of casual footsteps.

At eleven o'clock, a lion roared in the hangar. At eleven o'clock a steel juggernaut tore through the hangar wall and paused on a concrete ramp while bullets rico-cheted off the hull. Then the first star-chariot burnt a verticle column of flame in the night. Thunder walked upward on fiery stilts, while men shouted angrily. When we were alone in the airless, star-stung, sun-torn blackness, I stroked the web of space, and listened to the muted notes. When the tune is memorized, I speak. I contradict. I refute the universe. We lived in a spaceless space beyond stars.

The man and the woman had gone. But the plan re-mained on Earth. My principle lingered on the drawing boards, and in the dreams of men—men who said they were sick of wars and politics and the braying of collectivist jackasses. Others were sick of petty peace and cheap-ness and Independence Day speeches and incorporated jackasses who blubbered disgustingly about various free-doms.

They wanted the one Big Freedom. They built me again, these pale, proud bipeds, these children of an Ape-Prince who walked like a god. They packed themselves in cylinders of steel and wandering, riding starward on a heart-tempest that had once sung them down from the trees to stalk the plains with club and torch. The pod of earth opened, scattered its seed spaceward. It was the time of the great bursting, the great birth-giving. Empires shivered in the storm.

Sky-chariots flung themselves upward to vanish beyond the fringes of the atmosphere. Prairie schooners of space bore the restless, the contemptuous, the hungry and the proud. And I led them along the self-road that runs around space. The world seethed, and empires toppled, and new empires arose whose purpose it was to build the sky-chariots.

Young men, young women, clamored at the gates of launching fields. Those who were chosen grinned expect-antly at the stars. They climbed aboard in throngs and deserted Earth. They were hard laughers with red freckles and big fists. They wore slide rules at their belts like swords, and they spoke familiarly of Schwarzschild Line-Elements and Riemann-Christofel tensors. Their women were restless talkers, big women, with flashing white teeth. They teased the men, and their hands were strong and brown.

Poets came—and misfits, and saints, sinners, dirt-farmers. Engineers came and child-bearers, fighters, uto-pianists, and dreamers with the lights of God glowing in their starward eyes.

"Why were we taught to pray with *downcast* eyes?" they asked. "When you pray, look starward, look to the God at the north end of the Universe."

Man was a starward wind, a mustard seed, a wisp of Brahma's breath breathed across space.

They found two corpses in an orbit about Arcturus. The corpses were frozen and the ice was slowly sublimat-ing into space-vapor. One of them had an Engineering Union card in his pocket. It gave his name as Abe Jolie. The other was a girl. And, because the corpse had given them the blueprints that led to space, they hauled him aboard with the girl. Somebody sang the "*Kyrie*" and somebody said, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." Then they cancelled out the orbital velocity and let the corpses go toppling toward Arcturus, toward a burning sun-grave where their light would shine forever.

There were those who remained behind. There were those who made Earth their business and stayed at home. Their tribes were numbered at two billion souls. And they were somehow different from the spacers. They liked to sit in their rocking chairs. They liked prettiness and a one-hundred-cent dollar. They voted for the Conservative Party. They abolished centralization. Eventually they abolished government. And for the first time in anyone's memory, there was peace on Earth, good will among men.

My Master was hungry for land. My Master sought new worlds. And we found them.

There was a yellow sun in Serpens called 27 Lambda, lying eight parsecs inward toward the galactic heartland and seven parsecs north toward the galactic pole. A lush green planet drifted at one hundred twenty megamiles from the friendly sun-star, and it awoke in the wandering biped nostalgic thoughts. We paused in space-black, we looked, we came down on tongues of lightning from the clear sky to set jet-fires in the grassy plain near a river and a forest.

Man was a seed replanted.

He wandered away from the sky-chariot and drank from a pool in the jungle. A behemoth with several legs and a parasite-rider came roaring his appetite at the pale biped. And his bones lay whitening in the sun, and his descendants learned that it was easier to stay alive by ignoring the biped from the sky.

I lay rusting in the rain. Houses of log and stone grew up on the hillsides. They crumbled slowly into ruin. A man wearing a fur robe came and built an altar at my feet. He burnt his eldest daughter on it while he sang a battle song and danced, danced a victory under strange sky.

The sons of men molded clay and chipped arrowheads and built fires. The old men told them stories of a space-going god, and the stories became their legends. They kidnapped the daughters of neighbors, knew wives, and multiplied.

A glacier came and ground me into dust. Millenniums passed, and each Prophet had his Bazar.

One of the prophets wrote an energy equation. Men crucified an Agitator on a telegraph pole. They purged a minority-group. They split a uranium atom into atoms of strontium and xenon. They wrote immortal lines deploring war while they invented better ways to wage it. They refashioned a body for my life-principle, for the tensor-transformers that constitute my soul. They mounted me again in a sky-borne prairie schooner because they were weary of sanctified braying.

There were growling columns of blue-white fire in the night, and growling voices of restless masses of men. Men darted along the road around space.

Men departed for other stars. But after a thousand years, many remained on the planet of their birth—home-bodies and movie-idols and morticians, nembatal-addicts and advocates of world-government.

When the restless ones, the wild-eyed spacers were gone, the addicts got religion and the federalists became placid anarchists and the Parliaments voted themselves out of existence. There was peace of the third planet of 27 Lambda Serpentis, and good will among the inhabit-ants thereof. They made love and studied sociology under a friendly sun, under a pleasant blue sky forever.

On the road around space, my Master hungered for land.

And there was a yellow sun in the region of the Scor-pion, and once it had been called 18 Scorpii, but now they named it Ba'Lagan. It was a little south of Serpens, a little nearer to the galactic nucleus. They named its planets Albrasa and Nynfi, and they were twins. Albrasa was already populated by a clan of hairy intellectuals with teeth and twittering voices. They liked the flavor of man-flesh, digested it easily.

Man came down on sky-lightning. Man came down to walk on the land and own it. I lay quietly rusting in the rain.

Man taught his grandson to hammer virgin copper into a vicious battle-ax, and taught him the mystic recipe for roasting a hairy intellectual. It was forbidden to boil a young intellectual in the milk of its mother, but it was permissible to roast it alive and remind it that its fathers had dared to attack a two-legged god.

Man's grandson waxed strong and malicious. He com-mitted genocide on the furry natives and used their skips for blankets. He shattered their braincases and erected his own altars in their temples. He butchered an octo-genarian on one of the altars, because the old man had made the silly suggestion that

they sacrifice a perfectly healthy young virgin to their god. The young virgin watched the ceremony with quietly triumphant eyes; then she married the chief priest and bore him many children.

The biped bludgeoned the planet into submission. He assured himself that he was the Chosen Child of the Most High. He built himself a throne and sat upon it—while he listened to a newscaster describe jet-battles over the North Pole. Centuries wandered by, decked in gaudy robes. And there was a war with Nynfi between the worlds.

And then another Abraham Jolie bent over his drawing board. Another crew of big-fisted men wrapped steel flesh around my principle. Another race of men spat contempt on the soil—the soil that had drunk the blood of their fathers, felt the fire of the suns as the rockets heaved skyward bearing my body and the bodies of my Master.

Men were steel-jacketed motes of flesh, scurrying among the stars. Men were as dust, rolling across the galactic prairie—bits of dandelion fluff whirling in a rising tempest that bore them along the arm of the galactic spiral and inward, ever inward. Their eyes were on Hercules and the far distant globular clusters. He paused at Nu Lupi and 15 Sagitteia and a nameless yellow sun in Ophiuchus where he met a native race who dared to be bipeds. He crushed them quickly.

There were always those who remained behind, lingered on the planets where their ancestors had fought. I watched them with my last eyes as the last ship hurtled into space. I watched, and saw the lust go out of them, saw them become as a cauldron removed from the fire. Their boiling waned to a simmer, and they cooled. They always found peace when the spacers were gone.

This I have never understood. I, the machine, the space-spider, cannot understand. But I have seen it—the exodus of the hungry, the settling of peace over those who chose to linger. The hungry drink of the emptiness of space, and their hunger grows. The placid eat of the earth, and find peace, yet somehow—they seem to die a little.

Ever deeper pressed the starships, deeper into Sagittarius and Scorpius, and Lupus, Ophiuchus and Sagitta. Now and then they paused to colonize and conquer. A planet devoured a handful of men and tormented them with its biological devices. But the men grew and beat the savage planet into a slave after long ages, forced it to pay tribute to its king. Once more they coveted the stars. Once more they darted heavenward, leaving reluctant brothers in peace.

They wrote a song. They called it "Ten Parsecs to Paradise." They sang the song as if they believed it. This I have never understood.

It was always ten or twelve parsecs to another sun with a class G spectrum, with a planet chastely clad in green forests and white clouds. There he landed to rebuild, to furrow the fertile earth, to rock in a porch swing at twilight sucking his pipe, and to thoughtfully stare at the stars while his grandchildren romped like young chimpanzees on the cool lawn.

He had forgotten Earth—this old man—his race had forgotten its history. But he knew a little. He knew the star-going cycle—the landing of the starships, the regression to savagery, the painful rebuilding, the cruelty, the re-learning, the proud exodus. He knew these things because Man had learned to keep a little of the past in tact throughout a cycle. He no longer fell back to chipping arrowheads. Now he managed to begin again in an age of bronze or soft iron. And he knew in advance that he would carve mighty industries out of savage wilderness.

But the old man was sad as he sat on his porch. He knew so little of the Great Purpose. Why must his seed fling itself starward? He knew that it *must*—but he lacked a reason. His grandchildren played in the twilight, played space-games, although there was not yet a starship on the planet.

There was a small boy on the lawn who tried to tease the girls, but the girls put on masks of superior sophistication and ignored the little man. Disgruntled, he looked up and saw the old man dreaming on the porch.

"Gramp's got star-craze!", he shrieked. "Look at Gramp menting! Nnyahh! Gramp's got star-craze."

Musical laughter tittered over the lawn. Another voice took up the cry. The old man chuckled affectionately but wistfully. They were young, but they knew about the star-thirst. The planet was young, too young for starships, even though the priests preserved the records and scientific writings in the

temples. The planet knew about space and coveted it. Yet, the children would all be dead before the first vessel was launched.

The laughter on the lawn subsided. The eldest child, a gawky and freckled girl of eight years came trudging up the steps to sit against the post and stare at him quietly in the gloom. He felt a question lurking in her silence. He nudged her ribs affectionately with his toe.

"What weighty matter worries you, Nari?" he asked pleasantly.

"Why is star-craze, Gramp?"

He rocked thoughtfully for a moment. "Why are there men to feel it?" he countered.

The child was silent.

"I know only what the priests say, Nari;" he told her gently. "They say that man once owned a paradise planet, and that he ran away in search of a better one. They say he made the Lord Bion angry. And the lord hid the paradise, and condemned Man to forever wander, touched his heart with eternal hunger for the place he lost."

"Will people find it again, Gramp?"

"Never—so the priests say. The hunger is on him, Nari."

"It's not fair!" said the little girl.

"What isn't, my child?"

"Star-craze. Last night I saw a lady crying. She was just standing there crying at the sky."

"Where?"

"On the street. Waiting for a motor bus."

"How old was she?"

Nari scraped her heels and muttered doubtfully. "It was kind of dark."

Gramp chuckled reassuringly. "I bet she wasn't over fourteen. I bet she was still a kid. Star-craze comes to little girls about the time they start being interested in little boys. Works the other way, too. But you grow out of it, Nari. By the time you're twenty, it won't make you miserable any more. It gives you a goal. Gives everyone a goal. Something to work for. Something to long for and fight for. The stars—you'll want to give them to your grandchildren."

"Won't I get to go?"

"Not ever, Nari."

They fell silent again, and the old man peered up into the deepening blackness with its countless array of suns sitting like hens on their nests of planets. He scarcely believed the legend of the lost paradise-planet, but it was a good story to tell little girls. It made him sad though, and revived a little of the forgotten restlessness of his youth. If only he could have lived two centuries later—

But then a gust of wind brought the sweet perfume of freshly cut hay from the field to the east of the farmhouse, and the odor made him smile. The field would have to be raked tomorrow, and the hay brought in to the barn. A lot of things like that needed to be done before the starships could rise again. And every straining muscle helped toward the ultimate goal. The hay fed the animals whose flesh fed the men who made the tools which built the factories which fashioned more complicated tools—and so the journey, down the long road to space again.

The old man didn't know why the road had to be traveled, nor did he really care. The road was there, and it beckoned, and it gave meaning to life, for surely the Lord Bion was less cruel a tempter than the priests sometimes proclaimed Him. Surely there was something more than despair at the end of the long, long road.

The old man grew older, and died peacefully, and his ashes were scattered across the fields he had tilled since boyhood. His children, and his grandchildren, followed in his patient steps, and their ashes were mingled with his own before the first gleaming sky craft burst star fire in the night.

When the spacecraft at last rumbled upward, the crowd thundered a triumphant roar, the crowd gathered to witness the culmination of their labors, and the labors of their ancestors. Men walked with shoulders erect and with pride glowing in their faces. Again they triumphed over forces that held them bound to a grain of sand in the sky. Again they slashed through the knot that held them in the web of the

continuum, and shed the weights that dragged at their feet.

I noticed a subtle difference in those who lingered behind. They no longer lingered of their own choosing. They were no longer the peace-seekers and placid ones. They were those who could not go because they were old, or sick, or because the industries were half-deserted and there was no one left to build the ships. They still stared longingly upward on dark nights.

"We'll do it again," they promised. "We'll repopulate and do it again."

But the bitterness of their plight was upon them, a sense of defeat and doom. They fought savagely among themselves. They fell in feudal wars, while the starward wave receded.

I am the acolyte of the space-priest, the server of the pale proud biped. I have taken him onward across the void, to the Hercules Cluster, and beyond it to the un-charted regions past the dust clouds of the Great Rift, into the star-pact heartland of the galactic nucleus where other races were testing their space wings and tasting of the great freedom. I have watched him, and have felt the life-aura of his longing. And I have wondered. What is his goal? Where is an answer to his hunger?

My neural circuits are not of flesh. My circuits are of glass and steel. My thought is a fanning electron stream. But I have prayed. I, the spider who builds around space, have prayed to the gods of the biped I serve. I have prayed to the God of the North End of Space. I have asked, "Where is his peace?"

*No answer came.*

I have seen my Master change.

The biped was thunder across the galaxy. The biped was a swift and steel-clad spear hurtling ruthlessly on-ward. He made no friends; for he came as a being who owned the stars, and he took what he wanted along the way. He left his seed to grow anew. A creature of fierce pride! And fiercer longing. He trampled hatelessly such races as he encountered. He crushed them, or harnessed them to his plow, or borrowed their neural circuits for his bio-computers. Sometimes he fought against his own race, men who had traveled other routes to the galactic heart-land. When man battled against man, they fought with hatred and cruelty and bitterness—but never with contempt. Man saw a rival king in man. Against other races, he waged only cool contempt and hot death.

Sometimes a thoughtful old man would say, "Seems to me they've got as much right to live as we have. Seems to me all intelligent creatures have got a common denominator. God, maybe." But he muttered it quietly, speculatively. Even if he believed it, he never objected to the swift ambush of the alien ship, nor to the razing of the alien city. For the biped stalked a new frontier. The ape-tribe stole across a field where danger lurked. He was fresh from the branches of the trees, not wise to the ways of the plains. How could he risk offering peace to the shaggy beast who crouched in the tall grass? He could only weigh the odds—then strike or run away.

He took the planets of the yellow suns—deep in the galactic heartland. He skipped from one to the next in jumps as long as his patience would last. He captured the globular clusters. He inhabited each planet for a few generations. He built ships, and battled with his brothers for the right to take them. Many were left behind. They repopulated after an exodus, rebuilt, launched a second flight, and a third—until those who finally remained at home were those who lacked the incentive of the big hunger.

Those who lacked incentive sought their peace. They molded a pleasant place to live in and infested it. Or else they scorned pleasantry and made themselves a battleground.

My Master is the Nomad, gaunt and tall. My Master grits his teeth in staring at the stars, and his eyes go narrow and moist. I have mirrored his hunger, have allowed his life-aura to seep into the cold steel and hot glass of me, have reflected his thoughts in my circuits. Sometimes he wonders if I am alive. But then he remembers that he built me. He built me to think, not to be alive. Perhaps I am not alive, but only a mirror that catches a little of my Master's life. I have seen him change.

The spearhead groups pushed relentlessly across the gleaming blackness, and each generation grew more restless than the one before it. The restless moved ahead. The contented remained at home. Each exodus was a separation, and a selection of the malcontent.

The biped came to believe his priests. He believed the legend of the lost home. He believed that Bion had touched him with the hunger curse. How else could they explain the pressing cry of the heart? How could they interpret the clamor of the young, the tears—except as a Divine Thirst.

The star-craze. The endless search.

There was a green planet beyond the heartland, and it was ripe for bursting its human star-seed. There was a launching field, and a ship, and teeming crowd, and a fence with guards to keep the others out. A man and a girl stood at the fence, and it was nearly dawn.

He touched her arm and gazed at the shadows on the launching site.

"We won't find it, Marka," he said quietly. "We'll never find it."

"You believe the legend, Teris?" she whispered.

"The Planet of Heaven? It's up there. But we can never find it."

"Then why must you look?"

"We are damned. Marka."

There was a silence, then she breathed, "It *can* be found. The Lord Bion promised—"

"Where is *that* written, Marka?" he scoffed coldly. "In a woman's heart."

Teris laughed loudly. "What does the heart-writing say?"

She turned to stare at the dark shadow of the ship against the graying sky. "It says: 'When Man is content—without his lost paradise—when he reconciles himself—Bich will forgive, and show us the road home.'"

He waved his hand fiercely at the fading stars in the west. "*Ours*, Marka. They're ours! We took them."

"Do you want them?"

He stiffened angrily and glared at the shadow of her face. "You ... you make me sick. You're a hanghacker."

"No!" She shook her head wildly. "No!" She caught at his arm as he retreated a step. "I wish I could go! I want to go, do you hear?"

"I hear," he snapped. "But you can't, so there's no use talking about it. You're not well, Marka. The others wouldn't let you aboard." He backed away another step.

"I love you," she said frantically.

He turned and stumbled away toward the sky-chariot. "*I love you!*"

He began to trot, then burst into a wild sprint. Afraid, she thought in triumph. Afraid of turning back. Of loving her too much.

"*You'll never find it!*" she screamed after him. "*You can't find it up there! It's here—right here!*"

But he was lost in the crowd that milled about the ship. The ship had opened its hatches. The ship was devouring the people, two at a time. The ship devoured Teris and the space crew. Then it closed its mouth and belched flame from its rockets.

She gasped and slumped against a fencepost. She hung there sobbing until a guard drove her away.

A rocket bellowed the space song. The girl tore off her wedding bracelet and flung it in the gutter. Then she went home to fix breakfast for the children.

I am the Weaver of space. I am a Merchant of new fabrics in flux patterns for five-space continua. I serve the biped who built me, though his heart he steeped in hell.

Once in space, a man looked at me and murmured softly, "You are the cross on which we crucify ourselves."

But the big hunger pushed him on—on toward the ends of space. And he encountered worlds where his ancestors had lived, and where his peaceful cousins still dwelt in symbiosis with their neighbors. Some of the worlds were civilized, some barbaric, and some were archaeological graveyards. My nomads, they wore haunted faces as they re-explored the fringes of the galaxy where Man had walked before, leaving his footprints and his peace-seeking children. The galaxy was filled.

*Where could he go now?*

I have seen the frantic despair in their faces when, upon landing, natives appeared and greeted them politely, or tried to kill them, or worshiped them, or just ran away to hide. The nomads lurked near their ships. A planet with teeming cities was no place for a wanderer. They watched the multifaceted civilizations with bitter, lonely eyes.



Where were new planets?

Across the great emptiness to the Andromeda galaxy? Too far for the ships to go. Out to the Magellanic clouds? Already visited.

Where then?

He groped blindly, this biped. He had forgotten the trail by which his ancestors had come, and he kept re-crossing it, finding it winding everywhere. He could only plunge aimlessly on, and when he reached the last limit of his fuel—land. If the natives could not provide the fuel, he would have to stay, and try to pass another cycle of starward growth on the already inhabited world. But a cycle was seldom completed. The nomads intermarried with the local people; the children, the hybrid children, were less steeped in hunger than their fathers. Sometimes they built ships for economic purposes, for trade and commerce—but never for the hysterical starward sweep. They heard no music from the North End of Space, no Lorelei call from the void. The craving was slowly dying.

They came to a planet. The natives called it "Earth." They departed again in cold fright, and a space commander blew out his brains to banish the memory. Then they found another planet that called itself "Earth"—and another and another. They smiled again, knowing that they would never know which was the true home of Man.

They sensed the nearness of the end.

They no longer sang the old songs of a forgotten paradise. And there were no priests among them. They looked back at the Milky Way, and it had been their royal road. They looked ahead, where only scattered stars separated them from the intergalactic wasteland—an ocean of emptiness and death. They could not consign themselves to its ultimate embrace. They had fought too long, labored too hard to surrender willingly to extinction.

But the cup of their life was broken.

And to the land's last limit they came.

They found a planet with a single moon, with green forests, with thin clouds draping her gold and blue body in the sunlight. The breath of the snowking was white on her ice caps, and her seas were placid green. They landed. They smiled when the natives called the planet "Earth." Lots of planets claimed the distinction of being Man's birthplace.

Among the natives there was a dumpy little professor—still human, though slightly evolved. On the night following the nomad's landing, he sat huddled in an easy-chair, staring at the gaunt nomadic giant whose bald head nearly touched the ceiling of the professor's library. The professor slowly shook his head and sighed.

"I can't understand you people."

"Nor I you," rumbled the nomad.

"Here is Earth—yet you won't believe it!"

The giant snorted contemptuously. "Who cares? Is this crumb in space the fulfillment of a dream?"

"You dreamed of a lost Earth paradise."

"So we thought. But who knows the real longing of a dream? Where is its end? Its goal?"

"We found ours here on Earth."

The giant made a wry mouth. "You've found nothing but your own smug existence. You're a snake swallowing its tail."

"Are you sure you're not the same?" purred the scholar. The giant put his fists on his hips and glowered at him. The professor whitened.

"That's untrue," boomed the giant. "We've found nothing. And we're through. At least we went searching. Now we're finished."

"Not *you*. It's the *job* that's finished. You can live here. And be proud of a job well done."

The giant frowned. "Job? *What* job?"

"Why, fencing in the stars. Populating the galaxy." The big man stared at him in horrified amazement.

"Well," the scholar insisted, "you did it, you know. Who populates the galaxy now?"

"*People like you.*"

The impact of the scaring words brought a sick gasp from the small professor. He was a long moment in realiz-ing their full significance. He wilted. He sank lower in the chair.

The nomad's laughter suddenly rocked the room. He turned away from his victim and helped himself to a tum-bler of liqueur. He downed it at a gulp and grinned at the professor. He tucked the professor's liqueur under his arm, waved a jaunty farewell, and lumbered out into the night.

"My decanter," protested the professor in a whisper.

He went to bed and lay whimpering slightly in drowsi-ness. He was afraid of the tomorrows that lay ahead.

The nomads settled on the planet for lack of fuel. They complained of the climate and steadfastly refused to be-lieve that it was Earth. They were a troublesome, boister-ous lot, and frequently needed psychoanalysis for their various crimes. A provisional government was set up to deal with the problem. The natives had forgotten about governments, and they called it a "welfare commission."

The nomads who were single kidnapped native wives. Sometimes they kidnapped several, being a prolific lot. They begot many children, and a third-generation hybrid became the first dictator of a northern continent.

I am rusting in the rain. I shall never serve my priest here on Earth again. Nuclear fuels are scarce. They are needed for the atomic warheads now zipping back and forth across the North Pole. A poet—one of the hybrids—has written immortal lines deploring war; and the lines were inscribed on the post-humour medal they gave his widow.

Three dumpy idealists built a spaceship, but they were caught and hung for treason. The eight-foot lawyer who defended them was also hung.

The world wears a long face; and the stars twinkle in-vitingly. But few men look upward now. Things are prob-ably just as bad on the next inhabited planet.

I am the spider who walked around space. I, Harpist for a pale proud Master, have seen the big hunger, have tasted its red glow reflected in my circuits. Still I cannot understand.

But I feel there are some who understand. I have seen the pride in their faces. They walk like kings.

## **Big Joe and the Nth Generation**

A THIEF, HE was about to die like a thief.

He hung from the post by his wrists. The wan sunlight glistened faintly on his naked back as he waited, eyes tightly closed, lips moving slowly as he pressed his face against the rough wood and stood on tiptoe to relieve the growing ache in his shoulders. When his ankles ached, he hung by the nails that pierced his forearms just above the wrists.

He was young, perhaps in his tenth Marsyear, and his, crisp black hair was close-cropped in the fashion of the bachelor who had not yet sired a pup, or not yet ad-mitted that he had. Lithe and sleek, with the quick knotty muscles and slender rawhide limbs of a wild thing, half-fed and hungry with a quick furious hunger that crouched in ambush. His face, though twisted with pain and fright, remained that of a cocky pup.

When he opened his eyes he could see the low hills of Mars, sun-washed and gray-green with trees, trees brought down from the heavens by the Ancient Fathers. But he could also see the executioner in the foreground, sitting spraddle legged and calm while he chewed a blade of grass and waited. A squat man with a thick face, he occasionally peered at the thief with empty blue eyes—while he casually played mumblety-peg with the bleeding-blade. His stare was blank.

"Ready for me yet, Asir?" he grumbled, not unpleas-antly.

The knifeman sat beyond spitting range, but Asir spat, and tried to wipe his chin on the post. "Your dirty mother!" he mumbled.

The executioner chuckled and played mumblety-peg.

After three hours of dangling from the spikes that pierced his arms, Asir was weakening, and the blood throbbed hard in his temples, with each jolt of his heart a separate pulse of pain. The red stickiness

had stopped oozing down his arms; they knew how to drive the spike just right. But the heartbeats labored in his head like a hammer beating at red-hot iron.

*How many heartbeats in a lifetime—and how many left to him now?*

He whimpered and writhed, beginning to lose all hope. Mara had gone to see the Chief Commoner, to plead with him for the pilferer's life—but Mara was about as trustworthy as a wild hiiffen, and he had visions of them chuckling together in Tokra's villa over a glass of amber wine, while life drained slowly from a young thief.

Asir regretted nothing. His father had been a renegade before him, had squandered his last ritual formula to buy a wife, then impoverished, had taken her away to the hills. Asir was born in the hills, but he came back to the village of his ancestors to work as a servant and steal the rituals of his masters. No thief could last for long. A ritual-thief caused havoc in the community. The owner of a holy phrase, not knowing that it had been stolen, tried to spend it—and eventually counterclaims would come to light, and a general accounting had to be called. The thief was always found out.

Asir had stolen more than wealth, he had stolen the strength of their souls. For this they hung him by his wrists and waited for him to beg for the bleeding-blade.

*Woman thirsts for husband,  
Man thirsts for wife,  
Baby thirsts for breast-milk  
Thief thirsts for knife ..*

A rhyme from his childhood, a childish chant, an eenie--meenie-miney for determining who should drink first from a nectar-cactus. He groaned and tried to shift his weight more comfortably. Where was Mara?

"Ready for me yet, Asir?" the squat man asked.

Asir hated him with narrowed eyes. The executioner was bound by law to wait until his victim requested his fate. But Asir remained ignorant of what the fate would be. The Council of Senior Kinsmen judged him in secret, and passed sentence as to what the executioner would do with the knife. But Asir was not informed of their judgment. He knew only that when he asked for it, the executioner would advance with the bleeding blade and exact the punishment—his life, or an amputation, depending on the judgment. He might lose only an eye or an ear or a finger. But on the other hand, he might lose his life, both arms, or his masculinity.

There was no way to find out until he asked for the punishment. If he refused to ask, they would leave him hanging there. In theory, a thief could escape by hanging four days, after which the executioner would pull out the nails. Sometimes a culprit managed it, but when the nails were pulled, the thing that toppled was already a corpse.

The sun was sinking in the west, and it blinded him. Asir knew about the sun—knew things the stupid council failed to know. A thief, if successful, frequently became endowed with wisdom, for he memorized more wealth than a score of honest men. Quotations from the ancient gods—Fermi, Einstein, Elgermann, Hauser and the rest—most men owned scattered phrases, and scattered phrases remained meaningless. But a thief memorized all transactions that he overheard, and the countless phrases could be fitted together into meaningful ideas.

He knew now that Mars, once dead, was dying again, its air leaking away once more into space. And Man would die with it, unless something were done, and done quickly. The Blaze of the Great Wind needed to be rekindled under the earth, but it would not be done. The tribes had fallen into ignorance, even as the holy books had warned:

*It is realized that the colonists will be unable to maintain a technology without basic tools, and that a rebuilding will require several generations of intelligently directed effort. Given the knowledge, the colonists may be able to restore a machine culture if the knowledge continues to be bolstered by desire. But if the third, fourth, and Nth generations fail to further the gradual retooling process, the knowledge will become worthless.*

The quotation was from the god Roggins, *Progress of the Mars-Culture*, and he had stolen bits of it from various sources. The books themselves were no longer in existence, remembered only in memorized ritual chants, the possession of which meant wealth.

Asir was sick. Pain and slow loss of blood made him weak, and his vision blurred. He failed to see her coming until he heard her feet rustling in the dry grass.

"Mara—"

She smirked and spat contemptuously at the foot of the post. The daughter of a Senior Kinsman, she was a tall, slender girl with an arrogant strut and mocking eyes. She stood for a moment with folded arms, eyeing him with amusement. Then, slowly, one eye closed in a solemn wink. She turned her back on him and spoke to the executioner.

"May I taunt the prisoner, Slubil?" she asked.

"It is forbidden to speak to the thief," growled the knifeman.

"Is he ready to beg for justice, Slubil?"

The knifeman grinned and looked at Asir. "Are you ready for me yet, thief?"

Asir hissed an insult. The girl had betrayed him. "Evidently a coward," she said. "Perhaps he means to hang four days."

"Let him then."

"No—I think that I should *like* to see him beg."

She gave Asir a long searching glance, then turned to walk away. The thief cursed her quietly and followed her with his eyes. A dozen steps away she stopped again, looked back over her shoulder, and repeated the slow wink. Then she marched on toward her father's house. The wink made his scalp crawl for a moment, but then ...

*Suppose she hasn't betrayed me? Suppose she had wheedled the sentence out of Tokra, and knew what his punishment would be. I think that I should like to see him beg.*

But on the other hand, the fickle she-devil might be tricking him into asking for a sentence that she *knew* would be death or dismemberment—just to amuse herself.

He cursed inwardly and trembled as he peered at the bored executioner. He licked his lips and fought against dizziness as he groped for words. Slubil heard him muttering and looked up.

"Are you ready for me yet?"

Asir closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. "Give it to me!" he yelled suddenly, and braced himself against the post.

Why not? The short time gained couldn't be classed as living. Have it done with. Eternity would be sweet in comparison to this ignominy. A knife could be a blessing.

He heard the executioner chuckle and stand up. He heard the man's footsteps approaching slowly, and the singing hiss of the knife as Slubil swung it in quick arcs. The executioner moved about him slowly, teasing him with the whistle of steel fanning the air about him. He was expected to beg. Slubil occasionally laid the knife against his skin and took it away again. Then Asir heard the rustle of the executioner's cloak as his arm went back. Asir opened his eyes.

The executioner grinned as he held the blade high—aimed at Asir's head! The girl had tricked him. He groaned and closed his eyes again, muttering a half-forgotten prayer.

The stroke fell—and the blade chopped into the post above his head. Asir fainted.

When he awoke he lay in a crumpled heap on the ground. The executioner rolled him over with his foot.

"In view of your extreme youth, thief," the knifeman growled, "the council has ordered you perpetually banished. The sun is setting. Let dawn find you in the hills. If you return to the plains, you will be chained to a wild hilfffen and dragged to death."

Panting weakly, Asir groped at his forehead, and found a fresh wound, raw and rubbed with rust to make a scar. Slubil had marked him as an outcast. But except for the nail-holes through his forearms, he was still in one piece. His hands were numb, and he could scarcely move his fingers. Slubil had bound the spike-wounds, but the bandages were bloody and leaking.

When the knifeman had gone, Asir climbed weakly to his feet. Several of the townspeople stood

nearby, snicker-ing at him. He ignored their catcalls and staggered toward the outskirts of the village, ten minutes away. He had to speak to Mara, and to her father if the crusty oldster would listen. His thief's knowledge weighed upon him and brought desperate fear.

Darkness had fallen by the time he came to Welkir's house. The people spat at him in the streets, and some of them flung handfuls of loose dirt after him as he passed.

A light flickered feebly through Welkir's door. Asir rat-tled it and waited.

Welkir came with a lamp. He set the lamp on the floor and stood with feet spread apart, arms folded, glaring haughtily at the thief. His face was stiff as weathered stone. He said nothing, but only stared contemptuously.

Asir bowed his head. "I have come to plead with you, Senior Kinsman."

Welkin snorted disgust. "Against the mercy we have shown you?"

He looked up quickly, shaking his head. "No! For that I am grateful."

"What then?"

"As a thief, I acquired much wisdom. I know that the world is dying, and the air is boiling out of it into the sky. I wish to be heard by the council. We must study the words of the ancients and perform their magic, lest our children's children be born to strangle in a dead world."

Welkir snorted again. He picked up the lamp. "He who listens to a thief's wisdom is cursed. He who acts upon it is doubly cursed and a party to the crime."

"The vaults," Asir insisted. "The key to the Blaze of the Winds is in the vaults. The god Roggins tells us in the words—"

"Stop! I will not hear!"

"Very well, but the blaze can be rekindled, and the air renewed. The vaults—" He stammered and shook his head. "The council must hear me."

"The council will hear nothing, and you shall be gone before dawn. And the vaults are guarded by the sleeper called Big Joe. To enter is to die. Now go away."

Welkir stepped back and slammed the door. Asir sagged in defeat. He sank down on the doorstep to rest a mo-moment. The night was black, except for lamp-flickers from an occasional window.

"Ssssst!"

A sound from the shadows. He looked around quickly, searching for the source.

"Ssssst! Asir!"

It was the girl Mara, Welkir's daughter. She had slipped out the back of the house and was peering at him around the corner. He arose quietly and went to her.

"What did Slubil do to you?" she whispered.

Asir gasped and caught her shoulders angrily. "Don't you *know*?"

"No! Stop! You're hurting me. Tokra wouldn't tell me. I made love to him, but he wouldn't tell."

He released her with an angry curse.

"You *had* to take it sometime," she hissed. "I knew if you waited you would be too weak from hanging to even run away."

He called her a foul name.

"Ingrate!" she snapped. "And I bought you a huffen!"

"You what?"

"Tokra gave me a ritual phrase and I bought you a huffen with it. You can't *walk* to the hills, you know."

Asir burned with full rage. "You slept with Tokra!" he snapped.

"You're jealous!" she tittered.

"How can I be jealous! I hate the sight of you!"

"Very well then, I'll keep the huffen."

"Do!" he growled. "I won't need it, since I'm not going to the hills!"

She gasped. "You've got to go, you fool. They'll kill you!"

He turned away, feeling sick. She caught at his arm and tried to pull him back. "Asir! Take the huffen and *go*!"

"I'll go," he growled. "But not to the hills. I'm going out to the vault."

He stalked away, but she trotted along beside him, trying to tug him back. "Fool! The vaults are sacred! The priests guard the entrance, and the Sleeper guards the inner door. They'll kill you if you try it, and if you linger, the council will kill you tomorrow."

"Let them!" he snarled. "I am no sniveling townsman! I am of the hills, and my father was a renegade. Your council had no right to judge me. Now I shall judge *them!*"

The words were spoken hotly, and he realized their folly. He expected a scornful rebuke from Mara, but she hung onto his arm and pleaded with him. He had dragged her a dozen doorways from the house of her father. Her voice had lost its arrogance and became pleading.

"Please, Asir! Go away. Listen! I will even go with you—if you want me."

He laughed harshly. "Tokra's leavings."

She slapped him hard across the mouth. "Tokra is an impotent old dodderer. He can scarcely move for arthri-tis. You're an idiot! I sat on his lap and kissed his bald pate for you."

"Then why did he give you a ritual phrase?" he asked stiffly.

"Because he likes me."

"You lie." He stalked angrily on.

"Very well! Go to the vaults. I'll tell my father, and they'll hunt you down before you get there."

She released his arm and stopped. Asir hesitated. She meant it. He came back to her slowly, then slipped his swollen hands to her throat. She did not back away.

"Why don't I just choke you and leave you lying here?" he hissed.

Her face was only a shadow in darkness, but he could see her cool smirk.

"Because you love me, Asir of Franic."

He dropped his hands and grunted a low curse. She laughed low and took his arm.

"Come on. We'll go get the huffen," she said.

*Why not?* he thought. *Take her huffen, and take her too.* He could dump her a few miles from the village, then circle back to the vaults. She leaned against him as they moved back toward her father's house, then skirted it and stole back to the field behind the row of dwellings. Phobos hung low in the west, its tiny disk lending only a faint glow to the darkness.

He heard the huffen's breathing as they approached a hulking shadow in the gloom. Its great wings snaked out slowly as it sensed their approach, and it made a low piping sound. A native Martian species, it bore no resemblance to the beasts that the ancients had brought with them from the sky. Its back was covered with a thin shell like a beetle's, but its belly was porous and soft. It digested food by sitting on it, and absorbing it. The wings were bony—parchment stretched across a fragile frame. It was headless, and lacked a centralized brain, the nerv-ous functions being distributed.

The great creature made no protest as they climbed up the broad flat back and strapped themselves down with the belts that had been threaded through holes cut in the huffen's thin, tough shell. Its lungs slowly gathered a tremendous breath of air, causing the riders to rise up as the huge air-sacs became distended. The girth of an inflated huffen was nearly four times as great as when deflated. When the air was gathered, the creature began to shrink again as its muscles tightened, compressing the breath until a faint leakage-hiss came from behind. It waited, wings taut.

The girl tugged at a ring set through the flesh of its flank. There was a blast of sound and a jerk. Nature's experiment in jet propulsion soared ahead and turned into the wind. Its first breath exhausted, it gathered another and blew itself ahead again. The ride was jerky. Each tailward belch was a rough lurch. They let the huffen choose its own heading as it gained altitude. Then Mara tugged at the wing-straps, and the creature wheeled to soar toward the dark hills in the distance.

Asir sat behind her, a sardonic smirk on his face, as the wind whipped about them. He waited until they had flown beyond screaming distance of the village. Then he took her shoulders lightly in his hands. Mistaking it for affection, she leaned back against him easily and rested her dark head on his shoulder. He kissed her—while his hand felt gingerly for the knife at her belt. His fingers were numb, but he managed to clutch it, and press the blade lightly against her throat. She gasped. With his other hand, he

caught her hair.

"Now guide the huffen down!" he ordered.

"Asir!"

"Quickly!" he barked.

"What are you going to do?"

"Leave you here and circle back to the vaults."

"No! Not out here at night!"

He hesitated. There were slinking prowlers on the Cimerian plain, beasts who would regard the marooned daughter of Welkir a delicious bit of good fortune, a gustatory delight of a sort they seldom were able to enjoy. Even above the moan of the wind, he would hear an occasional howl-cry from the fanged welcoming committee that waited for its dinner beneath them.

"Very well," he growled reluctantly. "Turn toward the vaults. But one scream and I'll slice you." He took the blade from her throat but kept the point touching her back.

"Please, Asir, no!" she pleaded. "Let me go on to the hills. Why do you want to go to the vaults? Because of Tokra?"

He gouged her with the point until she yelped. "Tokra be damned, and you with him!" he snarled. "Turn back."

"Why?"

"I'm going down to kindle the Blaze of the Winds."

"You're mad! *The spirits of the ancients live in the vaults.*"

"I am going to kindle the Blaze of the Winds," he insisted stubbornly. "Now either turn back, or go down and I'll turn back alone."

After a hesitant moment, she tugged at a wing rein and the huffen banked majestically. They flew a mile to the south of the village, then beyond it toward the clois-ter where the priests of Big Joe guarded the entrance to the vaults. The cloister was marked by a patch of faint light on the ground ahead.

"Circle around it once," he ordered.

"You can't get in. They'll kill you."

He doubted it. No one ever tried to enter, except the priests who carried small animals down as sacrifices to the great Sleeper. Since no outsider ever dared go near the shaft, the guards expected no one. He doubted that they would be alert.

The cloister was a hollow square with a small stone tower rising in the center of the courtyard. The tower contained the entrance to the shaft. In the dim light of Phobos, assisted by yellow flickers from the cloister win-dows, he peered at the courtyard as they circled closer. It seemed to be empty.

"Land beside the tower!" he ordered.

"Asir—please—"

"Do it!"

The huffen plunged rapidly, soared across the outer walls, and burst into the courtyard. It landed with a rough jolt and began squeaking plaintively.

"Hurry!" he hissed. "Get your straps off and let's go." "I'm not going."

A prick of the knife point changed her mind. They slid quickly to the ground, and Asir kicked the huffen in the flanks. The beast sucked in air and burst aloft.

Startled faces were trying to peer through the lighted cloister windows into the courtyard. Someone cried a challenge. Asir darted to the door of the tower and dragged it open. Now forced to share the danger, the girl came with him without urging. They stepped into a stair-landing. A candle flickered from a wall bracket. A guard, sitting on the floor beneath the candle glanced up in complete surprise. Then he reached for a short barbed pike. Asir kicked him hard in the temple, then rolled his limp from outside. Men with torches were running across the courtyard. He slammed the heavy metal door and bolted it.

Fists began beating on the door. They paused for a moment to rest, and Mara stared at him in fright. He ex-pected her to burst into angry speech, but she only leaned against the wall and panted. The dark mouth of the stairway yawned at them—a stone throat that led into the bowels of Mars and the realm of the monster, Big Joe. He glanced at Mara thoughtfully, and felt sorry for her.

"I can leave you here," he offered, "but I'll have to tie you."

She moistened her lips, glanced first at the stairs, then at the door where the guards were raising a frantic howl. She shook her head.

"I'll go with you."

"The priests won't bother you, if they see that you were a prisoner."

"I'll go with you."

He was pleased, but angry with himself for the pleasure. An arrogant, spiteful, conniving wench, he told himself. She'd lied about Tokra. He grunted gruffly, seized the candle, and started down the stairs. When she started after him, he stiffened and glanced back, remembering the barbed pike.

As he had suspected, she had picked it up. The point was a foot from the small of his back. They stared at each other, and she wore her self-assured smirk.

"Here," she said, and handed it casually. "You might need this."

They stared at each other again, but it was different this time. Bewildered, he shook his head and resumed the descent toward the vaults. The guards were battering at the doors behind them.

The stairwell was damp and cold. Blackness folded about them like a shroud. They moved in silence, and after five thousand steps, Ash stopped counting.

Somewhere in the depths, Big Joe slept his restless sleep. Asir wondered grimly how long it would take the guards to tear down the metal door. Somehow they had to get past Big Joe before the guards came thundering after them. There was a way to get around the monster: of that he was certain. A series of twenty-four numbers was involved, and he had memorized them with a stolen bit of ritual. How to use them was a different matter. He imagined vaguely that one must call them out in a loud voice before the inner entrance.

The girl walked beside him now, and he could feel her shivering. His eyes were quick and nervous as he scanned each pool of darkness, each nook and cranny along the stairway wall. The well was silent except for the mutter of their footsteps, and the gloom was full of musty odors. The candle afforded little light.

"I told you the truth about Tokra," she blurted suddenly.

Asir glowered straight ahead and said nothing, embarrassed by his previous jealousy. They moved on in silence.

Suddenly she stopped. "Look," she hissed, pointing down ahead.

He shielded the candle with his hand and peered downward toward a small square of dim light. "The bottom of the stairs," he muttered.

The light seemed faint and diffuse—with a slight greenish cast. Asir blew out the candle, and the girl quickly protested.

"How will we see to climb again?"

He laughed humorlessly. "What makes you think we will?"

She moaned and clutched at his arm, but came with him as he descended slowly toward the light. The stairway opened into a long corridor whose ceiling was faintly luminous. White-faced and frightened, they paused on the bottom step and looked down the corridor. Mara gasped and covered her eyes.

"Big Joe!" she whispered in awe.

He stared through the stairwell door and down the corridor through another door into a large room. Big Joe sat in the center of the room, sleeping his sleep of ages amid a heap of broken and whitening bones. A creature of metal, twice the height of Asir, he had obviously been designed to kill. Tri-fingered hands with gleaming talons, and a monstrous head shaped like a Marswolf, with long silver fangs. Why should a metal-creature have fangs, unless he had been built to kill?

The behemoth slept in a crouch, waiting for the intruders.

He tugged the girl through the stairwell door. A voice droned out of nowhere: *"If you have come to plunder, go back!"*

He stiffened, looking around. The girl whimpered.

"Stay here by the stairs," he told her, and pushed her firmly back through the door.

Asir started slowly toward the room where Big Joe waited. Beyond the room he could see another



door, and the monster's job was apparently to keep intruders back from the inner vaults where, according to the ritual chants, the Blaze of the Winds could be kindled.

Halfway along the corridor, the voice called out again, beginning a kind of sing-song chant: "*Big Joe will kill you, Big Joe will kill you, Big Joe will kill you—*"

He turned slowly, searching for the speaker. But the voice seemed to come from a black disk on the wall. The talking-machines perhaps, as mentioned somewhere in the ritual.

A few paces from the entrance to the room, the voice fell silent. He stopped at the door, staring in at the mon-ster. Then he took a deep breath and began chanting the twenty-four numbers in a loud but quavering voice. Big Joe remained in his motionless crouch. Nothing hap-pened. He stepped through the doorway.

Big Joe emitted a deafening roar, straightened with a metallic groan, and lumbered toward him, taloned hands extended and eyes blazing furiously. Asir shrieked and ran for his life.

Then he saw Mara lying sprawled in the stairway entrance. She had fainted. Blocking an impulse to leap over her and flee alone, he stopped to lift her.

But suddenly he realized that there was no pursuit. He looked back. Big Joe had returned to his former position, and he appeared to be asleep again. Puzzled, Asir stepped back into the corridor.

*"If you have come to plunder, go back!"*

He moved gingerly ahead again.

*"Big Joe will kill you, Big Joe will kill you, Big Joe will kill—"*

He recovered the barbed pike from the floor and stole into the zone of silence. This time he stopped to look around. Slowly he reached the pike-staff through the doorway. Nothing happened. He stepped closer and waved it around inside. Big Joe remained motionless.

Then he dropped the point of the pike to the floor. The monster bellowed and started to rise. Asir leaped back, scalp crawling. But Big Joe settled back in his crouch.

Fighting a desire to flee, Asir reached the pike through the door and rapped it on the floor again. This time noth-ing happened. He glanced down. The pike's point rested in the center of a gray floor-tile, just to the left of the entrance. The floor was a checkerboard pattern of gray and white. He tapped another gray square, and this time the monster started out of his drowse again.

After a moment's thought, he began touching each tile within reach of the door. Most of them brought a response from Big Joe. He found four that did not. He knelt down before the door to peer at them closely. The first was unmarked. The second bore a dot in the center. The third bore two, and the fourth three—in order of their distance from the door.

He stood up and stepped inside again, standing on the first tile. Big Joe remained motionless. He stepped diag-onally left to the second—straight ahead to the third—then diagonally right to the fourth. He stood there for a moment, trembling and staring at the Sleeper. He was four feet past the door!

Having assured himself that the monster was still asleep, he crouched to peer at the next tiles. He stared for a long time, but found no similar markings. Were the dots coincidence?

He reached out with the pike, then drew it back. He was too close to the Sleeper to risk a mistake. He stood up and looked around carefully, noting each detail of the room—and of the floor in particular. He counted the rows and columns of tiles—twenty-four each way.

Twenty-four—and there were twenty-four numbers in the series that was somehow connected with safe passage through the room. He frowned and muttered through the series to himself

0,1,2,3,3,3,2,2,1 . .

The first four numbers—0,1,2,3. And the tiles—the first with no dots, the second with one, the third with two, the fourth with three. But the four tiles were not in a straight line, and there were no marked ones beyond the fourth. He backed out of the room and studied them from the end of the corridor again.

Mara had come dizzily awake and was calling for him weakly. He replied reassuringly and turned to his task again. "First tile, then diagonally left, then straight, then diagonally right—"

0,1,2,3,3.

A hunch came. He advanced as far as the second tile, then reached as far ahead as he could and touched the square diagonally right from the fourth one. Big Joe re-mained motionless but began to

speak. His scalp bristled at the growling voice.

*"If the intruder makes an error, Big Joe will kill."*

Standing tense, ready to leap back to the corridor, he touched the square again. The motionless behemoth re-peated the grim warning.

Asir tried to reach the square diagonally right from the fifth, but could not without stepping up to the third. Taking a deep breath, he stepped up and extended the pike cautiously, keeping his eyes on Big Joe. The pike rapped the floor.

*"If the intruder makes an error, Big Joe will kill."* But the huge figure remained in his place.

Starting from the first square, the path went left, straight, right, right, right. And after zero, the numbers went 1, 2, 3, 3, 3. Apparently he had found the key. One meant a square to the southeast; two meant south; and three southwest. Shivering, he moved up to the fifth square upon which the monster growled his first warning. He looked back at the door, then at Big Joe. The taloned hands could grab him before he could dive back into the corridor.

He hesitated. He could either turn back now, or gamble his life on the accuracy of the tentative belief. The girl was calling to him again.

"Come to the end of the corridor!" he replied.

She came hurriedly, to his surprise.

"No!" he bellowed. "Stay back of the entrance! Not on the tile! *No!*"

Slowly she withdrew the foot that hung poised over a trigger-tile.

"You can't come in unless you know how," he gasped. She blinked at him and glanced nervously back over her shoulder. "But I hear them. They're coming down the stairs."

Asir cursed softly. Now he *had* to go ahead.

"Wait just a minute," he said. "Then I'll show you how to come through."

He advanced to the last tile that he had tested and stopped. The next two numbers were two—for straight ahead. And they would take him within easy reach of the long taloned arms of the murderous sentinel. He glanced around in fright at the crushed bones scattered across the floor. Some were human. Others were animal-sacrifices tossed in by the priests.

He had tested only one two—back near the door. If he made a mistake, he would never escape; no need bothering with the pike.

He stepped to the next tile and closed his eyes.

*"If the intruder makes an error, Big Joe will kill."*

He opened his eyes again and heaved a breath of relief.

"Asir! They're getting closer! I can hear them!"

He listened for a moment. A faint murmur of angry voices in the distance. "All right," he said calmly. "Step only on the tiles I tell you. See the gray one at the left of the door?"

She pointed. "This one?"

"Yes, step on it."

The girl moved up and stared fearfully at the monstrous sentinel. He guided her up toward him. "Diagonally left—one ahead—diagonally right. Now don't be frightened when he speaks—"

The girl came on until she stood one square behind him. Her quick frightened breathing blended with the growing sounds of shouting from the stairway. He glanced up at Big Joe, noticing for the first time that the steel jaws were stained with a red-brown crust. He shuddered.

The grim chess-game continued a cautious step at a time, with the girl following one square behind him. What if she fainted again? And fell across a triggered tile? They passed within a foot of Big Joe's arm.

Looking up, he saw the monster's eyes move—following them, scrutinizing them as they passed. He froze. "We want no plunder," he said to the machine. The gaze was steady and unwinking.

"The air is leaking away from the world."

The monster remained silent.

"Hurry!" whimpered the girl. Their pursuers were gain-ing rapidly and they had crossed only half the distance to the opposing doorway. Progress was slower now, for Asir needed occasionally to repeat

through the whole series of numbers, looking back to count squares and make certain that the next step was not a fatal one.

"They won't dare to come in after us," he said hopefully.

"And if they do?"

*"If the intruder makes an error, Big Joe will kill,"* announced the machine as Asir took another step.

"Eight squares to go!" he muttered, and stopped to count again.

"Asir! They're in the corridor!"

Hearing the tumble of voices, he looked back to see blue-robed men spilling out of the stairway and milling down the corridor toward the room. But halfway down the hall, the priests paused—seeing the unbelievable: two intruders walking safely past their devil-god. They growled excitedly among themselves. Asir took another step. Again the machine voiced the monotonous warning.

*"If the intruder makes an error ..."*

Hearing their deity speak, the priests of Big Joe bab-bled wildly and withdrew a little. But one, more impulsive than the rest, began shrieking.

*"Kill the intruders! Cut them down with your spears!"*

Asir glanced back to see two of them racing toward the room, lances cocked for the throw. If a spear struck a trigger-tile—

"Stop!" he bellowed, facing around.

The two priests paused. Wondering if it would result in his sudden death, he rested a hand lightly against the huge steel arm of the robot, then leaned against it. The huge eyes were staring down at him, but Big Joe did not move.

The spearmen stood frozen, gazing at the thief's familiarity with the horrendous hulk. Then, slowly they backed away.

Continuing his bluff, he looked up at Big Joe and spoke in a loud voice. "If they throw their spears or try to enter, kill them."

He turned his back on the throng in the hall and continued the cautious advance. Five to go, four, three, two—

He paused to stare into the room beyond. Gleaming machinery—all silent—and great panels, covered with a multitude of white circles and dials. His heart sank. If here lay the magic that controlled the Blaze of the Great Wind, he could never hope to rekindle it.

He stepped through the doorway, and the girl followed. Immediately the robot spoke like low thunder.

*"The identity of the two technologists is recognized. Hereafter they may pass with impunity. Big Joe is charged to ask the following: why do the technologists come, when it is not yet time?"*

Staring back, Asir saw that the robot's head had turned so that he was looking directly back at the thief and the girl. Asir also saw that someone had approached the door again. Not priests, but townspeople.

He stared, recognizing the Chief Commoner, and the girl's father Welkir, three other Senior Kinsmen, and—Slubil, the executioner who had nailed him to the post.

"Father! Stay back."

Welkir remained silent, glaring at them. He turned and whispered to the Chief Commoner. The Chief Commoner whispered to Slubil. The executioner nodded grimly and took a short-axe from his belt thong. He stepped through the entrance, his left foot striking the zero-tile. He peered at Big Joe and saw that the monster remained motionless. He grinned at the ones behind him, then snarled in Asir's direction.

"Your sentence has been changed, thief."

"Don't try to cross, Slubil!" Asir barked.

Slubil spat, brandished the axe, and stalked forward. Big Joe came up like a resurrection of fury, and his elbow was explosive in the vaults. Slubil froze, then stupidly drew back his axe.

Asir gasped as the talons closed. He turned away quickly. Slubil's scream was cut off abruptly by a

ripping sound, then a series of dull cracks and snaps. The girl shrieked and closed her eyes. There were two distinct thuds as Big Joe tossed Slubil aside.

The priests and the townspeople—all except Welkir—had fled from the corridor and up the stairway. Welkir was on his knees, his hands covering his face.

"Mara!" he moaned. "My daughter."

"Go back, Father," she called.

Dazed, the old man picked himself up weakly and stag-gered down the corridor toward the stairway. When he passed the place of the first warning voice, the robot moved again—arose slowly and turned toward Asir and Mara who backed quickly away, deeper into the room of strange machines. Big Joe came lumbering slowly after them.

Asir looked around for a place to flee, but the monster stopped in the doorway. He spoke again, a mechanical drone like memorized ritual.

*Big Joe is charged with announcing his function for the intelligence of the technologists. His primary function is to prevent the entrance of possibly destructive organisms into the vaults containing the control equipment for the fu-sion reaction which must periodically renew atmospheric oxygen. His secondary function is to direct the tech-nologists to records containing such information as they may need. His tertiary function is to carry out simple directions given by the technologists if such directions are possible to his limited design.*

Asir stared at the lumbering creature and realized for the first time that it was not alive, but only a machine built by the ancients to perform specific tasks. Despite the fresh redness about his hands and jaws, Big Joe was no more guilty of Slubil's death than a grinding mill would be if the squat sadist had climbed into it while the Mars oxen were yoked to the crushing roller.

Perhaps the ancients had been unnecessarily brutal in building such a guard—but at least they had built him to *look* like a destroyer, and to give ample warning to the intruder. Glancing around at the machinery, he vaguely understood the reason for Big Joe. Such metals as these would mean riches for swordmakers and smiths and plun-derers of all kinds.

Asir straightened his shoulders and addressed the machine.

"Teach us how to kindle the Blaze of the Great Wind."

*"Teaching is not within the designed functions of Big Joe. I am charged to say: the renewal reaction should not be begun before the Marsyear 6,000, as the builders reckoned time."*

Asir frowned. The years were not longer numbered, but only named in honor of the Chief Commoners who ruled the villages. "How long until the year 6,000?" he asked.

Big Joe clucked like an adding machine. "Twelve Marsyears, technologist."

Asir stared at the complicated machinery. Could they learn to operate it in twelve years? It seemed impossible.

"How can we begin to learn?" he asked the robot.

*"This is an instruction room, where you may examine records. The control mechanisms are installed in the deepest vault."*

Asir frowned and walked to the far end of the hail where another door opened into—*another anteroom with another Big Joe!* As he approached the second robot spoke:

*"If the intruder has not acquired the proper knowl-edge, Big Oswald will kill."*

Thunderstruck, he leaped back from the entrance and swayed heavily against an instrument panel. The panel lit up and a polite recorded voice began reading something about "President Snell's role in the Eighth World War." He lurched away from the panel and stumbled back toward Mara who sat glumly on the foundation slap of a weighty machine.

"What are you laughing about?" she muttered.

"We're still in the first grade!" he groaned, envisioning a sequence of rooms. "We'll have to learn the magic of the ancients before we pass to the next."

"The ancients weren't so great," she grumbled. "Look at the mural on the wall."

Asir looked, and saw only a strange design of circles about a bright splash of yellow that might have

been the sun. "What about it?" he asked.

"My father taught me about the planets," she said. "That is supposed to be the way they go around the sun." "What's wrong with it?"

"One planet too many," she said. "Everyone knows that there is only an asteroid belt between Mars and Venus. The picture shows a planet there."

Asir shrugged indifferently, being interested only in the machinery. "Can't you allow them one small mistake?"

"I suppose." She paused, gazing miserably in the direction in which her father had gone. "What do we do now?"

Asir considered it for a long time. Then he spoke to Big Joe. "You will come with us to the village."

The machine was silent for a moment, then: *"There is an apparent contradiction between primary and tertiary functions. Request priority decision by technologist."*

Asir failed to understand. He repeated his request. The robot turned slowly and stepped through the doorway. He waited.

Asir grinned. "Let's go back up," he said to the girl.

She arose eagerly. They crossed the anteroom to the corridor and began the long climb toward the surface, with Big Joe lumbering along behind.

"What about your banishment, Asir?" she asked gravely.

"Wait and see." He envisioned the pandemonium that would reign when girl, man, and robot marched through the village to the council house, and he chuckled. "I think that I shall be the next Chief Commoner," he said. "And my councilmen will all be thieves."

"Thieves!" she gasped. "Why?"

"Thieves who are not afraid to steal the knowledge of the gods—and become technologists, to kindle the Blaze of the Winds."

"What is a 'technologist', Asir?" she asked worshipfully.

Asir glowered at himself for blundering with words he did not understand, but could not admit ignorance to Mara who clung tightly to his arm. "I think," he said, "that a technologist is a thief who tells the gods what to do."

"Kiss me, Technologist," she told him in a small voice. Big Joe clanked to a stop to wait for them to move on. He waited a long time.

## Bitter Victory

By WALTER MILLER, Jr.

*Klia had a beautiful body. And why not? She made it herself.*

HE PROWLED the city's the crowds with eyes of gray steel, waiting for Klia's probing thoughts to touch some unwary Terran. Sooner or later she would have to betray herself to him if she meant to pursue her goal. And then he would kill her and go. This was his task, set for him by the director of the Phoenician Quarantine Commission.

He had been here six months, and thus far the only evidence of her presence was a series of articles in a technical journal, written by a certain Willa E. Foggerty, M.S. The author had access to information possessed by no Terran scientist. The information was presented tidbit-style, almost humorously, and as pure speculation rather than as fact, but it was obviously calculated to steer the minds' of readers toward certain doors that Klia wanted opened.

Klia's mental formative-patterns were those of the paranoid, but having matured in a society where such patterns were the norm, she was neither insane nor neurotic. Her mind was keen, and her goals

were those of the predator. San Rorrek had to find and kill her quickly.

He watched the streets by night because her race and his were both non-sleepers. They were capable of resting a part of the brain at a time, having two cortical areas for each bodily function. He knew she would become bored by night-time inactivity; sooner or later she would come wandering, while most of the city slept. In what guise would he find her? Her normal racial appearance did not conform to Terran standards. She was tall, willowy, nearly albino, with pink-gray eyes, slightly slanted, and with rich red hair that swept upward in a natural tufted appearance. But hair and skin could be dyed. And over a period of several weeks she could control her circulatory and glandular systems in such a way that fatty deposits would appear where she desired them and disappear in other places so that she could change her features and her form at will, as he himself had done.

Of one thing he was certain: Her paranoid pride would not permit her to assume a guise regarded as ugly by this world. Most certainly she would make herself strikingly beautiful.

San Rorrek however had reduced his body-weight, padded his cheekbones to give himself a gaunt appearance, dyed his hair black and his skin a sallow shade. An irritant, rubbed into pinpricks on his face, resulted in mild acne that made him something less than handsome. He smeared his teeth with brown stain, wore shabby second-hand clothing, and a pair of plain-rimmed glasses. He was not here to attract attention; he was here to kill. He looked like a peddler or a laborer out of a job.

He was walking down a side-street at midnight when he caught the first faint aura of her presence. She was somewhere within a few blocks, and she was planting a suggestion in the mind of the Terran who would not recognize the source of the thoughts as stemming from outside his own consciousness.

*Sweee-whew! That dame on the corner! Did she look at me? Think I'll walk that way.*

This was it! San had not reached out to touch the Terran's mind, for in doing so he would broadcast his own thought-aura and reveal his presence to Klia. He had merely listened to Klia's planting of the thought in the Terran's mind, and he caught the general direction from whence it came. He began walking rapidly up the street, then cut through the blackness of an alley.

Was she playing games, or had she chosen a Terran to be of some service to her? Perhaps she was bored, and only wanted a brief love-affair.

AT THE END of the alley, he paused to peer toward both intersections. There were a few people on the sidewalk, but no woman tall enough to be Klia. He jaywalked and darted down the next alleyway. If the Terran had responded immediately to her suggestion, they would perhaps be gone before he could reach them.

But then he caught another brief flash of thought—not words, but an image. She was helping the Terran imagine what she might look like without clothing. San chuckled as he trotted ahead. Unknowingly, she had given him a clue as to her appearance. Through glandular control, she had apparently padded herself to a remarkable condition of mammalian grandiloquence. The effect was almost surrealistic; the way a male might design a female if he had any choice in the matter.

"You liked that, eh?" snarled a quiet voice from the darkness of a doorway.

He stopped abruptly in mid-alley, caught in a puddle of moonlight. She had tricked him. There had been no Terran. The phoney suggestion had been a trap. He glanced quickly around.

"Don't move," she snapped. "I've got a native gun on, you—a projectile weapon, in case you aren't familiar with their artifacts."

He stood in stony silence, staring at the doorway until he made out her faint shadow. There was a tiny venom-gun strapped to his wrist, but its action would not be immediate, and if he used it, she would have ample time to kill him before she died. If it came to that he would use it, but now he hesitated, trying to piece together her immediate intentions.

He shrugged and grinned. "Okay. So I lost. Shoot and get it over with."

"Not here. They'd run an autopsy on you, pastoral. They'd figure you weren't quite Terran."

"I'm no pastoral. I'm an inventive."

"It's all the same to me, Rorrek. You're a lousy Thirder. Now move! Stay in the moonlight and walk slow. Stop when you come to the street. I'll be right behind you."

"Where are we going?"

"Shut up! And don't start making suggestions at a policeman, or I'll kill you."

Rorrek started walking. He felt her thoughts scanning lightly through various regions of consciousness-patterns until she found a taxi-driver. *Then: I gotta hunch there's a customer on the next street. Think I'll turn right.*

The taxi was approaching the alley entrance as they emerged. "Flag it," she ordered. Rorrek obeyed grim-lipped.

"You get in first, darling," she said in a pleasant tone. "I like to sit on the right."

"That's just because I'm right handed, dear," he purred acidly.

"Where to, sir?"

*Out of the city*, the girl ordered Rorrek wordlessly. *Tell him.*

"Ask her. She's boss."

The gun jabbed him ruthlessly in the ribs. The driver grinned. "Where to, lady?"

She hesitated. "A long trip?"

"How long?"

"Oh, thirty, forty miles. North."

"It'll cost you."

"That's all right. Will twenty dollars do it?"

"Maybe. Watch the meter and double it. You'll have to pay both ways."

"Let's go."

Rorrek glanced at her sourly as they moved through the traffic. She had been exaggerating only slightly with the mental image used to trap him. The platinum blonde hair, the gray eyes, the aristocratic features, the full, slightly cynical mouth—she conformed perfectly to the beauty standards of this world. The black dress revealed things that would have won her first place in any of the inane native female contests.

"You've done well by yourself, I see," he said, eyeing the expensive clothing and jewelry.

*What telepath couldn't? And stop talking aloud.*

He watched her for a moment. The gun was in her handbag. So was her hand. And she was keeping a sharp eye on him. Rorrek frowned. No opening yet.

*Where are we going?*

*Someplace where you can dig a hole without being seen.*

Rorrek stared ahead at the traffic for a moment. He didn't need to ask her what the hole was for.

THE DRIVER was approaching an intersection and the light was just changing from green to red. Having heard the girl summon the taxi, Rorrek knew the man's consciousness pattern. He adjusted to it quickly and planted a rapid suggestion: *Damn the light! I can make it!*

The girl cursed and lifted the handbag. The light was already red. A car shot out from the other street. The brakes screamed. A police-whistle shrilled angrily.

"Shoot," Rorrek dared, smirking at Klia.

The handbag hesitated. "Make a wrong move and I'll have to."

The driver was too busy with his own troubles to hear them. The cop came stalking across the pavement. "You like to live dangerously, huh?" he said in a bored voice.

The cabby began a plaintive explanation.

"Come on, dear," said Klia. "We'll catch another cab."

"I like this one."

*Get out, or I'll kill you and the cop too. Pay the driver.*

Rorrek handed the driver a dollar. They crossed to the sidewalk and the girl looked shaken. This was a busier street and there were more pedestrians. He grinned at her again.

"May I buy you a drink before you finish me off?"

Surprisingly, she replied, "I'll let you live that long, pastoral. It's interesting to watch you try to wiggle out of it."

He knew she meant it. She could have hypnotized the cop and the driver, shot him in the cab, and strolled calmly away as one of a dozen multiple mental images. She could still do it, but evidently the idea of making him dig his own grave appealed to her icy sense of humor.

They entered a small bar and she directed him toward a secluded booth. "I'm surprised you haven't used your wrist weapon yet," she said as they sipped a martini. "Apparently you pastorals have no capability for self-sacrifice."

His face showed no surprise, but he rested his arm across the table. He smirked. "I was waiting for a better opportunity, but since you put it that way let's get it over with." His other hand darted toward the lethal wrist.

"One moment," she said.

He paused.

"Do you have an extra projectile?"

He frowned, then nodded.

She smiled again, and laid a braceleted white arm across the table. "I'll save you the trouble of firing. Prick me with it."

His throat started with surprise.

"You're not immune," he hissed.

"To Ayoyo venom? Try me."

Rorrek gained new admiration for her. The process of immunization was an excruciatingly painful treatment covering three years and usually it shortened the lifespan considerably. This could, mean but one thing.

"You've been plotting this for a long time then?"

Her eyes narrowed and she leaned forward. "Correct, pastoral. Ever since you excluded us from your society and sent us to an iron-less planet."

"I'm *not* a pastoral," he protested. "I'm an inventive."

"An artificial category. An inventive is a maladjusted pastoral who wishes he were a Klidd."

Her use of the ancient feudal name for her race startled him. His people had almost forgotten it. Once on Nu Phoenicis IV there had been the Klidds, or barons, the Algon, or serfs, and the Taknon, or artisans. The feudal system had lasted more than five thousand years, and because of natural selection operating within the occupational groups, the three classes had become genetically distinct. After the rise of a technology, the Klidds were overthrown and exiled to the ironless fourth planet where they formed their own ruthless social order under a strict space quarantine, enforced by the Taknon space-force which Rorrek served.

"I'll stop arguing heredity with you, Klia," he said. "Finish your drink and let's go."

"I'll call the signals."

"I love your Terran idiom," he grunted, "and your company is charming. But get your business over with."

"You're anxious to die?"

He shrugged indifferently. "Someone else will come and kill you, if I don't do the job. They know you're here now."

A smile. "You underestimate these people, Rorrek." She waved a casual hand toward the rest of the room. "Before another yokel like you can find me, I'll have these primitives building a five-space drive and proving that Nu Phoenicis has habitable planets. Then let's see you stop us."

He nodded thoughtfully. "So that's the picture. You get Terra to send ships to your world, expecting no human life there. The ships come back to Terra full of your people, ready to take over. Then you get your hands on Terran iron and steel to use in attacking my people."

"In general, yes." Her gray eyes were icy calm, and she hated him with a fierceness that he could feel —hated him as a symbol of the race who had exiled her people.

"You're pathetic," he said quietly.

She flushed, then her face went hard. He bored in.

"I have always felt intensely sorry for your asinine emotion patterns."



No Klidd could endure that. She turned white and hissed a curse in her native tongue. He locked a probe in her consciousness, and when she squeezed the trigger of her gun, he was on his feet heaving the table into her lap. It crashed down as the gun exploded. The bullet tore his calf. He lashed out with a heavy fist, hard to her temple, and hoping it was brutal enough to kill her. She sagged and toppled to the floor.

THE LOUNGE was in an uproar, the people cringing toward the walls. A police-whistle made an ear-shocking screech as the traffic cop from the corner came lumbering in to investigate.

"Don't anyone move!" he bellowed, and charged across the room toward Rorrek, who was about to kick Klia's temple to insure her death. His foot froze and settled to the floor.

"Call an ambulance," the cop bawled at the manager. "Everybody stay back!"

Rorrek began, "It was purely an—"

"Don't say anything. Just stand there and keep your hands in sight."

Rorrek kept his hands in sight. He stared at the cop, suggesting nausea, suggesting a fluttering of the heart, suggesting asphyxiation. The cop began to gasp and reel. Rorrek increased the mental dosage. The cop choked and fainted.

As Rorrek walked calmly out into the night, he heard voices behind him telling that the girl was dead. He felt sick himself now. There was something compelling about Klia, something that attracted. He felt a little like a child, drawn toward a cruel mother—or a husband, lured to a wantonly selfish and unfaithful mistress. He knew she had to be killed, yet now that it was done, he felt rotten inside.

At last he found a doctor and had his flesh-wound dressed. He stared at the doctor peculiarly and the medic seemed to forget it had been a bullet wound. Rorrek went home to his apartment, packed his belongings and called a cab.

An hour later he was aboard a flight for San Francisco. There was no returning to his home planet for he had ditched the ship at sea lest it be found by Terrans. Such were the quarantine regulations. He felt certain that Klia had done the same with her stolen Hydrian ship for another reason: Lest it be found by a commission agent such as himself. Also, her plan for leading Terrans spaceward, luring them to Phoenicis IV, and taking their ships, required that they continue in their naive belief that Terra possessed the only human life in the galaxy.

So he was stuck here for life unless a Taknon ship came to pick him up, and there had been no guarantee of that from the Commission. Secret landings on nonspacegoing planets were forbidden except in several specifically defined emergencies. Rescuing a second-class agent was not one of them.

He was faced with a life of ease but of loneliness. A telepath would have no difficulty acquiring tremendous wealth here, but a telepath would have no company—unless he could find a few natives whose neural associative circuits were so ordered as to make telepathy latently possible. Occasionally he had encountered a Terran whose thought-aura was vaguely perceptible. Perhaps, through long and patient hypnotic conditioning, their latent abilities could be brought forth. If the genetic hodgepodge could be straightened out, Terrans had high possibilities. Their basic genetic emotion-patterns were not as sharply divided into groups as those of Nu Phoenicis, but the patterns were present, and the conflict among them was present. Rather than calling them Pastorals, Inventives, and Imperials, as in the Phoenician case, he decided perhaps that the basic Terran-patterns could best be described by the goals they were inclined to favor. The "Security-Seekers", the "Knowledge-Seekers", and the "Glory-Seekers" perhaps.

Phoenician code forbade any tampering with non-threat cultural forms, but who was there to enforce it? And in a sense, this was his planet now. Marooned here, he could participate in a subtle (way, and help a few local inventives find new directions. Maybe he owed them that much for killing Klia, who would certainly have steered them spaceward, although the end result would have been disastrous for them, had her plan worked.

THE FIRST WEEK in San Francisco he spent replenishing his funds through poker games, wrestling matches, and various forms of betting in which thought-projective powers were a distinct advantage.

Then he rented a house in the suburbs, ordered half a ton of various electronic parts, and began building several computer units while he concentrated on revising his physical appearance to a more pleasing form.

As the weeks passed, he put on weight, removed the fatty tissue from his cheekbones, thickened his cheeks enough to remove the gauntness, and restored his complexion to a healthier hue. When he was finished, he had the appearance of a gregarious young businessman, cleanly attractive but not offensively handsome.

He finished the computer shortly after he finished himself. It was not a large unit as computers went. It was built into a chassis the size of an eight-foot refrigerator. A Terran might say it was constructed to handle problems in that rarefied strata of mathematics known as the Von Neumann theory of games. But the twenty-four instruments on its face were calibrated in "points per share".

Rorrek spent a month in libraries, photographing stock-market reports covering a thirty-year period. These he laboriously studied, plotting the rise and fall of each stock on graphs, writing empirical equations to describe each graph, and feeding the equations to the computer's memory tanks. Fed also into the tanks, were thirty-year record-equations describing tax-rates, population growth, national income, government expenditures, world armaments, exports, imports, and average individual incomes. The computer, required to assume that all the variables were dependent upon one another, evolved an implicit function in some thirty-seven variable quantities.

He then fed it the "present conditions" and required it to extrapolate the values forward over a period of two months. Eleven stocks appeared due for sharp rises within the period. San Rorrek invested ten thousand dollars. At the end of two months, the stocks had risen fifteen thousand. He corrected the small errors in the computer's estimates by supplying new data, then extrapolated again, selling and reinvesting in accordance with the new predictions. There was danger, of course, that a completely unpredictable series of events might occur to cause unfavorable market fluctuations. Therefore he very carefully watched world conditions, political developments, and technical advancements.

Klia's articles were still appearing in magazines and technical journals, but that was not surprising, considering the usual lag between the acceptance of an essay and its publication. And the pieces were having subtle repercussions in the news, attracting no attention in themselves, but spurring certain scientists to think along new lines. Klia had suggested a method for testing basic mental formative patterns in infancy; and now a western university's psychology department was setting up a research lab "for studying the basic affective reaction patterns of infants at birth".

Klia, under another pen-name, had suggested an extension of relativistic mechanics to cover hypothetical N-dimensional universes. The newspapers announced now that the famous mathematician, Larwich, was beginning work on the creation of a mathematical physics with no basic assumptions other than those of elementary arithmetic. "Man's only insight into reality," said Larwich, "derives from his ability to count on his fingers. All else is purely experiential approximation."

Rorrek grinned. Klia had been trying to steer Terran inventors straight toward a five-space interstellar drive, while the government was still spending billions on rocket research in the hope of reaching the moon. She was trying to get the mathematicians to see the velocity of light as a constant *only* at one specific universe-level of five-space, and as a different constant at other levels. And she had managed to steer Larwich in the right direction.

Only one thing was lacking: an experiential tie between observable reality and the theory Larwich would certainly develop. Without it, the theory would remain merely abstruse mathematical speculation of an invariantive nature. Rorrek's fingers itched at the typewriter, longing to supply the missing suggestion. A guilt-reaction, he told himself, probably associated with Klia's death.

Nevertheless he wrote an essay entitled "Origin of Interstellar Hydrogen", and sent it to a university press periodical. The article suggested that the spontaneous appearance of matter in the four-space cosmos could be explained in terms of a five-space continuum with a circulation of matter along the fifth component.

The essay was rejected with a brief note from the editor: "Sorry, but we just last week purchased an essay dealing with the mechanics of this 'continuous creation' notion. Your style is good. Try us again,

soon, Editor."

Rorrek snorted and chucked the essay in the wastebasket. Some local yokel had probably beat him to the draw with some weirdly empirical notion that left out the tie with five-space.

The rejection irritated him. He decided to give it up for a while, and concentrate on making himself a millionaire. Then he learned that Dr. Larwich was in San Francisco for the summer. After some debate about the desirability of direct intervention, he found the professor's address—a modest cottage overlooking the bay with a short stretch of narrow beach before it.

RORREK RENTED a cottage half a mile away. Three days later he wandered past the professor's cottage, having spied three brown bodies sunbathing on the beach before it. As he drew nearer, he studied them curiously. An elderly couple and a girl in her late twenties, possibly Larwich's daughter. She was watching him casually—a large, dark girl with hazel eyes and firm breasts.

Rorrek approached the group. "Am I still on a public beach?" he asked, "Or am I a trespasser?"

The elderly couple glanced up questioningly. The girl smiled. "Trespassers are welcome. Help yourself." She had a nice musical voice.

"I've got the next cottage down the line," he said. "But I scarcely realized I had neighbors."

"It is lonely out here. Won't you sit with us awhile? You look tired."

Rorrek grinned and patted a slight bulge in his mid-section. "Trying to work off my bay window." He strolled toward them, scraping his feet in the sand.

The old man looked down at his own sagging belly, then glowered at the stranger. "Young man, you have just committed a grievous *faux pas*," he grunted.

"I'm Edith Larwich," said the girl. "This is my father, Frank Larwich . . . and my mother, Louise."

He nodded and sat down. "I'm Sam Rory." He hesitated, looking at the professor and gathering a frown. "Larwich—Frank Larwich—I've heard of you, I think. Is it Doctor Larwich—of the new look in invariantive viewpoints?"

The old man looked surprised. He lifted his eyebrows first at his wife, then his daughter. He extended his hand to Rorrek and looked a beam of amusement down his slender nose. "Young man, you have just absolved yourself of that *faux pas*. What school are you with?"

"No school."

"What research lab, then?"

"No lab, I'm a gambler."

"Bah! Stop joking. Laymen don't talk about invariance, or remember the names of old codgers like me."

He shrugged. "I apologize for being a layman, sir, but I like mathematics. I've read a few of your pieces in the digest."

Larwich glanced at his wife and daughter again. They were looking curiously at Rorrek.

"My fame comes as a distinct shock to me," the old man said with a slight smile.

"Have a cup of iced tea," said Edith, pouring from a thermos.

He thanked her and managed to pull his eyes away from her body. Terran standards of beauty were beginning to appeal to him.

"When do you expect to publish your new theory, Doctor?" he asked casually.

"Make it 'Frank'," grunted the oldster. "And I expect to publish it within a few months. It's coming along much faster than I thought. In fact, it scares me sometimes."

Rorrek fell briefly thoughtful. Any man who could work that theory out in a few months was certainly the mental equal of the best minds of his own race. It startled him. Here seemed proof enough that Terran-humanity was going places, given a little intelligent biosocial reform.

"That's remarkable," he murmured. "I thought it would be at least two years."

"So did I. But Edith here helped me tremendously with certain down-to-earth suggestions. It may seem unbelievable to you, but I think this thing is going to have some practical applications, and apply to certain observable phenomena."

Rorrek looked sharply at the girl. She was smiling at him faintly with the cool green eyes. The old

man laughed.

"Edith forgot to mention—it's Edith Larwich, Ph.D. in physics. She instantly spotted some possible correlations between my theory and some of the modern cosmologies."

Rorrek was still staring at her. "Such as the mechanics of spontaneous creation of matter?" he asked quietly.

The girl nodded, and smiled amusement at her father who appeared taken aback. "If Sam Rory is really a gambler, let's not invite him to any poker games." She grinned at the visitor again. "This is remarkable. We'll have to get better acquainted."

He murmured pleasantly, but felt a vague uneasiness. He had come to plant a hint of the correlation in the mathematician's mind, but now there was no need to do so. When Larwich was through, physicists could build an experimental five-space generator on the basis of his theory. When the physicists were through making data-tables, engineers would be able to constrict a working model interstellar drive, provided someone would make the investment. Rorrek, busy making a fortune in the stock-market, musingly saw himself as angel for the first ship.

Edith stood up, tugging at her suit to cover a streak of white hip. She smiled down at him. "Think I'll swim. Care to join me?"

"Leave him here for a while, will you?" grunted Larwich.

Rorrek nodded at the girl. "I'll meet you in the water."

She trotted toward the surf, lithe, brown, and lovely in the sun.

"Your daughter is very beautiful, sir," Rorrek murmured.

"Eh? Oh, thank you. I find myself marvelling about her change so much that I scarcely notice her prettiness."

"Change?"

"In personality. You see, she was nearly blind until a few months ago. Cataracts. And she was always so retiring, quiet and introspective. It's remarkable what the removal of a physical defect can do for a girl's personality. You wouldn't call her shy and retiring now, would you?"

"Not at all. Quite friendly, I'd say."

Rorrek watched her plunging gracefully in the surf, and he wondered at his vague uneasiness.

"What do you really do, Sam?" Larwich asked.

"Investor. I hit it lucky on the market. Gambler—same thing."

Larwich chuckled. "You evidently read technical publications as a hobby, then. Or are you working on a mathematical way to beat the stock market?"

Rorrek smiled enigmatically, and got to his feet. "You might try the Von Neumann theory of games," he offered, then smiled sheepishly. "If you'll excuse me, I think I'll join your daughter for a swim."

HE WAS far out beyond the feeble breakers when he trotted through the shallow water, but she rolled on her, back to wave and watch him. A very beautiful, intelligent girl, he thought calculatingly. If he were to remain marooned on Terra, it would be interesting to see if normal procreation could result from marriage with a native. He felt an urge to touch the girl's mind, then decided against it for the present. Some Terrans seemed sensitively receptive, and they became startled by undue power.

She lay treading water until he swam up beside her, then she smiled but her eyes were thoughtful.

"Water's nice!" he grunted. "Is it?"

He frowned. "Why the challenging tone?"

"Who are you, anyway?"

"Just who I said I was. Sam Rory, gambler, investor."

She said nothing more about it, but her eyes were suspicious. They swam in silence for a time, then she called, "How's the beach down at your place?"

He hesitated. Was she angling? "Just fine," he said. "Why don't you come down?"

She lifted her wet head from the tide and nodded soberly. "I will. Very soon."

Again he felt the vague uneasiness.

Rorrek spent the afternoon on his porch, watching the bay. Tomorrow he meant to go back to the

suburbs, return to the task of making himself the wealthiest man in the country as quickly as possible, then start endowing universities with research grants like a fat old capitalist with a guilty conscience.

Twilight came, and he felt the loneliness of an alien longing for home. He visualized the warm, rolling hills of Phoenicia III, dotted with pastoral Algon villages, and the great walled city-states of the Taknon, covering hundreds of square miles and set in the midst of the Algon landscape. They worked in harmony, the two races—each maintaining its own government, each keeping itself socially and biologically separated, yet each realizing that one could not exist and prosper without the other. It was a class society that worked, worked because the classes were divided according to the goals they sought, not according to any artificial framework. Of course, Man's goals were chosen in the light of his emotions and aptitudes, and at least among the Phoenicians, emotion and aptitude patterns were founded on genetic bedrock. It was only rarely that Taknon aptitudes were born in an Algon village, and equally rare when a pastorally inclined child appeared in the Taknon cities.

Loneliness weighed heavily on him. With some misgivings he closed his eyes, and searched through the transor regions for the Larwich girl's pattern of consciousness. When he passed through it, he started up with a low gasp—and lost the pattern. There had been a knife-edge sharpness about it—a clarity of focus that suggested resonant neural circuits as in the trained telepath. He groped for it again.

But when he found it, the sharpness was gone—if it had really been there. The transor was strong but blurred, unreadable. He decided his first impression had been illusion.

*I wonder what that young man is doing?* he suggested. *He did invite me to his beach. Maybe if I walked down that way.*

He paused a moment, trying to catch the blurred images that swam in leisure through her consciousness. But they were too muddled. He withdrew from her and waited. Half-a-mile might be too far for the untrained mind to catch the faint suggestion, and even though she would mistake the thoughts for her own, she might offer herself some counter-excuse for not coming.

HE WATCHED the cottage in the failing gray of twilight. After a few minutes, the screen door opened, and someone stood on the porch. Then she trotted down the steps to the beach and came walking his way, but looking toward the sea. As she drew nearer, he saw that she was wearing white shorts and a pale blue blouse with the tail knotted about her waist. The wind whipped the blouse against her breasts and ruffled her short dark hair like a nest of feathers. He watched her come toward him with narrow speculative eyes, and he wondered again: Was a procreative union possible here?

She looked toward him and waved, breaking his reverie, then on apparently sudden impulse turned and plodded through the sand toward his porch.

"Am I trespassing? Or did you invite me to your beach?"

"Come on up," he called. "I was just wishing you'd drop by."

She hooked her foot on the step and cocked her head at him. "Why?"

It startled him. "The answer to that," he chuckled, "might be found in textbooks of psychology and biology, particularly the latter. Come up and sit down."

"Not if you're going to be biological."

"Only introspectively so. I have insufficient data on the subject to feel safe in rash experiments."

She laughed and came up to take a chair, propping her long, trim legs on the rail. "The subject is a carnivore who might chew off an ear."

"Mmm! How about a nice thick steak with onions and french fries and a gallon of beer?"

"The bloated subject would fall asleep in her cage."

"Exactly."

She watched him with cool amusement in the dusk. "I think we find each other attractive."

"I'm glad it's mutual. I have plans for you."

She dropped her legs, rested her elbows on her knees, and swung half around to grin peculiarly, head cocked up at him. "Okay, Sam. Finish the funny story."

He leaned toward her and tried to steal as softly as possible into her consciousness pattern, but he kept his voice light and casual.

"The plan is simple biology, but it involves many unknowns as yet. For instance—"

He pulled her face toward him slowly, and moulded her mouth with his. Quietly they slipped to their feet, locked tightly together, laughing quietly with soft fire where their faces touched. He brought his mind slowly into full resonance with her pattern, demanding her to respond.

The response was white flame, but not of the body. His mind reeled for an instant before he understood. *Full focus! Too bright!* And something hard against his ribs.

*You should have been born a Klidd!*

He backed away, staring at her, and the glint of metal in her hand.

*I wasn't certain, she went on until you threw that full resonance at me.*

"Klia!"

"Yes." She found a cigaret with her left hand and lit it while she held the gun on him with her right. He could see her face in the match-flare, and it appeared tight and drawn.

"Your lipstick is smeared," he offered.

"Thanks. It was a pleasure. I'm really sorry I have to kill you."

"Like you killed Larwich's blind daughter and took her place?"

Klia snorted. "She's not dead. She's still blind, and she's an amnesiac in a Pennsylvania psychopathic ward."

"Hypnotically induced amnesia, undoubtedly."

"Right. I had to get her personality patterns, and leave her a blank."

"I thought I left you dead on the floor."

She sighed impatiently. "Would a Terran know when a Phoenician was dead?"

Rorrek saw his blunder and gritted his teeth. He'd been a fool to believe. Naturally, every time someone touched her wrist to test her pulse, she had simply stopped her heartbeat until the fellow let go, or perhaps shut off the circulation in the arm.

"Well, you've got Larwich well on the road to the theory of a space drive, I see."

She nodded, started to reply, paused, then: "You didn't suspect me because you thought I was dead. Then why did you come prowling around Larwich?"

"To do what you've already done."

"You're lying."

"See for yourself." He began sliding into resonance with her, but she backed away warily and blocked him out.

"You can break it whenever you want to," he said.

She risked it, and their transors found sharp focus again. He reeled off the contents of his associative circuits relating to Larwich and his theory, reeled them off too rapidly for them to be inventions of the moment. Then he switched to memories concerning his thoughts of her.

"Why did you do that?" she muttered when he was through. Her voice was shaky, and the gun seemed to be sagging in her hand.

He shrugged. "We're a long way from Nu Phoenicis. I expect to be here for good."

"You will be," she said ominously, straightening. "Start marching down to the water."

"Why?"

"The tide's going out. You'll go with it."

"Suppose I suggest we work together."

She laughed scornfully. "Move quickly, Taknon!"

He walked slowly down the steps and into the faint moonlight. He moved ahead with a calm leisurely tread. Behind him the girl laughed.

"You're part Klidd, Rorrek. A hybrid—or a throwback."

He failed to ask her why.

"I could feel affection for a Taknon, but I couldn't love one. I've watched you. You're part Klidd. I can feel it."

He wondered why his throat constricted. He said nothing.

"I love you, Rorrek. Damn your hide."

But she loved her planet more.

"What are you going to do about Larwich now?" he asked coldly. "Are you going to switch to someone else, or are you going to keep on brazening it out?"

"Switch. I'm through with him. He's on the right course."

Rorrek started wading into shallow water.

"Go on out past the breakers," she called. "I don't want you to wash back in."

"Glad to oblige," he grunted, but he paused to look back. She had kicked off her sandals and was wading after him.

She stopped, gun glinting in the moonlight. "Well?"

"One thing."

He scanned for her mind, but she blocked, refusing him resonance. He bludgeoned through until he made a strong but fuzzy contact. He held the contact, but turned away and began wading through the gentle rush of breakers while he wandered through his associative circuits concerning her.

*Stop it, Rorrek!*

Then the resonance was complete, and he chuckled, because she was going to feel it when she shot him. Beyond the breakers, he turned again to face her. She was reeling dizzily, holding the gun at arm's length, with her left hand pressed tight to her face.

HE WAS unprepared for the shots when they came. Two went wide, but the third seared his chest, and he went down, fighting for air, hearing a choking scream from Klia. He gasped once and went under, swimming weakly for deeper water. Another bullet streaked phosphorescence through the blackness about him. He drove still deeper, clinging precariously to consciousness. Another slug streaked under him and he veered upward. Seven cartridges in the gun, five gone. If he could only live a little longer.

Then he had to rise for air. He spun around and came up slowly, facing shore. She was walking dejectedly back across the beach toward his cottage. He waited for her to look back. He dog-paddled with the waves, but the tide seemed to be sweeping him out.

*"PraTalv Bladen, Klia!"* he choked in their native tongue. "For the love of Man!"

She heard him. She turned slowly, watched him coldly for a moment, pistol lifted high.

*"PraTalv' Kliddn, Taknon!"* came her icy paraphrase.

The gun barked, and barked again. Seven! But this time it was his abdomen, and he heard himself screaming as he fought toward shore. He could only partially control the flow of blood to the wounds. When tissue cried for blood, the unconscious reflex let it go. It was like holding one's breath, and occasionally he had to bleed.

She was standing there watching him, white in the moonlight, locked in a kind of trance.

*Go,* he thought at her savagely. *When I get there, I'll kill you—for those last two shots.*

She looked at the gun in her hand. She let it drop, stared down at it, wiped the hand distastefully on her shorts. She backed away a step, stumbled in the sand, and sat down, rolling her head on her knees. He groped for her mind, and she erected no block. She hoped he would die before he got to shore, but she wasn't going to move.

Fate, about to be satisfied—it gave him angry strength. A breaker washed over him from behind, and he rode with it briefly. When it passed him by and dropped him, he stood chest-deep, wading shoreward. He peered at her dazedly, hands clenching and unclenching in anticipation. He let her feel the strength of his hate, but her thoughts were wandering—her home, her people. But she saw them differently somehow, as if she were no longer capable of being guided by their values. Her affective framework had collapsed. She sat in a bewildered daze.

He staggered from the water and fell to his knees on the sand. He crawled toward her with savage deliberation in the moonlight.

*Run, Klia—I'm going to kill you!*

She looked up slowly, watched him crawling toward her. Then she pulled herself up and went to meet him. Snarling, he lurched for her.

"Let me get you to a doctor," she said.

He laughed, groped for her. She slipped her shoulders under his arm to support him. His fist cracked savagely. Something brittle shattered. She screamed and pawed at her face. He hit her again and again, rblbing across the sand, battering her face until his fists were driving into wet pulp.

"My eyes! My eyes!"

Weakly he crouched over her, staring. She had been wearing contact lenses. The green irises had been stained on the glass to cover her gray ones. Now jagged slivers of glass protruded from under her eyelids. She rolled her head and moaned, trying to escape him.

Flashlights were coming down the beach, and Doc Larwich was shouting frantically. Rorrek backed away from the girl. She came to her feet and began running blindly, staggering toward a sand embankment.

"Rorrek!" The cry was plaintive.

He moved drunkenly after her, groping for resonance, steering her toward the pathway around the cottage. His car loomed on the driveway. He guided her into it, followed her.

The girl drove, watching the' road through his eyes.

*You're finished, Klia!*

There was only wildness and fright in her racing mind. *My eyes, my eyes, my eyes .*

He let her alone, clinging precariously to consciousness and fighting internal hemorrhage. The glaring lights on the road dazed him, and the car weaved crazily as she used his dimming vision to guide her.

He knew he had won. He had stopped her, for as in every paranoiac culture, loss of function or deformity was cause for shame and ridicule among the Klidd. A blinded Klidd, like a Kwakiutl tribesman or Zulu warrior, was disgraced and ashamed. The only recourse was death.

Why didn't she accept it then? He was waiting for her to ram the car into a truck or bridge, but she drove as straight as his failing sight would allow.

A SIGN on the road said, "Robert Honkler, Physician and Surgeon." He stared at the white house, and the girl pulled to the curb.

"Get out!" she ordered, but left the engine running and stayed behind the wheel.

So that was it. She brought him here, and now, blinded, she was going to plunge on.

"Why?" he gasped. "Why—help —me—?"

"*PraTalv' Bladen, Rorrek!*" she snapped with a sarcastic viciousness that masked her heart. "—for love of Man!"

He jerked the key from the ignition and fell across her to hold her in the car. His elbow pressed against the horn and held it down.

"Let me go!"

*We'll work together, Klia. We'll get these people into space, and somehow we'll help your people.*

She laughed bitterly. *Help them? You never gave them a chance! When the feudal order collapsed, the Taknon and the Algun adapted themselves to technology. But you banished the Klidd without letting them find a place in the new society. You hated them too much as your former tyrants.*

"A place? What place could a Klidd—"

*Administrators, coordinators, organizers. But you exiled us to a world without iron, condemned us to an eternal stone age. There is but one fundamental right of Man, Taknon! The right to try. You denied it to us.*

Footsteps were coming down the walk, and gentle hands were dragging them out of the car. Came blackness.

When he awoke, he expected to see iron bars, or the walls of a hospital room. Instead, he was in his own home in the suburbs. He tried to move, and groaned. Something rustled in the room.

"Lie still," she said.

He rolled his head weakly to look at her. She sat stiffly in a straight-backed chair by the window, morning sunlight playing in her hair. There was a bandage across her eyes. He groped for her mind, and



found the answer. She had helped the doctor forget that he had ever seen three bullet-wounds and a pair of ruined eyes.

"As soon as you're able to get up, I'll go," she said coldly.

"No. You'll stay. We'll build ships. We'll get your people to a ferrous planet somehow—an uninhabited one. If they can build a civilization from scratch, they deserve it."

She stood up and faced the window for a time, soaking in the warm sunlight, and he allowed her the privacy of her thoughts.

*The right to try—even for a race of power-grabbers.*

*PraTalv' Bladen.* For the love of Man.

"My eyes," she said dully. "He said there's not much chance."

"There is a chance?"

She shrugged.

"We still have *one* pair." And he showed her herself through them; showed her herself with ever-increasing daring until she blushed crimson.

But her hands reached out to him.

THE END

## Blood Bank

THE COLONEL'S SECRETARY heard clomping footsteps in the corridor and looked up from her typing. The footsteps stopped in the doorway. A pair of jet-black eyes bored through her once, then looked away. A tall, thin joker in a space commander's uniform stalked into the reception room, sat in the corner, and folded his hands stiffly in his lap. The secretary arched her plucked brows. It had been six months since a visitor had done that—walked in without saying boo to the girl behind the rail.

"You have an appointment, sir?" she asked with a pro-fessional smile.

The man nodded curtly but said nothing. His eyes flick-ered toward her briefly, then returned to the wall. She tried to decide whether he was angry or in pain. The black eyes burned with cold fire. She checked the list of appointments. Her smile disappeared, to be replaced by a tight-lipped expression of scorn.

"You're Space Commander Eli Roki?" she asked in an icy tone.

Again the curt nod. She gazed at him steadily for several seconds. "Colonel Beth will see you in a few minutes." Then her typewriter began clattering with sharp sounds of hate.

The man sat quietly, motionlessly. The colonel passed through the reception room once and gave him a brief nod. Two majors came in from the corridor and entered the colonel's office without looking at him. A few moments later, the intercom crackled, "Send Roki in, Dela. Bring your pad and come with him."

The girl looked at Roki, but he was already on his feet, striding toward the door. Evidently he came from an unchivalrous planet; he opened the door without looking at her and let her catch in when it started to slam.

Chubby, elderly Colonel Beth sat waiting behind his desk, flanked by the pair of majors. Roki's bearing as he approached and saluted was that of the professional soldier, trained from birth for the military.

"Sit down, Roki."

The tall space commander sat at attention and waited, his face expressionless, his eyes coolly upon the colonel's forehead. Beth shuffled some papers on his desk, then spoke slowly.

"Before we begin, I want you to understand something, commander."

"Yes, sir."

"You are not being tried. This is not a court-martial. There are no charges against you. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

The colonel's pale eyes managed to look at Roki's face without showing any contempt. "This investigation is for the record, and for the public. The incident has already been investigated, as you know. But the people are aroused, and we have to make a show of some kind."

"I understand, sir."

"Then let's begin. Dela, take notes, please." The colonel glanced at the papers before him. "Space Commander Roki, will you please tell us in your own words what happened during patrol flight Sixty-one on fourday sixmonth, year eighty-seven?"

There was a brief silence. The girl was staring at the back of Roki's neck as if she longed to attack it with a hatchet. Roki's thin face was a waxen mask as he framed his words. His voice came calm as a bell and clear.

"The flight was a random patrol. We blasted off Jod VII at thirteen hours, Universal Patrol Time, switched on the high-C drive, and penetrated to the ten-thousandth level of the C'th component. We re-entered the continuum on the outer patrol radius at thirty-six degrees theta and two-hundred degrees psi. My navigator threw the dice to select a random course. We were to proceed to a point on the same co-ordinate shell at thirty theta and one-fifty psi. We began—"

The colonel interrupted. "Were you aware at the time that your course would intersect that of the mercy ship?"

The girl looked up again. Roki failed to wince at the question. "I was aware of it, sir."

"Go on."

"We proceeded along the randomly selected course until the warp detectors warned us of a ship. When we came in range, I told the engineer to jockey into a parallel course and to lock the automatics to *keep* us parallel. When that was accomplished, I called the unknown freighter with the standard challenge."

"You saw its insignia?"

"Yes, sir. The yellow mercy star."

"Go on. Did they answer your challenge?"

"Yes, sir. The reply, decoded, was: Mercy liner Sol-G-6, departure Sol III, destination Jod VI, cargo emer-gency surgi-bank supplies, Cluster Request A-4-J."

Beth nodded and watched Roki with clinical curiosity. "You knew about the Jod VI disaster? That twenty thousand casualties were waiting in Suspendfreeze lockers for those supplies?"

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

"Go on with your account."

"I ordered the navigator to throw the dice again, to determine whether or not the freighter should be boarded for random cargo inspection. He threw a twelve, the yes-number. I called the freighter again, ordered the outer locks opened. It failed to answer, or respond in any way."

"One moment. You explained the reason for boarding? Sol is on the outer rim of the galaxy. It doesn't belong to any cluster system. Primitive place—or regressed. They wouldn't understand our ways."

"I allowed for that, sir," continued the cold-faced Roki. "I explained the situation, even read them extracts of our patrol regs. They failed to acknowledge. I thought per-haps they were out of contact, so I had the message re-peated to them by blinker. I know they got it, because the blinker-operator acknowledged the message. Evidently carried it to his superiors. Apparently they told him to ignore us, because when we blinked again, he failed to acknowledge. I then attempted to pull alongside and attach to their hull by magnetic grapples."

"They resisted?"

"Yes, sir. They tried to break away by driving to a higher C-level. Our warp was already at six-thousand C's. The mass-components of our star cluster at that level were just a collapsing gas cloud. Of course, with our auto-matic trackers, they just dragged us with them, stalled, and plunged the other way. They pulled us down to the quarter-C level; most of the galaxy was at the red-dwarf stage. I suppose they realized then that they couldn't get away from us like that. They came back to a sensible warp and continued on their previous course."

"And you did what?"

"We warned them by every means of communication at our disposal, read them the standard warning."

"They acknowledge?"

"Once, sir. They came back to say: This is an emergency shipment. We have orders not to stop. We are continuing on course, and will report you to authority upon arrival." Roki paused, eyeing the colonel doubtfully. "May I make a personal observation, sir?"

Beth nodded tolerantly. "Go ahead."

"They wasted more time dodging about in the C'th component than they would have lost if they had allowed us to board them. I regarded this behavior as highly suspicious."

"Did it occur to you that it might be due to some peculiarity in Sol III's culture? Some stubbornness, or resentment of authority?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you ask opinions of your crew?"

A slight frown creased Roki's high forehead. "No, sir."

"Why not?"

"Regulation does not require it, sir. My personal reason—the cultural peculiarities of my planet."

The barb struck home. Colonel Beth knew the military culture of Roki's world—Coph IV. Military rank was inherited. On his own planet, Roki was a nobleman and an officer of the war-college. He had been taught to rely upon his own decisions and to expect crisp, quick obedience. The colonel frowned at his desk.

"Let's put it this way: Did you *know* the opinions of the crew?"

"Yes, sir. They thought that we should abandon the pursuit and allow the freighter to continue. I was forced to confine two of them to the brig for insubordination and attempted mutiny." He stopped and glanced at one of the majors. "All due apologies to you, sir."

The major flushed. He ranked Roki, but he had been with the patrol as an observer, and despite his higher rank, he was subject to the ship commander's authority while in space. He had also been tossed in the brig. Now he glared at the Cophian space commander without speaking.

"All right, commander, when they refused to halt, what did you do?"

"I withdrew to a safe range and fired a warning charge ahead of them. It exploded in full view of their scopes, dead ahead. They ignored the warning and tried to flee again."

"Go on."

Roki's shoulders lifted in the suggestion of a shrug. "In accordance with Article Thirty of the Code; I shot them out of space."

The girl made a choking sound. "And over ten thousand people died on Jod VI because you—"

"*That will do, Dalai*" snapped Colonel Beth.

There was a long silence. Roki waited calmly for further questioning. He seemed unaware of the girl's outburst. The colonel's voice came again with a forced softness.

"You examined the debris of the destroyed vessel?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you find?"

"Fragments of quick-frozen bone, blood plasma, various bodily organs and tissues in cultured or frozen form, prepared for surgical use in transplanting operations; in other words, a complete stock of surgibank supplies, as was anticipated. We gathered up samples, but we had no facilities for preserving what was left."

The colonel drummed his fingers. "You said 'anticipated.' Then you knew full well the nature of the cargo, and you did not suspect contraband material of any kind?"

Roki paused. "I suspected contraband, colonel," he said quietly.

Beth lifted his eyebrows in surprise. "You didn't say that before."

"I was never asked."

"Why didn't you say it anyway?"

"I had no proof."

"Ah, yes," murmured the colonel. "The culture of Coph IV again. Very well, but in examining the debris, you found no evidence of contraband?" The colonel's dis-tasteful expression told the room that he knew the an-swer, but only wanted it on the record.

But Roki paused a long time. Finally, he said, "No evidence, sir."

"Why do you hesitate?"

"Because I still suspect an illegality—without proof, I'm afraid."

This time, the colonel's personal feelings betrayed him in a snort of disgust. He shuffled his papers for a long time, then looked at the major who had accompa-nied the patrol. "Will you confirm Roki's testimony, major? Is it essentially truthful, as far as you know?"

The embarrassed officer glared at Roki in undisguised hatred. "For the record, sir—I think the commander be-haved disgracefully and insensibly. The results of the stoppage of vitally needed supplies prove—"

"I didn't ask for a moral judgment!" Beth snapped. "I asked you to confirm what he has said here. Were the incidents as he described them?"

The major swallowed hard. "Yes, sir."

The colonel nodded. "Very well. I'll ask your opinions, gentlemen. Was there an infraction of regulations? Did Commander Roki behave as required by Space Code, or did he not? Yes or no, please. Major Tuli?"

"No direct infraction, sir, but—"

"No *buts!* Major Go'an?"

"Uh—no infraction, sir."

"I find myself in agreement." The colonel spoke di-rectly at Dela's note pad. "The ultimate results of the in-cident were disastrous, indeed. And, Roki's action was unfortunate, ill-advised, and not as the Sixty Star Patrol would approve. Laws, codes, regulations are made for men, not men for regulations. Roki observed the letter of the law, but was perhaps forgetful of its spirit. However, no charge can be found against him. This investigating body recommends that he be temporarily grounded without prejudice, and given thorough physical and mental examinations before being returned to duty. That brings us to an end, gentlemen. Dela, you may go."

With another glare at the haughty Cophian, the girl stalked out of the room. Beth leaned back in his chair, while the majors saluted and excused themselves. His eyes kept Roki locked in his chair. When they were alone, Beth said:

"You have anything to say to me off the record?"

Roki nodded. "I can submit my resignation from the patrol through your office, can't I, sir?"

Beth smiled coldly. "I thought you'd do that, Roki." He opened a desk drawer and brought out a single sheet of paper. "I took the liberty of having it prepared for your signature. Don't misunderstand. I'm not urging you to resign, but we're prepared to accept it if you choose to do so. If you don't like this standard from, you may prepare your own."

The jet-eyed commander took the paper quickly and slashed his name quickly across the bottom. "Is this ef-fective immediately, sir?"

"In this case, we can make it so."

"Thank you, sir."

"Don't regard it as a favor." The colonel witnessed the signature.

The Cophian could not be stung. "May I go now?"

Beth looked up, noticing with amusement that Roki—now a civilian—had suddenly dropped the "sir." And his eyes were no longer cold. They were angry, hurt, despairing.

"What makes you Cophians tick anyway?" he mur-mured thoughtfully.

Roki stood up. "I don't care to discuss it with you, colonel. I'll be going now."

"Wait, Roki." Beth frowned ominously to cover whatever he felt.

"I'm waiting."

"Up until this incident, I liked you, Roki. In fact, I told the general that you were the most promising young officer in my force."

"Kind of you," he replied tonelessly.

"And you could have been sitting at this desk, in a few years. You hoped to, I believe."

A curt nod, and a quick glance at Beth's shoulder in-signia.

"You chose your career, and now you don't have it. I know what it means to you."

A tightening of the Cophian's jaw told the colonel that he wanted no sympathy, but Beth continued.

"Since this is the oldest, most established, most static planet in the Cluster, you're out of a job in a place where there's no work."

"That's none of your business, colonel," Roki said quietly.

"According to my culture's ethics it *is* my business," he bellowed. "Of course you Cophians think differently. But we're not quite so cold. Now you listen: I'm prepared to help you a little, although you're probably too pig-headed to accept. God knows, you don't deserve it anyway."

"Go on."

"I'm prepared to have a patrol ship take you to any planet in the galaxy. Name it, and we'll take you there." He paused. "All right, go ahead and refuse. Then get out."

Roki's thin face twitched for a moment. Then he nodded. "I'll accept. Take me to Sol III."

The colonel got his breath again slowly. He reddened and chewed his lip. "I did say galaxy, didn't I? I meant . . . well . . . you know we can't send a military ship outside the Sixty-Star Cluster."

Roki waited impassively, his dark eyes measuring the colonel.

"Why do you want to go *there*?"

"Personal reasons."

"Connected with the mercy ship incident?"

"The investigation is over."

Beth pounded his desk. "It's crazy, man! Nobody's been to Sol for a thousand years. No reason to go. Sloppy, decadent place. I never suspected *they'd* answer Jod VI's plea for surgibank supplies!"

"Why not? They were *selling* them."

"Of course. But I doubted that Sol still had ships, es-pecially C-drive ships. Only contribution Sol ever made to the galaxy was to spawn the race of Man—if you be-lieve that story. It's way out of contact with any interstellar nation. I just don't get it."

"Then you restrict your offer, colonel?" Roki's eyes mocked him.

Beth sighed. "No, no—I *said* it. I'll do it. But I can't send a patrol ship that far. I'll have to pay your way on a private vessel. We can find some excuse—exploration maybe."

Roki's eyes flickered sardonically. "Why not send a diplomatic delegation—to apologize to Sol for the blast-ing of their mercy ship."

"Uk! With YOU aboard?"

"Certainly. They won't know me."

Beth just stared at Roki as if he were of a strange species.

"You'll do it?" urged Roki.

"I'll think it over. I'll see that you get there, if you in-sist on going. Now get out of here. I've had enough of you, Roki."

The Cophian was not offended. He turned on his heel and left the office. The girl looked up from her filing cab-inets as he came out. She darted ahead of him and blocked the doorway with her small tense body. Her face was a white mask of disgust, and she spoke between her teeth.

"How does it feel to murder ten thousand people and get away with it?" she hissed.

Roki looked at her face more closely and saw the racial characteristics of Jod VI—the slightly oversized irises of her yellow-brown eyes, the thin nose with flaring nostrils, the pointed jaw. Evidently some of her relatives had died in the disaster and she held him personally re-sponsible. He had destroyed the help that was on its way to casualties.

"How does it feel?" she demanded, her voice going higher, and her hands clenching into weapons.

"Would you step aside please, Miss?"

A quick hand slashed out to rake his cheek with sharp nails. Pain seared his face. He did not move. Two bright stripes of blood appeared from his eye to the corner of his mouth. A drop trickled to the point of his chin and splattered down upon the girl's shoe.

"On my planet," he said, in a not unkindly tone, "when a woman insists on behaving like an animal, we assist her—by having her flogged naked in the public square. I see personal dignity is not so highly prized here. You do not regard it as a crime to behave like an alley *cat*?"

Her breath gushed out of her in a sound of rage, and she tore at the wounds again. Then, when he did nothing but look at her coldly, she fled.

Eli Roki, born to the nobility of Coph, dedicated to the service of the Sixty-Star Cluster, suddenly found himself something of an outcast. As he strode down the corridor away from Beth's office, he seemed to be walking into a thickening fog of desolation. He had no home now; for he had abdicated his hereditary rights on Coph in order to accept a commission with the SSC Patrol. That, too, was gone; and with it his career.

He had known from the moment he pressed the firing stud to blast the mercy freighter that unless the freighter proved to be a smuggler, his career would be forfeit. He was still morally certain that he had made no mistake. Had the freighter been carrying any other cargo, he would have been disciplined for *not* blasting it. And, if they had had nothing to hide, they would have stopped for inspection. Somewhere among Sol's planets lay the answer to the question—"What else was aboard besides the cargo of mercy?"

Roki shivered and stiffened his shoulders as he rode homeward in a heliocab. If the answer to the question were "Nothing," then according to the code of his planet, there was only one course left to follow. "The Sword of Apology" it was called.

He waited in his quarters for the colonel to fulfill his promise. On the following day, Beth called.

"I've found a Dalethian ship, Roki. Privately owned. Pilot's willing to fly you out of the Cluster. It's going as an observation mission—gather data on the Sol System. The commissioners vetoed the idea of sending a diplo-matic delegation until we try to contact Solarians by high-C radio."

"When do I leave?"

"Be at the spaceport tonight. And good luck, son. I'm sorry all this happened, and I hope—"

"Yeah, thanks."

"Well—"

"Well?"

The colonel grunted and hung up. Ex-Commander Roki gathered up his uniforms and went looking for a pawn shop. "Hock 'em, or sell 'em?" asked a bald man behind the counter. Then he peered more closely at Roki's face, and paused to glance at a picture on the front page of the paper. "Oh," he grunted, "you. You wanta sell 'em." With a slight sneer, he pulled two bills from his pocket and slapped them on the counter with a contemptuous take-it-or-leave-it stare. The clothing was worth at least twice as much. Roki took it after a mo-ment's hesitation. The money just matched the price tag on a sleek, snub-nosed Multin automatic that lay in the display case.

"And three hundred rounds of ammunition," he said quietly as he pocketed the weapon.

The dealer sniffed. "It only takes one shot, bud—for what *you* need to do."

Roki thanked him for the advice and took his three hundred rounds.

He arrived at the spaceport before his pilot, and went out to inspect the small Dalethian freighter that would bear him to the rim of the galaxy. His face clouded as he saw the pitted hull and the glaze of fusion around the lips of the jet tubes. Some of the ground personnel had left a Geiger hanging on the stern, to warn wanderers to keep away. Its dial indicator was fluttering in the red. He carried it into the ship. The needle dropped to a safe reading in the control cabin, but there were dangerous spots in the reactor room. Angrily he went to look over the controls.

His irritation grew. The ship—aptly named the *Idiot*—was of ancient vintage, without the standard warning systems or safety devices, and with no armament other than its ion guns. The fifth dial of its

position-indicator was calibrated only to one hundred thousand C's, and was redlined at ninety thousand. A modern service-ship, on the other hand, could have penetrated to a segment of five-space where light's velocity was constant at one hundred fifty thousand C's and could reach Sol in two months. The *Idiot* would need five or six, if it could make the trip at all. Roki dobtod it. Under normal circum-stances, he would hesitate to use the vessel even within the volume of the Sixty-Star Cluster.

He thought of protesting to Beth, but realized that the colonel had fulfilled his promise, and would do nothing more. Grumbling, he stowed his gear in the cargo hold, and settled down in the control room to doze in wait for the pilot.

A sharp whack across the soles of his hoots brought him painfully awake. "Get your feet off the controls!" snapped an angry voice.

Roki winced and blinked at a narrow frowning face with a cigar clenched in its teeth. "And get out of that chair!" the face growled around its cigar.

His feet stung with pain. He hissed a snarl and bounded to his feet; grabbing a handful of the intruder's shirt-front, he aimed a punch at the cigar—then stayed the fist in midair. Something felt wrong about the shirt. Aghast, he realized there was a woman inside it. He let go and reddened. "I . . . I thought you were the pilot."

She eyed him contemptuously as she tucked in her shirt. "I am, Doc." She tossed her bat on the navigation desk, revealing a close-cropped head of dark hair. She removed the cigar from her face, neatly pinched out the fire, and filed the butt in the pocket of her dungarees for a rainy day. She had a nice mouth, with the cigar gone, but it was tight with anger.

"Stay out of my seat," she told him crisply, "and out of my hair. Let's get that straight before we start."

"This . . . this is *your* tub?" he gasped.

She stalked to a panel and began punching settings into the courser. "That's right. I'm Daleth Shipping In-corporated. Any comments?"

"You expect this wreck to make it to Sol?" he growled.

She snapped him a sharp, green-eyed glance. "Well listen to the free ride! Make your complaints to the colo-nel, fellow. I don't expect anything, except my pay. I'm willing to chance it. Why shouldn't you?"

"The existence of a fool is not necessarily a proof of the existence of two fools," he said sourly.

"If you don't like it, go elsewhere." She straightened and swept him with a clinical glance. "But as I understand it, *you* can't be too particular."

He frowned. "Are you planning to make *that* your business?"

"Uh-uh! You're nothing to me, fellow. I don't care *who* I haul, as long as it's legal. Now do you want a ride, or don't you?"

He nodded curtly and stalked back to find quarters. "Stay outa my cabin," she bellowed after him.

Roki grunted disgustedly. The pilot was typical of Daleth civilization. It was still a rough, uncouth planet with a thinly scattered population, a wild frontier, and growing pains. The girl was the product of a wildly ex-panding tough-fisted culture with little respect for au-thority. It occurred to him immediately that she might be thinking of selling him to the Solarian officials—as the man who blasted the mercy ship.

"Prepare to lift," came the voice of the intercom. "Two minutes before blast-off."

Roki suppressed an urge to scramble out of the ship and call the whole thing off. The rockets belched, coughed, and then hissed faintly, idling in wait for a command. Roki stretched out on his bunk, for some of these older ships were rather rough on blast-off. The hiss became a thunder, and the *Idiot* moved skyward—first slowly, then with a spurt of speed. When it cleared the atmosphere, there was a sudden lurch as it shed the now empty booster burners. There was a moment of dead silence, as the ship hovered without power. Then the faint shriek of the ion streams came to his ears—as the ion drive became useful in the vacuum of space. He glanced out the port to watch the faint streak of lumines-cence focus into a slender needle of high-speed particles, pushing the *Idiot* ever higher in a rush of acceleration.

He punched the intercom button. "Not bad, for a Dalethian," he called admiringly.

"Keep your opinions to yourself," growled Daleth In-corporated.

The penetration to higher C-levels came without sub-jective sensation. Roki knew it was happening

when the purr from the reactor room went deep-throated and when the cabin lights went dimmer. He stared calmly out the port, for the phenomenon of penetration never ceased to thrill him.

The transition to high-C began as a blue-shift in the starlight. Distant, dull-red stars came slowly brighter, whiter—until they burned like myriad welding arcs in the black vault. They were not identical with the stars of the home continuum, but rather, projections of the same star-masses at higher C-levels of five-space, where the velocity of light was gradually increasing as the *Idiot* climbed higher in the C-component.

At last he had to close the port, for the starlight was becoming unbearable as its wave-length moved into the ultra-violet and the X-ray bands. He watched on a fluo-rescent viewing screen. The projective star-masses were flaring into supernovae, and the changing continuums seemed to be collapsing toward the ship in the blue-shift of the cosmos. As the radiant energy increased, the cabin became warmer, and the pilot set up a partial radiation screen.

At last the penetration stopped. Roki punched the in-tercom again. "What level are we on, Daleth?"

"Ninety thousand," she replied curtly.

Roki made a wry mouth. She had pushed it up to the red line without a blink. It was O.K.—if the radiation screens held out. If they failed to hold it, the ship would be blistered into a drifting dust cloud.

"Want me to navigate for you?" he called.

"I'm capable of handling my own ship," she barked.

"I'm aware of that. But I have nothing else to do. You might as well put me to work."

She paused, then softened a little. "O.K., come on forward."

She swung around in her chair as he entered the cabin, and for the first time, he noticed that, despite the close-cropped hair and the dungarees and the cigar-smoking, she was quite a handsome girl—handsome, proud, and highly capable. Daleth, the frontier planet, bred a healthy if somewhat unscrupulous species.

"The C-maps are in that case," she said, jerking her thumb toward a filing cabinet. "Work out a course for maximum radiant thrust."

Roki frowned. "Why not a least-time course?"

She shook her head. "My reactors aren't too efficient. We need all the boost we can get from external energy. Otherwise we'll have to dive back down for fuel."

Worse and worse!—Roki thought as he dragged out the C-maps. Flying this boat to Sol would have been a feat of daring two centuries ago. Now, in an age of finer ships, it was a feat of idiocy.

Half an hour later, he handed her a course plan that would allow the *Idiot* to derive about half of its thrust from the variations in radiation pressure from the roaring inferno of the high-level cosmos. She looked it over without change of expression, then glanced at him curiously, after noting the time.

"You're pretty quick," she said.

"Thank you."

"You're hardly stupid. Why did you pull such a stupid boner?"

Roki stiffened. "I thought you planned to regard that as none of your business."

She shrugged and began punching course-settings into the courser. "Sorry, I forgot."

Still angry, he said, "I don't regard it as a boner. I'd do it again."

She shrugged again and pretended a lack of interest.

"Space-smuggling could be the death of the galaxy," he went on. "That's been proven. A billion people once died on Tau II because somebody smuggled in a load of non-Tauian animals—for house pets. I did only what his-tory has proven best."

"I'm trying to mind my own business," she growled, eyeing him sourly.

Roki fell silent and watched her reshape the radiation screen to catch a maximum of force from the flare of energy that blazed behind them. Roki was not sure that he wanted her to mind her own business. They would have to bear each other's presence for several months, and it would be nice to know how things stood.

"So you think it was a stupid boner," he continued at last. "So does everyone else. It hasn't been very



pleasant."

She snorted scornfully as she worked. "Where I come from, we don't condemn fools. We don't need to. They just don't live very long, not on Daleth."

"And I am a fool, by your code?"

"How should I know? If you live to a ripe old age and get what you want, you probably aren't a fool."

And *that*, thought Roki, was the Dalethian golden rule. If the universe lets you live, then you're doing all right. And there was truth in it, perhaps. Man was born with only one right—the right to a chance at proving his fit-ness. And that right was the foundation of every culture, even though most civilized worlds tried to define "fitness" in terms of cultural values. Where life was rough, it was rated in terms of survival.

"I really don't mind talking about it," he said with some embarrassment. "I have nothing to hide."

"That's nice."

"Do you have a name—other than your firm name?"

"As far as you're concerned, I'm Daleth Incorporated." She gave him a suspicious look that lingered a while and became contemplative. "There's only one thing I'm curious about—why are you going to Sol?"

He smiled wryly. "If I told a Dalethian that, she would indeed think me a fool."

Slowly the girl nodded. "I see. I know of Cophian ethics. If an officer's blunder results in someone's death, he either proves that it was not a blunder or he cuts his throat—ceremonially, I believe. Will you do that?"

Roki shrugged. He had been away from Coph a long time. He didn't know.

"A stupid custom," she said.

"It manages to drain off the fools, doesn't it? It's better than having society try them and execute them forcibly for their crimes. On Coph, a man doesn't need to be afraid of society. He needs only to be afraid of his own weakness. Society's function is to protect individuals against unfortunate accidents, but not against their own blunders. And when a man blunders, Coph simply excludes him from the protectorate. As an outcast, he sacrifices himself. It's not too bad a system."

"You can have it."

"Dalethian?"

"Yeah?"

"You have no personal anger against what I did?"

She frowned at him contemptuously. "Uh-uh! I judge no one. I judge no one unless I'm personally involved. Why are you worried about what others think?"

"In our more highly developed society," he said stiffly, "a man inevitably grows a set of thinking-habits called `conscience. "

"Oh—yeah." Her dull tone indicated a complete lack of interest.

Again Roki wondered if she would think of making a quick bit of cash by informing Solarian officials of his identity. He began a mental search for a plan to avoid such possible treachery.

They ate and slept by the ship's clock. On the tenth day, Roki noticed a deviation in the readings of the radiation-screen instruments. The shape of the screen shell was gradually trying to drift toward minimum torsion, and assume a spherical shape. He pointed it out to Daleth, and she quickly made the necessary readjustments. But the output of the reactors crept a notch higher as a result of the added drain. Roki wore an apprehensive frown as the flight progressed.

Two days later, the screen began creeping again. Once more the additional power was applied. And the reactor output needle hung in the yellow band of warning. The field-generators were groaning and shivering with threatening overload. Roki worked furiously to locate the trouble, and at last he found it. He returned to the control cabin in a cold fury.

"Did you have this ship pre-flighted before blast-off?" he demanded.

Her mouth fluttered with amusement as she watched his anger. "Certainly, commander."

He flushed at the worthless title. "May I see the papers?"

For a moment she hesitated, then fumbled in her pocket and displayed a folded pink paper.

"Pink!" he roared. "You had no business taking off!"

Haughtily, she read him the first line of the pre-flight report. "Base personnel disclaim any

responsibility for accidents resulting from flight of Daleth Ship—"It doesn't say I can't take off."

"I'll see you banned from space!" he growled.

She gave him a look that reminded him of his current status. It was a tolerant, amused stare. "What's wrong, commander?"

"The synchronizers are out, that's all," he fumed. "Screen's getting farther and farther from resonance."

"So?"

"So the overload'll get worse, and the screen'll break down. You'll have to drop back down out of the C-component and get it repaired."

She shook her head. "We'll chance it like it is. I've always wanted to find out how much overload the reactor'll take."

Roki choked. There wasn't a chance of making it. "Are you a graduate space engineer?" he asked.

"No."

"Then you'd better take one's advice."

"Yours?"

"Yes."

"No! We're going on."

"Suppose I refuse to let you?"

She whirled quickly, eyes flashing. "I'm in command of my ship. I'm also armed. I suggest you return to your quarters, passenger."

Roki sized up the situation, measured the determination in the girl's eyes, and decided that there was only one thing to do. He shrugged and looked away, as if admitting her authority. She glared at him for a moment, but did not press her demand that he leave the control room. As soon as she glanced back at the instruments, Roki padded his rough knuckles with a handkerchief, selected a target at the back of her short crop of dark hair, and removed her objections with a short chopping blow to the head. "Sorry, friend," he murmured as he lifted her limp body out of the seat.

He carried her to her quarters and placed her on the bunk. After removing a small needle gun from her pocket, he left a box of headache tablets in easy reach, locked her inside, and went back to the controls. His fist was numb, and he felt like a heel, but there was no use arguing with a Dalethian. Clubbing her to sleep was the only way to avoid bloodier mayhem in which she might have emerged the victor—until the screen gave way.

The power-indication was threateningly high as Roki activated the C-drive and began piloting the ship downward through the fifth component. But with proper adjustments, he made the process analogous to freefall, and the power reading fell off slowly. A glance at the C-maps told him that the *Idiot* would emerge far beyond the limits of Sixty-Star Cluster. When it re-entered the continuum, it would be in the general volume of space controlled by another interstellar organization called The Viggern Federation. He knew little of its culture, but certainly it should have facilities for repairing a set of screen-synchronizers. He looked up its capitol planet, and began jetting toward it while the ship drifted downward in C. As he reached lower energy-levels, he cut out the screen altogether and went to look in on Daleth Incorporated who had made no sound for two hours.

He was surprised to see her awake and sitting up on the bunk. She gave him a cold and deadly stare, but displayed no rage. "I should've known better than to turn my back on you."

"Sorry. You were going to—"

"Save it. Where are we?"

"Coming in on Tragor III."

"I'll have you jailed on Tragor III, then."

He nodded. "You *could* do that, but then you might have trouble collecting my fare from Beth."

"That's all right."

"Suit yourself. I'd rather be jailed on your trumped-up charges than be a wisp of gas at ninety-thousand C's."

"Trumped up?"

"Sure, the pink pre-flight. Any court will say that whatever happened was your own fault. You lose your authority if you fly pink, unless your crew signs a release."

"You a lawyer?"

"I've had a few courses in space law. But if you don't believe me, check with the Interfed Service on Tragor III."

"I will. Now how about opening the door. I want out."

"Behave?"

She paused, then: "My promise wouldn't mean anything, Roki. I don't share your system of ethics."

He watched her cool green eyes for a moment, then chuckled. "In a sense you do—or you wouldn't have said *that*." He unlocked the cabin and released her, not trust-ing her, but realizing that the synchronizers were so bad by now that she couldn't attempt to go on without repairs. She could have no motive for turning on him—except anger perhaps.

"My gun?" she said.

Again Roki hesitated. Then, smiling faintly, he handed it to her. She took the weapon, sniffed scornfully, and cocked it.

"Turn around, fool!" she barked.

Roki folded his arms across his chest, and remained facing her. "Go to the devil," he said quietly.

Her fingers whitened on the trigger. Still the Cophian failed to flinch, lose his smile, or move. Daleth Incorpo-rated arched her eyebrows, uncocked the pistol, and returned it to her belt. Then she patted his cheek and chuckled nastily. "Just watch yourself, commander. I don't like you."

And he noticed, as she turned away, that she had a bump on her head to prove it. He wondered how much the bump would cost him before it was over. Treachery on Sol, perhaps.

The pilot called Tragor III and received instructions to set an orbital course to await inspection. All foreign ships were boarded before being permitted to land. A few hours later, a small patrol ship winged close and grappled to the hull. Roki went to manipulate the locks.

A captain and two assistants came through. The in-spector was a young man with glasses and oversized ears. His eyebrows were ridiculously bushy and extended down on each side to his cheekbones. The ears were also filled with yellow brush. Roki recognized the peculiarities as local evolutionary tendencies; for they were shared also by the assistants. Tragor III evidently had an exceedingly dusty atmosphere.

The captain nodded a greeting and requested the ship's flight papers. He glanced at the pink pre-flight, clucked to himself, and read every word in the dispatcher's forms. "Observation flight? To Sol?" He addressed himself to Roki, using the interstellar Esperanto.

The girl answered. "That's right. Let's get this over with."

The captain gave her a searing, head-to toe glance. "Are you the ship's owner, woman?"

Daleth Incorporated contained her anger with an effort. "I am."

The captain told her what a Tragorian thought of it by turning aside from her, and continuing to address Roki as if he were ship's skipper. "Please leave the ship while we fumigate and inspect. Wohr will make you comfortable in the patrol vessel. You will have to submit to physical examination—a contagion precaution."

Roki nodded, and they started out after the assistant. As they entered the corridor, he grinned at Daleth, and received a savage kick in the shin for his trouble.

"Oops, sorry!" she muttered.

"Oh—one moment, sir," the captain called after them. "May I speak to you a moment—"

They both stopped and turned.

"Privately," the captain added.

The girl marched angrily on. Roki stepped back in the cabin and nodded.

"You are a well-traveled man, E Roki?" the bushy-browed man asked politely.

"Space has been my business."

"Then you need no warning about local customs." The captain bowed.

"I know enough to respect them and conform to them," Roki assured him. "That's a general rule. But I'm not familiar with Tragor III. Is there anything special I should know before we start out?"

"Your woman, E Roki. You might do well to inform her that she will have to wear a veil, speak to no man, and be escorted upon the streets at all times. Otherwise, she will be wise to remain on the ship, in her quarters."

Roki suppressed a grin. "I shall try to insure her good behavior."

The captain looked defensive. "You regard our customs as primitive?"

"Every society to its own tastes, captain. The wisdom of one society would be folly for another. Who is qualified to judge? Only the universe, which passes the judgment of survival on all peoples."

"Thank you. You are a wise traveler. I might explain that our purdah is the result of an evolutionary peculiar-ity. You will see for yourself, however."

"I can't *guarantee my* companion's behavior," Roki said before he went to join Daleth. "But I'll try my best to influence her."

Roki was grinning broadly as he went to the patrol vessel to wait. One thing was certain: the girl would have a rough time on Tragor if she tried to have him jailed for mutiny.

Her face reddened to forge-heat as he relayed the cap-tain's warning.

"I shall do nothing of the sort," she said stiffly.

Roki shrugged. "You know enough to respect local customs."

"Not when they're personally humiliating!" She curled up on a padded seat in the visitor's room and began to pout. He decided to drop the subject.

Repairing the synchronizers promised to be a week-long job, according to the Tragorian inspector who ac-companied the *Idiot* upon landing. "Our replacements are standardized, of course—within our own system. But parts for SSC ships aren't carried in stock. The synchro-nizers will have to be specially tailored."

"Any chance of rushing the job?"

"A week is rushing it."

"All right, we'll have to wait." Roki nudged the con-trols a bit, guiding the ship toward the landing site pointed out by the captain. Daleth was in her cabin, alone, to save herself embarrassment.

"May I ask a question about your mission, E Roki-, or is it confidential in nature?"

Roki paused to think before answering. He would have to lie, of course, but he had to make it safe. Suddenly he chuckled. "I forgot for a moment that you weren't with Sixty-Star Cluster. So I'll tell you the truth. This is supposed to be an observation mission, officially—but actu-ally, our superior sent us to buy him a holdful of a certain scarce commodity."

The captain grinned. Graft and corruption were appar-ently not entirely foreign to Tragor III. But then his grin faded into thoughtfulness. "On Sol's planets?"

Roki nodded.

"This scarce commodity—if I'm not too curious—is it surgibank supplies?"

Roki felt his face twitch with surprise. But he recovered from his shock in an instant. "Perhaps," he said calmly. He wanted to grab the man by the shoulders and shout a thousand questions, but he said nothing else.

The official squirmed in his seat for a time. "Does your federation buy many mercy cargoes from Sol?"

Roki glanced at him curiously. The captain was brim-ming with ill-concealed curiosity. Why?

"Occasionally, yes."

The captain chewed his lip for a moment. "Tell me," he blurted, "will the Solarian ships stop for your patrol inspections?"

Roki hesitated for a long time. Then he said, "I suppose that you and I could get together and share what we know about Sol without revealing any secrets of our own governments. Frankly, I, too, am curious about Sol."

The official, whose name was WeJan, was eager to accept. He scrawled a peculiar series of lines on a scrap of paper and gave it to Roki. "Show this to a heliocab driver. He will take you to my apartment.

Would dinner be convenient?"

Roki said that it would.

The girl remained in her quarters when they landed. Roki knocked at the door, but she was either stubborn or asleep. He left the ship and stood for a moment on the ramp, staring at the hazy violet sky. Fine grit sifted against his face and stung his eyes.

"You will be provided goggles, suitable clothing, and an interpreter to accompany you during your stay," said WeJan as they started toward a low building.

But Roki was scarcely listening as he stared across the ramp. A thousand yards away was a yellow-starred mercy ship, bearing Solar markings. The most peculiar thing about it was the ring of guards that surrounded it. *They* apparently belonged to the ship, for their uniforms were different from those of the base personnel.

WeJan saw him looking. "Strange creatures, aren't they?" he whispered confidentially.

Roki had decided that in the long run he could gain more information by pretending to know more than he did. So he nodded wisely and said nothing. The mercy ship was too far away for him to decide whether the guards were human. He could make out only that they were bipeds. "Sometimes one meets strange ones all right. Do you know the Quinjori—from the other side of the galaxy?"

"No—no, I believe not, E Roki. Quinjori?"

"Yes. A very curious folk. Very curious indeed." He smiled to himself and fell silent. Perhaps, before his visit was over, he could trade fictions about the fictitious Quinjori for facts about the Solarians.

Roki met his interpreter in the spaceport offices, donned the loose garb of Tragor, and went to quibble with repair service. Still he could not shorten the promised time on the new synchros. They were obviously stuck for a week on Tragor. He thought of trying to approach the Solarian ship, but decided that it would be better to avoid suspicion.

Accompanied by the bandy-legged interpreter, whose mannerisms were those of a dog who had received too many beatings, Roki set out for Polarin, the Tragorian capital, a few miles away. His companion was a small middle-aged man with a piping voice and flaring ears; Roki decided that his real job was to watch his alien charge for suspicious activities, for the little man was no expert linguist. He spoke two or three of the tongues used in the Sixty-Star Cluster, but not fluently. The Cophian decided to rely on the Esperanto of space, and let the interpreter translate it into native Tragorian wherever necessary.

"How would E Roki care to amuse himself?" the little man asked. "A drink? A pretty girl? A museum?"

Roki chuckled. "What do most of your visitors do while they're here?" He wondered quietly what, in particular, the *Solarian* visitors did. But it might not be safe to ask.

"Uh—that would depend on nationality, sir," mur-mured Pok. "The true-human foreigners often like to visit the Wanderer, an establishment which caters to their business. The evolved-human and the nonhuman visitors like to frequent The Court of Kings—a rather, uh, peculiar place." He looked at Roki, doubtfully, as if wondering about his biological status.

"Which is most expensive?" he asked, although he really didn't care. Because of the phony "observation mission papers," he could make Colonel Beth foot the bill.

"The Court of Kings is rather high," Pok said. "But so is the Wanderer."

"Such impartiality deserves a return. We will visit them both, E Pok. If it suits you."

"I am your servant, E Roki."

How to identify a Solarian without asking?—Roki wondered as they sat sipping a sticky, yeasty drink in the lounge of the Wanderer. The dimly lighted room was filled with men of all races—pygmies, giants, black, red, and brown. All appeared human, or nearly so. There were a few women among the crewmen, and most of them removed their borrowed veils while in the tolerant sanctuary of the Wanderer. The Tragorian staff kept stealing furtive glances at these out-system females, and the Cophian wondered about their covetousness.

"Why do you keep watching the strange women, E Pok?" he asked the interpreter a few minutes later.

The small man sighed. "Evidently you have not yet seen Tragorian women."

Roki had seen a few heavily draped figures on the street outside, clinging tightly to the arms of men, but there hadn't been much to look at. Still, Pok's hint was enough to give him an idea.

"You don't mean Tragor III is one of those places where evolution has pushed the sexes further apart?"

"I do," Pok said sadly. "The feminine I.Q. is seldom higher than sixty, the height is seldom taller than your jacket pocket, and the weight is usually greater than your own. As one traveler put it: 'short, dumpy, and dumb'. Hence, the Purdah."

"Because you don't like looking at them?"

"Not at all. Theirs is our standard of beauty. The purdah is because they are frequently too stupid to remember which man is their husband."

"Sorry I asked."

"Not at all," said Pok, whose tongue was being loosened by the yeasty brew. "It is our tragedy. We can bear it."

"Well, you've got it better than some planets. On Jevah, for instance, the men evolved into sluggish spidery little fellows, and the women are big husky brawlers."

"Ah yes. But Sol is the most peculiar of all, is it not?" said Pok.

"How do you mean?" Roki carefully controlled his voice and tried to look bored.

"Why, the Vamir, of course."

Because of the fact that Pok's eyes failed to move toward any particular part of the room, Roki concluded that there were no Solarians in the place. "Shall we visit the Court of Kings now, E Pok?" he suggested.

The small man was obviously not anxious to go. He murmured about ugly brutes, lingered over his drink, and gazed wistfully at a big dusky Sanbe woman. "Do you suppose she would notice me if I spoke to her?" the small interpreter asked.

"Probably. So would her five husbands. Let's go." Pok sighed mournfully and came with him.

The Court of Kings catered to a peculiar clientele indeed; but not a one, so far as Roki could see, was completely inhuman. There seemed to be at least one common denominator to all intelligent life: it was bipedal and bimanual. Four legs was the most practical number for any animal on any planet, and it seemed that nature had nothing else to work with. When she decided to give intelligence to a species, she taught him to stand on his hind legs, freeing his forefeet to become tools of his intellect. And she usually taught him by making him use his hands to climb. As a Cophian biologist had said, "Life first tries to climb a tree to get to the stars. When it fails, it comes down and invents the high-C drive."

Again, Roki looked around for something that might be a Solarian. He saw several familiar species, some horned, some tailed, scaled, or heavily furred. Some stumbled and drooped as if Tragorian gravity weighted them down. Others bounced about as if floating free in space. One small creature, the native of a planet with an eight-hour rotational period, curled up on the table and fell asleep. Roki guessed that ninety per cent of the customers were of human ancestry, for at one time during the history of the galaxy, Man had sprung forth like a sudden blossom to inherit most of space. Some said they came from Sol III, but there was no positive evidence.

As if echoing his thoughts, Pok suddenly grunted, "I will never believe we are descended from those surly creatures."

Roki looked up quickly, wondering if the small inter-preter was telepathic. But Pok was sneering toward the doorway. The Cophian followed his tipsy gaze and saw a man enter. The man was distinguished only by his height and by the fact that he appeared more human, in the classical sense, than most of the other customers. He wore a uniform—maroon jacket and gray trousers—and it matched the ones Roki had seen from a distance at the spaceport.

So this was a Solarian. He stared hard, trying to take in much at once. The man wore a short beard, but there seemed to be something peculiar about the jaw. It was—predatory, perhaps. The skull was massive, but plump and rounded like a baby's, and covered with sparse yellow fur. The eyes were quick

and sharp, and seemed almost to leap about the room. He was at least seven feet tall, and there was a look of savagery about him that caused the Cophian to tense, as if sensing an adversary.

"What is it you don't like about them?" he asked, without taking his eyes from the Solarian.

"Their sharp ears for one thing," whispered Pok as the Solarian whirled to stare toward their table. "Their nasty tempers for another."

"Ah? Rage reactions show biologic weakness," said the Cophian in a mild tone, but as loud as the first time.

The Solarian, who had been waiting for a seat at tip bar, turned and stalked straight toward them. Pok whimpered. Roki stared at him coolly. The Solarian loomed over them and glared from one to the other. He seemed to decide that Pok was properly cowed, and he turned his fierce eyes on the ex-patrolman.

"Would you like to discuss biology, manthing?" he growled like distant thunder. His speaking exposed his teeth—huge white chisels of heavy ivory. They were not regressed toward the fanged stage, but they suggested, together with the massive jaw, that nature might be working toward an efficient bone-crusher.

Roki swirled his drink thoughtfully. "I don't know you, Bristleface," he murmured. "But if your biology bothers you, I'd be glad to discuss it with you."

He watched carefully for the reaction. The Solarian went gray-purple. His eyes danced with fire, and his slit mouth quivered as if to bare the strong teeth. Just as he seemed about to explode, the anger faded—or rather, settled in upon itself to brood. "This is beneath me," the eyes seemed to be saying. Then he laughed cordially.

"My apologies. I thought to share a table with you."

"Help yourself."

The Solarian paused. "Where are you from, manthing?"

Roki also paused. They might have heard that a Cophian commander blasted one of their ships. Still he didn't care to be caught in a lie. "Sixty-Star Cluster," he grunted.

"Which sun?" The Solarian's voice suggested that he was accustomed to being answered instantly.

Roki glowered at him. "Information for information, fellow. And I don't talk to people who stand over me." He pointedly turned to Pok. "As we were saying—"

"I am of Sol," growled the big one.

"Fair enough. I am of Coph."

The giant's brows lifted slightly. "Ah, yes." He inspected Roki curiously and sat down. The chair creaked a warning. "Perhaps that explains it."

"Explains what?" Roki frowned ominously. He disliked overbearing men, and his hackles were rising. There was something about this fellow—

"I understand that Cophians are given to a certain ruthlessness."

Roki pretended to ponder the statement while he eyed the big man coldly. "True, perhaps. It would be dangerous for you to go to Coph, I think. You would probably be killed rather quickly."

The angry color reappeared, but the man smiled politely. "A nation of duelists, I believe, military in character, highly disciplined. Yes? They sometimes serve in the Sixty-Star Forces, eh?"

The words left no doubt in Roki's mind that the Solarian knew who had blasted their ship and why. But he doubted that the man had guessed his identity.

"I know less of your world, Solarian."

"Such ignorance is common. We are regarded as the galactic rurals, so to speak. We are too far from your dense star cluster." He paused. "You knew us once. We planted you here. And I feel sure you will know us again." He smiled to himself, finished his drink, and arose. "May we meet again, Cophian."

Roki nodded and watched the giant stride away. Pok was breathing asthmatically and picking nervously at his nails. He let out a sigh of relief with the Solarian's departure.

Roki offered the frightened interpreter a stiff drink, and then another. After two more, Pok swayed dizzily, then fell asleep across the table. Roki left him there. If Pok were an informer, it would be better to keep him out of the meeting with the patrol officer, Captain WeJan.

He hailed a cab and gave the driver the scrap of paper. A few minutes later, he arrived before a small building in the suburbs. WeJan's name was on the door—written in the space-tongue—but the officer was not at home. Frown-ing, he tried the door; locked. Then, glancing back toward the street, he caught a glimpse of a man standing in the shadows. It was a Solarian.

Slowly, Roki walked across the street. "Got a match, Bristleface?" he grunted.

In the light of triple-moons, he saw the giant figure swell with rage. The man looked quickly up and down the street. No one was watching. He emitted a low animal-growl, exposing the brutal teeth. His arms shot out to grasp the Cophian's shoulders, dragging him close.

Roki gripped the Multin automatic in his pocket and struggled to slip free. The Solarian jerked him up toward the bared teeth.

His throat about to be crushed, Roki pulled the trigger. There was a dull *chug*. The Solarian looked surprised. He released Roki and felt of his chest. There was no visible wound. Then, within his chest, the incendiary needle flared to incandescent heat. The Solarian sat down in the street. He breathed a frying sound. He crumpled. Roki left hastily before the needle burned its way out of the body.

He hadn't meant to kill the man, and it had been in self-defense, but he might have a hard time proving it. He hurried along back alleys toward the spaceport. If only they could leave Tragor immediately!

What had happened to WeJan? Bribed, beaten, or frightened away. Then the Solarians *did* know who he was and where he was going. There were half a dozen men around the spaceport who knew—and the informa-tion would be easy to buy. Pok had known that he was to meet with WeJan, and the Solarian had evidently been sent to watch the captain's quarters. It wasn't going to be easy now—getting to Sol III and landing.

What manner of creatures were these, he wondered. Men who supplied mercy cargoes to the galactic nations—as if charity were the theme and purpose of their culture—yet who seemed as arrogant as the warriors of some primitive culture whose central value was brutal power? What did they really want here? The Solarian had called him "manthing" as if he regarded the Cophian as a member of some lesser species.

The Solarians were definitely different. Roki could see it. Their heads were plump and soft like a baby's, hinting of some new evolutionary trend—a brain that could con-tinue growing, perhaps. But the jaws, the teeth, the quick tempers, and the hypersensitive ears—what sort of animal developed such traits? There was only one an-swer: a nocturnal predator with the instincts of a lion. "You shall get to know us again," the man had said.

It spelled politico-galactic ambitions. And it hinted at something else—something that made the Cophian shiver, and shy away from dark shadows as he hurried shipward.

Daleth Incorporated was either asleep or out. He checked at the ship, then went to the Administration Building to inquire about her. The clerk seemed embar-rased.

"Uh . . . E Roki, she departed from the port about five."

"You've heard nothing of her since?"

"Well . . . there was a call from the police agency, I understand." He looked apologetic. "I assure you I had nothing to do with the matter."

"Police! What . . . what's wrong, man?"

"I hear she went unescorted and unveiled. The police are holding her."

"How long will they keep her?"

"Until some gentleman signs for her custody."

"You mean I have to sign for her?"

"Yes, sir."

Roki smiled thoughtfully. "Tell me, young man—are Tragorian jails particularly uncomfortable?"

"I wouldn't know, personally," the clerk said stiffly. "I understand they conform to the intergalactic 'Code of Humanity' however."

"Good enough," Roki grunted. "I'll leave her there till we're ready to go."

"Not a bad idea," murmured the clerk, who had evi-dently encountered the cigar-chewing lady from



Daleth.

Roki was not amused by the reversal of positions, but it seemed as good a place as any to leave her for safekeeping. If the Solarians became interested in him, they might also notice his pilot.

He spent the following day watching the Sol ship, and waiting fatalistically for the police to come and question him about the Solarian's death. But the police failed to come. A check with the news agencies revealed that the man's body had not even been found. Roki was puzzled. He had left the giant lying in plain sight where he had fallen. At noon, the Solarian crew came bearing several lead cases slung from the centers of carrying poles. They wore metal gauntlets and handled the cases cautiously. Roki knew they contained radioactive materials. So that was what they purchased with their surgibank supplies—nuclear fuels.

Toward nightfall, they loaded two large crates aboard. He noted the shape of the crates, and decided that one of them contained the body of the man he had killed. Why didn't they want the police to know? Was it possible that they wanted him free to follow them?

The Sol-ship blasted-off during the night. He was surprised to find it gone, and himself still unmolested by morning. Wandering around the spaceport, he saw WeJan, but the man had developed a sudden lapse of memory. He failed to recognize the Cophian visitor. With the Solarians gone, Roki grew bolder in his questioning.

"How often do the Solarians visit you?" he inquired of a desk clerk at Administration.

"Whenever a hospital places an order, sir. Not often. Every six months perhaps."

"That's all the traffic they have with Tragor?"

"Yes, sir. This is our only interstellar port."

"Do the supplies pass through your government channels?"

The clerk looked around nervously. "Uh, no sir. They refuse to deal through our government. They contact their customers directly. The government lets them because the supplies are badly needed."

Roki stabbed out bluntly. "What do you think of the Solarians?"

The clerk looked blank for a moment, then chuckled. "I don't know, myself. But if you want a low opinion, ask at the spaceport cafe."

"Why? Do they cause trouble there?"

"No, sir. They bring their own lunches, so to speak. They eat and sleep aboard ship, and won't spend a thin galak around town."

Roki turned away and went back to the *Idiot*. Somewhere in his mind, an idea was refusing to let itself be believed. A mercy ship visited Tragor every six months. Roki had seen the scattered, ruined cargo of such a ship, and he had estimated it at about four thousand pints of blood, six thousand pounds of frozen bone, and seven thousand pounds of various replaceable organs and tissues. That tonnage in itself was not so startling, but if Sol III supplied an equal amount twice annually to even a third of the twenty-eight thousand civilized worlds in the galaxy, a numbing question arose: where did they get their raw material? Surgibank supplies were normally obtained by contributions from accident victims who lived long enough to voluntarily contribute their undamaged organs to a good cause.

Charitable organizations tried to secure pledges from men in dangerous jobs, donating their bodies to the planet's surgibank in the event of death. But no man felt easy about signing over his kidneys or his liver to the bank, and such recruiters were less popular than hangmen or life insurance agents. Mercy supplies were quite understandably scarce.

The grim question lingered in Roki's mind: where did the Sol III traders find between three and five million healthy accident victims annually? Perhaps they made the accidents themselves, accidents very similar to those occurring at the end of the chute in the slaughterhouse. He shook his head, refusing to believe it. No planet's population, however terrorized by its rulers, could endure such a thing without generating a sociological explosion that would make the world quiver in its orbit. There was a limit to the endurance of tyranny.

He spent the rest of the week asking innocent questions here and there about the city. He learned nearly nothing. The Solarians came bearing their peculiar cargo, sold it quickly at a good price, purchased fissionable materials, and blasted-off without a civil word to anyone. Most men seemed

nervous in their presence, perhaps because of their bulk and their native arrogance.

When the base personnel finished installing the syn-chronizers, he decided the time had come to secure Daleth Incorporated from the local jail. Sometimes he had chided himself for leaving her there after the Solarians had blasted-off, but it seemed to be the best place to keep the willful wench out of trouble. Belatedly, as he rode toward the police station, he wondered what sort of mayhem she would attempt to commit on his person for leaving her to fume in a cell. His smile was rueful as he marched in to pay her fine. The man behind the desk frowned sharply.

"Who did you say?" he grunted.

"The foreign woman from the Dalethian Ship."

The officer studied his records. "Ah, yes—Talewa Walkeka the name?"

Roki realized he didn't know her name. She was still Daleth Incorporated. "From the Daleth Ship," he insisted.

"Yes. Talewa Walkeka—she was released into the cus-tody of Eli Roki on twoday of last spaceweek."

"That's impos—" Roki choked and whitened. "I am Eli Roki. Was the man a Solarian?"

"I don't recall."

—"Why *don't you*? Didn't you ask him for identification?"

"Stop bellowing, please," said the official coldly. "And get your fists off my desk."

The Cophian closed his eyes and tried to control himself. "Who is responsible for this?"

The officer failed to answer.

"*You* are responsible!"

"I cannot look out for all the problems of all the for-eigners who—"

"Stop! You have let her die."

"She is only a female."

Roki straightened. "Meet me at any secluded place of your choice and I will kill you with any weapon of your choice."

The official eyed him coldly, then turned to call over his shoulder. "Sergeant, escort this barbarian to his ship and see that he remains aboard for the rest of his visit."

The Cophian went peacefully, realizing that violence would gain him nothing but the iron hospitality of a cell. Besides, he had only himself to blame for leaving her there. It was obvious to him now—the contents of the second crate the Solarians had carried aboard consisted of Talewa Walkeka, lately of Daleth and high-C. Un-doubtedly they had taken her alive. Undoubtedly she was additional bait to bring him on to Sol. Why did they want him to come? *I'll oblige them and find out for myself*, he thought.

The ship was ready. The bill would be sent back to Beth. He signed the papers, and blasted off as soon as possible. The lonely old freighter crept upward into the fifth component like a struggling old vulture, too ancient to leave its sunny lair. But the snychros were working per-fectly, and the screen held its shape when the ascent ceased just below red-line level. He chose an evasive course toward Sol and began gathering velocity.

Then he fed a message into the coder, to be broadcast back toward the Sixty-Star Cluster: *Pilot abducted by Solarians; evidence secured to indicate that Solarian mercy-merchandise is obtained through genocide*. He recorded the coded message on tape and let it feed continuously into the transmitters, knowing that the carrier made him a perfect target for homing devices, if anyone chose to silence him.

And he knew it was a rather poor bluff. The message might or might not be picked up. A listening ship would have to be at the same C-level to catch the signal. Few ships, save the old freighters, lingered long at ninety-thousand C's. But if the Solarians let him live long enough, the message would eventually be picked up—but not necessarily believed. The most he could hope for was to arouse curiosity about Sol. No one would care much about the girl's abduction, or about his own death. Interstellar federations never tried to protect their citizens be-yond the limits of their own volume of space. It would be an impossible task.

Unless the Solarians were looking for him however, they themselves would probably not intercept the call. Their ships would be on higher C. And since they knew he was coming, they had no reason to search for him. At his present velocity and energy-level, he was four months from Sol. The mercy ship on a higher level, would probably reach Sol within three weeks. He was a sparrow chasing a smug hawk.

But now there was more at stake than pride or reputation. He had set out to clear himself of a bad name, but now his name mattered little. If what he suspected were true, then Sol III was a potential threat to every world in the galaxy. Again he remembered the Solarian's form of address—"manthing"—as if a new race had arisen to inherit the places of their ancestors. If so, the new race had a right to bid for survival. And the old race called Man had a right to crush it if he could. Such was the dialectic of life.

Four months in the solitary confinement of a space-ship was enough to unnerve any man, however well-conditioned to it. He paced restlessly in his cell, from quarters to control to reactor room, reading everything that was aboard to read and devouring it several times. Sometimes he stopped to stare in Daleth's doorway. Her gear was still in the compartment, gathering dust. A pair of boots in the corner, a box of Dalethia cigars on the shelf.

"Maybe she has a book or two," he said once, and entered. He opened the closet and chuckled at the rough masculine clothing that hung there. But among the coarse fabrics was a wisp of pale green silk. He parted the dungarees to stare at the frail feminine frock, nestled toward the end and half-hidden like a suppressed desire. For a moment he saw her in it, strolling along the cool avenues of a Cophian city. But quickly he let the dungarees fall back, slammed the door, and stalked outside, feeling ashamed. He never entered again.

The loneliness was overpowering. After three months, he shut off the transmitters and listened on the space-frequencies for the sound of a human voice. There was nothing except the occasional twittering of a coded message. Some of them came from the direction of Sol.

Why were they letting him come without interference? Why had they allowed him to transmit the message freely? Perhaps they wanted him as a man who knew a great deal about the military and economic resources of the Sixty-Star Cluster, information they would need if they had high ambitions in space. And perhaps the message no longer mattered, if they had already acquired enough nuclear materials for their plans.

After a logical analysis of the situation, he hit upon a better answer. Their ships didn't have the warp-locking devices that permitted one ship to slip into a parallel C with an enemy and stay with that enemy while it maneuvered in the fifth component. The Solarians had proven that deficiency when the "mercy ship" had tried to escape him by evasive coursing. If their own ships were equipped with the warp lockers, they would have known better than to try. They wanted such equipment. Perhaps they thought that the *Idiot* possessed it, or that he could furnish them with enough information to let them build it.

After several days of correlating such facts as he already knew, Roki cut on his transmitters, fanned the beam down to a narrow pencil, and directed it toward Sol. "Blind Stab from Cluster-Ship *Idiot*," he called. "Any Sol Ship from *Idiot*. I have information to sell in exchange for the person of Talewa Walkeka. Acknowledge, please."

He repeated the message several times, and expected to wait a few days for an answer. But the reply came within three hours, indicating that a ship had been hovering just ahead of him, beyond the range of his own out-moded detectors.

"Cluster-Ship from Sol Seven," crackled the loud-speaker. "Do you wish to land on our planet? If so, please prepare to be boarded. One of our pilots will take you in. You are approaching our outer patrol zone. If you refuse to be boarded, you will have to turn back. Nonco-operative vessels are destroyed upon attempting to land. Over."

There was a note of amusement in the voice. They knew he wouldn't turn back. They had a hostage. They were inviting him to surrender but phrasing the invitation politely.

Roki hesitated. Why had the man said—"destroyed upon attempting to land?" After a moment's thought, he realized that it was because they could not destroy a ship while maneuvering in the fifth component. They could not even stay in the same continuum with it, unless they had the warp-locking

devices. A vague plan began form-ing in his mind.

"I agree conditionally. Do you have Talewa Walkeka aboard? If so, prove it by asking her to answer the fol-lowing request in her own voice: 'List the garments con-tained in the closet of her quarters aboard this ship.' If this is accomplished satisfactorily, then I'll tentatively as-sume intentions are not hostile. Let me remind you, however, that while we are grappled together, I can rip half your hull off by hitting my C-drive—unless you're equipped with warp-locking devices."

That should do it, he thought. With such a warning, they would make certain that they had him aboard their own ship as a captive before they made any other move. And he would do his best to make it easy for them. Two or three hours would pass before he could expect an an-swer, so he began work immediately, preparing to use every means at his disposal to make a booby trap of the *Idiot*, and to set the trap so that only his continued well-being would keep it from springing.

The *Idiot's* stock of spare parts was strictly limited, as he had discovered previously. There were a few spare selsyns, replacement units for the calculator and courser, radio and radar parts, control-mechanisms for the reac-tors, and an assortment of spare instruments and detec-tors. He augmented this stock by ruthlessly tearing into the calculator and taking what he needed.

He was hard at work when the answer came from the Sol ship. It was Daleth's voice, crisp and angry, saying, "Six pair of dungarees, a jacket, a robe, and a silk frock. Drop dead, Roki."

The Solarian operator took over. "Expect a meeting in six hours. In view of your threat, we must ask that you stand in the outer lock with the hatch open, so that we may see you as we grapple together. Please acknowledge willingness to co-operate."

Roki grinned. They wanted to make certain that he was nowhere near the controls. He gave them a grum-bling acknowledgment and returned to his work, tearing into the electronic control-circuits, the radio equipment, the reaction-rate limiters, and the controls of the C-drive. He wove a network of inter-dependency throughout the ship, running linking-circuits from the air-lock mecha-nisms to the reactors, and from the communication equip-ment to the C-drive. Gradually the ship became useless as a means of transportation. The jets were silent. He set time clocks to activate some of the apparatus, and keyed other equipment by relays set to trip upon the occurrence of various events.

It was not a difficult task, nor a long one. He added nothing really new. For example, it was easy to remove the wires from the air lock indicator lamp and feed their signal into a relay section removed from the calculator, a section which would send a control pulse to the reactors if the air locks were opened twice. The control pulse, if it came, would push the units past the red line. The relay sections were like single-task robots, set to obey the command: "If *this* happens, then push *that* switch."

When he was finished, the six hours were nearly gone. Pacing restlessly, he waited for them to come. Then, no-ticing a sudden flutter on the instruments, he glanced out to see the dark hulk slipping through his radiation screen. It came to a stop a short distance away.

Roki started the timers he had set, then donned a pres-sure suit. Carrying a circuit diagram of the changes he had wrought, he went to stand in the outer lock. He held open the outer hatch. The beam of a searchlight stabbed out to hold him while the Sol Ship eased closer. He could see another suited figure in its lock, calling guidance to the pilot. Roki glanced up at his own grapples; they were already energized and waiting for something to which they could cling.

The ships came together with a rocking jerk as both sets of grapples caught and clung. Roki swung himself across a gravityless space, then stood facing the burly fig-ure of the Solarian. The man pushed him into the next lock and stepped after him.

"Search him for weapons," growled a harsh voice as Roki removed his helmet. "And get the boarding party through the locks."

"If you do that, you'll blow both ships to hell," the Cophian commented quietly. "The hatches are rigged to throw the reactors past red line."

The commander, a sharp-eyed oldster with a massive bald skull, gave him a cold stare that slowly became a sneer. "Very well, we can cut through the hull."

Roki nodded. "You can, but don't let any pressure escape. The throttles are also keyed to the

pressure gauge."

The commander reddened slightly. "Is there anything else?"

"Several things." Roki handed him the circuit diagram. "Have your engineer study this. Until he gets the idea, anything you do may be dangerous, like trying to pull away from my grapples. I assure you we're either per-manently grappled together, or permanently dead."

The Solarian was apparently his own engineer. He stared at the schematic while another relieved Roki of his weapon. There were four of them in the cabin. Three were armed and watching him carefully. He knew by their expressions that they considered him to be of a lesser species. And he watched them communicate silently among themselves by a soundless language of facial twitches and peculiar nods. Once the commander looked up to ask a question.

"When will this timer activate this network?"

Roki glanced at his watch. "In about ten minutes. If the transmitter's periodic signals aren't answered in the correct code, the signals serve to activate C-drive."

"I see that," he snapped. He glanced at a burly as-sistant. "Take him out. Skin him—from the feet up. He'll give you the code."

"I'll give it to you now," Roki offered calmly.

The commander showed faint surprise. "Do so then." "The Cophian multiplication tables is the code. My transmitter will send a pair of Cophian numbers every two minutes. If you fail to supply the product within one second, a relay starts the C-drive. Since you can't guaran-tee an exactly simultaneous thrust, there should be quite a crash."

"Very well, give us your Cophian number symbols."

"Gladly. But they won't help you."

"Why not?"

"Our numbers are to the base eighteen instead of base ten. You couldn't react quickly enough unless you've been using them since childhood."

The Solarian's lips pulled back from his heavy teeth and his jaw muscles began twitching. Roki looked at his watch.

"You have seven minutes to get your transmitter set up, with me at the key. We'll talk while I keep us intact."

The commander hesitated, then nodded to one of the guards who promptly left the room.

"Very well, manthing, we will set it up temporarily." He paused to smile arrogantly. "You have much to learn about our race. But you have little time in which to learn it."

"What do you mean?"

"Just this. This transmitter—and the whole apparatus—will be shut down after a certain period of time."

Roki stiffened. "Just how do you propose to do it?"

"Fool! By waiting until the signals stop. You obviously must have set a time limit on it. I would guess a few hours at the most."

It was true, but he had hoped to avoid mentioning it. The power to the control circuits would be interrupted af-ter four hours, and the booby trap would be deactivated. For if he hadn't achieved his goal by then, he meant to neglect a signal during the last half-hour and let the C-ward lurch tear them apart. He nodded slowly.

"You're quiet right. You have four hours in which to surrender your ship into my control. Maybe. I'll send the signals until I decide you don't mean to co-operate. Then—" He shrugged.

The Solarian gave a command to his aides. They departed in different directions. Roki guessed that they had been sent to check for some way to enter the *Idiot* that would not energize a booby circuit.

His host waved him through a doorway, and he found himself in their control room. A glance told him that their science still fell short of the most modern cultures. They had the earmarks of a new race, and yet Sol's civilization was supposedly the oldest in the galaxy.

"There are the transmitters," the commander barked. "Say what you have to say, and we shall see

who is best at waiting."

Roki sat down, fingered the key, and watched his ad-versary closely. The commander fell into a seat opposite him and gazed coolly through narrowed lids. He wore a fixed smile of amusement. "Your name is Eli Roki, I be-lieve. I am Space Commander Hulgruv."

A blare of sound suddenly came from the receiver. Hulgruv frowned and lowered the volume. The sound came forth as a steady musical tone. He questioned the Cophian with his eyes.

"When the tone ceases, the signals will begin."

"I see."

"I warn you, I may get bored rather quickly. I'll keep the signals going only until I think you've had time to assure yourselves that this is not a bluff I am trying to put over on you."

"I'm sure it's not. It's merely an inconvenience."

"You know little of my home planet then."

"I know a little."

"Then you've heard of the 'Sword of Apology.' "

"How does that—" Hulgruv paused and lost his smirk for an instant. "I see. If you blunder, your code de-mands that you die anyway. So you think you wouldn't hesitate to neglect a signal."

"Try me."

"It may not be necessary. Tell me, why did you space them two minutes apart? Why not one signal every hour?"

"You can answer that."

"Ah yes. You think the short period insures you against any painful method of persuasion, eh?"

"Uh-huh. And it gives me a chance to decide fre-quently whether it's worth it."

"What is it you want, Cophian? Suppose we give you the girl and release you."

"She is a mere incidental," he growled, fearful of choking on the words. "The price is surrender."

Hulgruv laughed heartily. It was obvious he had other plans. "Why do you deem us your enemy?"

"You heard the accusation I beamed back to my Cluster."

"Certainly. We ignored it, directly. Indirectly we made a fool of you by launching another, uh, mercy ship to your system. The cargo was labeled as to source, and the ship made a point of meeting one of your patrol vessels. It stopped for inspection. You're less popular at home than ever." He grinned. "I suggest you return to Sol with us. Help us develop the warp locks."

Roki hesitated. "You say the ship *stopped for inspec-tion*?"

"Certainly."

"Wasn't it inconvenient? Changing your diet, leaving your 'livestock' at home—so our people wouldn't know you for what you really are."

Hulgruv stiffened slightly, then nodded. "Good guess."

"*Cannibal!*"

"Not at all. I am not a man."

They stared fixedly at one another. The Cophian felt the clammy cloak of hate creeping about him. The tone from the speaker suddenly stopped. A moment of dead silence. Roki leaned back in his chair.

"I'm not going to answer the first signal."

The commander glanced through the doorway and jerked his head. A moment later, Talcwa Walkeka stepped proudly into the room, escorted by a burly guard. She gave him an icy glance and said nothing.

"Daleth—"

She made a noise like an angry cat and sat where the guard pushed her. They waited. The first signal suddenly screeched from the receiver: two series of short bleats of three different notes.

Involuntarily his hand leaped to the key. He bleated back the answering signal.

Daleth wore a puzzled frown. "Ilgen times ufneg is hork-segan," she muttered in translation.

A slow grin spread across Hulgruv's heavy face. He turned to look at the girl. "You're trained in the Cophian number system?"

"Don't answer that!" Roki bellowed.

"She has answered it, manthing. Are you aware of what your friend is doing, female?"

She shook her head. Hulgruv told her briefly. She frowned at Roki, shook her head, and stared impassively at the floor. Apparently she was either drugged or had learned nothing about the Solarians to convince her that they were enemies of the galaxy.

"Tell me, Daleth. Have they been feeding you well?" She hissed at him again. "Are you crazy—"

Hulgruv chuckled. "He is trying to tell you that we are cannibals. Do you believe it?"

Fright appeared in her face for an instant, then disbelief. She stared at the commander, saw no guilt in his expression. She looked scorn at Roki.

"Listen, Daleth! That's why they wouldn't stop. Human livestock aboard. One look in their holds and we would have known, seen through their guise of mercy, recognized them as self-styled supermen, guessed their plans for galactic conquest. They breed their human cattle on their home planet and make a business of selling the parts. Their first weapon is infiltration into our confidence. They knew that if we gained an insight into their bloodthirsty culture, we would crush them."

"You're insane, Roki!" she snapped.

"No! Why else would they refuse to stop? Technical secrets? Baloney! Their technology is still inferior to ours. They carried a cargo of hate, our hate, riding with them unrecognized. They couldn't afford to reveal it."

Hulgruv laughed uproariously. The girl shook her head slowly at Roki, as if pitying him.

"It's true, I tell you! I guessed, sure. But it was pretty obvious they were taking their surgibank supplies by murder. And they contend they're not men. They guard their ships so closely, live around them while in port. And he admitted it to me."

The second signal came. Roki answered it, then began ignoring the girl. She didn't believe him. Hulgruv appeared amused. He hummed the signals over to himself —*without mistake*.

"You're using polytonal code for challenge, monotonal for reply. That makes it harder to learn."

The Cophian caught his breath. He glanced at the Solarian's huge, bald braincase. "You hope to learn some three or four hundred sounds—and sound-combinations within the time I allow you?"

"We'll see."

Some note of contempt in Hulgruv's voice gave Roki warning.

"I shorten my ultimatum to one hour! Decide by then. Surrender, or I stop answering. Learn it, if you can."

"He can, Roki," muttered Daleth. "They can memorize a whole page at a glance."

Roki keyed another answer. "I'll cut it off if he tries it."

The commander was enduring the tension of the stalemate superbly. "Ask yourself, Cophian," he grunted with a smile, "what would you gain by destroying the ship—and yourself? We are not important. If we're destroyed, our planet loses another gnat in space, nothing more. Do you imagine we are incapable of self-sacrifice?"

Roki found no answer. He set his jaw in silence and answered the signals as they came. He hoped the bluff would win, but now he saw that Hulgruv would let him destroy the ship. And—if the situation were reversed, Roki knew that he would do the same. He had mistakenly refused to concede honor to an enemy. The commander seemed to sense his quiet dismay, and he leaned forward to speak softly.

"We are a new race, Roki—grown out of man. We have abilities of which you know nothing. It's useless to fight us. Ultimately, your people will pass away. Or become stagnant. Already it has happened to man on Earth."

"Then—there are *two* races on Earth."

"Yes, of course. Did apes pass away when man appeared? The new does not replace the old. It adds to it, builds above it. The old species is the root of the new tree."

"Feeding it," the Cophian grunted bitterly.

He noticed that Talewa was becoming disturbed. Her eyes fluttered from one to the other of them.

"That was inevitable, manthing. There are no other animal foodstuffs on Earth. Man exhausted his planet, overpopulated it, drove lesser species into extinction. He spent the world's resources getting your

ancestors to the denser star-clusters. He saw his own approaching stagnation on Earth. And, since Sol is near the rim of the galaxy, with no close star-neighbors, he realized he could never achieve a mass-exodus into space. He didn't have the C-drive in its present form. The best he could do was a field-cancellation drive."

"But that's the heart of the C-drive."

"True. But he was too stupid to realize what he had. He penetrated the fifth component and failed to realize what he had done. His ships went up to five-hundred C's or so, spent a few hours there by the ship's clock, and came down to find several years had passed on Earth. They never got around that time-lag."

"But that's hardly more than a problem in five-space navigation!"

"True again. But they still thought of it in terms of field-cancellation. They didn't realize they'd actually left the four-space continuum. They failed to see the blue-shift as anything more than a field-phenomenon. Even in high-C, you measure light's velocity as the same constant—because your measuring instruments have changed pro-portionally. It's different, relative to the home continuum, but you can't know it except by pure reasoning. They never found out.

"Using what they had, they saw that they could send a few of their numbers to the denser star-clusters, if they wanted to wait twenty thousand years for them to arrive. Of course, only a few\_ years would pass aboard ship. They knew they could do it, but they procrastinated. Society was egalitarian at the time. Who would go? And why should the planet's industry exhaust itself to launch a handful of ships that no one would ever see again? Who wanted to make a twenty thousand year investment that would impoverish the world? Sol's atomic resources were never plentiful."

"How did it come about then?"

"Through a small group of men who didn't *care* about the cost. They seized power during a `population rebel-lion'—when the sterilizers were fighting the euthana-siasts and the do-nothings. The small clique came into power by the fantastic promise of draining off the population-surplus into space. Enough of the stupid be-lieved it to furnish them with a strong backing. They clamped censorship on the news agencies and impris-oned everyone who said it couldn't be done. They put the planet to work building ships. Their fanatic personal philosophy was: `We are giving the galaxy to Man. What does it matter if he perishes on Earth?' They put about twelve hundred ships into space before their slave-structure collapsed. Man never developed another technology on Sol III. He was sick of it."

"And *your* people?"

Hulgruv smiled. "A natural outgrowth of the situation. If a planet were glutted with rabbits who ate all the grass, a species of rabbits who learned to exploit other rabbits would have the best chance for survival. We are predators, Cophian. Nature raised us up to be a check on your race."

"You pompous fool!" Roki snapped. "Predators are specialists. What abilities do you have—besides the abil-ity to prey on man?"

"I'll show you in a few minutes," the commander mut-tered darkly.

Daleth had lost color slowly as she listened to the Solarian's roundabout admission of Roki's charge. She suddenly moaned and slumped in a sick heap. Hulgruv spoke to the guard in the soundless facial language. The guard carried her away quickly.

""If you were an advanced species, Hulgruv—you would not have let yourself be tricked so easily, by me. And a highly intelligent race would discover the warp locks for themselves."

Hulgruv flushed. "We underestimated you, manthing. It was a natural mistake. Your race has sunk to the level of cattle on earth. As for the warp locks, we know their principles. We have experimental models. But we could short-circuit needless research by using your design. We are a new race, new to space. Naturally we cannot do in a few years what you needed centuries to accomplish."

"You'll have to look for help elsewhere. In ten minutes, I'm quitting the key—unless you change your mind."

Hulgruv shrugged. While Roki answered the signals, he listened for sounds of activity throughout the ship. He heard nothing except the occasional clump of boots, the brief mutter of a voice in the corridor, the intermittent rattling of small tools. There seemed to be no excitement or anxiety. The Solarians



conducted themselves with quiet self-assurance.

"Is your crew aware of what is happening?"

"Certainly."

As the deadline approached, his fingers grew nervous on the key. He steeled himself, and waited, clutching at each second as it marched past. What good would it do to sacrifice Daleth and himself? He would succeed only in destroying one ship and one crew. But it was a good trade—two pawns for several knights and a rook. And, when the Solarians began their march across space, there would be many such sacrifices.

For the last time, he answered a signal, then leaned back to stare at Hulgruv. "Two minutes, Solarian. There's still time to change your mind."

Hulgruv only smiled. Roki shrugged and stood up. A pistol flashed into the commander's hand, warning him back. Roki laughed contemptuously.

"Afraid I'll try to take your last two minutes away?" He strolled away from the table toward the door. "Stop!" Hulgruv barked.

"Why? I want to see the girl."

"Very touching. But she's busy at the moment."

"What?" He turned slowly, and glanced at his watch. "You don't seem to realize that in fifty seconds—"

"We'll see. Stay where you are."

The Cophian felt a sudden coldness in his face. Could they have found a flaw in his net of death?—a way to circumvent the sudden application of the *Idiot's* C-drive, with its consequent ruinous stresses to both ships? Or had they truly memorized the Cophian symbols to a one second reaction time?

He shrugged agreeably and moved in the general di-rection of the transmitter tuning units. There was one way to test the possibility. He stopped several feet away and turned to face Hulgruv's suspicious eyes. "You are braver than I thought," he growled.

The admission had the desired effect. Hulgruv tossed his head and laughed arrogantly. There was an instant of relaxation. The heavy automatic wavered slightly. Roki backed against the transmitters and cut the power switch. The hum died.

"Ten seconds, Hulgruv! Toss me your weapon. Shoot and you shatter the set. Wait and the tubes get cold. *Toss it!*"

Hulgruv bellowed, and raised the weapon to fire. Roki grinned. The gun quivered. Then with a choking sound, the Solarian threw it to him. "Get it on!" he howled. "*Get it on!*"

As Roki tripped the switch again, the signals were already chirping in the loud-speaker. He darted aside, out of view from the corridor. Footsteps were already racing toward the control room.

The signals stopped. Then the bleat of an answer! Another key had been set up in the adjoining room! With Daleth answering the challenges?

The pistol exploded in his hand as the first crewman came racing through the doorway. The others backed out of sight into the corridor as the projectile-weapon knocked their comrade back in a bleeding sprawl. Hulgruv made a dash for the door. Roki cut him down with a shot at the knee.

"The next one takes the transmitter," he bellowed. "Stay back."

Hulgruv roared a command. "Take him! If you can't, let the trap spring!"

Roki stooped over him and brought the pistol butt crashing against his skull, meaning only to silence him. It was a mistake; he had forgotten about the structure of the Solarian skull. He put his foot on Hulgruv's neck and jerked. The butt came free with a wet *cluck*. He raced to the doorway and pressed himself against the wall to listen. The crewmen were apparently having a parley at the far end of the corridor. He waited for the next signal.

When it came, he dropped to the floor—to furnish an unexpected sort of target—and snaked into view. He shot twice at three figures a dozen yards away. The answering fire did something to the side of his face, blurring his vi-sion. Another shot sprayed him with flakes from the deck. One crewman was down. The others backed through a door at the end of the corridor. They slammed it and a pressure seal tightened with a rubbery sound.

Roki climbed to his feet and slipped toward a doorway from which he heard the click of the auxiliary key. He felt certain someone was there besides Daleth. But when he risked a quick glance around the corner, he saw only the girl. She sat at a small desk, her hand frozen to the key, her eyes staring dazedly at nothing. He started to speak, then realized what was wrong. Hypnosis! Or a hyp-notic drug. She sensed nothing but the key beneath her fingers, waiting for the next challenge.

The door was only half-open. He could see no one, but there had been another man; of that he was certain. Thoughtfully he took aim at the plastic door panel and fired. A gun skidded toward Daleth's desk. A heavy body sprawled across the floor.

The girl started. The dull daze left her face, to be re-placed with wide-eyed shock. She clasped her hands to her cheeks and whimpered. A challenge bleated from the radio.

"Answer!" he bellowed.

Her hand shot to the key and just in time. But she seemed about to faint.

"Stay on it!" he barked, and dashed back to the con-trol room. The crewmen had locked themselves aft of the bulkhead, and had started the ventilator fans. Roki heard their whine, then caught the faint odor of gas. His eyes were burning and he sneezed spasmodically.

"Surrender immediately, manthing!" blared the inter-com.

Roki looked around, then darted toward the controls. He threw a damping voltage on the drive tubes, defocused the ion streams, and threw the reactors to full emission. The random shower of high-speed particles would spray toward the focusing coils, scatter like deflected buckshot, and loose a blast of hard X-radiation as they peppered the walls of the reaction chambers. Within a few seconds, if the walls failed to melt, the crewmen back of the bulkhead should recognize the possibility of being quickly fried by the radiant inferno.

The tear gas was choking him. From the next compart-ment, he could hear Daleth coughing and moaning. How could she hear the signals for her own weeping? He tried to watch the corridor and the reaction-chamber temperature at the same time. The needle crept toward the danger-point. An explosion could result, if the walls failed to melt.

Suddenly the voice of the intercom again: "Shut it off, you fool! You'll destroy the ship."

He said nothing, but waited in tense silence, watching the other end of the corridor. Suddenly the ventilator fans died. Then the bulkhead door opened a crack, and paused.

"Throw out your weapon first!" he barked.

A gun fell through the crack and to the floor. A Solarian slipped through, sneezed, and rubbed his eyes. "Turn around and back down the corridor."

The crewman obeyed slowly. Roki stood a few feet behind him, using him for a shield while the others emerged. The fight was gone out of them. It was strange, he thought; they were willing to risk the danger of the *Idiot's* C-drive, but they couldn't stand being locked up with a runaway reactor. They could see death coming then. He throttled back the reactors, and prodded the men toward the storage rooms. There was only one door that suggested a lockup. He halted the prisoners in the hallway and tried the bolt.

"Not in there, manthing!" growled one of the Solarians. "Why not?"

"There are—"

A muffled wail from within the compartment in-terrupted the explanation. It was the cry of a child. His hand trembled on the bolt.

"They are wild, and we are weaponless," pleaded the Solarian.

"How many are in there?"

"Four adults, three children."

Roki paused. "There's nowhere else to put you. One of you—you there—go inside, and we'll see what happens."

The man shook his head stubbornly in refusal. Roki repeated the order. Again the man refused. The predator, unarmed, was afraid of its prey. The Cophian aimed low and calmly shot him through the leg.

"Throw him inside," he ordered tonelessly.

With ill-concealed fright for their own safety, the other two lifted their screaming comrade. Roki

swung open the door and caught a brief glimpse of several human shadows in the gloom. Then the Solarian was thrown through the doorway and the bolt snapped closed.

At first there was silence, then a bull-roar from some angry throat. Stamping feet—then the Solarian's shriek—and a body was being dashed against the inside walls while several savage voices roared approval. The two remaining crewmen stood in stunned silence.

"Doesn't work so well, does it?" Roki murmured with ruthless unconcern.

After a brief search, he found a closet to lock them in, and went to relieve Daleth at the key. When the last signal came, at the end of the four hours, she was asleep from exhaustion. And curled up on the floor, she looked less like a tough little frontier urchin than a frightened bedraggled kitten. He grinned at her for a moment, then went back to inspect the damage to the briefly overloaded reactors. It was not as bad as it might have been. He worked for two hours, replacing fused focusing sections. The jets would carry them home.

The *Idiot* was left drifting in space to await the coming of a repair ship. And Daleth was not anxious to fly it back alone. Roki set the Solarian vessel on a course with a variable C-level, so that no Sol ship could track them without warp lockers. As far as Roki was concerned the job was done. He had a shipful of evidence and two live Solarians who could be forced to confirm it.

"What will they do about it?" Daleth asked as the captured ship jetted them back toward the Sixty-Star Cluster. "Crush the Solarian race immediately."

"I thought we were supposed to keep hands-off non-human races?"

"We are, unless they try to exploit human beings. That is automatically an act of war. But I imagine an Ultimatum will bring a surrender. They can't fight without warp lockers."

"What will happen on Earth when they do surrender?" Roki turned to grin. "Go ask the human Earthers. Climb in their cage."

She shuddered, and murmured, "Some day—they'll be a civilized race again, won't they?"

He sobered, and stared thoughtfully at the star-lanced cosmos. "Theirs is the past, Daleth. Theirs is the glory of having founded the race of man. They sent us into space. They gave the galaxy to man—in the beginning. We would do well to let them alone."

He watched her for a moment. She had lost cockiness, temporarily.

"Stop grinning at me like that!" she snapped.

Roki went to feed the Solarian captives: canned cabbage.

## CHECK and CHECKMATE

*Victory hinges not always on the mightiest sword, but often on lowly subterfuge. Here is a classic example, with the Western World as stooge!*

JOHN SMITH XVI, new President of the Western Federation of Autonomous States, had made a number of campaign promises that nobody really expected him to fulfill, for after all, the campaign and the election were only ceremonies, and the President—who had no real name of his own—had been trained for the executive post since birth. He had been elected by a popular vote of 603,217,954 to 130, the dissenters casting their negative by announcing that, for the sake of national unity, they refused to participate in any civilized activities during the President's term, whereupon they were admitted (voluntarily) to the camp for conscientious objectors.

But now, two weeks after his inauguration, he seemed ready to make good the first and perhaps most difficult promise of the lot: to confer by televiewphone with Ivan Ivanovitch the Ninth, the Peoples-friend and Vicar of the Asian Proletarian League. The President apparently meant to keep to himself the secret of his success in the difficult task of arranging the interview in spite of the lack of any diplomatic contact between the nations, in spite of the Hell Wall, and the interference stations which

made even radio communication impossible between the two halves of the globe. Someone had suggested that John Smith XVI had floated a note to Ivan IX in a bottle, and the suggestion, though ludicrous, seemed not at all unlikely.

John XVI seemed quite pleased with himself as he sat with his staff of Primary Stand-ins in the study of his presidential palace. His face, of course, was invisible behind the golden mask of the official helmet, the mask of tragedy with its expression of pathos symbolizing the self-immolation of public service—as well as protecting the President's own personal visage from public view, and hence from assassination in unmasked private life, for not only was he publicly nameless, but also publicly faceless and publicly unknown as an individual. But despite the invisibility of his expression, his contentment became apparent by a certain briskness of gesticulation and a certain smugness in his voice as he spoke to the nine Stand-ins who were also bodyguards, council-members, and advisors to the chief executive.

"Think of it, men," he sighed happily in his smooth tenor, slightly muffled by the mask.

"Communication with the East—after forty years of the Big Silence. A great moment in history, perhaps the greatest since the last peace-effort."

The nine men nodded dutifully. The President looked around at them and chuckled.

"'Peace-effort'," he echoed, spitting the words out distinctly as if they were a pair of phonetic specimens. "Do you remember what it used to be called—in the middle of the last century?"

A brief silence, then a Stand-in frowned thoughtfully. "Called it 'war', didn't they, John?"

"Precisely." The golden helmet nodded crisply. "War"—and now 'peace-effort'. Our semantics has progressed. Our present 'security-probe' was once called 'lynch'. 'Social-security' once meant a limited insurance plan, not connoting euthanasia and sterilization for the *elliemoes*. And that word '*elliemoes*'—once *eleemosynary*—was once applied to institutions that took *care* of the handicapped."

He waited for the burst of laughter to subside. A Stand-in, still chuckling, spoke up.

"It's our institutions that have evolved, John."

"True enough," the President agreed. "But as they changed, most of them kept their own names. Like 'the Presidency'. It used to be rabble-chosen, as our ceremonies imply. Then the Qualifications Amendment that limited it to the psychologically fit. And then the Education Amendment prescribed other qualifying rules. And the Genetic Amendment, and the Selection Amendment, and finally the seclusion and depersonalization. Until it gradually got out of the rabble's hands, except symbolically." He paused. "Still, it's good to keep the old names. As long as the names don't change, the rabble is happy, and say, 'We have preserved the Pan-American way of life'."

"While the rabble is really impotent," added a Stand-in.

"Don't say that!" John Smith XVI snapped irritably, sitting quickly erect on the self-conforming couch. "And if you believe it, you're a fool." His voice went sardonic. "Why don't you try abolishing me and find out?"

"Sorry, John. I didn't mean—"

THE PRESIDENT stood up and paced slowly toward the window where he stood gazing between the breeze-stirred drapes at the sun swept city of Acapulco and at the breakers rolling toward the distant beach.

"No, my power is of the rabble," he confessed, "and I am their friend." He turned to look at them and laugh. "Should I build my power on men like you? Or the Secondary Stand-ins? Baa! For all your securities, you are still stooges. Of the rabble. Do you obey me because I control military force? Or because I control rabble? The latter I think. For despite precautions, military forces can be corrupted. Rabble cannot. They rule you through me, and I rule you through them. And I am their servant because I have to be. No tyrant can survive by oppression."

A gloomy hush followed his words. It was still fourteen minutes before time for the televiewphone contact with Ivan Ivanovitch IX. The President turned back to the "window". He stared "outside" until he grew tired of the view. He pressed a button on the wall. The window went black. He pressed another button, which brought another view: Pike's Peak at sunset. As the sky gathered gray twilight, he twisted a dial and ran the sun back up again.

The palace was built two hundred feet underground, and the study was a safe with walls of eight-inch steel. It lent a certain air of security.

The historic moment was approaching. The Stand-ins seemed nervous. What changes had occurred behind the Hell Wall, what new developments in science, what political mutations? Only rumors came from beyond the Wall, since the last big peace-effort which had ended in stalemate and total isolation. The intelligence service did the best that it could, but the picture was fuzzy and incomplete. There was still "communism", but the word's meaning had apparently changed. It was said that the third Ivan had been a crafty opportunist but also a wise man who, although he did nothing to abolish absolutism, effected a bloody reformation in which the hair-splitting Marxist dogmatics had been purged. He appointed the most pragmatic men he could find to succeed them, and set the whole continental regime on the road to a harsh but practical utilitarian civilization.

A slogan had leaked across the Wall recently: "There is no God but a Practical Man; there is no Law but a Best Solution," and it seemed to affirm that the third Ivan's influence had continued after his passing—although the slogan itself was a dogma. And it might mean something quite non-literal to the people who spoke it. The rabble of the West were still stirred to deep emotion by a thing that began, "When in the course of human events—" and they saw nothing incongruous about Tertiary Stand-ins who quoted it in the name of the Federation's rule.

But the unknown factor that disturbed the President most was not the present Asian political or economic situation, but rather, the state of scientific development, particularly as it applied to military matters. The forty years of non-communication had not been spent in military stasis, at least not for the West. Sixty percent of the federal budget was still being spent for defense. Powerful new weapons were still being developed, and old ones pronounced obsolete. The seventh John Smith had even conspired to have a conspiracy against himself in Argentina, with resulting civil war, so that the weapons could be tested under actual battle conditions—for the region had been overpopulated anyway. The results had been comforting—but John the Sixteenth wanted to know more about what the enemy was doing.

THE HELL WALL—which was really only a globe-encircling belt of booby-trapped land and ocean, guarded from both sides—had its political advantages, of course. The mysterious doings of the enemy, real and imagined, were a constant and suspenseful threat that made it easy for the Smiths to keep the rabble in hand. But for all the present Smith knew, the threat might very well be real. He had to find out. It would also be a popular triumph he could toss to the rabble, bolstering his position with them, and thereby securing his hold on the Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Stand-ins, who were becoming a little too presumptuous of late.

He had a plan in mind, vague, tentative, and subject to constant revision to suit events as they might begin to occur. He kept the plan's goal to himself, knowing that the Stand-ins would call it insane, dangerous, impossible.

"John! We're picking up their station!" a Stand-in called. "It's a minute before time!"

He left the window and walked calmly to the couch before the televiewphone, whose screen had come alive with the kaleidoscope patterns of the interference-station which sprang to life as soon as an enemy station tried to broadcast.

"Have the fools cut that scatter-station!" he barked angrily.

A Stand-in grabbed at a microphone, but before he made the call the interference stopped—a few seconds before the appointed time. The screen revealed an empty desk and a wall behind, with a flag of the Asian League. No one was in the picture, which was slightly blurred by several relay stations, which had been set up on short notice for this one broadcast.

A wall-clock peeped the hour in a childish voice: "Sixteen o'clock, Thirdday, Smithweek, also Accident-Prevention Week and Probe-Subversives Week; Happy 2073! Peep!"

A man walked into the picture and sat down, facing John Smith XVI. A heavy-set man, clad in coveralls, and wearing a red rubber or plastic helmet-mask. The mask was the face of the first Soviet dictator, dead over a century ago. John's scalp bristled slightly beneath his own golden headdress. He tried to relax. The room was hushed. The opposing leaders stared at each other without speaking.

Historic moment!

Ivan Ivanovitch slowly lifted his hand and waved it in greeting. John Smith returned the gesture, then summoned courage to speak first.

"You have translators at hand?"

"I need none," the red mask growled in the Western tongue. "You are unable to speak my tongue. We shall speak yours."

The President started. How could the Red know that he did not speak the Russo-Asian dialect?

"Very well," The President reached for a prepared text and began to read. "I requested this conference in the hope of establishing some form of contact between our peoples, through their duly constituted executive authorities. I hope that we can agree on a series of conferences, aimed eventually at a lessening of the tension between us. I do not propose that we alter our respective positions, nor to change our physical isolation from one another except in the field of high level diplomacy and . . ."

"Why?" grunted the Asian chieftain.

John Smith XVI hesitated. The guttural monosyllable had been toneless and disinterested. The Red was going to draw him out, apparently. Very well, he would be frank—for a time.

"The answer should be evident, Peoplesfriend. I presume that your government spends a respectable sum for armaments. My government does likewise. The eventual aim should be economy . . ."

"Is this a disarmament proposal?"

The fellow was blunt. Smith cleared his throat. "Not at the present time, Peoplesfriend. I hoped that eventually we might be able to establish a mutual trust so that to some extent we could lessen the burden . . ."

"Stop talking Achesonian, President. What do you want?"

The President went rigid. "Very well," he said sarcastically, "I propose that we reduce military expenses by blowing the planet in half. The halves can circle each other as satellite twins, and we'll have achieved perfect isolation. It would seem more economical than the present course."

He apparently had sized up the Peoplesfriend correctly. The man threw back his masked head and laughed uproariously.

"The Solomon solution! . . . ha ha! . . . Slice the baby in half!" the Stalin-mask chuckled. Then he paused to grow sober. "Too bad we can't do it, isn't it?"

JOHN SMITH sat stiffly waiting. Diplomacy was dead, and he had made a mistake in trying to be polite. Diplomats were dead, and the art forgotten. Poker-game protocol had to apply here, and it was really the only sensible way: for two opponents to try to cheat each other honestly and jovially. He was glad the Soviet Worker's Vicar had not responded to his first politeness. "Anything else, Smith?"

"We can discuss agenda later. What about the continued conferences?"

"Suits me. I have nothing to lose. I am in a position to destroy you anyway, a position I have occupied for several years. I have not cared to do so, since you made no overt moves against us."

A brief silence. Bluff? Smith wondered. Certainly bluff. On the other hand, it would be interesting to see how far Ivan would brag.

"I gather your atomic research has made rapid strides, for you to make such a boast," Smith ventured.

"Not at all. In fact, my predecessor had it curtailed and limited to industrial applications. Our weapons program has become unidirectional, and extremely inexpensive. I'll tell you about it sometime."

Smith's flesh crawled. Something was wrong here. The Asian leader was too much at his ease. His words meant nothing, of course. It had to be lying noise; it could be nothing else. A meeting such as this was not meant to communicate truth, but to discern an opponent's attitude and to try to hide one's own.

"Let it suffice to say," the Red leader went on, "that we know more about you than you know about us. Our system has changed. A century ago, our continent suffered a blight of dogmatism and senseless butchery such as the world had never seen. Obviously, such conditions cannot endure. They did not. There was strong reaction and revolution within the framework of the old system. We have achieved a workable technological aristocratism, based on an empirical approach to problems. We realize that the

final power is in the hands of the people—and I use that archaic word in preference to your 'rabble'—"

"Are you trying to convert me to something?" John Smith growled acidly.

"Not at all. I'm telling you our position." He paused for a moment, then inserted his fingertips under the edge of the mask. "Here is probably the best way to tell you." The Red leader ripped off the mask, revealing an impassive Oriental face with deepset black eyes and a glowering frown. The President sucked in his breath. It was unthinkable, that a man should expose himself to . . . but then, that was what he was trying to prove wasn't it?

He kicked a foot-switch to kill the microphone circuit, and spoke quickly to the Stand-ins, knowing that the Asian could not see his lips move behind the golden mask.

"Is Security Section guarding against spy circuits?"

"Yes, John."

"Then quick, get out of the room, all of you! Join the Secondaries."

"But John, it'll leave you fingered! If nine of us leave, they'll know that the remaining one is—"

"Get on your masks and get out! *I'm* going to take mine off."

"But John—!"

"Move, Subversive!"

"You don't need to curse," the Stand-in muttered. The nine men, out of the camera's field, donned golden helmets identical to Smith's, whistled six notes to the audio-combination, then slipped out the thick steel door as it clicked and came open.

The Red was jeering at him quietly. "Afraid to take off your mask, President? The rabble? Or your self-appointed Stand-ins? Which frightens you, President—"

John Smith plucked at a latch under his chin, and the golden headdress came apart down the sides. He lifted it off and laid it casually aside, revealing a hard, blocky face, slightly in need of a shave, with cool blue eyes and blond brows. His hair was graying slightly at the temples, with a fortyish hairline.

THE RED nodded. "Greetings, human. I doubted that you would."

"Why not?" growled Smith.

"Because you fear your Stand-ins, as appointees, not subject to your 'rabble'. Our ruling clique selects its own members, but they are subject to popular approval or recall by referendum. I fear nothing from them."

"Let's not compare our domestic forms, Peoplesfriend."

"I wanted to point out," the Asian continued calmly, "that your system slipped into what it is with out realizing it. A bad was allowed to grow worse. We, however were reacting against unreasonableness and stupidity within our own system. In the year 2001—"

"I am aware of your history before the Big Silence. May we discuss pertinent matters—?"

The Asian stared at him sharply. The frown grew deeper. The black eyes looked haughty. "If you *really* want to discuss something, John Smith, suppose we arrange a personal meeting in a non-walled, neutral region? Say, Antarctica?"

John Smith XVI, unaccustomed to dealing without a mask, let surprise fill his face before he caught himself. The Asian chuckled but said nothing. The President studied the border of the televue screen for a moment.

"I shall have to consider your proposal," he said dully.

The Peoplesfriend nodded curtly, then suggested a time for the next interview. Smith revised it ahead to gain more time, and agreement was reached. The screen went blank; the interview was at an end. The Sixteenth Smith took a slow, worried breath, then slowly donned the mask of office again. He summoned the nine Primaries immediately.

"That was dangerous, John," one of them warned him as they entered. "You may regret it. They knew you were in here alone. We're not all identical from the neck-down you know. When we come out, they might compare—"

He cut the man off with a curt gesture. "No time. We're in a bad situation. Maybe worse than I guess." He began pacing the floor and staring down at the metallifiber rug as he spoke. "He knows more

about us than he should. It took me awhile to realize that he's speaking our latest language variations. A language changes idiom in forty years, and slang. He's got the latest phrases. 'Greetings, human' is one, like a rabbleman says when somebody softens up."

"Spies?"

"Maybe a whole network. I don't see how they could get them through the Wall, but—maybe it's not so hard. Antarctic's open, as he pointed out."

"What can we do about it, John?"

Smith stopped pacing, popped his knuckles hard, stared at them. "Assemble Congress. Security-probe. It's the only answer. Let the 'Rabble's Parliament' run their own inquisition. They were always good at purging themselves. Start a big spy-scare, and keep it in the channels. I'll lead with a message to the rabble." He paused, the tragedy mask gaping at them. "You won't like this, but I'm having the Stand-ins probed too. The Presidency is *not* immune."

A muttering of indignation. Some of them went white. No one protested however.

"No witch-hunt in this group, however," he assured them. "I'll veto anything that looks unfair for the Primaries, but—" He paused and rang the word again. "—*but*—there will be no leniency tolerated from here on down. If Congress thinks it's found a spy, it can execute him on the spot—and I won't lift a finger. This has got to be rooted out and burned."

He began to pace again. He began barking crisp orders for specific details of the probe, or rather, for the campaign that would start the probe. The rabble were better at witch-hunts than a government was. Congress had not been assembled for fifteen years, since there had been nothing suspicious to investigate, but once it was called to duty, heads would roll—some of them literally. If some innocent people were hurt, the rabble could only blame themselves, for their own enthusiasm in ruthlessly searching out the underground enemy. Smith couldn't worry about that. If an Asian spy-system were operating in the continent, it had to be crushed quickly.

WHEN HE had outlined the propaganda and string-pulling plans for them, he turned to the other matter—the Red leader's boast of ability to conquer the West.

"It's probably foolish talk, but we don't know their present psychology. Double production on our most impressive weapons. Give the artificial-satellite program all the money it wants, and get them moving on it. I want a missile-launching site in space before the end of the year. Pay particular attention to depopulation weapons for use against industrial areas. We may have to strike in a hurry. We've been fools—coasting this way, feeling secure behind the Wall."

"You're *not* contemplating another peace-effort, John?" gasped an elderly Stand-in.

"I'm contemplating survival!" the leader snapped. "I don't know that we're in serious danger, but if it takes a peace-effort to make sure, then we'll start one. So fast it'll knock out their industry before they know we've hit them." He stood frozen for a moment, the mask lifted proudly erect. "By Ike, I love the West! And it's not going to suffer any creeping eruption while I'm at its head!"

When the President had finished and was ready to leave, the others started donning their masks again.

"Just a minute," he grunted. "Number Six."

One of the men, about the President's size and build, looked up quickly. "Yes, John?"

"Your cloak is stained at the left shoulder. Grease?"

Six inspected it curiously, then nodded. "I was inspecting a machine shop, and—"

"Never mind. Trade cloaks with me."

"Why, if—" Six stopped. His face lost color. "But the others—might have—"

"Precisely."

Six unclasped it slowly and handed it to the Sixteenth Smith, accepting the President's in return. His face was set in rigid lines, but he made no further protest.

Masked and prepared, a Stand-in whistled a tune to the door, which had changed its combination since the last time. The tumblers clicked, and they walked out into a large auditorium containing two hundred Secondary Stand-ins, all wearing the official mask.



If a Secondary ever wanted to assassinate the President, one shot would give him a single chance in ten as they filed through the door. "Mill about!" bellowed a Sergeant-at-Arms, and the two hundred began wandering among themselves in the big room, a queer porridge, stirred clumsily but violently. The Primaries and the President lost themselves in the throng. For ten minutes the room milled and circulated.

"Unmask!" bellowed the crier. The two hundred and ten promptly removed their helmets and placed them on the floor. The President was unmasked and unknown—unmarked except by a certain physical peculiarity that could be checked only by a physician, in case the authenticity of the presidential person was challenged, as it frequently was.

Then the Secondaries went out to lose themselves in a larger throng of Tertiaries, and the group split randomly to take the various underground highways to their homes.

The President entered his house in the suburbs of Dia City, hugged the children, and kissed his wife.

John Smith was profoundly disturbed. During the years of the Big Silence, a feeling of uneasy security had evolved. The Federation had been in isolation too long, and the East had become a mysterious unknown. The Presidency had oscillated between suspicious unease and smug confidence, depending perhaps upon the personality of the particular president more than anything else. The mysteriousness of the foe had been used politically to good advantage by every president selected to office, and the Sixteenth Smith had intended to so use it. But now he vaguely regretted it.

THE TENURE of office was still four years, and he could not help feeling that if he had maintained the intercontinental silence, he would not have had to worry about the spy-matter. If the hemisphere had been infiltrated, the subversive work had not begun yesterday. It had probably been going on for years, during several administrations, and the plans of the East, if any, would perhaps not come to a climax for several more years. He felt himself in the position of a man who suffered no pain as yet, but learned that he had an incurable disease. Why did he have to find out?

But now that the danger was apparent, he had to go ahead and fight it instead of allowing it to pass on to the next John Smith.

He made a stirring speech to Congress when it convened. The cowed figures of the people's representatives sat like gloomy gray shadows in the tiers of seats around the great amphitheatre under the night sky; the symbolic torches threw fluttering black shadows among their ranks. The sight always made him shiver. Their cowls and robes had been affected during the last great peace-effort, at which time they had been impregnated with lead to protect against bomb-radiation but the garb of office had endured for ceremonial reasons.

There was still a Senate and a House, the former acting chiefly as an investigating body, the latter serving a legislative function in accordance with the rabble-code, which no longer applied to the Executive, being chiefly concerned with matters of rabble morals and police-functions. Its duties could mostly be handled by mail and televiuephone voting, so that it seldom convened in the physical sense.

President John quoted freely from the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, the MacArthur Speech to Congress, and the immortal words of the first John Smith in his *Shall We Submit?* which began: "If thy brother the son of thy mother, or thy son, or daughters, or thy wife, or thy friend whom thou lovest, would persuade thee secretly, saying, 'Let us go and serve strange gods', neither let thy eyes spare him nor conceal him, but thou shalt presently put him to death!"

The speech was televised to the rabble, and for that matter, one of the Stand-ins delivered the actual address to protect the President who was present on the platform among the ranks of Primaries and Secondaries, although not even these officials were aware of it. The address was honestly an emotional one, not bothering with any attempt at logical analysis. None was needed. Congress was always eager to investigate subversion. It was good political publicity, and about the only congressional activity that could command public attention and interest. The cheers were rousing and prolonged. When it was over, the Speaker and the President of the Senate both made brief addresses to set the machinery in motion.

JOHN SMITH watched the proceedings with deep satisfaction. But as time wore on, he began to wonder how many spies were truly being apprehended. Among the many thousands who were brought

to justice, only sixty-nine actually confessed to espionage, and over half of them, upon being subjected to psychiatric examination, proved to be neurotic publicity-seekers who would have confessed to anything sufficiently dramatic. Twenty-seven of them were psychiatrically cleared, but even so, their stories broke down when questioned under hypnosis or hypnotic drugs, except for seven who, although constantly maintaining their guilt, could not substantiate one another's claims, nor furnish any evidence which might lead to the discovery of a well-organized espionage network. John Smith was baffled.

He was particularly baffled by the disappearance of seventeen men in key positions, who, upon being mentioned as possible candidates for the probe, immediately vanished into thin air, leaving no trace. It seemed to Smith, upon reading the individual reports, that many of them would have been absolved before their cases got beyond the deputy level, so flimsy were the accusations made against them. But they had not waited to find out. Two were obviously guilty of *something*. One had murdered a deputy who came to question him, then fled in a private plane, last seen heading out to sea. He had apparently run out of fuel over the ocean and crashed. The second man, an ordnance officer at the proving ground, had spectacularly committed suicide by exploding an atomic artillery shell, vaporizing himself and certain key comrades including his superior officer.

Here, the President felt, was something really ominous. The disappearances and the suicides spelled careful discipline and planning. Their records had been impeccable. The accusations seemed absurd. If they were agents, they had done nothing but sit in their positions and wait for an appointed time. The possibilities were frightening, but evidence was inconclusive and led nowhere. Nevertheless, the house-cleaning continued.

On Fourthday of Traffic Safety Week, which was also Eat More Corn-Popsies Week, John Smith XVI conferred with Ivan Ivanovitch IX again at the appointed time. Contrary to all traditions, he again ordered the Stand-ins—temporarily eight in number, since Number Six had died mysteriously in the bathtub—to leave the study so that he might unmask. Promptly at sixteen o'clock the Asian's face—or rather his ceremonial mask—came on the screen. But seeing the Westerner's square-cut visage smiling at him sourly, he promptly removed the covering to reveal his Oriental face. The exchange of greetings was curt.

"I see by recent events," said Ivan, "that you are nervous on your throne. For the sake of your own people, let me warn you that we have no designs on your autonomy unless you become aggressive toward us. The real difficulty, as revealed by your purge, is that you feel insecure, and insecurity makes you unpredictable. I do not, of course, expect you to be trustworthy. But insecurity sometimes breeds impulsiveness. If you are to strike out blindly, perhaps the talks had best be broken off."

Smith XVI reddened angrily but held his temper. The man's presumption was intolerable. Further, he knew about the probe, knowledge which could only come from espionage.

"I have become aware," the President said firmly, "that you have managed to establish a spy-system on this continent. If you wish better relations, you will have the activity stop at once."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said the Peoplesfriend with a bland smile. "I might point out however that at least forty of your spies are either killed while trying to cross the Wall, or are apprehended after they manage to enter my regime."

"The accusation is too ridiculous to deny," Smith lied. "We have no desire to pry into your activities. We wish only to maintain the status quo."

The exchange continued, charges and countercharges and denials. Neither side expected truth or honesty, and the game was as old as civilization. Neither expected to be believed, although the press of both nations would heatedly condemn the other's lack of good faith. The ethical side of the affair was for the rabble to consider, for only the rabble cared about such things. The real task was to ferret out the enemy's attitudes and intentions without revealing one's own.

SMITH FELT that he had won a little, and lost a little too. He had found many hints of subversive activity, but had betrayed his own lack of certainty by reacting so swiftly to it. Ivan IX, on the other hand, seemed too much at ease, too secure, and even impertinent.

"At our last meeting," said the Asian, "I suggested a meeting between ourselves. Have you given

thought to the matter?"

"I have given it thought," said the President, "and will agree to the proposal provided you come to this country. The meeting will be held at my capitol."

"Which you change at random intervals, I notice," purred Ivan with a bland smile. "For security reasons?"

"You could only know that by espionage!" Smith snapped.

"Your proposal of course is outrageous. The only sensible place for the meeting is in Singapore."

"That is out of the question. I must insist on the capitol of my government as the only acceptable meeting-place. My government in contacting yours put itself in the position of extending an invitation, a position from which we could not depart without loss of dignity."

"I suggest we delay the matter then," grunted the Peoplesfriend. "And talk about the agenda for such a meeting. What did you have in mind?"

"I have already stated our general aims as being a reduction of armament expenses, beneficial to both sides. I think you agree?"

"Not necessarily, since our budget is already rather low. However, make your specific proposals, and I shall consider them. Further economy, where not injurious to security, is always desirable."

"I propose, then, that we discuss a method whereby agreement might be reached on a plan to divulge the nature of our respective armaments, including number, nature, and purpose of each weapon-class, as a foundation for discussions relating to reductions."

Smith waited for a flat "no" to the suggestion. The Asian leader apparently knew a great deal more about the West's armaments than Smith knew about the East. The Peoplesfriend had nothing to gain by revealing the military strength of his own hemisphere. But he paused, watching Smith with an expressionless stare.

"I accept that for further consideration, at least," Ivan said at last.

John XVI hovered between elation and suspicion. Suspicion won. "Of course there must be some method to assure that accurate figures are divulged."

"That could probably be settled."

Again the President was shocked. It was all too easy. Something was rotten about the whole thing. The Peoplesfriend agreed too readily to things that seemed to be to his disadvantage. The discussion continued for several hours, during which both men presented viewpoints and postponed agreement until a later meeting.

"Stockpiles of fissionable material," said the President, "which could quickly be converted to weapons use should also be discussed."

Ivan frowned. "I mentioned before that we have no need of atomic armaments, nor any plans for building them. Our defense is secured by something entirely different, a weapon which serves an industrial function in time of peace, and a weapon which I might add was largely responsible for our abandoning Marxism. A single discovery, Andrei Sorkin's, made communist doctrine not only a wrong solution, but a wrong solution to a problem that had ceased to exist."

"What problem are you referring to?"

"The use of human beings as automatic devices in a corporate machine—the social-structure of industry, in which the worker was caught and bolted down and expected to perform a single, highly specialized task. That of course, is almost a definition of the word 'proletarian'. We no longer have a true proletariat. For that reason, we are no longer Marxist—although the name 'communist' has survived with its meaning changed."

The conference ended after setting the time for another meeting. John Smith XVI felt that he had been groping in the dark, because of the information-vacuum that kept him from even making a reasonable guess as to Ivan's real aims. He kept feeling vaguely that Ivan was just playing along, reacting according to the opportunity of the moment, not particularly caring what Smith did next. But leaders of states just did not proceed so carelessly—not unless they were fools, or unless they were supremely confident in the ultimate outcome.

THE INTELLIGENCE service analysis of his latest conversation with Ivan gave him something to think about later however. Andrei Sorkin had been a physicist who had done considerable work in crystal-structure before the Big Silence had cut off knowledge of his activities from the West. Further, the Peoplesfriend's references to industrial usage, coupled with his remarks about specialized labor, seemed to suggest that the East had made great strides in servo-mechanisms and auto-control devices. But control devices were not weapons in themselves. Electronic rocket-pilots were not weapons unless there were rockets for them to fly. Automatic target-trackers were not weapons unless they guided a weapon to shoot at the target. It made little sense; he concluded that Ivan had not meant it to make much sense. Smith could only interpret it as meaning: "Our weapons are marvelously controlled; therefore we need fewer of them."

On the probe front, events were about as usual. The lists of suspects and convictions grew bulky enough to keep a large office staff busy with details. More sinister, in the President's judgment, was the small list of suspects who vanished or committed suicide at the slightest hint of suspicion. The list grew at a slow but steady pace. John assumed that these were certainly guilty. And thorough, searching inquiries into their past activities were made. These post mortem probes revealed nothing. Their records were clean. Their families, friends, relatives, and even their ancestors were above suspicion. If they had sold out to the enemy, they had given him nothing in return for his wages except perhaps a promise to be fulfilled on a Deadline Day.

He called the Secretary of Defense and demanded a screening procedure be adopted for future personnel, a procedure which would be aimed at selecting men with fanatic loyalty, rather than merely guarding against treason.

"We seem to already have something," murmured the Secretary, a slender, graying gentleman with aristocratic features. "The incidents at the satellite-project seem to indicate that there's something they don't like about our ordinary testing methods."

"Eh? How do you mean?"

"Three men—volunteers for the project—vanished as soon as they found out that they had to submit to all the physicals, mental tests, and so forth. I don't know what they were afraid of. They were already on the reservation. Found out they'd have to be tested again, and vanished. One a known suicide, but the body's still in the river."

"Tested *again*?" the President echoed.

"That's right, John. They'd gone through it before. This was just a recheck for this particular project. Of course, I don't *know* that they were agents."

"Mmm! So they can't stand a recheck. All right, recheck everybody."

"John! A third of the population works for the government!"

"I mean everybody connected with new projects, the most important installations. This might be a weapon for us."

When he received the Secretary's report a week later, John grinned happily. The rechecks had begun, and the disappearances were mounting. But the grin faded when he read the rest of it. Two of the men had been caught attempting to escape. They had been lodged in a local jail to await transfer to the capitol. During the night, the jailer became aware of a blinding light from the cell-blocks and the stench of burnt organic matter. By the time he reached their cells, the men were gone, and there were only sickening fumes, charred ashes, and a pair of red-hot patches on the floor. Somehow they had gotten incendiary materials into their cells, and the cremation was complete—too complete to be credible.

Then the disappearances began to taper off—until finally, after a few weeks, they ceased completely. He wondered: were the culprits all ferretted out, or had some of them managed to get around the rechecks?

He had spoken to the Asian leader several times, and Ivan was growing curt, even bitingly nasty at times. The President hopefully interpreted it as a sign that his probe was successful enough to worry the Red. He tried to strengthen his position with respect to the proposed conferences, and made only minor concessions such as agreeing to a coastal city in Mexico as the site, rather than the shifting capitol. Ivan sneeringly made equally minute adjustments eastward from Singapore. There was apparently going to be

a deadlock, and John was somehow not sorry.

Then the cold-eyed face on the screen did an abrupt about-face, and announced, "I propose that the delegates, including the leaders of both states, meet at a site of your selection in either of the neutral polar regions, not later than Seventhday of Veto Week—which, I think is your Fried Pie Week?—and come prepared to discuss and exchange information relating to size of armament-inventories and future plans. This is my last proposal."

THEY STARED at each other coldly. John started to utter a refusal, then paused. Seventhday of . . . it was one day before the satellite program began moving into space. If he could keep the Eastern Leader tied up for a few weeks afterwards—

"I'll consider your proposal and give you a reply tomorrow," he said bluntly.

The Peoplesfriend gave him a curt nod and clicked off the screen. John chuckled. The enemy's espionage program was evidently getting badly hurt. About one percent of the West's population had been executed, imprisoned, or shifted to other jobs as a result of the congressional probe. The one percent probably included quite a few guilty citizens.

"Rodner, I want a Strike-Day set, a full-scale blitz-operation readied as soon as possible," he told the defense-chief. "I know that a lot of your target information is forty years old, but work out the best plan you can. A depopulation strike, perhaps; there are only two opinions in the world, so 'world-opinion' is not one of the things we need to consider."

The Defense Secretary caught his breath and sat stiffly erect. "War?" he gasped.

"Don't use that word."

"Sorry, peace-effort."

"No. At least I hope not. I want a gun aimed at them as a bargaining point. But I want it to be a damned *big* gun, and one that's capable of shattering every major city in the East on a few hours' notice. How effective could you make it—if you had to?"

The Secretary frowned doubtfully and tugged at his ear. "Well, John, our strategic command has kept a running plan in effect, revising it to allow for every tidbit of information we can get. Planning continental blitzes is a favorite past-time around high-level strategic commands; it keeps the boys in trim. A plan could probably be agreed upon in a very short time, but its nature would depend on your earliest deadline date."

"Two dates," grunted the tragedy-mask. "The first is Seventh-day, Fried Pie Week. I want a maximum possible effort readied by then, with a plan that allows for a possible stand-by at that date, and a continued build-up to a greater maximum—to be reached when the satellite station is in space and ready for battle. Include the station in the extended plan."

"This is a very dangerous business, John."

The mask whirled. "Do you presume to—?"

"No, Sir. The strike-effort will be prepared as soon as possible." He bowed slightly, then left the presidential study-vault.

Smith turned to gaze at his Stand-ins. "You will go," he said, "all of you, to the examining authorities for the standard loyalty tests and psych-phys rechecks."

The nine masked figures glanced at one another in surprise, then nodded. There were no protests. The following day he had only seven Stand-ins; Four and Eight had been trapped in a burning building on the outskirts of the rabble city, and their remains had not been found.

Smith kept a tight cork on his rage, but it seethed inside him and threatened to burn through as the time approached to speak again with Ivan Ivanovitch IX. The enemy's infiltration into the very ranks of the Presidency robbed him even of dignity. Furthermore, now that the two scoundrels were uncovered, and dead, he remembered a very unpleasant but significant fact: he had, even before his "election" by the rabble, discussed the televiwhone conferences with the Primaries. The idea of contacting Ivan had started, as most ideas start, from some small seed or other that could scarcely be remembered, some off-hand reference to the costly aspects of the Big Silence perhaps, and it had grown into the plan for contact. But *how* had the idea first come to him? Had one of the guilty Stand-ins perhaps planted the

seed in his mind? *After* he proposed it, they had seemed demurring at first, but not too long.

Grimly, he realized that the idea might have originated on the far side of the Pacific.

"Who, pray, is the potter, and who the pot?" he grunted, glowering at the nearest Stand-in.

"I beg your pardon?" answered the man, who could not see the glower for the mask.

"Khayyam, you fool!"

"Oh—"

"*Sixteen o'clock!*" cheeped the timepiece on the wall. "*Fifthday, Anti-Rabies Week, Practice-Eugenics Week; Happy 2073; Peep!*"

IVAN CAME on the screen, but John did not bother to remove his mask. He sat down quickly and began speaking before any greeting could be exchanged.

"I have decided to accept your last proposal. I specify the meeting place as the deserted weather station at the old settlement of Tharviana in the Byrd-Ellsworth Sector of Antarctica. Date to be Seventh-day of Fried Pie Week. Advance cadres of personnel from both sides should meet at the side two weeks earlier to make repairs and preparations. Do you agree?"

Ivan nodded impatiently, his dark eyes watching the President closely. Smith went on to suggest limits for the size of both cadres, their equipment, and the kind of transportation. Ivan made only one suggestion: that the details, such as permissible arms and standards of conduct, be left to the cadre commanders to settle between themselves before the leaders' parties arrived.

"Your continual espionage activities," Smith said coldly, "do not recommend your government as one to be trusted in the matter of agreements without guarantees. My cadre commander will be instructed as to details."

The Asian grunted. "You speak of trust, yet violate it in advance by preparing an assault against us."

They glared at each other. After a few more words, the conversation ended abruptly, and the matter was tentatively settled.

It was Antarctic Summer. The sun lay low in the north, but clouds threatened to obscure it, and a forbidding coastline hulked under the ugly sky. A small group of ships sulked to the east, and watched another group that sulked to the west. Two rows of buoys marked an ice-free strip across the choppy face of the sea.

A speck appeared in the north, grew larger, became a giant seaplane. It circled once, then swooped majestically down between the rows of buoys, its atomic-fired jets breathing heat over the water. It slid between streamers of spray until slowly it came to a coasting halt and rode on the rise and the fall of the sea. A section of its back rolled open. It pushed a helicopter up into view. The helicopter unfolded its rotors, spun them, then climbed lazily aloft like a beetle that had ridden the eagle. It soared, and travelled inland. The sea-plane taxied west to join one group of ships.

The helicopter landed near a long, windowless concrete building which lay in the shadow of an old control-tower's skeleton. The tower was twisted awry, and the concrete was pock-marked by shrapnel or bullets dating back to one of the peace-efforts. The President, two Stand-ins, and the pilot climbed from the helicopter. A small detachment of troops presented arms.

The cadre commander, a major general, approached the delegation formally, gave it a salute, and took the President's hand.

"The Peoplesfriend is already in the conference hall, Sir, with several of his aides. Do you wish to enter now, or—"

"Where are their troops?"

"Over there, Sir. As you know, we could not agree to completely disarm the site. Only inside the building itself."

"Any unpleasantness?"

"No, sir. Their men are well-disciplined."

"Then let's go and get started. I assume that you're in constant contact with the capitol?"

"Yes, Sir. Televiewphone relay chain all the way up."

John looked around. The Peoplesfriend's helicopter was parked not far away, and beyond it stood a

platoon of the Peoplesfriend's troops, lightly armed as his own.

An Asian and a Western guard flanked the entrance to the building, but their only weapons were police-clubs. The party entered slowly and stood for a moment just inside the heavy door that swung closed behind them. John Smith removed his mask.

"Greetings, human."

THE DULL voice called it from the far end of the gloomy hall where Ivan Ivanovitch IX sat facing him, flanked by a pair of aides, at a long, plain table. John Smith XVI advanced with dignity toward him. Curt bows were exchanged, but no handshakes. The Western delegation took their seats.

John nudged the Stand-in on his right, who immediately opened a portfolio to extract a sheaf of papers.

"Would you care to exchange prepared statements to begin with?" Smith asked coolly.

"We have no—" The Peoples-friend stopped, smirked coldly at his deputies but continued to frown. He peered thoughtfully at his huge knuckles for a moment, then nodded slowly. "A statement—yes."

John slid a section of the sheaf of papers to the Peoplesfriend. The Red leader ignored them, spoke to a deputy curtly.

"Give me a sheet of paper." The deputy fumbled in a thin briefcase, shook his head and muttered. Finally he found a dog-eared sheet with only a few lines typed across the top. He glanced questioningly at his leader. Ivan snatched it with a low grunt, tore off the good half, produced a stubby, gnawed pencil, and wrote slowly as if his hands were cramped with arthritis. John could see the big block-letters but not the words.

"My prepared statement," said the Peoplesfriend.

With that he pushed the scrap of paper across the table. John stared, and felt the blood leaving his face. The prepared statement said:

*I VETO YOU.*

"Is this a joke?" he growled, keeping his voice calm. "You cannot mean that you reject proposals before they are made? I fail to see the humor in—"

"There is no humor."

John pushed back his chair, glanced at his men. "Gentlemen, it would appear that we have come to the bottom of the world for nothing. I think we had better retire to discuss—"

"Sit down," the Asian growled.

"Why—" The President stopped. One of the Red deputies had produced a gun. He sat, and stared coldly at the eastern leader. "Have your man dispose of that weapon. This is a conference table."

The Peoplesfriend grunted an order to the other deputy instead. "Search them."

"Stay back," Smith droned. "I can kill you all quite easily."

The deputy hesitated. The leader started laughing, then checked it. "May I ask how?"

John smiled. "Stay back, or you will find out too quickly." He unzipped his heavy Arctic clothing, removed a heavy container, shaped to conform to his chest, and laid it on the table. A cord ran from the container into his sleeve.

The Peoplesfriend laughed. "High explosives? You would not set them off. However—Jacob, let them keep their weapons. This will be over shortly."

They glared at each other for a moment.

"There is no conference?"

"There is no conference."

"Then why this farce?"

The eastern leader wore a tight smile. He glanced at his watch, began counting backwards: "Seven, six, five, four—"

When he reached zero, there was a long pause; then a sharp whistle from outside.

"Your men are now disarmed," said the Asian. "Your cadre commander is ours."

"Impossible! The recheck—"

"He joined us since the recheck. Further, three of your televuephone stations in the relay chain are

ours, and are relaying recorded broadcasts prepared especially for the purpose."

"I don't believe it!"

THE ASIAN shrugged. "In addition, your entire defense system will be in our hands within six days—while your nation imagines that we are here conferring on disarmament."

"Ridiculous!" the President sputtered. "No system of infiltration or subversion could—"

"Your people were not subverted, Smith. They were merely replaced by ours. Your two Stand-ins, for instance, the ones that died in the fire. They were not the original men."

"You could not possibly find exact doubles—" Something about the Asian's smile made his voice taper off.

He picked up the container of explosives and prepared to rise. "I am going to walk out. And you are going with me. We will return in a helicopter to my plane. Let me explain this mechanism. I have no control over the detonator, for it is not a suicide device. The detonator can be triggered only by either of two events."

"Which are?" The Peoplesfriend was smiling.

"The relay would be closed by a sudden drop in my arterial pressure. Or by an attempt to remove it without knowing how. I am going out, and you are going with me."

"Why?"

"Because I am about to reach in my pocket and produce a gun. Your deputy cannot shoot without blasting a fifty-foot crater where this building now rests." Gingerly, while he watched the wavering deputy, he made good the promise. He kept the snub-nosed automatic aimed at the easterner's belly.

But the Peoplesfriend continued to smile. "May I say something before we go?"

There was a sour mockery about it that made Smith pause. He nodded slowly.

"I hoped to keep you here alive, so that we would not have to destroy the whole mission, including the ships. Of course, when the building is blown up, your little fleet will see and hear and try to respond, and we shall have to destroy it before word can be gotten to your capital. Our plans included that possibility, but it is unfortunate."

"Our aircraft will—"

"You do not seem to realize the nature of our weapons yet. And there is no harm in telling you now, I suppose."

"Well?"

"We have a microscopic crystalline relay, so small that millions of them can be packed into a few cubic inches. The crystals are minute tetrahedrons, with each pointed corner an electrical contact. And there is a method for arranging them in circuits without individual attention to each connection. It involves certain techniques in electro-plating and the growing of crystals."

Smith glanced questioningly at one of his Stand-ins, a weapons expert. The man shook his head.

"I can see," he muttered, "how it might replace a lot of bulky circuit elements in some electronics work—particularly computers and servo-mechanisms—but—"

"Indeed," said Ivan, "We have built many so-called 'thinking-machines' no larger than a human brain."

"For self-piloting weapons, I suppose?" asked the Stand-in.

"For self-piloting weapons."

"I fail to see how this could do what you seem to think."

The Peoplesfriend snorted. "Jacob—?" He nodded to the deputy, who immediately fumbled in his pocket, found a penknife, opened it, and handed it to Ivan. He laid his finger on the table. He cut it off at the second joint with the penknife. There was no blood. Flesh of soft plastic. Tendons of nylon. Bones of bakelite.

"Our leader," the robot said, "is still in Singapore."

The President looked at the robot and a great, weariness swept over him. Suddenly it all seemed futile—a senseless game, played by madmen, dancing over countless graves—playing tag among the tombstones.



Check and checkmate. But always there was a way out. Never a final move. Life eternal and with life, the eternal plotting and scheming. And never a final victor.

Almost regretfully, the President turned his mind back to the affair at hand.

THE END

*There was little chance that the suspendfreeze techniques or apparatus would go wrong. But that didn't mean they couldn't be sent wrong . . .*

"You've got a pretty nasty job, haven't you, Mr. Joley?" purred the bland-faced scientist with an engaging smile.

"I'm not complaining," grunted the lanky lieutenant who sat across the desk from him and gazed at him curiously, as if wondering what this interview all about.

From beneath the deck came the surly growl of the rockets. Behind the desk, a viewing port displayed the glittering jewelry of the galaxy, hung in the black emptiness. They had been in space for several months.

After a few moments of waiting for the scientist to come to his purpose, the lieutenant glanced restlessly aside to stare through the hatchway into the adjoining compartment, where a gleaming maze of electro-surgical apparatus lurked in gloomy half-light.

"Is that stuff part of your suspendfreeze gadgetry?" he asked.

The physicist-surgeon stiffened slightly, then smiled pompously. "' Stuff' —` gadgetry'," he echoed in the tones of a professor plucking bad words out of a freshman English theme.

"I didn't mean to belittle it, Doc!" Joley said hastily, remembering that the man was unreasonably touchy about his inventions.

"That's all right, Joley," said Doc Fraylin like a martyr. "I guess I should have known that people—all people—would be instinctively suspicious of it. They seem to feel it smacks of death—or of tampering with the sacred perhaps."

"I didn't mean to imply—"

"Never mind," Fraylin sighed. He glanced lovingly through the hatchway. "De Galbin invented the alpha drive and gave men the planets. De Galbin is now a multimillionaire. I invented the suspendfreeze and gave men the stars. And I am still—" He shrugged and smiled benignly, as if his presence as a technician aboard the ship were self-explanatory.

Lieutenant Joley said nothing to contradict. But he knew Fraylin was warping the truth a little. De Galbin had been a millionaire to begin with. He had hired dozens of engineers to help him perfect the drive; it had been De Galbin's money, but not altogether his brain-child. Fraylin, on the other hand, had been hired by the government to tackle a specific project: that of quick-freezing and thawing a human body without killing the subject.

"Ah well!" said Fraylin. "I suppose I can't complain. We all get bad breaks. Like you for instance, Mr. Joley."

"How do you mean?" the engineer asked stiffly.

"Why—you wanted to come on this trip as a colonist, I believe. Applied five years ago, didn't you? And here you are as an emergency-technician."

Eric Joley frowned. "I'll be permitted to join the colonists, when we get to Sigma Seven," he growled.

"I know, I know. If you're still alive. But you must remember: you're the ship's main fuse, Joley. If trouble comes while the ship sleeps, the emergency-circuits are set to thaw you out of your suspendfreeze unit, to handle the difficulty. And you can't put yourself back in. You'll be all alone, Joley—in a shipful of frozen corpses—maybe two hundred years before arrival-time."

Eric glared at the scientist irritably. Was he being sounded-out? What did Fraylin want?

"As I say: bad breaks," Fraylin continued. "It's not your fault the psychologists thought your

personality fitted the task. They think your ethical standards are high enough so that you would endure a lifetime of solitude in space rather than awaken someone to be your companion—and share your fate. Therefore, you were condemned to the task because of your ethics."

Eric snorted angrily. " 'Ethics' wasn't the word they used. They said 'emotional stability during prolonged deprivation of social contacts.' Furthermore, I volunteered for the job—when they wouldn't take me as a colonist. Did you call me in here to tell me what a sucker I am?"

Fraylin laughed. "Not at all. Roagan called me. Asked me to make a last-minute check on your attitude. I understand we're approaching final velocity, and that the jets will be shut off in about forty hours. We'll begin freezing colonists before then. When the jets are off, we freeze the crew. Then you and the other two, uh ... fuses. When everybody's tucked in, of course, my staff and I will get aboard the tug and go back to Earth. Then—you're all alone. Roagan naturally wants to make certain of everything before then."

"I see."

"You have any last minute qualms?"

Eric grinned. "Slight case of the jitters. I don't relish the idea of thawing out in mid-space."

Fraylin nodded sympathetically and glanced toward the pharmaceutical lockers. "If you're very nervous, I can give you something."

"No thanks."

The physicist-surgeon shrugged. "You'll observe your pledge then? To disturb none of the 'sleepers' in case you're awakened?" He paused. "Not even the girl who's listed with you on the genetic recommendations?"

"I haven't even seen her. I haven't looked at the bio-recs. I don't even know her name. I don't want to know."

Fraylin made a surprised mouth. "You're either remarkably self-restrained—or else you're remarkably feelingless."

"Neither. I don't want to be tempted."

"If you thawed yourself a companion, you wouldn't be punished, you know. You couldn't be."

"Don't put the idea in my mind," he growled.

Fraylin mused in silence for a moment. "I wonder what I would do—if I were in your place."

Eric watched the man's speculative eyes. He wondered, too.

"If you're brought to consciousness," Fraylin murmured, "you'll be in a position of complete control over more than two hundred sleepers. They'll be helpless in your hands. Joley."

"So?"

"You'll be unwatched, unjudged, a law unto yourself. A king aboard the ship."

"A hermit, you mean."

"If you wish it so."

"Still not convinced about those ethics, are you?" Eric snapped, brushing back the lock of red hair that fell on his forehead whenever anger threatened.

"I didn't say—"

"Listen, Fraylin! Are you through? I want to get out of here. I don't like inquisitions, I don't like your talk, and—as of now—I don't like *you*."

Fraylin glanced at him with lofty pity. "I'm not so sure you're as stable as they think, Joley."

"I didn't know you were a psych," he snapped.

"I'm not." Fraylin slid a filing folder onto his desk top and studied its contents briefly. "Psychologists are fallible," he muttered.

"You're not?"

The scientist ignored it. "Only child," he breathed, reading half-aloud. "No early-implemented need for social contact . . . mechanical extrovert, social introvert ... motivation derives from self-approval in task-accomplishment . . . endures prolonged solitude without distress—"

"Such inferences are guesswork," he grunted, looking up.

"I spent six months in solitary confinement to prove—"

Fraylin softened. "Nobody's satisfied, Joley—not with anything—not until the ship's safely in Sigma Seven. This whole deal is a gamble from beginning to end. Nearly three hundred lives are the stakes."

"For a man who's going back to Earth, Doc, you're worrying a lot." "Not worrying, just checking." "Are you through with me?"

"Yes—thank you. You may go."

Eric's exit was carefully jaunty, but when he reached a turning in the corridor, he paused to mop his forehead and to glance back to see if Fraylin was watching from the doorway. But the surgeon had remained at his desk. Eric caught the faint mutter of his voice speaking on the private interphone—to Commander Roagan, he guessed. He strode on toward the colonists' quarters, his face wearing a gloomier expression than he cared to show to the medics or to Skipper Roagan. It was not pleasant to think about the cold and utter aloneness of a lifetime spent in a silent ship of frigid corpses. A living death in a tomb of suspended life. Why did they keep reminding him of that possibility?

The call-system suddenly blared: *Hear this, hear this. Mr. Jessel report to Space-Surgeon's office. Jessel to surgeon's office. This is all.*

Eric made a wry mouth. Jessel was the second link in the emergency fusing. He would be awakened if the first link was already dead and if a second emergency threatened the ship. Eric felt better. At least he alone had not been singled out for Roagan's doubts.

He liked to wander about in that area of the ship assigned to the two hundred colonists. They were a tough but gregarious lot, and he enjoyed hovering on the outskirts of their laughter and companionship, even though he was less than welcome there. The presence of the gawky guardian of their big sleep sent the voices wavering into lower tones, and he sometimes felt their eyes watching his back with uneasy curiosity. The crew and the colonists both gave him the restless respect men reserve for those whose duty involves their own death. He saw their feelings toward him: they knew they owed him gratitude, yet friendly overtures were always damped by the thought *what if I were in his boots?*

And sometimes he detected a note of suspicion. *What if his mind goes haywire? What if he wakes us all a couple of centuries too soon? What will the lonely prowler do while we are asleep and helpless? How could a man spend fifty years in complete aloneness—in a lifeless sepulcher. How will he deal with the temptation to awaken a comrade?*

They were afraid of him. *If I become his friend, he might thaw me out of loneliness.*

Eric stopped to lounge in the doorway of the ship's dayroom where a game of poker progressed in an atmosphere of boredom—boredom, because the chips, whatever they represented were necessarily worthless. Money would mean nothing on the new world they sought. There would be no values save survival values. He listened to their talk for a time, and learned that the chips were acres of land, but that, too, was meaningless. Farming would have to be communal for a long time, until the colony grew.

They were all young, the two-hundred—young and hardy. A staff of government scientists had spent two years selecting them from many thousands of volunteers. Five additional years were given to their indoctrination, education, and conditioning—a year of which had left them stranded in the Amazon jungles for "survival" practice." They were physically healthy, mentally superior, and personally gregarious—with an aggressiveness that branded some of them as abnormal in a politer society, and with a high adaptability that sometimes expressed itself as complete abandonment of conventionality.

Eric, who had been selected for a different task, knew that he was not one of them.

One of the players—a muscular young man with a smugly handsome face—glanced up briefly from the game to see Eric standing in the entrance. He turned and murmured quietly to a sandy-haired girl beside him. Then he grinned at her mockingly. The girl reddened beneath her freckles and shook her head slightly. She stared fixedly at her cards. Eric recalled having seen them before—strolling about the ship together. Partners, he guessed, thrown together on the recommended mating lists.

The young man chuckled inaudibly and nudged her again. She responded by kicking him under the table. He turned to whisper to the others. Several pairs of eyes glanced up at Eric, but looked quickly back to the center of amusement: the sandy-haired girl. They began muttering to her and giggling. Her color deepened, and she hissed at them to be silent.

Eric studied her briefly. She was no beauty—slightly gawky and rawbone. She had a nice white grin

that flickered on and off amid her embarrassed protests. Once she stole a glance at Eric, who was beginning to stiffen self-consciously.

"All right!" she snapped suddenly. "I'll let you have your fun."

She pushed back her chair and arose. Then he saw with consternation that she was coming toward him with a friendly if nervous smile, and her hand was extended in greeting. From the table, five teasing grins watched her derisively.

"Hello, Lieutenant Joley." Her voice was warm and throaty, and some of the flush was leaving her face. Frank blue eyes gazed at him evenly.

Eric murmured politely, took the hand coolly, and dropped it quickly. "A pleasure, Miss, but—"

"Waters—Angela Waters."

An instant of hushed expectancy hovered over the room, but Eric shook his head slowly. Snickers came from the table. He felt a dark inkling.

"Those jokers are having their fun at my expense, lieutenant. They're not laughing at you."

A chorus of guffaws came from the small audience. Eric frowned angrily over the girl's shoulder. He guessed the situation, then.

"He never heard of you, Ang!" somebody called in mockery.

Then the voice of the young man who had initiated the scene: "Mr. Joley, meet your wife."

The engineer looked helplessly at the girl and saw she was miserable; nor was she doing a good job of concealing it any longer. Her eyes fluttered longingly toward the exit, and she stood nervously hesitating between an urge to flee and the waning desire to "be a sport."

"Excuse me for a moment, Angela," he murmured with a quiet smile, then stepped around her and approached the table stiffly.

He dropped his knuckles lightly among the cards and stared expressionlessly down at the young originator of the incident.

"It wasn't funny."

The man's grin became defiant. "I thought it was." He extended his hand. "I'm Kenneth Thoren."

Eric ignored the hand. "Care to apologize to Miss Waters?"

An expectant hush had fallen over the group. A girl giggled. "Watch out, Ken. Don't make him mad. He's your guardian angel."

"Yee-eah!" Thoren drawled, grinning at her.

"I'm telling you—watch out. You might wake up too soon."

"Care to apologize, Thoren?" Eric asked again, but his voice was drowned in a sudden chatter of conversation. Even Thoren was joining in it.

Their indifference to his anger stung him to cool rage. He tapped Thoren's shoulder. "Let's step aft, fellow. I know a good joke, too."

Thoren brushed his hand away contemptuously. "Don't bother me, boy scout. Go chase your wife."

Eric caught his collar to tug him upward, but Thoren had evidently expected it. His fist lashed up and skidded against the engineer's cheekbone. Although startled, Eric jerked hard at the collar, throwing him off balance as he came up. He threw a short chopping blow hard into Thoren's face, then sent him sprawling across the table with a left to the temple. Poker chips and cards sprayed across the room, and the spectators lunged for safety.

"Call the skipper," a voice barked.

Eric was on the fallen man before he could crawl away from the table. "If you want more in here, I'll kick your teeth out now. Otherwise you can get up, and we'll go aft."

Thoren rolled over and came to his hands and knees. He spat blood, then looked up with a red snarl. "It'll wait for Sigma Seven, fellow," he panted. "The skipper wouldn't like what I'm going to do to you."

"Any time, Thoren. Any time." Eric recovered his cap, glanced coolly at the others, and stalked out of the hushed room. The girl had gone.

But as he passed the first bend in the corridor he stumbled quickly aside to avoid colliding with her. She was leaning against the metal handrail, staring gloomily at the stars through a narrow viewing port. He muttered a hasty apology, tipped his cap, and started away briskly.

"Wait."

He came back slowly toward a pair of dismayed blue eyes.

"I'm sorry it happened," she said. "You were minding your own business. It was my fault." She found a handkerchief and dabbed at his cheekbone. It came away streaked with red.

"You heard the commotion?"

She nodded. "Is Ken all right?"

"For a while," he muttered ominously.

"You let him alone!"

Eric caught his breath at the sharpness of her tone. He smiled stiffly, nodded, and started away again.

"Wait."

"Yes?" He stopped to look back.

"I didn't mean . . . well . . . I meant, you'd do well to avoid trouble with him. He's got a nasty disposition."

"So have I."

"Well, I'm warning you. I know Ken Thoren too well." She stopped to watch his expression for an instant. Then she laughed nervously. "Oh no. Not *that* well, lieutenant."

He reapproached her slowly, wearing an easy "I *am* sorry it happened. I don't belong in this part of the ship, really. If I had stayed away—"

"I wouldn't have bothered you."

"Then I'm glad it *did* happen."

She acknowledged the gallantry with a wry smirk. "Well, since we're acquainted, shall we talk business?"

"I don't understand."

"The genetic recommendations—that's business, isn't it?"

He laughed nervously. "I suppose so. I hereby relinquish my claim—reluctantly and sorrowfully of course. Not that the listings give any claims. They're just suggestions. So I release you from the suggestion. I can't imagine what made them decide I was deserving of you anyway."

She smiled peculiarly for a moment. "You talk that way because you're shy, don't you?"

Eric bowed slightly. "Shall we announce the business session as closed?" She studied him speculatively.

"Maybe we'll leave it open a while."

"Ma'am?"

"You're quaint. Say—why did they pick you for that emergency job?"

"I have the exact form of unsanity that fits their needs."

"Which is?"

"I'm antisocial enough to live alone and like it."

"You don't *sound* like a hermit. You *act* reasonably human."

"Thanks. It's just a defense mechanism I have."

"What will you do if you're thawed—in space, I mean?"

Eric considered it. "Oh—dump all the male corpses overboard, I guess and wake all the ladies."

She laughed. "Business is definitely closed. I won't be a member of Joley's flying harem. Leave me in my icebox, please."

"O.K., but I'll come often to peek through the little window."

"Will I be dressed?"

Eric smiled at the ceiling and shook his head slowly. "Naked as a hard-boiled egg—unshelled." He sighed.

"Stop wiggling your Adam's apple!"

He fingered his throat thoughtfully and gazed down at her with wry grin. "Thanks, ma'am," he murmured.

"For what?"

"For not looking at me like I might turn out to be a time bomb instead of a protective device."

Her face went solemn and she looked again through the viewscreen. "I wonder who started that rumor," she breathed.

"What rumor?"

"You don't *know*?"

He shook his head slowly. She looked quickly up and down the corridor before she spoke.

"There's a story around that you three men, if you're called for an emergency, get your pick of the women. That you have the right to—"

Eric's face became a sudden thundercloud. He seized her arm and pulled her to the nearest interphone station.

"What are you doing?" she protested.

Eric buzzed the commander's office quickly. A gruff voice barked, "Roagan speaking."

"Just a minute, skipper. I've uncovered something I think you ought to hear." He turned to the girl. "Tell him about that rumor."

Surprised and sobered, she blurted it out haltingly. When she was half-finished, Roagan began bellowing.

"*Whoa!*" she cried. "I didn't start it."

"Who did then?"

"How should *I* know?"

"Then find out."

"I'm not your lackey" she snapped.

Roagan sputtered for a moment. "Joley, get to my cabin—or—no, never mind! I'll call a meeting of the colonists. We'll get this straight. No colonist is to be thawed before we hit Sigma Seven."

The station clicked off. The girl looked at Eric and arched her brows. "Pardon me—for starting a minor *riot*."

"Good thing you did. That story could start real trouble. Some of the couples have already married. The husbands might get a little nasty if they heard it."

"There *is* some bitter talk," she admitted.

The call system crackled for a moment, then blurted : *Hear this, hear this. All non-crewmen colonists report to assembly room. Colonists to assembly. Hasty hasty. This is all.*

"I'd better go," she muttered.

Eric nodded and stepped aside, but she hesitated, her pale eyes scrutinizing his face.

"Meet me later," she said.

His forehead wrinkled in surprise. "Why? The bio-reck business being closed, maybe we shouldn't—"

"Who *said* it was closed?"

She winked, simpered sourly, and sauntered away, leaving Eric uneasily gnawing the corner of his lip. The girl puzzled him. She seemed nice enough, but the pale eyes were full of strangeness. They quietly judged and measured him, but he caught the queer impression that the code by which they weighed was not the code currently popular among civilized humans.

" 'Also doth Satan bless, or damn,' " he breathed after her.

One thing seemed apparent — she approved him. But Eric somehow failed to feel flattered.

Although he had no duty-assignment while the ship was accelerating to final velocity, he wandered about through the control and reactor rooms, idly inspecting equipment, checking the computer circuits of the automatic course-correcting equipment, and otherwise trying to assure himself that no emergency would occur during the big sleep of the inertial flight across the galaxy. The circuits were a network of checks and balances, each capable, of detecting trouble in another, and of switching out the faulty elements to replace them with new circuit sections which were already set up. The equipment could repair itself—within limits. But the repair devices were without imagination, and if their judgment was wrong, they would continue switching new elements into the same recurrent trouble until the replacement-sections were exhausted. Then they could only call Joley from his big freeze, call him awake

to build new ones.

His inspection revealed nothing but good efficient operation. But he failed to be reassured. Before leaving Earth, he had privately gathered data from intra-system space companies, gathered it and organized it into meaningful form. The repair records revealed that he could regard his premature awakening as sixty per cent probable, a conclusion which he discussed with Jessel, the second link in the emergency chain.

"Only one chance in ten of *two* emergencies occurring, Jess," he said as they sat in the observation blister, watching the Doppler effect tinge the stars to the fore with blue, and redden the ones to the aft. "Your odds are better than mine. Almost as good as those of finding an earthlike planet in Sigma Seven."

"You got it wrong, Eric," grunted the chubby Jessel as he sucked at a fat pipe. "Your data won't apply."

Eric glanced at him with a faint smile. Jessel was fond of contradicting, whatever the cause. "Why not, Jess?"

Jessel counted off the reasons on his stubby fingers. "*One*: A five-hundred-year flight has never been tried before. *Two*: This ship is no tried-and-true edition; new mechanical species are always full of bugs. *Three*: It's pushing overload right now, trying to get up to final velocity in a hurry—on account of the medics gotta go home; it's getting a good opportunity to develop electrical ulcers. *Four*: How do we know our course is clear? Meteors the automatics can avoid, but if we get sucked off course by the gravity of some black-dwarf star that they never foresaw . . . well . . . we can only call on you, Mr. Joley."

"Is that all?"

"If it's not enough, there's *five*: The interception factor."

"The *what*?"

Jesser grinned a wide expanse of pink gums and small teeth. "We'll range within a light-year or so of several stars before we get to the Sigma Seven cluster, Eric—stars, and maybe a planet or so. Can you anthropocentrically assume that there aren't any unearthly gentlemen living thereupon? Fellows capable of coming out to investigate us and holler, 'Stop in the name of the law!'?"

Eric scoffed. "I don't assume not, but it seems unlikely."

"O.K., go on in your naive faith—Man's the center of the universe, and all that. But don't wake me up in case a six-legged policeman comes banging on the air lock to spoil the fun."

"You're taking this pretty lightly, Jess."

"I can afford to. My odds are better than yours—as you say."

"You got it wrong, Jess," Eric mimicked. "There's the psychological factor."

"Huh?"

"Sure, I might lose my head and turn on your induction heater."

"That sort of practical joke could lead to a killing," said Jessel in a gloomy tone that suggested he meant it.

An aura of uneasiness seemed to be growing about the ship—affecting passengers and crew alike. Even after the meeting of the colonists, at which Roagan loudly contradicted the whispered rumor, Eric noticed the tenseness in men's glances as he wandered past them. And there was a general feeling of unrest that made itself apparent in surly faces, sharp tongues, and pointless arguments. The ship was restless, living in anxious dread of the big sleep drawing close upon them. By ship's-night, the corridors echoed with the footsteps of wandering insomniacs that drifted from screen to screen to stare across the emptiness, as if seeking an escape.

Suspendfreeze was temporary death. Would there be a resurrection? The time was growing shorter, and men's minds fled down the unseen bypaths of silent desperation, while they waited, forlornly waited.

"What if we *do* wake in Sigma Seven," came the gloomy whispers, "wake—and find no planets as the scientists predicted?"

And of course there was also: *Let us make the most of what we yet may spend, my love, my dove—behold thou art fair.* And doors closed softly along the corridors.

Once Eric was startled by the bedtime whisper of the call system. *Hear this, hear this. Mr. Joley to*

*Commander Roagan's quarters. Hasty hasty. This is all."*

He stopped in surprise, then turned back. He was scarcely a dozen paces from Roagan's door. A few seconds later, he stood in the lighted entrance, watching the florid old commander finish pouring himself a stout drink. He looked around and held the bottle poised.

"Oh—you!" Roagan grunted. "You didn't need to run."

"I didn't."

With irritable carelessness, the old man sloshed whisky in a second glass. Eric watched him with mild amusement. He was less than drunk, but there was an abnormal casualness about his movements that could only have resulted from a generous dosage of bourbon and water.

"They say it helps in this suspend-freeze business," Roagan grunted gruffly as he handed Eric a glass.

"I thought it was snake bite," the engineer murmured.

The commander gave him a black look and settled heavily behind his desk to glower at the wall.

"Doc Fraylin tells me you'll probably do," he growled.

"Glad to hear it, sir."

"But personally, I doubt it."

"What?"

"Nothing personal, y'understand."

"No, sir."

"What I mean is . . . well, blast it, Joley, there's something afoot! He waved a thick paw airily toward the ceiling. I can *feel* it—here." He tapped his chest significantly. "I've been in space for twenty years, and I know unrest when it's around. It *gnaws* at you—here inside—unrest does, even when you can't see it or hear it or smell its sneaking stench."

*Whose unrest, Eric wondered Roagan's own?* It was easy to see that the oldster was disturbed. Was he disturbed because of the general nervousness, or because of his own approaching sleep in suspendfreeze?

"Listen, Joley—something's up. I'm telling you! That bunch of psychopaths they recruited for colonists! Some of them are brewing up an underhanded batch of notions."

"How do you know? And what—?"

"I *know*, that's all! Watch them whisper around in sneaky little bunches. They look innocent when you pass, but look back—and they're watching you. I smell mutiny, son."

Eric started to scoff, but thought better of it. The old man was in a gloomy mood. He suddenly slapped his palm on the desk, then peered under it as if at an imaginary mosquito.

"Not violent mutiny," he said, "the sneaky kind, son. The kind where you wake up to hear some smilin' jackass tell you politely that plans are changed, and you might as well go back to sleep because your say-so don't amount to much any more. I feel it, Joley, I feel it."

Eric nodded politely. Roagan leaned forward to peer forlornly at the young engineer.

"Listen, Joley—know what I think? I think there's some of 'em would rather wake up in mid-space and spend a life carousing around the ship than they would fight it out to make a home on a new planet."

"That's a little farfetched, don't you think?"

The commander grunted to himself and stared into his glass.

"After all, they volunteered," Eric offered.

"Ever hear of changing your mind? That's why they were picked, Joley, because they're so all-fired adaptable they're positively poisonous. If they take it in their heads they'd rather stay on the ship, they'll try to swing it. 'Course—they wouldn't like it for long. They're like a bunch of miners on a spree. They take a notion, they do it, they get bored. But they won't keep a single notion very long. They get restless. Right now they're restless with the notion of suspendfreeze."

"Frontier spirit working the wrong way, huh?"

"Maybe. Listen, Joley—they won't dare pull anything while the medics are aboard. And before the



medics leave, we'll all be human ice cubes. They must be planning to work through you, somehow. Has anybody approached you?"

Eric shook his head.

"Well, watch for it. I trust you Joley, and I trust Jessel, too. Crain is the only one I'd worry about, and he the third man in the three-shot fuse. Not much chance of him getting thawed, I guess." Roagan's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Fraylin Clair Crain is schizoid—to the point feeling persecuted. Can't understand why they picked him. Walking nightmare."

Eric finished his drink, put his hands on the arms of his chair, and leaned forward—as a hint.

"Now wait, Joley—I'm not finished. I almost forgot! As soon as you wake up—if you wake up—you're to bring *me* around, too. That's an order. I'm too old to be any good on a new planet. But I want to see what goes on behind my back aboard ship. If you wake up, thaw me. That's an order."

Eric opened his mouth to protest, but closed it slowly. No use arguing with Roagan. But he had no intention of obeying the order. To wake a man in space was to condemn him to prison for life.

"You think I'm drinking too much."

"No, sir."

"You understood my order?"

"Yes, sir."

"You intend to obey it?"

"Of course."

"Good! That's all, Joley. See you before the big freeze."

Roagan was the victim of some wild imaginings, Eric thought as he left the commander's office. No sane man would want to be disturbed before the ship reached Sigma Seven. The journey would be timeless for the occupants of the freeze-lockers. They would sink into penathol anaesthesia before the present day-period was ended. A moment later, they would awake in a warm casket—with the aches of five centuries in their bones. The septenary star-system would be at hand. They would have no memory of the big-freeze.

"Roagan is nuts," he grunted as he made his way forward to the observation blister.

A shadow sat in one of the seats within the glass dome, and a cigarette glow traveled in a slow arc as he entered. The shadow had been sitting there for a long time apparently, for its eyes were adjusted to darkness and it recognized him.

"Lieutenant! 'Meet me later' to you means *much* later, doesn't it?" Her voice was a chiding purr.

"Oh, Miss Waters—"

"You don't sound happy to find me here."

"Well, I—"

"Come sit down."

Eric stepped inside the blister and found a seat across from her. By the sudden flare of her cigarette, he saw her pale eyes studying his shadow.

"There isn't much time left, is there?" she murmured.

"Until Sigma Seven?"

"Until the big freeze."

"Same thing."

"Is it, Mr. Joley?"

"Sure. Subjectively the freeze lasts no time at all."

"Or forever, maybe."

"What do you mean?"

"The freezer mechanisms. Liquid helium has funny habits, they say—like creeping through solid steel. Suppose a failure—"

Eric's face gathered a frown. "Are you an engineer, Miss Waters?"

"Oh no, but—"

"Then who put that thought in your head?"

She hesitated. "I don't know ... there's talk—"

"Talk! Who's starting all this talk?"

"Nobody starts it I guess. Just grows."

"Like mildew," he murmured gloomily.

"Tell me, Eric—why don't they let us stay alive on the ship—raise families, make a little world here. Sure we'd die in space, but twenty generations later, our descendants would get there. And they say the hydroponic tanks can—"

"*They* say! That kind of talk too, huh?"

"Well—why don't they let us?"

"Sociological reasons. The mores of a social group adjust gradually to the environment."

"I don't see—"

"Imagine the society that would develop aboard this ship after twenty generations. There's nothing to keep men busy. Nothing but their own urges and desires."

"Sounds heavenly," she chuckled.

"Utter dereliction, Miss Waters. The twentieth generation—if the group lasted that long—would be a degenerate batch of parasites. Our goal would be forgotten. They couldn't be pried loose from the ship; a Sigma Seven civilization would remain unborn. Probably by that time, Earth would be only a legend, a fiction out of the past. They'd be tied to the ship by a cultural umbilical cord."

"That's pure speculation; I don't believe it."

"You're right; *it is* speculation. Because it won't happen. Tomorrow we'll all be in the big freeze."

She said nothing. But there was a sardonic tone to the silence. It seemed to say: *there are things you don't know about, Eric Joley*. He felt vaguely disturbed. Was there an element of truth in Roagan's intuitive doubts?

"Eric?"

"What?"

"Suppose there's no Earthlike planet in Sigma Seven?"

"It's a ninety-seven per cent probable—according to the cosmologists."

"How do *they* know? They can't *see* planets that far."

"They can see three tiny red-dwarf stars in the vicinity—the cores left by supernovae explosions, over a billion years ago. They've calculated the amount of debris that would be gathered up by the stars in Sigma Seven. Enough explosion-dust to make about seventy-three Earth-size planets. And they applied the Gebrin-Tarnes 'criticalness' equations to get the chances for at least one Earthlike planet." She made a shivering sound in her throat. "And we're trusting our lives to Gebrin and Tarnes."

"Men have always left their security in the hands of a few geniuses—despite political oratory about equality. Remember your history? Nearly half the scientists at the first A-bomb test thought it would start a chain reaction in the Earth's crust. They gambled with destruction while polite society went on dancing at the Waldorf, completely unaware, while a large minority of expert opinion believed the world was about to become a small nova."

"Like now, huh? Like us, waiting for the big freeze?"

"Not at all," he growled irritably. I didn't mean it *that* way."

"Eric?"

"Yeah?"

She slipped out of her seat and crossed to him, laying her hands on his shoulders and leaning down to peer into his face. The loose locks of her hair dangled about his eyes, and he heard the soft sound of her breathing.

"Suppose you're awakened."

"Suppose I am."

"The loneliness would be terrible."

"There have been hermits before."

"You wouldn't need to be one."

"What do you mean?"

"Wake *me*."

He laughed mockingly: "So you could thaw out" he groped for a name—"Ken Thoren and start your little, colony of—"

Her hand lashed across his face like a whip, numbing his mouth. Sharp nails raked a path of pain across his cheek.

"So long, lieutenant!" she hissed. Then she was gone, and he sat blotting his face with a handkerchief, grumbling curses to himself. The swiftness of her violent reaction left him bewildered. It seemed to suggest —perhaps—that he had hit upon the truth. Had someone sent her to coax him? To dangle herself as bait?

At ship's dawn, Roagan called all deck officers to his cabin and armed them with forty-fives. Dark patches arced under his eyes, and his hands were nervous. Eric guessed that the commander had gone sleepless since their last meeting.

"An attempt was made to sabotage the suspendfreeze apparatus about two hours ago," he announced grimly. "Whoever did it was ignorant of the mechanism. Damage is already repaired. But watch out. Watch for trouble. Keep the weapons in plain sight, and don't turn your backs on any of the colonists."

The officers muttered surprise among themselves, but Roagan silenced them with a gesture.

"I've set guards on the equipment. You gentlemen are to stay alert and watch for suspicious gatherings. Break them up. When the medics are ready to begin, you'll lock the colonists in their own cabins and escort them to the surgical section one roomful at a time. Expect individual outbreaks of violence—and maybe some hysterical females. But let's try to keep it on a small scale. Don't waste any time arguing with them. There are strait jackets, ether inhalers, and handcuffs in the stock rooms. But don't bruise anybody. Bruises are bad business in suspendfreeze. That's all, gentlemen."

The officers filed out of the cabin, and as Eric sauntered aft along the catwalk, Jessel fell in step beside him.

"You see Crain take off?" the chubby engineer whispered.

"Uh-uh. When?"

"Just now—after the meeting. He stood by the door while Roagan was talking. Acted like he had a shirtful of fleas. When Roagan was through, he took off like his tail was on fire."

"Which way did he go?"

"Toward the colonist's quarters."

"Did Roagan give him a gun?"

"Yeah, I guess he pretty well had to."

"Let's go hang around the day-room, Jess."

"O.K. What do you think of Crain, Eric?"

"No comment."

"You know how the skipper feels?"

"Yeah—he's talked to you too, eh?"

"Mm-m-m! Seems to think Crain'd like to play Ezekiel to the dry bones."

"That's silly."

"Is it?"

"I hope."

They paused at the entrance to the dayroom. A large gathering of colonists was assembled there in quiet idleness. Too many of their faces were turned toward the doorway, watching the officers' entrance. The crowd had the look of an audience whose show had been rudely interrupted. Conversations were just beginning here and there. The faces looked away again.

"There's Crain," Jessel whispered. "Center of the room."

Eric glimpsed the black shock of hair and the gloomy eyes. He nodded. "Let's sit here by the door. Watch for trouble."

They sat quietly on the wall bench, one on each side of the entrance. The voices in the room spoke in low tones. Occasionally one of the men shouldered his way through the group, speaking the same short sentences to first one sub-gathering and then another. But there was little sense to be made of the low

babble.

Once Eric heard a woman say, "Oh yes, that's true. Statistics show that you can expect nineteen per cent mortality in suspendfreeze: Of course, ours will probably be worse than that; it's such a long time. And that nineteen per cent doesn't count the amputees, as I understand it. Faulty thawing causes a lot of that."

"Hey lady!" Jessel grunted.

She looked around with lifted brows. "Where do you get off—spreading that hogwash?"

The woman's face hardened into a frigid smile. "Statistics aren't hogwash."

"Those *statistics* are a pack of lies."

She went white with cold fury, but before she could frame an answer, her companion glanced at the two engineers and burst out laughing. "Well look what's here! Our keepers are guarding us already. Guns and all."

Several people turned to stare. Eric and Jessel maintained an expressionless silence. The woman and her companion moved away, muttering to one another. But the room had seen and heard. The room was a step closer to open enmity.

"Notice Crain," Eric breathed. Nobody seems to mind him."

"Yeah. Who's starting all these rumors?"

"You're thinking Crain?"

"Don't know, Eric. Wish I did."

"Jess, there's no reason at all for this unrest. These people wouldn't be acting this way unless they were being prodded by somebody. They're nervous, naturally—but their nervousness wouldn't take this shape of overt nastiness unless—"

Eric never finished the speech. Within the span of a second came the pop of a rubber band, a hairpin darting toward the light globe, the crash of the bulb, and then a blanket of darkness. Reflexively Eric dived to the floor. Three pistol shots exploded deafeningly above him. He heard someone fall, then the weapon clattered on the floor.

From the back of the room, Crain's nasal voice cried, "My gun! Who stole my gun?"

Eric stood up. He had crawled to the center of the room, and he mingled with the milling, shouting herd in the darkness. They were crowding out the doorway into the dimly lighted corridor. But then they began crowding back inside, and Roagan's voice was bellowing from beyond the door. Eric shouldered his way toward it. Flashlight beams stabbed about in the day-room and found the shattered bulb.

"All right!" Roagan roared. "Crowd back against the far wall! Back in the bus! Get moving. All crew personnel to the front! Hasty with it!" Doc Fraylin came in panting close behind him. '

One of the flashlights by the door was directed downward. As Eric tore himself free of the crowd, he saw what lay crumpled in the beam of light. It was Jessel, and the blood was tracked around his body like muddy footstep's across a porch floor. The gun—Crain's forty-five—lay beside the body. Fraylin arose and shook his head grimly.

Crain was already making his protestations of innocence to Roagan who listened in tight-lipped silence for a time, then turned to a lieutenant. "Lock Mr. Crain in his quarters," he snapped. "Put a guard on him."

"Am I under arrest?" whined the gloomy engineer.

"What gives you that idea?"

"You said—"

"So I did." Roagan addressed the lieutenant again. "Shoot him down if he tries anything."

"Yes, sir."

Crain pointed a trembling finger at Eric Joley. "Ask *him!* Ask him where I was."

Roagan paused. "Well, Joley? How did it happen."

Eric told him briefly, and added, "The shots came from about right here, skipper. Then Crain yelled

that somebody had stolen his gun. His voice seemed to come from the back of the room. I don't think he fired the shot, sir."

"See?" Crain quavered. "You hear that?"

"But," Eric continued, "the one that knocked out the light wasn't the same one that fired the shots either."

Roagan grunted. "Who did you give that gun to, Crain?"

Crain's protest was almost a shriek. "Give? Give! It was stolen, skipper."

"Lock him up."

Crain was dragged away. A crewman replaced the broken lamp, and the light came on. The colonists were crowded together at one end of the room. Eric looked at the wall against which he had been sitting. A slug had torn through the thin aluminum partition at about the level of his chest.

"They tried for you too," Roagan grunted absently. He was staring at the bloody footprints. Suddenly he glanced up at the colonists. "Anybody see who did it?"

No one answered him.

"All right, file out of here one at a time. Let us look at your shoes as you go. Then move straight to your cabins and stay there. Everyone's restricted to quarters."

When they were all gone, Eric stood beside the skipper, staring over his shoulder at the list of twenty-seven names. Angela Waters' name was there, and so was Kenneth Thoren. Roagan had checked ten names, and Angela's was one of them—traces of blood on the shoe soles. Then Eric watched him scratch off the ten.

"That eliminates those," Roagan grunted. "The killer wouldn't have waited around for Jessel to bleed all over his shoes. Those ten evidently didn't know what they were skidding around in."

"Nice thinking, sir."

The commander glanced grimly down at the still form on the floor. "Not much chance of our finding the assassin, Joley. There's no time. The medics begin their work in an hour."

Eric looked slowly around the empty room, his face tight with anger. "I have an idea, sir. Can I work on it for that hour? I'll need a couple of guys to help me. And I'll need the dayroom here."

Roagan nodded slowly. "Go ahead, Joley. You're welcome to try. But I doubt—"

"I think I can narrow it down to three or four people, sir. And if I can, will you be willing to ship them back with the medics? At least we can get rid of the killer that way, whether we prove anything or not."

"I'll think about it." Roagan turned to direct two men with a stretcher in moving the body.

Eric left the dayroom and returned shortly with a pad of co-ordinate paper, a piece of chalk, and two enlisted guards. Then he quickly marked the floor into a grid of one-pace squares. He handed the list of names to the guards.

"Start bringing these people in here one at a time—including the scratched-out names. When I'm through with one, bring in the next. But don't let anybody get back to his cabin before I'm through with them all. Herd them in the assembly room."

The process began. As each colonist entered, Eric asked the same questions. "Where were you standing when the lights went out? Who was standing next to you? Point out the exact location."

Each colonist required less than a minute to answer and move on. And for each one, Eric marked a separate sheet of co-ordinate paper to correspond with the chalk-line grid on the floor; he labeled each ex with the corresponding name, and turned the sheets face down as the next colonist entered.

Angela came as number eleven, wearing an icy smile. "I was standing right here," she told him, "and Kenneth was here."

"Who else?" he asked, his face expressionless.

"I don't know. I was looking at Kenneth."

"That's all, thank you."

"Yes, lieutenant."

She pranced out arrogantly. Eric stared after her for a long moment before he called the next name on the list.

When he was finished, he ordered the guards to herd them back to their cabins. Then he went to

Roagan's cabin with his twenty-seven sheets of graph paper. Roagan glanced at them briefly and called Doc Fraylin. He read off the twenty-seven names and asked the surgeon to hold them until last. Then he grinned at the engineer.

"I get the idea, Joley. Now let's see it it'll work."

Working together, they numbered the grid lines on each sheet, and transferred the results to a master sheet. When they were finished, Roagan clucked his tongue thoughtfully.

"Well, skipper," Eric grunted, "do we have five men by the name of Love well, and four by the name of Herrick? If we don't, then those two men can stand in a lot of very innocent positions at once. And look—they list each other too—in a place nobody else saw them."

"The killer and the light-bulb sniper. But not the brains behind it."

"The ones who alibied them might fall in that class."

"Then Crain isn't one of them," Eric announced. "He covered neither of them, and all the ones who listed his position are consistent, so maybe you're wrong about him, skipper."

"We'll see." He punched the intercom and called one of Lovewell's inconsistent friends—a young girl who was obviously frightened.

"Miss Malin," Roagan growled sternly. "I'm sending you back to Earth aboard the tug. You'll be tried as an accessory to murder."

She lost color and whimpered a protest, but the commander interrupted.

"Unless of course, you care to correct your statement about Lovewell." She opened her mouth, closed it, set her jaw firmly, and shook her head.

"Lock her up," Roagan told the crewman who brought her.

"Wait!"

"All right."

"He . . . he was standing next to me."

Eric glanced at the sheet and noted the position—the center of the room. "When he knocked out the light, eh?"

"I . . . well . . . I lent him a hairpin."

Roagan nodded to the guard. "Take her back to her cabin."

"Herrick's the gunman, then," Eric breathed when she was gone.

Roagan rocked thoughtfully for a moment. "Yeah—yeah. Step outside, Joley. In fact, go to Herrick's cabin, call him outside, and tell him to come back here with you. Don't let anybody else hear you tell him. I want him to think he's not observed when he comes here. Now let me have your gun."

Eric gave it to him with a grunt of surprise. Roagan unloaded it and gave it back. "Stand where he can make a grab for it," the skipper ordered. "I'll have a witness watching from the next room—one of the medics."

A few moments later, the engineer was knocking at the door of a cabin in the colonist's section. Kenneth Thoren opened it, and his face immediately froze in hard lines.

"Where's Herrick, Thoren?"

"Are you the ship's cop, Joley?"

"Where's Herrick?"

Thoren hesitated. "He's gone to the suspendfreeze lockers."

"You're a liar. Roagan told them to take him last."

The colonist's eyes narrowed to slits. "It's too bad the killer missed you, Joley. I'm telling you, Herrick went to the medics."

A more friendly face appeared behind Thoren's shoulder, the cabin's third occupant. "He traded places with me, sir. He used my name—James Willis. I was to use his when he was called. I figured it didn't matter. And he was in a hurry to get it over with."

Eric reported back to the skipper.

"That does it, Joley!" Roagan growled. "We can't thaw him out of that locker before the tug leaves, not without having him die on us in the process. I wouldn't mind, but the medics would put up a howl."

"How about loading the whole locker aboard the tug?"

"You know better than that!"

Eric nodded glumly. The tug had no helium equipment to sustain the deep freeze, nor the right sort of power units to supply the induction thawers. "Guess we're stuck with our killer."

"He'll get his in Sigma Seven." Roagan reached for the intercom and called the service crew. "Peters, get a welding torch and go to the suspend-freeze room. Find out what locker a guy by the name of Willis is stowed in. Weld the lid on tight. Take the leads off his thawer and chuck them out the air lock. Make sure the helium supply is on, then cut the handle off the valve. Paint a sign on the lid: 'Locker out of order. Thawing will result in occupant's death.' Don't tell anybody what you're doing or why—or who ordered it."

He winked at Eric as he clicked off the phone. "Only an emergency engineer would dare try to get him out."

"Next question—what are you going to do about Crain?"

"Mmmph!" Roagan tugged at his chin. "I'd better work on the others who alibied Herrick and Lovewell, see if I can't get something out of them. Something to tie in Crain."

"Who'll replace him, skipper? And who'll replace Jessel?"

Roagan's face was grave as he paced slowly about the office. "I don't know, Joley—I don't know. I'll talk to Fraylin about it. You can leave now, if you want to."

In returning to his quarters, Eric passed the surgical section and stopped to speak to a guard. "Any trouble so far?" he asked.

The man blew a rueful puff and wagged his head. "Got thirty of 'em in the freeze so far, sir. Six of 'em had to be dragged. Two had to be put out cold. Somebody's filled 'em full of wild ideas about their chances of waking up dead."

Eric nodded and turned to watch a pair of deck officers carry an unconscious girl in through the doorway. He caught the faint odor of ether as they passed, and there were red finger marks on her bare arm. "They don't look like the cream of Earth, do they sir?"

"I don't know, sergeant. Where's the dividing line between the frontier spirit and the urge to run away—between individualism and antisocial; tendencies—between cowardice and refusal to conform. Two aspects of the same thing, maybe."

The medics, with the help of the deck officers, were bringing in the colonists at five-minute intervals. Eric watched the production line through the doorway. The procedure consisted of several massive intravenous injections of various drugs, then a gin anaesthesia before the patient was wheeled out of his line-of-sight. Three or four minutes later, a rushing hiss told him that a locker was being flooded with liquid helium.

Soon he moved on, puzzling to him self about the motive for Jessel's murder—and for his own close escape. The vague whispered rumors surely wouldn't drive anyone to such desperate measures. It was undoubtedly part of a plot—a plot to install Crain in emergency-locker number one, perhaps. But why? And who was behind it? Crain himself?

Eric thought about the moody face of the third engineer and shook hi head slowly. Crain was somehow a normal, but his mind was not that, of a leader in conspiracy. He was probably a part of any plot that might exist, but Eric doubted that he had originated the idea of murdering Jessel. Probably, he thought, the trouble-center was some quiet-looking little colonist with paranoic tendencies—some unobtrusive person whom he had never met.

"Hello, lieutenant."

Eric looked up sharply to see Angela Waters watching him from a cabin doorway. She wore an amused smirk, but he could read nothing in the mask of her face. He nodded curtly and started to pass on.

"Oh, lieutenant—"

He whirled irritably, and snapped, "What?"

"I've heard another rumor."

The smirk was twitching a little, threatening to burst into mocking laughter, he thought.

"Don't you want to hear it?"

"Go on."

"The rumor says you're going to die pretty soon."

"Who invented it—you?"

"Oh no. The man who pulled the trigger in the dayroom. *He* invented it, lieutenant."

Eric grinned nastily. "Sorry to disappoint you. That fellow is already taken care of."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

She pursed her lips and lowered her head to peer sideways at him. She clucked her tongue and shook her head. "Alas, poor Yorick—or was it *Herrick*? The unfortunate fellow you welded in his icebox."

He caught his breath and came close to glower at her. "How did you know about that?" he hissed.

"The grapevine swings from tree to tree. *Free* rhymes with *tree*, doesn't it? Di dah dah dah the killer's free. Work it out yourself, lieutenant."

She turned her back on him and stepped into the cabin, but Eric stepped after her, caught her shoulder, and spun her around. "What are you talking about!" he barked.

The pale eyes were laughing at him. "Would you like to close the door, lieutenant?"

He glanced quickly about the cabin. It was empty.

"Where are the others?"

"All cuddly-cozy in their little iceboxes."

"Are you drunk?"

Her breath seemed to catch in her throat, but she denied it with a *pfft*. He closed the door and leaned against it.

"What's this about Herrick?"

She shook her head impatiently and sat on the narrow bunk. He watched her hand slide under the pillow—casually. It lingered there. He remembered that he had forgotten to reload his automatic before leaving Roagan's office.

"You're a nice guy, lieutenant—even if you are infuriatingly stupid."

"You mentioned a rumor."

"And I told you what it was."

"And that's all you want to say."

She looked at him for a long time with her head cocked aside. "Uh-uh! No—not all, I guess. You see—Herrick didn't fire those shots. He just stole the gun from Crain. That's why they alibied him. You see—he just gave it to somebody else, somebody nobody saw take it, somebody who wasn't supposed to shoot. But he *shot*—didn't he?"

Eric, playing along with her, remained silent.

"Nobody expected a killing. We just wanted the gun, just the gun, lieutenant."

"We!" he hissed, seizing upon the word. His hand snaked down, and came up with the forty-five.

Her face blanched slowly, and a muscle knotted in her throat.

"Get your hand out from under that pillow!"

Staring at him, she withdrew it slowly.

"Now let's see what's under it. Turn the pillow over."

"Sure you want to see?"

"*Turn it!*" he snapped.

A forlorn smile crossed her face. She pulled it away slowly, pushed the pillow on the floor. Eric's gun was suddenly dangling heavily at his thigh.

"Ugly little thing, isn't it, lieutenant?"

He swallowed a hard dry lump in his throat and stared at the gleaming little hypodermic needle. Then he slid the gun back in its holster.

"I . . ."

"Stop stuttering, lieutenant."

"Morphine?"



She only looked at him. And then he saw what it was about her eyes—not evil, just dereliction, emptiness. "You get it here—aboard ship?" She turned her eyes to stare fixedly at the doorway. "Out there in the corridor," she breathed, "somebody's watching, knows you're in here, knows I'm telling you. They'll have to kill me."

Eric moistened his lips nervously. "Who—?"

"Who? Who passes it around? Kenneth Thoren knows, maybe. He gets it for me, when I need it."

"Are many of the colonists—"

She laughed bitterly. "Why do you think they're so anxious to avoid the big freeze. The big freeze means we get to Sigma Seven. And Sigma Seven means—" She shuddered.

"No more of the stuff," he finished. She covered her face with her hands. "I wonder why you let *me* in on this?"

"I . . . I *didn't* want to see you killed, Joley."

"But you don't know who's behind it—or why?"

"No. Just the rumors. They say—it you and Jessel are dead, things will be all right."

"Things?"

She suffered for a moment. "We . . . we won't have to worry about Sigma Seven. We'll spend our lives on the ship—awake."

"And somebody's slaves."

"It's sickening, isn't it?"

He shook his head sadly. "Frontier folk are just people that get bored with the *status quo*. Somebody offered you a frontier of sensation. Being tied down aboard ship for six months, you took it."

"What are *you* going to do, Joley?" He watched her misery for a moment. Why had she told him?

"This," he grunted, crossed the room, lifted her chin, and kissed her. Her mouth tasted of cool indifference, but her eyes were pleased.

Then she picked up the hypodermic syringe and stared at it, turning it over slowly in her hands. He saw the terrible ambivalence in her face—craving, and loathing.

"Break it."

"I can't," she whispered.

"So long, kid."

"Where to, lieutenant?"

"To kill a man, maybe."

"Don't look like that."

"Keep your door locked until they come for you." He went out into the corridor and looked around quickly. No one was in sight.

Around the bend, and a dozen paces. A closed door. Silence beyond it. Kenneth Thoren's cabin. He let his hand rest on the knob, then *twisted*. It was unlocked.

Thoren swung around slowly to blink at the intruder leaning in the entrance. His face twisted into an arrogant snarl, but before he spoke, the emergency engineer stepped inside and bolted the door behind him. Their eyes looked in silent hate.

"Get out!"

Eric grinned and crossed slowly toward him. Thoren swung reflexively into a defensive stance, but his face was bewildered.

"What do you mean—!"

Eric's boot crashed upward. Thoren shrieked as it thudded home, but as he doubled over, the engineer's fist exploded against his head, bowling him against the wall. He sat down hard. Eric kicked him in the stomach, and it robbed him of the wind to shriek.

"Where do you get the dope, Thoren?" he asked casually, and without waiting for an answer he brought a boot heel crunching down on Thoren's kneecap.

"Who gives it to you, Thoren?" This time the boot caught him in the mouth. Thoren spat two teeth, and a piece of his lip dangled loose. The colonist was whimpering weakly.

"I don't particularly care if you tell me or not. I like to do this." He caught a limp foot in both hands

and wrenched an ankle out of joint with an expert twist.

"Don't tell me, Thoren. Be brave."

"No! I'll tell—"

Eric drew back suddenly, seeing Thoren was about to faint. "All right, spill it. But don't bore me, fellow."

"I don't *know* where it comes from . . . *no, it's the truth!* It's delivered through the dayroom. Package left on the bench."

Eric stared at him for a moment. He was too frightened to be lying. "What do you give in return?"

"Nothing—just nothing."

"Anything else in the packages? Notes? Instructions? Orders?"

Thoren paused to wipe blood from his chin. "No. Not orders. Notes sometimes. News about—what's going on."

"The rumors, huh?"

He nodded weakly.

"Where does Crain fit in?"

". . . I . . . he's on the stuff, too."

"Where does he fit?"

"He's supposed to wake us—if he gets the chance."

Eric caught the colonist's arm, lifted him to his feet, and half-carried him to his bunk. "You don't have to worry, Thoren. You're going back to Earth aboard the tug."

He left the man lying there and started to see Roagan. But he hung back. Could he even be sure of Roagan? The man behind it was someone who had access to the medic's supplies —somebody high up. Yet it couldn't be a medic. The medics were going back. And there was only one possible motive for the insidious plot; some degenerate maniac wanted the ship for his private little paradise. A yacht cruise through eternity, a private kingdom, a madman's concept of heaven. Somehow it sounded like a tired and embittered old man. Roagan?

Roagan had nothing to look forward to on a new planet. The ship had been his kingdom for half a dozen years. He stood only to lose it, lose his authority, become a doddering liability to the group upon a frontier world. Eric paused. He could almost hear the oldster's reasoning: "I don't want much. Just a few years retirement aboard my own boat—and a little pleasure toward the end. It won't hurt anything. I won't bother many of the lockers—just my little group, *heh heh!*"

Roagan? Maybe. But it could be otherwise.

Time was running out. Most of the colonists were in their lockers, and the ship had grown quiet, save for the steady one-gravity thrust of the rockets and the glum clump of crewmen's boots along the corridors. Angela had gone to her temporary tomb. Ken Thoren was transferred to the tug—when the medics saw his bruises and disqualified him. Soon the crew would be shutting down the jets—and the quasi-gravity caused by their acceleration would cease.

*Hear this, hear this*, croaked the call system. *M. Joley report to Commander Roagan's cabin. Joley to command cabin. Hasty hasty. This is all.*

Fraylin and Roagan were waiting for him when he entered. Their eyes swept over him coolly while Roagan tapped his pencil with what seemed to be restrained irritation.

"I've got news for you, Joley," the commander grunted.

"Yes, sir?"

"You're being moved to the third position."

"But *why?*" he gasped.

"After the way you worked that Thoren-boy over, I'm not sure you're to be trusted. Neither is Doc Fraylin here."

Fraylin coughed in embarrassment and tried to smile. "Oh, it's not that incident, so much," he murmured.— " You see, Joley—I've never agreed with the psych's idea of what personality-type is best for the emergency job. True, you can endure solitude. And in a nonsocial emergency-situation, you hold up well. But you're basically unstable, schizoid type—what they used to call 'moral insanity.' No offense,

personally, Joley—but take the Thoren incident. Would a stable man react that brutally to an argument over a girl—Miss Waters, I believe her name is? "

Eric glowered in silence. So *that* had been Thoren's story! And in Roagan's presence, he dared not contradict it.

"Crain is to be number one, I suppose?"

Roagan arched his brows and purred, "Suppose again. Crain is going back to Earth—as an accessory in Jessel's murder."

"Who then?"

"*Me*, Joley."

*Naturally*, Eric thought. "And who is second?"

Roagan glanced at Fraylin and frowned. "We haven't decided yet. But it shouldn't matter to you, Joley."

"Is that all, sir?"

"Yes, that's all. Report to Fraylin's staff as soon as the rockets are shut off."

Lost in thought, he wandered up to the observation blister and sat smoking in the starry darkness. One thing seemed certain: *the third locker was a death trap.*

But how? The medics would have to see that its occupant was properly installed in the suspendfreeze, but—his mind wavered—the *thawers*, of course! They could be easily sabotaged. When the awakening came, the temperature of the cabinet should be allowed to increase slowly to a critical point, and remain there for a time. Then, through a massive coil of copper tubing that encircled the body, came a quick burst of high-frequency current. This r.f. surge induced eddy-currents within the frozen flesh, quickly thawing and heating it to body temperature. Its frequency was such that the current-surge would not rupture the cell walls, but otherwise the process was similiar to electronic cookery. The timing mechanisms could easily be thrown off enough to be fatal.

Suddenly the sound of labored breathing was in the compartment with him. A shadow moved in the doorway, and he heard the creak of boots. A chill crept along his nape.

"Who is it?" he asked stiffly.

"I . . . I . . . I, *Crain*," came the nasal reply.

Eric hesitated. "So he's giving you the run of the ship now, eh?"

"The guard—he's gone."

"To the lockers?"

"I guess. Uh..." He sat down heavily. His voice was dazed, laden with dull pain. "Wonder ... wonder where that colonist is?" He seemed to be musing to himself.

"Who? Thoren? To the lockers. You need what he has, don't you?"

"I . . . I need—" The voice halted, became a note higher in tone. "Oh . . . you . . . *Joley!* Joley, you *told* him I didn't do it, you told him."

"Told him you didn't shoot Jessel? Yeah. But I didn't say you didn't give your gun away."

The half-drugged man emitted a low moan. "I didn't! They stole it. They grabbed it when the light failed."

"I believe you. But you were going to do some thawing after the big freeze, weren't you?"

"I've got to! I've got to!"

Eric paused, then said coldly, "You haven't heard, then. Roagan's sending you back to Earth. Accessory to murder. They'll execute you."

There was a long silence, then a whimper. "You're lying, Joley!"

"No, I'm not. Roagan just told me."

Another silence, then an ear-piercing shriek. "I'll *kill him!*"

"Hush! He'll hear you. Sound carries in this tomb!"

"Tomb . . . tomb . . . it *is a tomb!*" The melancholy Crain was suddenly sobbing in his hands. "Only the dead will dance, Joley. The *already* dead."

"At whose command, Crain?"

There was a hollow chuckle. "The dead don't know their puppet master."

"Roagan."

"No!"

"Yes."

Crain fell into confused silence. His mind seemed close to the breaking point.

"Maybe I can help you, Crain," Eric said thoughtfully. "Maybe I can keep them from taking you back to Earth."

"Earth? How? But I don't want Sigma Seven." His shudder was audible.

"Listen, Crain. They're after me, too. They'll see you hanged, and they'll kill me in my locker. But we can work it out, maybe—if you'll buck up."

"It doesn't matter. All I want is . . . is . . . peace—"

In a syringe, Eric thought, but he said, "If we work it out, you'll be left aboard the ship. With plenty of . . . of whatever you need, all by yourself."

"How?" There was a sudden note of interest in the sharply barked word.

Before Eric could explain, there was a sudden lurch, and a slight faltering of the steady growl of the rockets.

*Hear this, hear this. Prepare for degravitation. We have attained final velocity. Buckle down, buckle down. Reactors going off. This is all.*

Eric hitched a safety belt across his lap and saw that Crain did likewise. Minutes later, a sharp *thwup* shivered through the hull. Then all was silence, and they floated upward in their seats. The ship would coast unpowered now—lunging on toward Sigma Seven.

Then the turning rockets thrummed to life, and slowly the ship began to spin about its long axis, like a bullet rifling in space. As the centrifugal force slowly increased, Eric listed sideways in his seat. He unfastened his belt and slid down to sit upon what had been the wall. Then he helped the moaning Crain to do likewise.

The turning rockets sputtered off, leaving the ship spinning inertially at a few r.p.m. The outer hull was now the floor.

"Come on," Eric hissed. "If I know Roagan, he won't leave his cabin till it's his freeze-time. He never cares for this centrifigravity. Weak stomach."

Crain made a sick sound in his throat, but he came like a lamb. Where the corridor was wide enough, they walked along the wall, and when it narrowed they crawled. They met no one. The crewmen who were not needed in the reactor rooms were already with the medics.

"Where we going?" Crain panted.

"Here." Eric stopped in the hallway and reached up to open a door in the ceiling.

"But that's Jessel's cabin!" Crain gasped.

"Right. Cup your hands for a foothold. I'm going up."

The engineer obeyed, staggering weakly as he bore Eric's weight for a moment.

"Come on, now I'll help you up, Crain."

"I . . . I . . . is his body in there?"

"Hurry up! Before someone comes."

He closed the door softly again beneath them, then struck a match in the darkness. An aluminum casket was bolted to the wall which had been the floor before the gravity-switch. He looked up at it sorrowfully for a few seconds.

"Joley . . . what—?"

"Hush! Help me get it open."

"No!"

"Well, strike matches for me, then."

The gloomy Crain sat on the floor while Eric worked quietly at the fastenings. Minutes later the cool, rigid body of Lieutenant Jessel slipped heavily into his arms. He lowered it gently to the floor.

"Joley, I'm sick!"

"I'll get you something," Eric grunted, almost happily. He fumbled in the darkness until he found Jessel's dufflebag, then browsed through it until his hand met a small bottle, a bottle he had known would

be there.

He shook several capsules onto the flat of his palm and gave them to Crain. "Take them."

"What are they?"

"Some stuff Jessel used to settle his nerves," he lied.

Crain made dry swallowing sounds in the darkness. Four sleeping capsules, Eric thought, should keep him down for a while—if coupled with a slight concussion.

Calmly he grasped a handful of Crain's greasy shock of hair and clubbed him hard with a fist to the temple. After a brief moan, he sank quietly to the floor.

Eric found Jessel's paper and scrawled a note by matchlight. He pinned it to Crain's chest, then transferred the wrapping-sheet from the dead man to the unconscious one. Crain's scrawny body was easily hoisted and secured in the unlined sheet-metal box that served for a casket. He hoped the seams around the lid were loose enough to keep the man from suffocating.

Footsteps made him pause, freezing into breathless silence. Were they coming to load the body aboard the tug now? The trampling of half a dozen men passed beneath him. And moved on. The reactor-room crew, on their way to the medics. He breathed again.

The time was right. The after section of the ship should be empty now. After stealing a glance down into the corridor, he lowered Jessel's body through the horizontal door, then came down behind it.

Minutes later, he stumbled into the dark reactor room where the plates were still making clucking noises as they cooled. He put the body down and felt about the emergency control panels with his hands, making certain that the rocket tubes had been left choked off tight. Then he cracked the hatch to one of the field-coil chambers to let the tube belch itself full of air from within the room. When it finished hissing, he opened it all the way and loaded the corpse inside.

"So long, fellow," he muttered, feeling like a ghoul.

He closed the hatch again tightly and opened the choked tube. The gruff bark of the released air pressure thudded through the ship. The body had been puffed out of the tube as if by a low-pressure pneumatic cannon. But Eric didn't stop to look. The others would come to investigate the sound. He choked off the tube again and fled.

Footsteps were approaching as he ducked inside his own quarters and closed the door beneath him. A moment later, a heavy fist knocked, and Roagan's voice called, "Joley, you in there?"

He grunted a sleepy affirmative. Roagan moved on. A few minutes later, the call system came to life.

*Hear this urgent. Answer roll call by intercom. Man in space, Man in space. Answer roll call. Ackerman ... Avery ... Bates*

"Ho ... here ... h'yo," came the disinterested answers, save for an occasional, "He's in an icebox."

*Crain ... Crain ... William Quinby Crain ... Anybody seen him?* Eric cleared his throat and answered, "This is Joley. I saw him in the obs-blister half an hour ago."

The roll call ceased. Footsteps came again, and Roagan growled, "Open up, Joley."

Eric slid down into the corridor, rather than have himself alone with the commander in the cabin. The oldster was staring at him suspiciously. "You saw him?"

Eric let himself look nervous. He nodded and shuffled his feet.

"Don't *tell* me," Roagan snapped savagely. "Let me guess. You told him he was going back to Earth for trial."

"I ... I figured he *knew*, skipper. I'm sorry."

"You idiot! I let him think I believed his story—so I wouldn't need to guard him! He burped himself out the jets!"

"Sorry—"

"Well—it saved a court-martial, I guess," Roagan growled. He stalked quickly away.

Eric followed at a distance and saw that he was going to his cabin, evidently to call the tug in for grappling. Within the hour the job would be finished, and the medics ready to leave the ship for their

return to Earth. He made his way to Fraylin's office. The last of the reactor room crew was filing inside.

Fraylin saw him and came to the door. "I was about to call you, Joley. We'll be ready for you soon. You can strip to your shorts, if you like."

"Yeah, well first—I'd like to take a last look at my locker. If you don't mind."

"Why?"—Fraylin's thin mouth fluttered with amusement—"not at all."

He went into the cold room, a long narrow corridor whose floor was now the faces of the freeze lockers—like graves with heavily insulated lids. The workings of the multi-stage refrigeration made a rushing sound beneath his feet. Once he stopped to stare down at a small square-panel in the floor. The nameplate said, "Angela Waters 184."

*Tomorrow is Sigma Seven*, he promised her, then moved hurriedly on.

The emergency lockers were in a small room at the far end of the main section, and the alarm mechanisms—triggered by the ship's trouble circuits—were located on a small panel board in the center of the floor. There was no time for a detailed inspection. He quickly knelt and switched the multi-contact plugs that connected the thawing coils to their timers. He interchanged the leads to lockers one and three, so that the thawing timer meant for unit one controlled his own locker. Then he hurried back across the faces of the temporarily dead.

"That was quick," Fraylin observed as he re-entered the office. "Everything suit you?"

"It's O.K., I guess."

The physicist surgeon peered at him with quiet amusement. "I invented those lockers, Joley. If there were something wrong with them, I'd know it."

He moved away. Eric wondered if he heard echoes of irritation in the scientist's voice. He remembered the man's sense of being wronged, wronged because his work in suspendfreeze hadn't brought him the rewards he felt that he deserved.

"Strip please, Mr. Joley," said a medic. "We're ready for you."

Needles began jabbing his arms, exploring, gouging in search of veins.

"This will make you a little drunk, Mr. Joley."

"Here's the anticrystalis. Protects the cell walls. Keeps ice crystals from—"

"Try to hold still, sir. This one goes in the abdominal wall. Oops!"

"Help him, Mike—that alk-shot hit him."

Eric staggered weakly, and the room began to blur.

"Onto the anaesthetic table now," somebody called.

Another needle began exploring in the hollow of his arm—

"Oops!"

Cold! Nasty, shivery, chilly cold. Not the kind he had expected at all. In fact, he had not expected to feel it. Sick and weak, he lay half awake, feeling the thick copper coil about him. Darkness and chilly moisture. Had he been thawed?

Impossible! They said it hurt. They said it was like a jolt of hell, that it crippled a man for days. He felt uncrippled. There was only nausea and a headache. His mind cleared slowly.

If the automatics had thawed him, they would have also hauled him out of the locker, laid him on a stretcher, shot him full of adrenalin, and loaded him into the iron lung for a session of enforced respiration. But they weren't doing anything.

He came to a conclusion: *I haven't been frozen at all*. Only anaesthetized. Hours, not years had passed. He wriggled upward, got his head against the door, and shoved. It budged a little, then flopped open. The blackness was only slightly lessened. The lights were off throughout the ship. The gravity was reduced to nearly nothing. He pushed himself out of the locker, then shuffled about with a bare foot until he found the lid of locker #1. He could feel the purr of refrigerant coursing aside. Ruefully he grinned.

"So, Roagan, you planned not to go to sleep at all, eh?" he muttered. "Well now let's see how you planned to wake *me* up."

He felt about on the panel until he found the thawer controls for unit one. He tripped them, the purring stopped. There came a draining sound. It would take a little time, he guessed, for Roagan's trap to kill himself.

So he hurried in search of some clothing, then went to the control section, started a power unit, and sent out a radio call to the tug. It failed to answer. But it could scarcely be more than an hour away. He tried again—with the same results.

They obviously weren't listening. And why should they listen for calls from a ship of the dead? He began praying for the life of a gloomy morphine-addict by the name of Crain. He even went to make certain that Jessel's casket had been loaded aboard the tug. It had.

"Wake up and start kicking the lid off!" he growled at a mental image of the sheet-metal casket.

Suppose they had it locked in a soundproof room? Or back by the reactors where the din would drown his nasal screams? Suppose they took it back and decked it with lilies and buried it in Arlington Cemetery before the "corpse" got a word in edgewise?

And then, on the other hand, he began to regret the little note he had written to accompany the melancholy Crain. "*Gentlemen,*" it said, "*you can have this one. There are nice live ones in the lockers.*"

The note was calculated to bring them back on screaming jets after he had gained control of the situation, after he had made certain that everyone who possibly might be involved was either bedded down or well in hand. But then, the tug's skipper might not see it that way. He might, in fact, take a dim view of Joley's controlling the situation—and even go so far as to clap him in irons and haul him back to Earth.

Queer noises were coming from the locker room. Roagan's thawers were at work. Eric shuddered and stayed away, not wanting to see the charred husk of a man that the automatics would haul out of the tomb. But electronic cookery never charred; it only over-stewed.

He paced restlessly about the ship, cutting on all the lights, waiting for the tug to come back. Finally the clanking sounds stopped, and he heard the wheezing *blurp* of the iron lung at work.

Grimly he went to take Roagan out of it, lest the lung tear the over-cooked remains to shreds and foul the bellows mechanism. He closed his eyes and cut on the lights.

But the remains were moaning softly, and its eyes were glaring at him balefully. His face was beet-red, but it was a normal thawing job.

"Roagan!"

"Joley!" he whispered. "So it was *you* behind this deal!"

"Don't give me that!" Eric barked. "If I hadn't switched leads with you, *I'd* be lying there, and *you'd* be standing over *me*."

"You *what*?" he gasped. "When?"

"I switched the control leads on lockers one and three—just before they put me under."

Roagan tried to twist his head a little. He yelped and screwed his face. "Who's in locker two?" he whimpered.

Joley gaped. "*You* tell me! You picked him."

"No," he whispered. "I picked Peters, but Peters got sick. I was still looking for somebody when—"

"When what?"

Roagan managed a pouting frown. "When I passed out cold in my cabin."

"Drinking?"

"Not *that* much."

"Anybody with you to prove it?"

"Fraylin."

"Where'd you wake up?"

"In here."

"And you didn't assign anybody to locker two?"

"No, I didn't want to. I figured the fellow who's behind this mess would try to get it. That's why I switched the control leads to units one and two."

"*What? When?*"

"Last sleeping period."

Eric sat down hard on the floor. There was a long silence. "First—you switch one and two—then I

switch one and three—"

"Shells-and-pea game," Roagan breathed. "The pea's in two."

Eric stared at the insulated hatch. "I gotta hunch I know him."

"So do I."

"He was pretty bitter about not getting the kind of credit he wanted for inventing these units."

"Mmm—"

"Let's see, if we hadn't switched leads, he'd be where I am. And you'd be where he is. And I'd be where you are. Right?"

"I'm not thinking that good yet."

Eric's hand snaked toward the thawing switch. "Let's make sure it's Fraylin," he muttered.

"I wouldn't, Joley! It might 'not be nice."

"Uh." He pulled the hand back. "Well, the tug'll be here in a little while, surely."

"Tug? You contacted them?"

Eric hastily explained the nature of the contact. "I think," he grumbled darkly, "that I'll crawl back in my locker while you explain my innocence."

Roagan chuckled evilly.

The alarm bell suddenly clamored through the ship, hammering its din on cold brass. Eric darted to his feet, then relaxed slowly. "The tug. I forgot. The scanners are set to turn in an emergency at the approach of any non-uniformly moving body."

Then there came sounds of relays clucking beneath his feet. He looked down sharply. "The emergency system is waking him up!"

"Get me out of here!" Roagan groaned.

"It'll release you when you've had enough."

Eric went to watch for the tug. It was not yet in sight, but its blip was on the screen. He put in a call on the radio, and tried to explain the situation. Their answer was noncommittal, but they ordered him to prepare for grappling.

When he went back to the freezer compartment, Roagan had fainted. The second locker was hissing steam and bubbling up around the lid. Eric held his nose while he shut off the thawers. Fraylin was thoroughly cooked.

He hauled Roagan out of the lung as soon as the diaphragm slid back to release him. The commander was still too weak to walk.

"I'm going back to Earth, Joley," he muttered. "I've had enough. Can't take another trip through that gadget."

Eric helped him back to his cabin, and they sat down to wait. "I thought it was you, skipper. I'm sorry."

"Mmmph!"

"I should have known—you wouldn't have to borrow Crain's gun to kill Jessel. But Fraylin had no reason to be armed. You hadn't issued him a gun."

"I still don't see how he could have killed Jessel. He wasn't there."

"No, he was in the corridor. Herrick stole Crain's gun and passed it outside, not knowing Fraylin meant to use it, right after Lovewell popped out the light. Fraylin immediately stepped inside and blasted at us in the darkness. Then during the confusion, he walked to the end of the corridor, and came back running. As soon as he was able, he got Herrick to switch places with the other colonist, and got him in a freeze-locker out of the way."

"If you thought it was me," Roagan grunted, "I'm surprised you didn't go to Fraylin for help."

"I didn't think Fraylin would believe me. And then, I thought you were probably getting the morphine through one of the medics. I didn't want to warn him, in case Fraylin *wouldn't* believe me."

"One other thing—why did you pitch Jessel's body overboard?"



"Because even if the tug's commander wouldn't come back on the strength of the note, he'd have to come back to get the corpse. They couldn't try Crain without a body."

Roagan stared at him with tired eyes. "Joley, I'm going to do one thing before I leave this ship. I'm going to see that you're stashed away in one of the colonist's lockers, and that the door is bolted on tight. I don't want you prowling again for five hundred years. I'll get three of the tug crew for the lockers. They've been itching to go."

Eric grinned. He wandered back to the cold room and sat down beside Angela's locker. He tore out the timing mechanisms from the thawer and went to lock them in a safe place. That was one unit he meant to handle personally.

## Anybody Else Like Me?

QUIET MISERY IN a darkened room. The clock spoke nine times with a cold brass voice. She stood motionless, lean-ing against the drapes by the window, alone. The night was black, the house empty and silent.

*"Come, Lisa!"* she told herself. *"You're not dying!"*

She was thirty-four, still lovely, with a slender white body and a short, rich thatch of warm red hair. She had a good dependable husband, three children, and security. She had friends, hobbies, social activities. She painted mediocre pictures for her own amusement, played the piano rather well, and wrote fair poetry for the University's literary quarterly. She was well-read, well-rounded, well-informed. She loved and was loved.

Then why this quiet misery?

Wanting something, expecting nothing, she stared out into the darkness of the stone-walled garden. The night was too quiet. A distant street lamp played in the branches of the elm, and the elm threw its shadow across another wing of the house. She watched the shadow's wandering for a time. A lone car purred past in the street and was gone. A horn sounded raucously in the distance.

What was wrong? A thousand times since childhood she had felt this uneasy stirring, this crawling of the mind that called out for some unfound expression. It had been particularly strong in recent weeks.

She tried to analyze. What was different about recent weeks? Events: Frank's job had sent him on the road for a month; the children were at Mother's; the city council had recommended a bond issue; she had fired her maid; a drunk had strangled his wife; the University had opened its new psycho-physics lab; her art class had adjourned for the summer.

Nothing there. No clue to the unreasoning, goalless urge that called like a voice crying in mental wilderness: *"Come, share, satisfy, express it to the fullest!"*

Express what? Satisfy what? How?

A baby, deserted at birth and dying of starvation, would feel terrible hunger. But if it had never tasted milk, it could not know the meaning of the hunger nor how to ease it.

*"I need to relate this thing to something else, to something in my own experience or in the experience of others."* She had tried to satisfy the urge with the goals of other hungers: her children, her husband's lovemaking, food, drink, art, friendship. But the craving was something else, crying for its pound of unknown flesh, and there was no fulfillment.

*"How am I different from others?"* she asked herself. But she was different only in the normal ways that every human being is different from the exact Average. Her in-telligence was high, short of genius, but superior. To a limited extent, she felt the call of creativity. Physically, she was delicately beautiful. The only peculiarities that she knew about seemed ridiculously irrelevant: a dark birth-mark on her thigh, a soft fontanel in the top of her long narrow head, like the soft spot in an infant's cranium. Silly little

differences!

One big difference: the quiet misery of the unfed hun-ger.

A scattering of big raindrops suddenly whispered on the walk and in the grass and through the foliage of the elm. A few drops splattered on the screen, spraying her face and arms with faint points of coolness. It had been oppressively hot. Now there was a chill breath in the night.

Reluctantly she closed the window. The oppression of the warm and empty house increased. She walked to the door opening into the walled garden.

Ready for a lonely bed, she was wearing a negligee over nothing. Vaguely, idly, her hand fumbled at the waist-knot, loosened it. The robe parted, and the fine spray of rain was delightfully cool on her skin.

The garden was dark, the shadows inky, the nearest neighbor a block away. The wall screened it from prying eyes. She brushed her hands over her shoulders; the sleeves slipped down her arms. Peeled clean, feeling like a freed animal, she pressed open the screen and stepped out under the eaves to stand on the warm stone walk.

The rain was rattling in the hedge and roaring softly all about her, splashing coldness about her slender calves. She hugged herself and stepped into it. The drench of icy fingers stroked her with pleasant lashes; she laughed and ran along the walk toward the elm. The drops stung her breasts, rivered her face, and coursed coldly down her sides and legs.

She exulted in the rain, tried to dance and laughed at herself. She ran. Then, tired, she threw herself down on the crisp wet lawn, stretching her arms and legs and roll-ing slowly on the grass. Eyes closed, drenched and languorous, she laughed softly and played imagining games with the rain.

The drops were steel-jacketed wasps, zipping down out of the blackness, but she melted them with her mind, made them soft and cool and caressing. The drops took impersonal liberties with her body, and she rolled de-murely to lie face down in the rainsoft grass.

*"I am still a pale beast," she thought happily, "still kin of my grandmother the ape who danced in the tree and chattered when it rained. How utterly barren life would be, if I were not a pale beast!"*

She dug her fingers into the sodden turf, bared her teeth, pressed her forehead against the ground, and growled a little animal growl. It amused her, and she laughed again. Crouching, she came up on her hands and knees, hunching low, teeth still bared. Like a cat, she hissed—and pounced upon a sleeping bird, caught it and shook it to death.

Again she lay laughing in the grass.

*"If Frank were to see me like this," she thought, "he would put me to bed with a couple of sleeping pills, and call that smug Dr. Mensley to have a look at my mind. And Dr. Mensley would check my ambivalences and my repressions and my narcissistic, voyeuristic, masochistic impulses. He would tighten my screws and readjust me to reality, fit me into a comfortable groove, and take the pale beast out of me to make me a talking doll."*

He had done it several times before. Thinking of Dr. Mensley, Lisa searched her vocabulary for the most savage word she could remember. She growled it aloud and felt better.

The rain was slowly subsiding. A siren was wailing in the distance. The police. She giggled and imagined a headline in tomorrow's paper: PROMINENT SOCIALITE JAILED FOR INDECENT EXPOSURE. And the story would go on: "Mrs. Lisa Waverly was taken into custody by the police after neighbors reported that she was running around stark naked in her back yard. Said Mrs. Heinehoffer who called the law: 'It was just terrible. Looked lo me like she was having fits.' Mr. Heinehoffer, when asked for comment, simply closed his eyes and smiled ecstatically."

Lisa sighed wearily. The siren had gone away. The rain had stopped, except for drippings out of the elm. She was tired, emotionally spent, yet strangely melan-choly. She sat up slowly in the grass and hugged her shins.

The feeling came over her gradually.

*"Someone has been watching me!"*

She stiffened slowly, but remained in place, letting her eyes probe about her in the shadows. If only the drippings would stop so she could listen! She peered along the hedge, and along the shadows by the garden wall, toward the dark windows of the house, up toward the low-hanging mist faintly illuminated from below by street lights. She saw nothing, heard nothing. There was no movement in the night. Yet the feeling lingered, even though she scoffed.

*"If anyone is here," she thought, "I'll call them gently, and if anyone appears, I'll scream so loud that Mrs. Heine-hoffer will hear me."*

"Hey!" she said in a low voice, but loud enough to penetrate any of the nearby shadows.

There was no answer. She folded her arms behind her head and spoke again, quietly, sensually.

"Come and get me."

No black monster slithered from behind the hedge to devour her. No panther sprang from the elm. No succubus congealed out of wet darkness. She giggled.

"Come have a bite."

No bull-ape came to crush her in ravenous jaws.

She had only imagined the eyes upon her. She stretched lazily and picked herself up, pausing to brush off the leaves of grass pasted to her wet skin. It was over, the strange worship in the rain, and she was weary. She walked slowly toward the house.

Then she heard it—a faint crackling sound, intermittent, distant. She stood poised in the black shadow of the house, listening. The crackle of paper . . . then a small pop . . . then crisp fragments dropped in the street. It was repeated at short intervals.

Taking nervous, shallow breaths, she tiptoed quietly toward the stone wall of the garden. It was six feet high, but there was a concrete bench under the trellis. The sound was coming from over the wall. She stood crouch-ing on the bench; then, hiding her face behind the vines, she lifted her head to peer.

The street lamp was half a block away, but she could see dimly. A man was standing across the street in the shadows, apparently waiting for a bus. He was eating peanuts out of a paper bag, tossing the shells in the street. That explained the crackling sound.

She glared at him balefully from behind the trellis. *"I'll claw your eyes out,"* she thought, *"if you came and peeped over my wall."*

"Hi!" the man said.

Lisa stiffened and remained motionless. It was impossible that he could see her. She was in shadow, against a dark background. Had he heard her foolish babbling a moment ago?

More likely, he had only cleared his throat.

"Hi!" he said again.

Her face was hidden in the dripping vines, and she could not move without rustling. She froze in place, staring. She could see little of him. Dark raincoat, dark hat, slender shadow. Was he looking toward her? She was desperately frightened.

Suddenly the man chucked the paper bag in the gutter, stepped off the curb, and came sauntering across the street toward the wall. He removed his hat, and crisp blond hair glinted in the distant streetlight. He stopped three yards away, smiling uncertainly at the vines.

Lisa stood trembling and frozen, staring at him in horror. Strange sensations, utterly alien, passed over her in waves. There was no describing them, no understanding them.

"I—I found you," he stammered sheepishly. "Do you know what it is?"

*"I know you," she thought. "You have a small scar on the back of your neck, and a mole between your toes. Your eyes are blue, and you have an impacted wisdom tooth, and your feet are hurting you because you walked all the way out here from the University, and I'm almost old enough to be your mother. But I can't know you, because I've never seen you before!"*

"Strange, isn't it?" he said uncertainly. He was holding his hat in his hand and cocking his head politely.

"What?" she whispered.

He shuffled his feet and stared at them. "It must be some sort of palpable biophysical energy form, analytically definable—if we had enough data. Lord knows, I'm no mystic. If it exists, it's got to be mathematically definable. But why us?"

Horried curiosity made her step aside and lean her arms on the wall to stare down at him. He looked up bashfully, and his eyes widened slightly.

"Oh!"

"Oh what?" she demanded, putting on a terrible frown.

"You're beautiful!"

"What do you want?" she asked icily. "Go away!"

"I—" He paused and closed his mouth slowly. He stared at her with narrowed eyes, and touched one hand to his temple as if concentrating.

For an instant, she was no longer herself. She was looking up at her own shadowy face from down in the street, looking through the eyes of a stranger who was not a stranger. She was feeling the fatigue in the weary ankles, and the nasal ache of a slight head cold, and the strange sadness in a curious heart—a sadness too akin to her own.

She rocked dizzily. It was like being in two places at once, like wearing someone else's body for a moment.

The feeling passed. "*It didn't happen!*" she told herself.

"No use denying it," he said quietly. "I tried to make it go away, too, but apparently we've got something unique. It would be interesting to study. Do you suppose we're related?"

"Who are you?" she choked, only half-hearing his question.

"You know my name," he said, "if you'll just take the trouble to think about it. Yours is Lisa—Lisa O'Brien, or Lisa Waverly—I'm never sure which. Sometimes it comes to me one way, sometimes the other."

She swallowed hard. Her maiden name had been O'Brien.

"I don't know you," she snapped.

His name was trying to form in her mind. She refused to allow it. The young man sighed.

"I'm Kenneth Grearly, if you really don't know." He stepped back a pace and lifted his hat toward his head. "I—I guess I better go. I see this disturbs you. I had hoped we could talk about it, but—well, good night, Mrs. Waverly."

He turned and started away.

"Wait!" she called out against her will. He stopped again. "Yes?"

"Were—were you watching me—while it was raining?"

He opened his mouth and stared thoughtfully down the street toward the light. "You mean watching visually? You really are repressing this thing, aren't you? I thought you understood." He looked at her sharply, forlornly. "They say the failure to communicate is the basis of all tragedy. Do you suppose in our case ... ?"

"What?"

"Nothing." He shifted restlessly for a moment. "Good night."

"Good night," she whispered many seconds after he was gone.

Her bedroom was hot and lonely, and she tossed in growing restlessness. If only Frank were home! But he would be gone for two more weeks. The children would be back on Monday, but that was three whole days away. Crazy! It was just stark raving crazy!

Had the man really existed—what was his name?—Kenneth Grearly? Or was he only a phantasm invented by a mind that was failing—her mind? Dancing naked in the rain! Calling out to shadow shapes in the brush! Talking to a specter in the street! Schizophrenic syndrome- dream-world stuff. It could not be otherwise, for unless she had invented Kenneth Grearly, how could she know he had sore feet, an impacted wisdom tooth, and a head cold. Not only did she know about those things, but she felt them!

She buried her face in the dusty pillow and sobbed. Tomorrow she would have to call Dr. Mensley.

But fearing the specter's return, she arose a few minutes later and locked all the doors in the house. When she returned to bed, she tried to pray but it was as if the prayer were being watched. Someone was listening, eavesdropping from outside.

Kenneth Grearly appeared in her dreams, stood half-shrouded in a slowly swirling fog. He stared at her with his head cocked aside, smiling slightly, holding his hat respectfully in his hands.

"Don't you realize, Mrs. Waverly, that we are mutants perhaps?" he asked politely.

"No!" she screamed. "I'm happily married and I have three children and a place in society! Don't come near me!"

He melted slowly into the fog. But echoes came monotonously from invisible cliffs: *mutant mutant mutant mutant mutant ...*

Dawn came, splashing pink paint across the eastern sky. The light woke her to a dry and empty consciousness, to a headachy awareness full of dull anxiety. She arose wearily and trudged to the kitchen for a pot of coffee.

Lord! Couldn't it all be only a bad dream?

In the cold light of early morning, the things of the past night looked somehow detached, unreal. She tried to analyze objectively.

That sense of sharing a mind, a consciousness, with the stranger who came out of the shadows—what crazy thing had he called it?—"some sort of palpable biophysical energyform, analytically definable."

"If I invented the stranger," she thought, "I must have also invented the words."

But where had she heard such words before?

Lisa went to the telephone and thumbed through the directory. No Grearly was listed. If he existed at all, he probably lived in a rooming house. The University—last night she had thought that he had something to do with the University. She lifted the phone and dialed.

"University Station; number please," the operator said.

"I—uh—don't know the extension number. Could you tell me if there is a Kenneth Grearly connected with the school?"

"Student or faculty, Madam?"

"I don't know."

"Give me your number, please, and I'll call you back." "Lawrence 4750. Thanks, Operator."

She sat down to wait. Almost immediately it rang again. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Waverly, you were calling me?" A man's voice. His voice!

"The operator found you rather quickly." It was the only thing she could think of saying.

"No, no. I knew you were calling. In fact, I hoped you into it."

"Hoped me? Now look here, Mr. Grearly, I—"

"You were trying to explain our phenomenon in terms of insanity rather than telepathy. I didn't want you to do that, and so I hoped you into calling me."

Lisa was coldly speechless.

"What phenomenon are you talking about?" she asked after a few dazed seconds.

"Still repressing it? Listen, I can share your mind any time I want to, now that I understand where and who you are. You might as well face the fact. And it can work both ways, if you let it. Up to now, you've been—well, keeping your mind's eye closed, so to speak."

Her scalp was crawling. The whole thing had become intensely disgusting to her.

"I don't know what you're up to, Mr. Grearly, but I wish you'd stop it. I admit something strange is going on, but your explanation is ridiculous—offensive, even."

He was silent for a long time, then "I wonder if the first man-ape found his prehensile thumb ridiculous. I wonder if he thought using his hands for grasping was offensive."

"What are you trying to say?"

"That I think we're mutants. We're not the first ones. I had this same experience when I was in Boston once. There must be one of us there, too, but suddenly I got the feeling that he had committed suicide. I never saw him. We're probably the first ones to discover each other."

"Boston? If what you say is true, what would distance have to do with it?"

"Well, if telepathy exists, it certainly involves transfer of energy from one point to another. What kind of energy, I don't know. Possibly electromagnetic in character. Out it seems likely that it would obey the

inverse square law, like radiant energy forms. I came to town about three weeks ago. I didn't feel you until I got close."

"*There is a connection,*" she thought. She had been wondering about the increased anxiety of the past three weeks.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she evaded icily, though. "I'm no mutant. I don't believe in telepathy. I'm not insane. Now let me alone."

She slammed the telephone in its cradle and started to walk away.

Evidently he was angry, for she was suddenly communi-cating with him again.

She reeled dizzily and clutched at the wall, because she was in two places at once, and the two settings merged in her mind to become a blur, like a double exposure. She was in her own hallway, and she was also in an office, looking at a calculator keyboard, hearing glassware rat-tling from across a corridor, aware of the smell of formaldehyde. There was a chart on the wall behind the desk and it was covered with strange tracery—schematics of some neural arcs. The office of the psychophysics lab. She closed her eyes, and her own hallway disappeared.

She felt anger—his anger.

*"We've got to face this thing. If this is a new direction for human evolution, then we'd better study it and see what to do about it. I knew I was different and I became a psychophysicist to find out why. I haven't been able to measure much, but now with Lisa's help ..."*

She tried to shut him out. She opened her eyes and summoned her strength and tried to force him away. She stared at the bright doorway, but the tracery of neural arcs still remained. She fought him, but his mind lingered in hers.

*"... perhaps we can get to the bottom of it. I know my encephalograph recordings are abnormal, and now I can check them against hers. A few correlations will help. I'm glad to know about her soft fontanel. I wondered about mine. Now I think that underneath that fontanel lies a pattern of specialized neural—"*

She sagged to the floor of the hall and babbled aloud "Hickory Dickory Dock, the mouse ran up the clock. The clock struck one—"

Slowly he withdrew. The laboratory office faded from her vision. His thoughts left her. She lay there panting for a time.

Had she won?

No, there was no sense in claiming victory. She had not driven him away. He had withdrawn of his own volition when he felt her babbling. She knew his withdrawal was free, because she had felt his parting state of mind: sadness. He had stopped the forced contact because he pitied her, and there was a trace of contempt in the pity.

She climbed slowly to her feet, looking around wildly, touching the walls and the door-frame to reassure herself that she was still in her own home. She staggered into the parlor and sat shivering on the sofa.

Last night! That *crazy* running around in the rain! He was responsible for that. He had hoped her into doing it, or maybe he had just wondered what she looked like un-dressed, and she had subconsciously satisfied his curiosity. He had planted the suggestion—innocently, perhaps—and she had unknowingly taken the cue.

He could be with her whenever he wanted to! He had been with her while she frolicked insanely in the rain-sodden grass! Perhaps he was with her now.

Whom could she talk to? Where could she seek help? Dr. Mensley? He would immediately chalk it up as a de-lusion, and probably call for a sanity hearing if she wouldn't voluntarily enter a psycho-ward for observation.

The police? "Sergeant, I want to report a telepathic prowler. A man is burglarizing my mind."

A clergyman? He would shudder and refer her to a psychiatrist.

All roads led to the booby-hatch, it seemed. Frank wouldn't believe her. No one would believe her.

Lisa wandered through the day like a caged animal. She put on her brightest summer frock and a pert straw hat and went downtown. She wandered through the crowds in the business district, window-shopping. But she was alone. The herds of people about her brushed past and wandered on. A man whistled at her in front of a cigar store. A policeman waved her back to the curb when she started across an intersection.

"Wake up, lady!" he called irritably.

People all about her, but she could not tell them, explain to them, and so she was alone. She caught a taxi mid went to visit a friend, the wife of an English teacher, and drank a glass of iced tea in the friend's parlor, and talked of small things, and admitted that she was tired when the friend suggested that she looked that way. When she went back home, the sun was sinking in the west.

She called long distance and talked to her mother, then spoke to her children, asked them if they were ready to come home, but they wanted to stay another week. They begged, and her mother begged, and she reluctantly con-sented. It had been a mistake to call. Now the kids would be gone even longer.

She tried to call Frank in St. Louis, but the hotel clerk reported that he had just checked out. Lisa knew this meant he was on the road again.

"*Maybe I ought to go join the kids at Mother's,*" she thought. But Frank had wanted her to stay home. He was expecting a registered letter from Chicago, and it was ap-parently important, and she had to take care of it.

"*I'll invite somebody over,*" she thought. But the wives were home with their husbands, and it was a so-cial mistake to invite a couple when her husband was gone. It always wound up with two women yammering at each other while the lone male sat and glowered in uneasy isolation, occasionally disagreeing with his wife, just to let her know he was there and he was annoyed and bored and why didn't they go home? It was different if the business-widow called on a couple. Then the lone male could retire to some other part of the house to escape the yammering.

But she decided it wasn't company she wanted; she wanted help. And there was no place to get it.

When she allowed her thoughts to drift toward Ken-neth Gearly, it was almost like tuning in a radio station. He was eating early dinner in the University cafeteria with a bedraggled, bespectacled brunette from the laboratory. Lisa closed her eyes and let herself sift gingerly into his thoughts. His attention was on the conversation and on the food, and he failed to realize Lisa's presence. That knowledge gave her courage.

He was eating Swiss steak and hashed brown potatoes, and the flavors formed perceptions in her mind. She heard the rattle of silverware, the low murmur of voices, and smelled the food. She marveled at it. The strange ability had apparently been brought into focus by learn-ing what it was and how to use it.

"Our work has been too empirical," he was saying. "We've studied phenomena, gathered data, looked for correlations. But that method has limitations. We should try to find a way to approach psychology from below. Like the invariantive approach to physics."

The girl shook her head. "The nervous system is too complicated for writing theoretical equations about it. Empirical equations are the best we can do."

"They aren't good enough, Sarah. You can predict results with them, inside the limits of their accuracy. But you can't extrapolate them very well, and they won't stack up together into a single integrated structure. And when you're investigating a new field, they no longer apply. We need a broad mathematical theory, covering all hypothetically possible neural arrangements. It would let us predict not only results, but also predict patterns of possible order."

"Seems to me the possible patterns are infinite."

"No, Sarah. They're limited by the nature of the build-ing blocks—neurons, synaptic connections, and, so forth. With limited materials, you have structural limitations. You don't build skyscrapers out of modeling clay. And there is only a finite number of ways you can build atoms out of electrons, protons and neutrons. Similarly, brains are confined to the limitations of the things they're made of. We need a broad theory for defining the limits."

"Why?"

"Because . . ." He paused. Lisa felt his urge to explain his urgency, felt him suppress it, felt for a moment his loneliness in the awareness of his uniqueness and the way it isolated him from humanity.

"You must be doing new work," the girl offered, "if you feel the lack of such a theoretical approach. I just can't imagine an invariantive approach to psychology—or an all defining set of laws for it, either. Why do you need such a psychological 'Relativity'?"

He hesitated, frowning down at his plate, watching a fly crawl around its rim. "I'm interested in—in the quantitative aspects of nerve impulses. I—I suspect that there is such a thing as neural resonance."

She laughed politely and shook her head. "I'll stick to my empirical data-gathering, thank you."

He felt him thinking:

*'She could understand, if I could show her data. But my data is all subjective, experimental, personal. I share it with that Waverly woman, but she is only a social thinker, analytically shallow, refusing even to recognize facts. Why did it have to be her? She's flighty, emotional, and in a cultural rut. If she doesn't conform, she thinks she's nuts. But then at least she's a woman—and if this is really a mutation, we'll have to arrange for some children ...'*

Lisa gasped and sat bolt upright. Her shock revealed her presence to him, and he dropped his fork with a clatter.

"Lisa!"

She wrenched herself free of him abruptly. She angrily stalked about the house, slamming doors and muttering her rage. The nerve! The maddening, presumptuous, ill-mannered, self-centered, overly educated boor!

Arrange for some children indeed! An impossible situation!

As her anger gathered momentum, she contacted him again—like a snake striking. Thought was thunder out of a dark cloud.

*"I'm decent and I'm respectable, Mr. Grearly! I have a husband and three fine children and I love them, and you can go to hell! I never want to see you again or have you prowling around my mind. Get out and STAY out. And if you ever bother me again—I'll—I'll kill you."*

He was outdoors, striding across the campus alone. She saw the gray buildings, immersed in twilight, felt the wind on his face, hated him. He was thinking nothing, letting himself follow her angry flow of thought. When she finished, his thoughts began like the passionate pleading of a poem.

He was imagining a human race with telepathic abilities, in near-perfect communication with one another. So many of the world's troubles could be traced to im-perfect communication of ideas, to misunderstandings.

Then he thought briefly of Sarah—the nondescript laboratory girl he had taken to dinner—and Lisa realized he was in love with Sarah. There were sadness and resentment here. He couldn't have Sarah now, not if he were to be certain of perpetuating the mutant character-istic. The Waverly woman ought to be good for three or four children yet, before she reached middle age.

Lisa stood transfixed by shock. Then he was thinking directly to her.

*"I'm sorry. You're a beautiful, intelligent woman—but I don't love you. We're not alike. But I'm stuck with you and you're stuck with me, because I've decided it's going to be that way. I can't convince you since your thinking habits are already fixed, so I won't even try. I'm sorry it has to be against your will, but in any event it has to be. And now that I know what you're like, I don't dare wait—for fear you'll do something to mess things up."*

"No!" she screamed, watching the scenery that moved past his field of vision.

He had left the campus and was walking up the street—toward her neighborhood. He was walking with the briskness of purpose. He was coming to her house.

"Call the police!" she thought, and tried to dissolve him out of her mind.

But this time he followed, clung to her thoughts, would not let her go. It was like two flashlight beams playing over a wall, one trying to escape, the other following its frantic circle of brightness.

She staggered, groped her way toward the hall, which was confused with a superimposed image of a



sidewalk and a street. A phantom automobile came out of the hall wall, drove through her and vanished. Double exposures. He stared at a street light and it blinded her. At last she found the phone, but he was laughing at her.

*"Eight seven six five twenty-one Mary had a little lamb seven seven sixty-seven yesterday was May March April..."*

He was deliberately filling her mind with confusion. She fumbled at the directory, trying to find the police, but he thought a confused jumble of numbers and symbols, and they scampered across the page, blurring the lines.

She whimpered and groped at the phone-dial, trying to get the operator, but he was doing something with his fingertips, and she couldn't get the feel of the dial.

On her third try, it finally worked.

"Information," said a pleasant impersonal voice.

She had to get the police! She had to say

*"Pease porridge hot, pease porridge cold, pease porridge in the pot, nine days pretty pony parrot played peacefully plentiwise pease porridge . . ."*

He was jamming her speech centers with gibberish, and she blurted nonsense syllables into the mouthpiece.

"You'll have to speak more distinctly, madam. I can't understand you."

"Poress, Policer ..."

"The police? Just a moment."

A series of jumbled sounds and visions clouded her mind. Then a masculine voice rumbled, "Desk, Sergeant Harris."

She found a clear path through the confusion and gasped, "Three-oh-oh-three Willow Drive—'mergency come quick—man going to—"

"Three-oh-oh-three Willow. Check. We'll have a car right over there."

She hung up quickly—or tried to—but she couldn't find the cradle. Then her vision cleared, and she screamed. She wasn't in the hall at all!

The telephone was an eggbeater!

His voice came through her trapped panic.

*You might as well give in," he told her with a note of sadness. "I know how to mess you up like that, you see. And you haven't learned to retaliate yet. We're going to cooperate with this evolutionary trend, whether you like it or not—but it would be more pleasant if you agree to it."*

*"No!"*

*"All right, but I'm coming anyway. I hoped it wouldn't be like this. I wanted to convince you gradually. Now I know that it's impossible."*

He was still ten blocks away. She had a few minutes in which to escape. She bolted for the door. A black shadow-shape loomed up in the twilight, flung its arms wide, and emitted an apelike roar.

She yelped and darted back, fleeing frantically for the front. A boa constrictor lay coiled in the hall; it slithered toward her. She screamed again and raced toward the stairway.

She made it to the top and looked back. The living room was filling slowly with murky water. She rushed shrieking into the bedroom and bolted the door.

She smelled smoke. Her dress was on fire! The flames licked up, searing her skin.

She tore at it madly, and got it off, but her slip was afire. She ripped it away, scooped up the flaming clothing on a transom hook, opened the screen, and dropped them out the window. Flames still licked about her, and she rolled up in the bed-clothing to snuff them out.

Quiet laughter.

*"New syndrome," he called to her pleasantly. "The patient confuses someone else's fantasy with her own reality. Not schizophrenia—duophrenia, maybe?"*

She lay sobbing in hysterical desperation. He was just down the street now, coming rapidly up the walk. A car whisked slowly past. He felt her terrified despair and pitied her. The torment ceased.

She stayed there, panting for a moment, summoning spirit. He was nearing the intersection just two

blocks south, and she could hear the rapid traffic with his ears.

Suddenly she clenched her eyes closed and gritted her teeth. He was stepping off the curb, walking across—

She imagined a fire engine thundering toward her like a juggernaut, rumbling and wailing. She imagined another car racing out into the intersection, with herself caught in the crossfire. She imagined a woman screaming, "Look out, Mister!"

And then she was caught in his own responding fright, and it was easier to imagine. He was bolting for the other corner. She conjured a third car from another direction, brought it lunging at him to avoid the impending wreck. He staggered away from the phantom cars and screamed.

A real car confused the scene.

She echoed his scream. There was a moment of rending pain, and then the vision was gone. Brakes were still yowling two blocks away. Someone was running down the sidewalk. A part of her mind had heard the crashing thud. She was desperately sick.

And a sudden sense of complete aloneness told her that Grearly was dead. A siren was approaching out of the distance.

VOICES from the sidewalk: ". . . just threw a fit in the middle of the street . . . running around like crazy and hollering . . . it was a delivery truck . . . crushed his skull . . . nobody else hurt ..."

After the street returned to normal, she arose and went to get a drink of water. But she stood staring at her sick white face in the mirror. There were crow's feet forming at the corners of her eyes, and her skin was growing tired, almost middle-aged.

It was funny that she should notice that now, at this strange moment. She had just killed a man in self-defense. And no one would believe it if she told the truth. There was no cause for guilt.

Was there?

Frank would be back soon, and everything would be the same again: peace, security, nice kids, nice home, nice husband. Just the way it always had been.

But something was already different. An emptiness. A loneliness of the mind that she had never before felt. She kept looking around to see if the lights hadn't gone dim, or the clock stopped ticking, or the faucet stopped dripping.

It was none of those things. The awful silence was within her.

Gingerly, she touched the soft spot in the top of her head and felt an utter aloneness. She closed her eyes and thought a hopeless plea to the Universe:

*"Is there anybody else like me? Can anybody hear me?"*

There was only complete silence, the silence of the voiceless void.

And for the first time in her life she felt the confinement of total isolation and knew it for what it was.

## Conditionally Human

HE KNEW there was no use hanging around after breakfast, but he could not bear leaving her like this. He put on his coat in the kitchen, stood uncertainly in the doorway, and twisted his hat in his hands. His wife still sat at the table, fingered the handle of an empty cup, stared fixedly out the window at the kennels behind the house, and pointedly ignored his small coughings and scrapings. He watched the set of her jaw for a moment, then cleared his throat.

"Anne?"

"What?"

"I can't stand seeing you like this."

"Then go away."

"Can't I do anything—?"

"I told you what to do."

Her voice was a monotone, full of hurt. He could neither endure the hurt nor remove it. He gingerly

crossed the room to stand behind her, hoping she'd look up at him and let her face go soft, maybe even cry a little. But she kept gazing at the win-dow in accusing silence. He chuckled suddenly and touched her silk-clad shoulder. The shoulder shivered away. Her dark hair quivered as she shuddered, and her arms were suddenly locked tightly about her breasts as if she were cold. He pulled his hand back, and his big pliant face went slack. He gulped forlornly.

"Honeymoon's over, huh?"

"Ha!"

He backed a step away, paused again. "Hey, Baby, you knew before you married me," he reminded her gently.

"I did not."

"You knew I was a District Inspector for the F.B.A. You knew I had charge of a pound."

"I didn't know you *killed* them!" she snapped, whirling.

"I don't have to kill many," he offered.

"That's like saying you don't kill them very dead."

"Look, honey, they're only animals."

"*Intelligent* animals!"

"Intelligent as a human imbecile, maybe."

"A baby is an imbecile. Would you kill a baby?— Of course you would! You do! That's what they are: babies. I hate you." He withered, groped desperately for a new approach, tried a semantic tack.

"Look, 'intelligence' is a word applicable only to humans. It's the name of a human function, and . . ."

"And that makes *them* human!" she finished. "Murderer!"

"Baby—!"

"Don't call *me* baby! Call *them* baby!"

He made a miserable noise in his throat, backed a few steps toward the door, and beat down his better judgment to speak again: "Anne, honey, look! Think of the *good* things about the job. Sure—everything has its ugly angles. But just think: we get this house rent-free; I've got my own district with no local bosses to hound me; I make my own hours; you'll meet lots of people that stop in at the pound. It's a *fine* job, honey!"

Her face was a mask again. She sipped her coffee and seemed to be listening. He blundered hopefully on.

"And what can I do about it? I can't help my aptitudes. Place-ment Division checked them, sent me to Bio-Authority. Period. Okay, so I don't *have* to work where they send me. I could ig-nore the aptitudes and pick common labor, but that's all the law allows, and common laborers don't have families. So I go where they need my aptitudes."

"You've got aptitudes for killing kids?" she asked sweetly. He groaned, clenched his eyes closed, shook his head fiercely as if to clear it of a sudden ache. His voice went desperately pa-tient. "They assigned me to the job because I *like* babies. And because I have a degree in biology and an aptitude for dealing with people. Understand? Destroying unclaimed units is the smallest part of it. Honey, before the evolvotron, before anybody ever heard of Anthropos Incorporated, people used to elect animal catchers. Dogcatchers, they called them. Didn't have mutant dogs, of course. But just think of it that way—I'm a dog-catcher."

Ice-green eyes turned slowly to meet his gaze. Her face was delicately cut from cold marble. One corner of her mouth twitched contempt at him. Her head turned casually away again to stare out the window toward the kennels again.

He backed to the door, plucked nervously at a splinter on the woodwork, watched her hopefully for a moment.

"Well, gotta go. Work to do."

She looked at him again as if he were a specimen. "Do you need to be kissed?"

He ripped the splinter loose, gulped, "See you tonight," and stumbled toward the front of the house. The honeymoon indeed was done for District Inspector Norris of the Federal Biological Authority.

Anne heard his footsteps on the porch, heard the sudden grumble of the kennel-truck's turbines,

choked on a sob and darted for the door, but the truck had backed into the street, lurched suddenly away with angry acceleration toward the highway that lay to the east. She stood blinking into the red morning sunlight, shoulders slumped. Things were wrong with the world, she decided.

A bell rang somewhere, rang again. She started slightly, shook herself, went to answer the telephone. A carefully enunciated voice that sounded chubby and professional called for Inspector Norris. She told it disconsolately that he was gone.

"Gone? Oh, you mean to work. Heh heh. Can this be the new Mrs. Norris?" The voice was too hearty and greasy, she thought, muttered affirmatively.

"Ah, yes. Norris spoke of you, my dear. This is Doctor Georges. I have a very urgent problem to discuss with your husband. But perhaps I can talk to you."

"You can probably get him on the highway. There's a phone in the truck." What sort of urgent problems could doctors discuss with dogcatchers, she wondered.

"Afraid not, my dear. The inspector doesn't switch on his phone until office hours. I know him well, you see."

"Can't you wait?"

"It's really an emergency, Mrs. Norris. I need an animal from the pound—a Chimp-K-48-3, preferably a five year old."

"I know nothing about my husband's business," she said stiffly. "You'll have to talk to him."

"Now see here, Mrs. Norris, this is an emergency, and I have to have ..."

"What would you do if I hadn't answered the phone?" she interrupted.

"Why I—I would have—"

"Then do it," she snapped, dropped the phone in its cradle, marched angrily away. The phone began ringing again. She paused to glance back at it with a twinge of guilt. Emergency, the fat voice had said. But what sort of emergency would in-volve a chimp K-48, and what would Georges do with the ani-mal? Butchery, she suspected, was somehow implied. She let the phone ring. If Norris ever, ever, ever asked her to share his work in any way, she'd leave him, she told herself.

The truck whirled slowly along the suburban street that wound among nestled groups of pastel plasticoid cottages set approximately two to an acre on the lightly wooded land. With its population legally fixed at three hundred million, most of the country had become one gigantic suburb, dotted with com-munity centers and lined with narrow belts of industrial develop-ment. There was no open country now, nor had there been since the days of his grandparents. There was nowhere that one could feel alone.

He approached an intersection. A small animal sat on the curb, wrapped in its own bushy tail. The crown of its oversized head was bald, but its body was covered with blue-gray fur. A pink tongue licked daintily at small forepaws equipped with prehensile thumbs. It eyed the truck morosely as Norris drew to a halt and smiled down out of the window at it.

"Hi, kitten," he called. "What's *your* name?"

The Cat-Q-5 stared at him indifferently for a moment, uttered a stuttering high-pitched wail, then cried: "Kitty Rorry."

"Kitty Rorry. That's a nice name. Where do you live, Rorry?"

The Cat-Q-5 ignored him.

"Whose child are you, Rorry? Can you tell me that?"

Rorry regarded him disgustedly. Norris glanced quickly around. There were no houses near the intersection, and he feared that the animal might be lost. It blinked at him, sleepily bored, then resumed its paw-bath. He repeated the questions.

"Mama kiyi, kiyi Mama," it finally reported.

"That's right, Mama's kitty. But where's Mama? Do you suppose she ran away?"

The Cat-Q-5 looked startled. It stuttered for a moment. Its fur crept slowly erect. It glanced both ways along the street, shot suddenly away at a fast scamper along the sidewalk. Norris followed it in the truck for two blocks, where it darted onto a porch and began wailing through the screen: "Mama no run

ray! Mama no run ray!"

He chuckled and drove on. A couple who failed the genetic requirements, who could have no children of their own, could get quite attached to a Cat-Q-5, but the cats were emotionally safer than any of the quasi-human chimp-K models called "neu-troids." The death of a neutroid could strike a family as hard as the death of a child, while most couples could endure the loss of a cat-Q or a dog-F. A couple with a genetic "C" rating were permitted to own one neutroid, or two non-humanized models of daily food intake less than four hundred calories each. Most psychologists regarded the neutroids as emotional dynamite, and advised attaching affections to some tail-wagger with a lower love-demand potential.

Norris suddenly lost his vestigial smile. What about Anne? What outlet would she choose for her maternal needs?—for his own Social Security card was stamped "Genetic-C"—and Anne loved kids. He had been thinking in terms of the kennel animals, how she might direct her energies toward helping him take care of them, but now that her hostility was evident . . . well . . . suppose she wanted a pseudoparty and a neutroid of her own? Of this, he disapproved.

He shuddered slightly, fumbled in his pocket, and brought out a slightly battered invitation card that had come in yesterday's mail:

You are cordially invited  
to attend the pseudoparturition  
and ensuing cocktail hour  
to celebrate the arrival of  
HONEY BLOSSOM  
Blessed event to occur on  
Twelveweek's Sixday of 2063  
at 19:30 hours  
Reception Room, Rockabye Hours Clinic  
R.s.v.p.      Mr. & Mrs. John Hanley Slade

The invitation had come late, the party would be tonight. He had meant to call Slade today and say that he and Anne would probably drop in for cocktails, but would be unable to get there in time for the delivery. But now that she had reacted so hostilely to the nastier aspects of his job, perhaps he had better keep her away from sentimental occasions involving neutroids.

The battered card reminded him to stop in Sherman III Com-munity Center for his mail. He turned onto the shopping street that paralleled the great highway and drove past several blocks of commercial buildings that served the surrounding suburbs. At the down-ramp he gave the attendant a four-bit bill and sent the truck down to be parked under the street, then went to the message office. When he dropped his code-disk in the slot, the feedway under his box number chattered out a yard of paper tape at him. He scanned it slowly from end to end—note from Aunt Maye, bill from SynZhamilk Products, letter from Anne's mother. The only thing of importance was the memo from the chief, a troublesome tidbit that he had been expecting for days:

*Attention All District Inspectors: Subject: Deviant Neutroid.*

*You will immediately begin a systematic and thorough survey of all animals whose serial numbers fall in the Bermuda-K-99 series for birth dates during weeks 26 to 32 of year 2062. This is in connection with the Delmont Negligency case. Seize all animals in this category, impound, and run applicable sections of nor-malcy tests. Watch for signs of endocrinal deviation and non-standard response patterns. Delmont has confessed to passing only one non-standard model, but there may have been others. He disclaims memory of deviant's serial number. This could be a ruse to bring a stop to investigation when one animal is found. Be thorough.*

*If allowed to reach age-set or adulthood, such a deviant could be dangerous to its owner or to others. Hold all seized K-99s who exhibit the slightest departure from standard in the nor-malcy tests. Forward these to Central Lab. Return standard mod-els to their owners. Accomplish entire*

*survey project within seven days.*

*C. Franklin*

"Seven days!" he hissed irritably, wadded the tape in his pocket, stalked out to get the truck.

His district covered two hundred square miles. With a replacement quota of seventy-five neutroids a week, the district would have probably picked up about forty *K-99s* from the Bermuda factory influx during the six-week period last year. Could he round them up in a week? Doubtful. And there were only eleven empty cages in the kennel. The other forty-nine were occupied by the previous inspector's "unclaimed" inventory—awaiting destruction. The crematorium behind the kennels would have a busy week. Anne would love that.

He was halfway to Wylo City when the radiophone buzzed on the dashboard. He pulled into the slow lane and answered quickly, hoping for Anne's voice. A polite professional purr came instead.

"Inspector Norris? Doctor Georges."

Norris made a sour mouth, managed a jovial greeting.

"Are you extremely busy at the moment?" Georges asked. He paused. Georges usually wanted a favor for some wealthy patient, or for some wealthy patient's tail-wagger.

"Extremely," he grunted.

"Eh? Oh well, this won't take long. One of my patients—a Mrs. Sarah Glubbes—called a while ago and said her baby was sick."

"So?"

"No baby. I must be getting absent minded, because I forgot she's class C until I got there."

"I'll guess," Norris muttered. "Turned out to be a neutroid."

"Of course, of course."

"Why tell me?"

"It's dying. Eighteenth order virus. Naturally, I can't get it admitted to a hospital."

"Ever hear of vets?"

"You don't understand. She insists it's her baby, believes it's her own. How can I send it to a vet?"

"That's your worry. Is this an old patient of yours?"

"Why, yes, I've known Sarah since—"

"Since you presided at her pseudopart?"

"How did you know?"

"Just a guess. If you put her through pseudopart, then you deserve all the trouble you get."

"I take it you're a prohibitionist."

"Skip it. What did you want from me?"

"A replacement neutroid. From the kennel."

"Baloney. You couldn't fool her. If she's blind, she'd still know the difference."

"I'll have to take the chance. Listen, Norris, it's pathetic. She knows the disease *can* be cured—in humans—with hospitaliza-tion and expensive treatment that I can't *get* for a neutroid. No vet could get the drug either. Scarce. It's pathetic."

"I'm crying all over the steering wheel."

The doctor hesitated. "Sorry, Norris, I thought you were hu-man."

"Not to the extent of doing quasi-legal favors that won't be ap-preciated for some rich neurotic dame and a doc who practices pseudopart."

"One correction," Georges said stiffly. "Sarah's not rich. She's a middle-aged widow and couldn't pay for treatment if she could get it."

"Oh—"

"Thanks anyway, Norris."

"Hold it," he grunted. "What's the chimp's series?" "It's a K-48, a five-year-old with a three-year age set." Norris thought for a moment. It was a dirty deal, and it wouldn't work.

"I think I've got one in the kennel that's fairly close," he offered doubtfully.

"Good, good, I'll have Fred go over and—"

"Wait, now. This one'll be spooky, won't know her, and the serial number will be different."

"I know, I know," Georges sighed. "But it seems worth a try. An attack of V-i8 can cause mild amnesia in humans; that might explain why it won't know her. About the serial number—"

"Don't try changing it," Norris growled.

"How about obliterating—"

"Don't, and I'll check on it a couple of weeks from now to make damn sure you didn't. That's a felony, Georges."

"All right, all right, I'll just have to take the chance that she won't notice it. When can I pick it up?"

"Call my wife in fifteen minutes. I'll speak to her first."

"Uh, yes . . . Mrs. Norris. Uh, very well, thanks, Inspector." Georges hung up quickly.

Norris lit a cigaret, steeled himself, called Anne. Her voice was dull, depressed, but no longer angry.

"All right, Terry," she said tonelessly. "I'll go out to the kennel and get the one in cage thirty-one, and give it to Georges when he comes."

"Thanks, babe."

He heard her mutter, "And then I'll go take a bath," just before the circuit clicked off.

He flipped off the auto-driver, took control of the truck, slipped into the fast lane and drove furiously toward Wylo City and the district wholesale offices of Anthropol Incorporated to begin tracing down the suspected Bermuda K-99s in accordance with Franklin's memo. He would have to check through all incoming model files for the six week period, go over the present inventory, then run down the Bermuda serial numbers in a mountain of invoices covering a thirty-week period, find the pet shops and retail dealers that had taken the doubtful models, and finally survey the retail dealers to trace the models to their present owners. With cooperation from wholesaler and dealers, he might get it down to the retail level by mid-afternoon, but getting the models away from their owners would be the nasty part of the job. He was feeling pretty nasty himself, he decided. The spat with Anne, the distasteful thoughts associated with Slade's pseudoparty, the gnawing remorse about collaborating with Dr. Georges in a doubtful maneuver to pacify one Sarah Glubbes, a grim week's work ahead, plus his usual charge of suppressed resentment toward Chief Franklin—it all added up to a mood that could turn either black or vicious, depending on circumstance.

If some doting Mama gave him trouble about impounding her darling tail-wagger, he was, he decided, in the right kind of mood to get a warrant and turn the job over to the sheriff.

The gasping neutroid lay on the examining table under the glaring light. The torso quivered and twitched as muscles contracted spasmodically, but the short legs were already limp and paralyzed, allowing the chubby man in the white coat to lift them easily by the ankles and retrieve the rectal thermometer. The neutroid wheezed and chattered plaintively as the nurse drew the blanket across its small body again.

"A hundred and nine," grunted the chubby man, his voice muffled by the gauze mask. His eyes probed the nurse's eyes for a moment. He jerked his head toward the door. "She still out there?"

The nurse nodded.

The doctor stared absently at the thermometer stem for a moment, looked up again, spoke quietly. "Get a hypo—necrofine." She turned toward the sterilizer, paused briefly. "Three c.c.s?" she asked.

"Twelve," he corrected.

Their eyes locked with his for several seconds; then she nodded and went to the sterilizer.

"May I leave first?" she asked tonelessly while filling the syringe.

"Certainly."

"What'll I say to Mrs. Glubbes?" She crossed to the table again and handed him the hypo.

"Nothing. Use the back way. Go tell Fred to run over to the kennels and pick up the substitute. I've called Mrs. Norris. Oh yeah, and tell Fred to stop in here first. I'll have something for him to take out."

The nurse glanced down at the squirming, whimpering newt, shivered slightly, and left the room. When the door closed, Georges bent over the table with the hypo. When the door opened again, Georges looked up to see his son looking in.

"Take this along," he grunted, and handed Fred the bundle wrapped in newspapers.

"What'll I do with it?" the youth asked.

"Chuck it in Norris's incinerator."

Fred glanced at the empty examining table and nodded indifferently. "Can Miss Laskell come back now?" he asked in go-ing.

"Tell her yeah. And hurry with that other neut."

"Sure, Pop. See you later."

The nurse looked in uncertainly before entering.

"Get cleaned up," he told her. "And go sit with Mrs. Glubbes."

"What'll I say?"

"The 'baby' will recover. She can take it home late this afternoon if she gets some rest first."

"What're you going to do?—about the substitute."

"Give it a shot to put it to sleep, give her some codeine to feed it."

"Why?"

"So it'll be too groggy for a few days to even notice her, so it'll get addicted and attached to her because she gives it the coedine."

"The serial number?"

"I'll put the tattooed foot in a cast. V-18 paralysis—you know."

"Smart," she muttered, but there was no approval in her voice.

When she had changed clothes in the anteroom, she unlocked the door to the office, but paused before passing on into the reception room. The door was ajar, and she gazed through the crack at the woman who sat on the sofa.

Sarah Glubbes was gray and gaunt and rigid as stone. She sat with her hands clenched in her lap, her wide empty eyes—dull blue spots on yellowed marble orbs—staring ceilingward while the colorless lips of a knife-slash mouth moved tautly in earnest prayer. The nurse's throat felt tight. She rubbed it for a moment. After all, the thing was only an animal.

She straightened her shoulders, put on a cheerful smile, and marched on into the reception room. The yellowed orbs snapped demandingly toward her.

"Everything's *all* right, Mrs. Glubbes," she began.

"Finished," Norris grunted at three o'clock that afternoon.

"Thirty-six K-99s," murmured the Anthropos file-clerk, gazing over Norris's shoulder at the clip-board with the list of doubtful neuts and the dealers to whom they had been sent. "Lots of owners may be hard to locate."

"Yeah. Thanks, Andy, and you too, Mabel."

The girl smiled and handed him a slip of paper. "Here's a list of owners for thirteen of them. I called the two local shops for you. Most of them live here close."

He glanced at the names, felt tension gathering in his stom-ach. It wasn't going to be easy. What could he say to them?

*Howdy, Ma'am, excuse me, but I've come to take your little boy away to jail ... Oh, yes ma'am, he'll have a place to stay—in a little steel cage with a forkful of straw, and he'll get vitamin-ized mush every day. What's that? His sleepy-time stories and his pink honey-crumbles? Sorry, ma'am, your little boy is only a mutated chimpanzee, you know, and not really human at all.*

"That'll go over great," he grumbled, staring absently at the window.

"Beg pardon, sir?" answered the clerk.

"Nothing, Andy, nothing." He thanked them again and strode out into the late afternoon sunlight. Still a couple of hours work-ing time left, and plenty of things to do. Checking with the other retail dealers would be the least unpleasant task, but there was no use saving the worst until last. He glanced at the list Mabel had given him, checked it for the nearest address, then squared his shoulders and headed for the kennel truck.

Anne met him at the door when he came home at six. He stood on the porch for a moment, smiling at her weakly. The smile was not returned.



"Doctor Georges' boy came," she told him. "He signed for the—"

She stopped to stare at him, then opened the screen, reached up quickly to brush light fingertips over his cheek.

"Terry! Those welts! What happened—get scratched by a cat-Q?"

"No, by a human-F," he grumbled, and stepped past her into the hall; Anne followed, eyeing him curiously while he reached for the phone and dialed.

"Who're you calling?" she asked.

"Society's Watchdog," he answered as the receiver buzzed in his ear.

"Your eye, Terry—it's all puffy. Will it turn black?"

"Maybe."

"Did the human-F do that too?"

"Uh-uh. Human-M—name of Pete Klusky ...

The phone croaked at him suddenly. *"This is the record-voice of Sheriff Yates. I'll be out from five to seven. If it's urgent, call your constable."*

He hung up briefly, then irritably dialed the locator service. *"Mnemonic register, trail calls, and official locations,"* grated a mechanical voice. *"Your business, please."*

"This is T. Norris, Sherman-9-4566-78B, Official rating B, Pri-ority B, code XT-88-U-Bio. Get Sheriff Yates for me." *"Nature of the call?"*

"Offish biz."

*"I shall record the call."*

He waited. The robot found Yates on the first probability-trial attempt—in the local pool-hall.

"I'm getting to hate that infernal gadget," Yates snapped. "Acts like it's got me psyched. Whattaya want, Norris?"

"Cooperation. I'm mailing you three letters charging three Wylo citizens with resisting a federal official—namely me—and charging one of them with assault. I tried to pick up their neu-troids for a pound inspection, and—"

Yates bellowed lusty laughter in his ear.

"Not funny," he growled. "I've got to get those neutroids. It's connected with the Delmont case."

Yates stopped laughing. "Oh? Well . . . I'll take care of it."

"Rush order, Sheriff. Can you get the warrants tonight and pick up the animals in the morning?"

"Easy on those warrants, boy. Judge Charleman can't be bothered just any time. I can get the newts to you by noon, I guess, provided we don't have to get a helicopter posse to chase down the mothers."

"Well, okay—but listen—I want the charges dropped if they cooperate with you. And don't shake the warrants at them unless you have to. Just get those newts, that's all I want."

"Okay, boy. Give me the dope."

Norris read him the names and addresses of the three unwill-ing owners, and a precise account of what happened in each case. As soon as he hung up, Anne muttered "Sit still," perched on his knees, and began stroking chilly ointment across his burn-ing cheek. He watched her cool eyes flicker from his cheek to his own eyes and down again. She was no longer angry, but only gloomy and withdrawn from him. He touched her arm. She seemed not to notice it.

"Hard day, Terry?"

"Slightly. I picked up nine newts out of thirteen, anyhow. They're in the truck now."

"Good thing you didn't get them all. There are only twelve empty cages."

"Twelve?—oh, Georges picked one up, didn't he?"

"And sent a package," she said, eyeing him soberly.

"Package? Where is it?"

"In the crematorium. The boy took it back there." He swallowed a tight spot in his throat, said nothing.

"Oh, and darling—Mrs. Slade called. Why didn't you tell me we're going out tonight?"

"Going—out?" It sounded a little weak.

"Well, she said she hadn't heard from you. I couldn't very well say no, so I told her *I'd* be there, at

least."

"You—?"

"Oh, I didn't say about you, Terry. I said you'd like to go, but you might have to work. I'll go alone if you don't want to."

He stared at her with a puzzled frown. "You want to go to the psuedoparty?"

"Not particularly. But I've never been to one. I'm just curi-ous."

He nodded slowly, felt grim inside. She finished with the oint-ment, patted his cheek, managed a cheerful smile.

"Come on, Terry. Let's go unload your nine neutroids." He stared at her dumbly.

"Let's forget about this morning, Terry."

He nodded. She averted her face suddenly, and her lip quiv-ered. "I—I know you've got a job that's got to be—" She swal-lowed hard and turned away. "See you out in the kennels," she choked gaily, then hurried down the hall toward the door. Nor-ris scratched his chin unhappily as he watched her go.

After a moment, he dialed the mnemonic register again. "Keep a line on this number," he ordered after identifying himself. "If Yates or Franklin calls, ring continuously until I can get in to answer. Otherwise, just memorize the call."

"Instructions acknowledged," answered the circuitry.

He went out to the kennels to help Anne unload the neutroids.

A sprawling concrete barn housed the cages, and the barn was sectioned into three large rooms, one housing the fragile, humanoid chimpanzee-mutants, and another for the lesser breeds such as cat-Qs, dog-Fs, dwarf bears, and foot-high lambs that never matured into sheep. The third room contained a small gas chamber, with a conveyor belt leading from it to the crema-torium. He usually kept the third room locked, but he noticed in passing that it was open. Evidently Anne had found the keys in order to let Fred Georges dump his package.

A Noah's Ark Chorus greeted him as he passed through the animal room, to be replaced by the mindless chatter of the doll-like neutroids as soon as he entered the air conditioned neutroid-section. Dozens of blazing blond heads began dancing about their cages. Their bodies thwacked against the wire mesh as they leaped about their compartments with monkey-grace, in recognition of their feeder and keeper.

Their human appearance was broken only by two distinct features: short beaverlike tails decorated with fluffy curls of fur and an erect thatch of scalp hair that grew up into a bright candle-flame. Otherwise, they appeared completely human, with baby-pink skin, quick little smiles, and cherubic faces. They were sexually neuter and never grew beyond a predetermined age-set which varied for each series. Age-sets were available from one to ten years, human equivalent. Once a neutroid reached its age-set, it remained at this stage of retarded development until death.

"They must be getting to know you pretty well," Anne said as she came from behind a section of cages. "A big loud welcome for Pappa, huh?"

He frowned slightly as he glanced around the gloomy room and sniffed the animal odors. "That's funny. They don't usually get this excited."

She grinned. "Big confession: it started when I came in."

He shot her a quick suspicious glance, then walked slowly along a row of cages, peering inside. He stopped suddenly be-side a three year old K-76 to stare.

*"Apple cores!"*

He turned slowly to face his wife, trying to swallow a sudden spurt of anger.

"Well?" he demanded.

Anne reddened. "I felt sorry for them, eating that goo from the mechanical feeders. So I drove down to Sherman III and bought six dozen cooking apples."

"That was a mistake."

She frowned irritably. "We can afford it."

"That's not the point. There's a reason for mechanical feed-ings."

"Oh? What is it?"

He hesitated, knowing she wouldn't like the answer. But she was already stiffening.

"Let me guess," she said coldly. "If you feed them yourself they get to love you. Right?"

"Uh, yeah. They even attach some affection to me because they know that right after I come in, the feeders get turned on."

"I see. And if they love you, you might get queasy about run-ning them through Room 3's production line, eh?"

"That's about the size of it," he admitted.

"Okay, Terry, I feed them apples, you run your production line," she announced firmly. "I can't see anything contradictory about that, can you?"

Her eyes told him that he had damn well better see something contradictory about it, whether he admitted it or not.

"Planning to get real chummy with them, are you?" he in-quired stiffly.

"Planning to dispose of any soon?" she countered.

"Honeymoon's off again, eh?"

She shook her head slowly, came toward him a little. "I hope not, Terry—I hope not." She stopped again. They watched each other doubtfully amid the chatter of the neutroids.

After a time, he turned and walked to the truck, pulled out the snare-pole and began fishing for the squealing, squeaking doll-things that bounded about like frightened monkeys in the truck's wire mesh cage. They were one-family pets, always frightened of strangers, and these in the truck remembered him only as the villain who had dragged them away from Mamma into a terrifying world of whirling scenery and roaring traffic.

They worked for a time without talking; then Anne asked casually: "What's the Delmont case, Terry?"

"Huh? What makes you ask?"

"I heard you mention it on the phone. Anything to do with a black eye and a scratched face?"

He nodded sourly. "Indirectly. It's a long story. Well—you know about the evolvotron."

"Only that Anthropos Incorporated uses it to induce muta-tions."

"It's sort of a sub-atomic surgical instrument—for doing `plastic surgery' to reproductive cells—Here! Grab this chimp! Got him by the leg."

"Oop! Got him. . . . Go ahead, Terry."

"Using an evolvotron on the gene-structure of an ovum is likeplaying microscopic billiards—with protons and deuterons and alpha particles for cue-balls. The operator takes the living ovum, mounts it in the device, gets a tremendously magnified image of it with the slow-neutrino shadowscope, compares the image with a gene-map, starts gouging out submolecular tidbits with single-particle shots. He juggles them around, hammers chunks in where nothing was before, plugs up gaps, makes new gaps. Catch?"

She looked thoughtful, nodded. "Catch. And the Lord Man made neutroid from the slime of an ape," she murmured.

"Heh? Here, catch this critter! Snare's choking him!"

"Okay—come to Mamma . . . Well, go on—tell me about Delmont."

"Delmont was a green evolvotron operator. Takes years of training, months of practice."

"Practice?"

"It's an art more than a science. Speed's the thing. You've got to perform the whole operation from start to finish in a few sec-onds. Ovum dies if you take too long."

"About Delmont—"

"Got through training and practice tryouts okay. Good rating, in fact. But he was just one of those people that blow up when rehearsals stop and the act begins. He spoiled over a hundred ova the first week. That's to be expected. One success out of ten tries is a good average. But he didn't get any successes."

"Why didn't they fire him?"

"Threatened to. Guess he got hysterical. Anyhow, he reported one success the next day. It was faked. The ovum had a couple of flaws—something wrong in the nervous system's determinants, and in the endocrinal setup. Not a standard neutroid ovum. He passed it on to the incubators to get a credit,

knowing it wouldn't be caught until after birth."

"It wasn't caught at all?"

"Heh. He was afraid it might *not* be caught. So he suppressed the testosterone flow to its incubator so that it *would* be—later on."

"Why that?"

"All the neutroids are potential females, you know. But male hormone is pumped to the foetus as it develops. Keeps female sexuality from developing, results in a neuter. He decided that the inspectors would surely catch a female, and that would be blamed on a malfunction of the incubator, not on him."

"So?"

Norris shrugged. "So inspectors are human. So maybe a guy came on the job with a hangover and missed a trick or two. Besides, they all *look* female. Anyhow, she didn't get caught."

"How did they ever find out Delmont did it?"

"He got caught last month—trying it again. Confessed to doing it once before. No telling how many times he *really* did it."

Norris held up the final kicking, squealing, tassel-haired doll from the back of the kennel-truck. He grinned down at Anne.

"Now take this little yep, for instance. Might be a potential she. Might also be a potential murderer. *All* these kiddos from the truck came from the machines in the section where Delmont worked last year when he passed that fake. Can't have non-standard models on the loose. Can't have sexed models either—then they'd breed, get out of hand. The evolvotron could be shut down any time it became necessary, and when that generation of mutants died off . . ." He shrugged.

Anne caught the struggling baby-creature in her arms. It struggled and tried to bite, but subsided a little when she disentangled it from the snare.

"Kkr-r-reeee!" it cooed nervously. "Kree Kkr-r-reeee!"

"You tell him you're no murderer," she purred to it.

He watched disapprovingly while she fondled it. One code he had accepted: steer clear of emotional attachments. It was eight months old and looked like a child of two years—a year short of its age-set. And it was designed to be as affectionate as a human child.

"Put it in the cage, Anne," he said quietly.

She looked up and shook her head.

"It belongs to somebody else. Suppose it transfers its fixation to you? You'd be robbing its owners. They can't love many peo-ple at once."

She snorted, but installed the thing in its cage.

"Anne—" Norris hesitated, knowing that it was a bad time to approach the subject, but thinking about Slade's pseudoparty tonight, and wondering why she had accepted.

"What, Terry?"

He leaned on the snare pole and watched her. "Do you want one of them for yourself? I can sign an unclaimed one over to you. Wouldn't cost anything."

She stared at him evenly for a moment, glanced down at her feet, paced slowly to the window to stand hugging her arms and looking out into the twilight.

"With a pseudoparty, Terry?"

He swallowed a lump of anxiety, found his voice. "Whatever you want."

"I hear the phone ringing in the house."

He waited.

"It stopped," she said after a moment.

"Well, babe?"

"Whatever I want, Terry?" She turned slowly to lean back against a patch of gray light and look at him.

He nodded. "Whatever you want."

"I want your child."

He stiffened with hurt, stared at her open-mouthed. "I want your child."

He thrust his hand slowly in his hip pocket.

"Oh, don't reach for your social security card. I don't care if it's got 'Genetic triple-Z' on it. I want your child."

"Uncle Federal says 'no,' babe."

"To hell with Uncle Federal! They can't send a human through your Room 3! Not yet, anyhow! If it's born, the world's stuck with it!"

"And the parents are forcibly separated, reduced to common-labor status. Remember?"

She stamped her foot and whirled to the window again. "Damn the whole hellish world!" she snarled.

Norris sighed heavily. He was sorry she felt that way. She was probably right in feeling that way, but he was still sorry. Righteous anger, frustrated, was no less searing a psychic acid than the unrighteous sort, nor did a stomach pause to weigh the moral worth of the wrath that drenched it before giving birth to an ulcer.

"Hey, babe, if we're going to the Slade affair—"

She nodded grimly and turned to walk with him toward the house. At least it was better having her direct her anger at the world rather than at him, he thought.

The expectant mother played three games of badminton before sundown, then went inside to shower and dress before the guests arrived. Her face was wreathed in a merry smile as she trotted downstairs in a fresh smock, her neck still pink from the hot water, her wake fragrant with faint perfume. There was no apparent need for the smock, nor was there any pregnant caution in the way she threw her arms around John's neck and kicked her heels up behind.

"Darling!" she chirped. "There'll be plenty of milk. I never believed in bottle-feeding. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Great. The injections are working, I guess."

She looked around. "It's a lovely resort-hospital. I'm glad you didn't pick Angel's Haven."

"So am I," he grunted. "We'll have the reception room all to ourselves tonight."

"What time is it?"

"Seven ten. Oh, the doc called to say he'd be a few minutes late. He was busy all day with a sick baby."

She licked her lips and glanced aside uneasily. "Class A couple?"

"No, doll. Class C—and a widow."

"Oh." She brightened again, watched his face teasingly. "Will you pace and chain-smoke while I'm in delivery?"

He snorted amusement. "Hey, it's not as if you were really . . ." He stopped amid a fit of coughing.

"Not as if I really what?"

His mouth opened and closed. He stammered helplessly. "*Not as if I were really what?*" she demanded, eyes beginning to brim.

"Listen, darling, I didn't mean . . ."

A nurse came clicking across the floor. "Mrs. Slade, it's time for your first injection. Doctor Georges just called. Will you come with me please?"

"Not as if I what, John?" she insisted, ignoring the nurse. "Nothing, doll, nothing—"

"Mrs. Slade—"

"All right, nurse, I'm coming." She tossed her husband a hurt glance, walked away dabbing at her eyes.

"Expectant dames is always cranky," sympathized an attendant who sat on a bench nearby. "Take it easy. She won't be so touchy after it comes."

John Hanley Slade shot an irritable glare at the eavesdropper, saw a friendly comedian-face grinning at him, returned the grin uneasily, and went over to sit down.

"Your first?"

John Hanley nodded, stroked nervously at his thin hair. "I see 'em come, I see 'em go. It's always the same." "Whattaya mean?" John grunted.

"Same expressions, same worries, same attitudes, same conversation, same questions. The guy always makes some remark about how it's not *really* having a baby, and the dame always gets sore. Happens every time."

"It's all pretty routine for you, eh?" he muttered stiffly.

The attendant nodded. He watched the expectant father for several seconds, then grunted: "Go ahead, ask me." "Ask you what?"

"If I think all this is silly. They always do."

John stared at the attendant irritably. "Well—?"

"Do I think it's silly? No, I don't."

"Fine. That's settled, then."

"No, I don't think it's silly, because for a dame ain't satisfied if she plunks down the dough, buys a newt, and lets it go at that. There's something missing between bedroom and baby."

"That so?"

John's sarcastic tone was apparently lost on the man. "It's so," he announced. "Physiological change—that's what's missing. For a newt to really take the place of a baby, the mother's got to go through the whole build-up. Doc gives her injections, she craves pickles and mangoes. More injections for morning sickness. More injections, she gets chubby. And finally the shots to bring milk, labor, and false delivery. So then she gets the newt, and everything's right with the world."

"Mmmph."

"Ask me something else," the attendant offered.

John looked around helplessly, spied an elderly woman near the entrance. She had just entered, and stood looking around as if lost or confused. He did not recognize her, but he got up quickly.

"Excuse me, chum. Probably one of my guests."

"Sure, sure. I gotta get on the job anyhow."

The woman turned to stare at him as he crossed the floor to meet her. Perhaps one of Mary's friends, he thought. There were at least a dozen people coming that he hadn't met. But his well-coming smile faded slightly as he approached her. She wore a shabby dress, her hair was disheveled in a gray tangle, her matchstick legs were without make-up, and there were fierce red lines around her eyelids. She stared at him with wide wild eyes—dull orbs of dirty marble with tiny blue patches for pupils. And her mouth was a thin slash between gaunt leathery cheeks.

"Are—are you here for the party?" he asked doubtfully.

She seemed not to hear him, but continued to stare at or through him. Her mouth made words out of a quivering hiss of a voice. "I'm looking for *him*."

"Who?"

"The doctor."

He decided from her voice that she had laryngitis. "Doctor Georges? He'll be here soon, but he'll be busy tonight. Couldn't you consult another physician?"

The woman fumbled in her bag and brought out a small parcel to display. "I want to give him this," she hissed.

"I could—"

"I want to give it to him myself," she interrupted.

Two guests that he recognized came through the entrance. He glanced toward them nervously, returned their grins, glanced indecisively back at the haggard woman.

"I'll wait," she croaked, turned her back, and marched to the nearest chair where she perched like a sick crow, eyes glued to the door.

John Hanley Slade felt suddenly chilly. He shrugged it off and went to greet the Willinghams, who were the first arrivals.

Anne Norris, with her husband in tow, zig-zagged her way through a throng of chattering guests toward the hostess, who now occupied a wheel-chair near the entrance to the delivery room. They were a few minutes late, but the party had not yet actually begun.

"Why don't you go join the father's sweating circle?" Anne called over her shoulder. "The men are all over with John."

Norris glanced at the group that had gathered under a cloud of cigar smoke over by the portable bar. John Slade stood at the focus of it and looked persecuted.

"Job's counselors," Terry grunted.

A hand reached out from a nearby conversation-group and caught his arm. "Norris," coughed a gruff voice.

He glanced around. "Oh—Chief Franklin. Hello!"

Anne released his hand and said "See you later," then wound her way out of sight in the milling herd.

Franklin separated himself from the small congregation and glanced down coolly at his district inspector. He was a tall man, with shoulders hunched up close to his head, long spindly legs, a face that was exceedingly wide across the cheekbones but narrow at the jaw. Black eyes gazed from under heavy brows, and his unruly black hair was badly cut. His family tree had a few Cherokee Indians among its branches, Norris had heard, and they were frequently on the warpath.

Franklin gulped his drink casually and handed the glass to a passing attendant. "Thought you'd be working tonight, Norris," he said.

"I got trapped into coming, Chief," he replied amiably. "How're you doing with the Delmont pickup?"

"Nearly finished with record-tracing. I took a break today and picked up nine of them."

"Mmmph. *I wondered* why you plastipainted that right eye." Franklin rolled back his head and laughed loudly toward the ceiling. "Newt's mamma tossed the crockery at you, did she?"

"Her husband," he corrected a little stiffly.

"Well—get them in a hurry, Norris. If the newt's owner knows it's a deviant, he might hear we're after something and hide it somewhere. I want them rounded up quickly."

"Expect to find the one?"

Franklin nodded grimly. "It's somewhere in this part of the country—or was. It narrows down to about six or eight districts. Yours has a good chance of being it. If I had my way, we'd de-stroy every Bermuda K-99 that came out during that period. That way, we'd be sure—in case Delmont faked more than one."

"Be pretty tough on dames like Mary," Norris reminded him, glancing toward Mrs. Slade.

"Yeah, yeah, five hundred Rachels blubbering for their chil-dren, and all on my neck. I'd almost rather let the deviant get away than have to put up with the screaming mommies."

"The burdens of office, Chief. Bear up under the brickbats. Herod did."

Franklin glowered at him suspiciously, noticed Norris's bland expression, muttered "eh heh heh," and glanced around the room.

"Who's presiding over the whelping tonight?" Norris asked.

"Local doctor. Georges. You ought to know him."

Terry's eyebrows went up. He nodded.

"He's already here. Saw him come in the doctor's entrance a few minutes ago. He's probably getting ready. Well, Norris . . . if you'll excuse me ..."

Norris wandered toward the bar. He had been to several pseu-doparties before. There was nothing to it, really. After the guests had gathered, the medics rolled the mother into delivery, and everyone paced restlessly and talked in hushed voices while she reenacted the age-old drama of Birth—in a way that was only mildly uncomfortable and did nothing to aggravate the popula-tion problem. Then, when they rolled her out again—fatigued and emotionally spent—the nurse brought out a newly purchased neutroid, only a few days out of the incubator, and presented it to the mother. When the oohs and awws were finished, the mother went home with her child to rest, and the father whooped it up with the guests. Norris hoped to get away early. He had things to do before dawn.

"Who's that hag by the door?" a guest grunted in his ear.

Norris glanced incuriously at the thin-lipped woman who sat stiffly with her hands in her lap, not gazing at the guests but looking through and beyond them. He shook his head and moved on to shake hands with his host.

"Glad you came, Norris!" Slade said with a grin, then leaned closer. "Your presence could be embarrassing at a time like this, though."

"How's that?"

"You should have brought your net and snare-pole, Norris," said a man at Slade's elbow. "Then when they bring the baby out, go charging across the room yelling 'That's it! That's the one I'm after!'"

The men laughed heartily. Norris grinned weakly and started away.

"Hey, Slade," a voice called. "They're coming after Mary." Norris stood aside to let John hurry toward his wife. Most of the crowd stopped milling about to watch Dr. Georges, a nurse, and an attendant coming from a rear door to take charge of Mary.

"Stop! Stop *right there!*"

The voice came from near the front entrance. It was a choked and hoarse gasp of sound, not loud, but somehow penetrating enough to command the room. Norris glanced aside during the sudden lull to see the thin-lipped woman threading her way through the crowd, and the crowd folded back to clear a way. The farther she walked, the quieter the room, and Norris suddenly realized that somehow the center of the room was almost clear of people so that he could see Mary and John and the medics standing near the delivery room door. They had turned to stare at the intruder. Georges' mouth fell open slightly. He spoke in a low voice, but the room was suddenly silent enough so that Norris could hear.

"Why, Sarah—what're you doing here?"

The woman stopped six feet away from him. She pulled out a small parcel and reached it toward him. "This is for you," she croaked.

When Georges did not advance to take it, she threw it at his feet. "Open it!" she commanded.

Norris expected him to snort and tell the attendants to toss the nutty old dame out. Instead, he stooped, very slowly, keeping his eyes on the woman, and picked up the bundle.

"Unwrap it!" she hissed when he paused.

His hands fumbled with it, but his eyes never left her face. The package came open. Georges glanced down. He dropped it quickly to the floor.

"An amputated—"

Chubby mouth gaping, he stared at the gaunt woman. "My Primrose had a black cowlick in her tail!"

The doctor swallowed and continued to stare.

"Where is my Primrose?"

The woman had her hand in her purse. The doctor retreated a step.

"Where is my baby?"

"Really, Sarah, there was nothing to do but—"

Her hand brought a heavy automatic out of the purse. It wavered and moved uncertainly, too weighty for her scrawny wrist and arm. The room was suddenly a scramble and a babble.

"*You killed my baby!*"

"The first shot ricocheted from the ceiling and shattered a window," said the television announcer.

"The second shot went into the wall. The third shot struck Doctor Georges in the back of the head as he ran toward the delivery room door. He died instantly. Mrs. Glubbes fled from the room before any of the guests could stop her, and a dragnet is now combing..."

Norris shuddered and looked away from the television screen that revealed the present state of the reception room where they had been not more than two hours ago. He turned off the set, nervously lit a cigaret, and glanced at Anne who sat staring at nothing on the other end of the sofa.

"How do you feel?" he murmured.

She looked at him dumbly, shook her head. Norris got up, paced to the magazine rack, thumbed idly through its contents, glanced back at her nervously, walked to the window, stood smoking and staring toward the street for a time, moved to the piano, glanced back at her nervously again, tried to play a few bars of *Beethoven's Fifth* with one finger, hit a foul note after the opening ta-ta-ta-taaaahh, grunted a curse, banged a crashing discord with his fist, and leaned forward with a sigh to press his forehead against the music rack and close his eyes.

"Don't blame yourself, Terry," she said softly.



"If I hadn't let him have that impounded newt, it wouldn't have happened."

She thought that over briefly. "And if my maternal grandfather hadn't lied to his wife back in 2013, I would never have been born."

"Why not?"

"Because if he'd told her the truth, she'd have up and left him, and Mother wouldn't have been born."

"Oh. Nevertheless—"

"Nevertheless nothing!" She shook herself out of the blue mood. "You come here, Terry Norris!"

He came, and there was comfort in holding her. She was prepared to blame the world all right, but he was in the world, and a part of it, and so was she. And there was no sharing of guilt, but only the whole weight of it on the shoulders of each of them. He thought of the Delmont case, and the way Franklin talked casu-ally of slaughtering five hundred K-99s just to be sure, and how he continued to hate Franklin's guts for no apparent reason. Franklin was not a pleasant fellow, to be sure, but he had done nothing to Norris personally. He wondered if he hated what Franklin represented, but directed the hate at Franklin's person because he, Norris, represented it too. Franklin, however, liked the world as he found it, and was glad to help keep it that way.

If I think something's wrong with the set-up, but keep on being a part of it, then the wrongness is not part mine, he thought, it's *all* mine, because I bought it.

"It's hard to decide," he murmured.

"What's that, Terry?"

"Whether it's all wrong, dead wrong—or whether it's the best that can be done under the circumstances."

"Whatever are you talking about?"

He shook himself and yawned. "About going to bed," he grunted.

They went to bed at midnight. At one o'clock, he became certain she was asleep. He lay in darkness for a time, listening to her even breathing. Then he sat up and eased himself out of bed. There was work to be done. He tiptoed quietly out of the bedroom, carrying his shoes and his trousers. He dressed in the kitchen by the glow of a cigaret ember and stole quietly out into the chilly night. A half-moon hung low in a misty sky, and the wind was sharp out of the north. He walked quietly toward the kennels. There were only three empty cages. He needed twenty-seven to accommodate the doubtful K-99s that were to be picked up during the next few days. There was work to be done.

He went into the neutroid room and flicked a switch. A few sleepy chatters greeted the light.

One at a time he awoke twenty-four of the older creatures and carried them to a large glass-walled compartment. These were the long-time residents; they knew him well, and they came will-ingly, snuggling sleepily against his chest. He whistled tunelessly while he worked, began carrying them by the tails, two in each hand, to speed the chore.

When he had gotten them in the glass chamber, he sealed the door and turned on the gas. Then he switched off the lights, locked up for the night again, and walked back toward the house through the crisp grass. The conveyor belt from the cham-ber to the crematorium would finish the job unaided.

Norris felt suddenly ill. He sank down on the back steps and laid his head on his arms across his knees. His eyes burned, but thought of tears made him sicker. When the low *chug* of the crematorium's igniter coughed quietly from the kennels, he staggered hurriedly away from the steps to retch.

She was waiting for him in the bedroom. She sat on the window-seat, her small figure silhouetted against the paleness of the moonlit yard.

She was staring silently out at the dull red tongue of exhaust gas from the crematorium chimney when he tiptoed down the hall and paused in the doorway. She looked around. Dead silence between them, then:

"Out for a walk, eh, Terry?"

A resumption of the dead silence. He backed quietly away without speaking. He went to the parlor and lay down on the couch.

After a time, he heard her puttering around in the kitchen, and saw a light. A little later, he opened his

eyes to see her dark shadow over him, surrounded by an aura of negligee. She sat down on the edge of the couch and offered him a glass.

"Drink it. Make your stomach rest easy."

"Alcoholic?"

"Yeah."

He tasted it: milk, egg yolk, honey, and rum.

"No arsenic?"

She shook her head. He drank it quickly, lay back with a grunt, took her hand. They were silent for a time.

"I—I guess every new wife thinks her husband's flawless—for a while," she murmured absently.

"Silly—how it's such a shock to find out the obvious: that he's no different from the other bull humans of the tribe."

Norris stiffened, rolled his face quickly away from her. After a moment, her hand crept out to touch his cheek lightly. Her cool fingertips traced a soft line up and along his temple.

"It's all right, Terry," she whispered.

He kept his face averted. Her fingers stroked for a moment more, as if she were feeling something new and different in the familiar texture of his hair. Then she arose and padded quietly back to the bedroom.

Norris lay awake until dawn, knowing that it would never be all right Terry, nor all right World—never, as long as the prohibit-ing, the creating, the killing, the mockery, the falsification of birth, death, and life continued.

Dawn inherited the night mist, gathered it into clouds, and made a gloomy gray morning of it.

Anne was still asleep when he left for work. He backed out the kennel-truck, meaning to get the rest of the Bermuda K-99s as quickly as possible so that he could begin running the normalcy tests and get the whole thing over with. The night's guilt was still with him as he drove away, a sticky dew that refused to depart with morning. Why should *he* have to kill the things? Why couldn't Franklin arrange for a central slaughter house for de-stroying neutroids that had been deserted, or whose owners could not be located, or that found themselves unclaimed for any other reason? But Franklin would purple at the notion. It was only a routine part of the job. Why shouldn't it be routine? Why were neutroids manufactured anyhow? Obviously, because they were disposable—an important feature which human babies unfortunately lacked. When the market became glutted with humans, the merchandise could not be dumped in the sea.

Anthropos' mutant pets fulfilled a basic biological need of Man—of all life, for that matter—the need to have young, or a reasonable facsimile, and care for them. Neutroids kept human-ity satisfied with the restricted birth rate, and if it were not satis-fied, it would breed itself into famine, epidemic, and possibly ex-tinction. With the population held constant at five billions, the Federation could insure a decent living-standard for everyone. And as long as birth must be restricted, why not restrict it logi-cally and limit it to genetic desirables?

Why not? Norris felt no answer, but he was acutely aware of the "genetic C" on his social security card.

The world was a better place, wasn't it? Great strides since the last century. Science had made life easier to live and harder to lose. The populace thoughtlessly responded by pouring forth a flood of babies and doddering old codgers to clutter the earth and make things tougher again by eating and not producing; but again science increased the individual's chances to survive and augmented his motives for doing so—and again the populace responded with fecundity and long white beards, making more trouble for science again. So it had continued until it became obvious that progress wasn't headed toward "the Good Life" but toward more lives to continue the same old meager life as always. What could be done? Impede science? Unthinkable! Chuck the old codgers into the sea? Advance the retirement age to ninety and work them to death? The old codgers still had the suffrage, and plenty of time to go to the polls.

The unborn, however, were not permitted to vote.

Man's technology had created little for the individual. Man used his technology to lengthen his life and sweeten it, but something had to be subtracted somewhere. The lives of the unborn were added unto the years of the aged. A son of Terry Norris might easily live till 100, but he would have damn little chance of being born to do it.

Neutroids filled the cradles. Neutroids never ate much, nor grew up to eat more or be on the unemployment roles. Neutroids could be bashed with a shovel and buried in the back yard when hard times came. Neutroids could satisfy a woman's longing for something small and lovable, but they never got in the economic way.

It was no good thinking about it, he decided. It was a Way Of Doing Things, and most people accepted it, and if it sometimes yielded heartache and horrors such as had occurred at Slade's pseudoparty, it was still an Accepted Way, and he couldn't change it, even if he knew what to do about it. He was already adjusted to the world-as-it-was, a world that loved the artificial mutants as children, looked the other way when crematorium flames licked in the night. He had been brought up in such a world, and it was only when emotion conflicted with the grim necessity of his job that he thought to question the world. And Anne? Eventually, he supposed, she would have her pseudo-party, cuddle a neutroid, forget about romantic notions like having a kid of her own.

At noon he brought home another dozen K-99s and installed them in the cages. Two reluctant mothers had put up a howl, but he departed without protest and left seizure of the animals to the local authorities. Yates had already delivered the three from yesterday.

"What, no more scratches, bruises, broken bones?" Anne asked at lunch.

He smiled mechanically. "If Mamma puts up a squawk, I go. Quietly."

"Learned your lesson yesterday?"

"Mmm! One dame pulled a fast one on me though. I think. Told her what I wanted. She started moaning, but she let me in. I got her newt, started out with it. She wanted a receipt. So, I took the newt's serial number off the check list, made out the re-ceipt. She took one look and squealed 'That's not Chichi's num-ber!' and grabbed for her tail-wagger. I looked at its foot-tattoo.

Sure enough—wrong number. Had to leave it. A K-99 all right, but not even from Bermuda Plant."

"I thought they were all registered."

"They are, babe. Wires get crossed sometimes. I told her she had the wrong newt, and she started boiling. Got the sales re-ceipt and showed it to me. Number checked with the newt's. Something's fouled up somewhere."

"Where'd she get it?"

"O'Reilly's pet shop—over in Sherman II. Right place, wrong serial number."

"Anything to worry about, Terry?"

"Well, I've got to track down that doubtful Bermuda model."

"Oh."

"And—well--" He frowned out the window at the kennels. "Ever think what'd happen if somebody started a black market in neutroids?"

They finished the meal in silence. Apparently there was going to be no further mention of last-night's mass-disposal, nor any rehash of the nightmare at Slade's party. He was thankful.

The afternoon's work yielded seven more Bermuda neutroids for the pound. Except for the missing newt that was involved in the confusion of serial numbers, the rest of them would have to be collected by Yates or his deputies, armed with warrants. The groans and the tears of the owners left him in a gloomy mood, but the pickup phase of the operation was nearly finished. The normalcy tests, however, would consume the rest of the week and leave little time for sleeping and eating. If Delmont's falsification proved extensive, it might be necessary to deliver several of the animals to central lab for dissection and complete analysis, thus bringing the murderous wrath of the owners upon his head. He had a hunch about why bio-inspectors were frequently shifted from one territory to another.

On the way home, he stopped in Sherman II to check with the dealer about the confusion of serial numbers. Sherman II was the largest of the Sherman communities, covering fifty blocks of commercial buildings. He parked in the outskirts and took a side-walk escalator toward O'Reilly's address. He had

spoken to O'Reilley on the phone, but had not yet visited the dealer's shop.

It lay on a dingy side street that was reminiscent of centuries past, a street of small bars and bowling alleys and cigar stores. There was even a shop with three gold balls above the entrance, but the place was now an antique store. A light mist was falling when he stepped off the escalator and stood in front of the pet shop. A sign hung out over the sidewalk, announcing:

J. "DOGGY" O'REILLEY  
PETS FOR SALE  
DUMB BLONDES AND GOLDFISH  
MUTANTS FOR THE CHILDLESS  
BUY A BUNDLE OF JOY

He frowned at the sign for a moment, then wandered through the entrance into a warm and gloomy shop, wrinkling his nose at the strong musk of animal odors. O'Reilley's was no shining example of cleanliness.

Somewhere a puppy was yapping, and a parrot croaked the lyrics of *A Chimp To Call My Own*—theme song of a soap opera about a lady evolvotron operator, Norris recalled.

He paused briefly by a tank of silk-draped goldfish. The shop had a customer. An elderly lady haggled with the wizened man-ager over the price of a half-grown second-hand dog-F. She shook her last dog's death certificate under his nose and de-manded a guarantee of the dog's alleged F-5 intelligence. The old man offered to swear on a Bible that the dog was more knowl-edgeable than some humans, but he demurred when asked to swear by his ledger.

The dog was lamenting, "Don' sell me, Dadda, don' sell me," and punctuating the pleas with mournful train-whistle howls.

Norris smiled quietly. The non-human pets were brighter than the neutroids. A K-108 could speak a dozen words, but a K-99 never got farther than "mamma," "pappa," and "cookie." An-thropos feared making quasi-humans too intelligent, lest senti-mentalists proclaim them really human.

He wandered on toward the rear of the building, pausing briefly by the cash register to inspect O'Reilley's license which hung in a dusty frame on the wall behind the counter: "James Fallon O'Reilley . . . authorized dealer in mutant animals ... all non-predatory mammals including chimpanzee-K series . . . license expires 15W 3D 2063Y . . ."

Expiration date approaching, he noticed, but otherwise okay. He headed for a bank of neutroid cages along the opposite wall, but O'Reilley minced across the floor to meet him. The elderly lady was leaving. O'Reilley's face wore a v-shaped smirk on a loose-skinned face, and his bald head bobbed professionally.

"And a good afternoon to ye, sir. What'll it be this foine driz-zlin' afternoon? A dwarf kangaroo perhaps, or a—" He paused to adjust his spectacles as Norris flashed a badge and presented his card. O'Reilley's smile waned. "Inspector Norris it is," he mut-tered at the card, then looked up. "What'd they do with the last 'un, flay him alive?"

"My predecessor was transferred to the Montreal area."

"And I thought that I spoke to him only yesterday!"

"On the phone? That was me, O'Reilley. About the rundown on the K-99 sales."

"I gave it to you properly, did I not?" the oldster demanded.

"You gave it to me. Maybe properly."

O'Reilley seemed to puff up slightly and glower. "Meaning?"

"There's a mix-up in serial numbers on one of them. May not be your mistake."

"No mistakes, no mistakes."

"Okay, we'll see." Norris glanced at his list. "Let's check this number again—K-99-LJZ-35i."

"It's nearly closing time," the oldster protested. "Come back some other day, Norris."

"Sorry, this one's rush. It'll only take a minute. Where's your book?"

The oldster began to quiver angrily. "Are you suggestin', sir, that I falsely—"

"No," he growled, "I'm suggesting that there was a mistake. Maybe my mistake, maybe yours, maybe Anthropos, maybe the owners. I've got to find out, that's all. Let's have the book."

"What kind of a mistake? I gave you the owner's name!"

"She has a different newt."

"Can I help it if she traded with somebody?"

"She didn't. She bought it here. I saw the receipt." Norris was beginning to become impatient, tried to suppress it.

"Then she traded with one of my other customers!" O'Reilley insisted.

Norris snorted irritably. "You got two customers named Adelia Schultz?—Come on, pop, let's look at the duplicate receipt. Now."

"Doubt if it's still around," O'Reilley grumbled, refusing to budge.

Norris suddenly erupted. He turned away angrily and began pacing briskly around the shop, looking under cages, inspecting fixtures, probing into feeding troughs with a pencil, looking into feed bags, examining a dog-F's wiry coat.

"Here there! What do you think you're doing?" the owner de-manded.

Norris began barking off check-points in a loud voice. "Dirty cat-cage . . . inadequate ventilation . . . food trough not clean . . . no water in the newt cages ..."

"I water them twice a day!" O'Reilley raged.

". . . mouldy rabbit-meal . . . no signs of disinfectant ... What kind of a disease-trap are you running here?"

He came back to face O'Reilley who stood trembling with rage and cursing him with his eyes.

"Not to mention that sign outside," Norris added casually. "'Dumb blondes' they outlawed that one the year Kleyton got sent up for using hormones on K-108s, trying to grow himself a harem. Well?"

"Doubt if it's still around," O'Reilley repeated.

"Look, pop!" Norris snapped. "You're required to keep sales receipts until they're microfilmed. There hasn't been a micro-filming for over a year."

"Get out of my shop!"

"If I go, you won't *have* a shop after tomorrow."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Yeah."

For a moment, Norris thought the old man would attack him. But O'Reilley spat a sudden curse, scurried toward the counter, grabbed a fat book from beneath the cash register, then hurried away toward the stairs at the rear of the shop.

"Hey, pop! Where you going?"

"Get me glasses!"

"You're wearing your glasses!" Norris started after him. "New ones. Can't see through them." O'Reilley bounded up-stairs.

"Leave the book *here* and *I'll* check it!"

Norris stopped with his foot on the bottom step. O'Reilley slammed the door at the head of the stairs, locked it behind him. Grumbling suspiciously, the inspector went back to the counter to wait.

Five minutes passed. The door opened. O'Reilley came downstairs, looking less angry but decidedly nervous. He slammed the book on the counter, riffled its pages, found a place, muttered "Here it is, see for yourself," and held it at a difficult angle.

"Give it here."

O'Reilley reluctantly released it, began babbling about bu-reaucracy and tin-horn inspectors who acted like dictators and inspection codes that prescribed and circumscribed and pro-hibited. Norris ignored him and stared at the duplicate receipt.

"Adelia Schultz . . . received Chimpanzee-K-99-LJZ-35i on..."

It was the number on the list from Anthropos. It was the num-ber of the animal he wanted for normalcy tests. But it was not the number of Mrs. Schultz's neutroid, nor was it the number written on Mrs. Schultz's copy of *this very same invoice*.

O'Reilley was still babbling at him. Norris held the book up to his eye, took aim at the bright doorway across the surface of the page. O'Reilley stopped babbling.

"Rub marks," the inspector grunted. "Scrape marks on the paper."

O'Reilley's breathing sounded asthmatic. Norris lowered the book.

"Nice erasure job—for a carbon copy. Do it while you were upstairs?"

O'Reilley said nothing. Norris took a scrap of paper, folded his handkerchief over the point of his pocketknife blade, used the point to clean out the eraser dust from between the receipts, emptied the dust on the paper, folded it and put it in his pocket.

"Evidence."

O'Reilley said nothing.

Norris tore out the erased receipt, pocketed it, put on his hat and started for the door.

"See you in court, O'Reilley."

"Wait!"

He turned. "Okay—I'm waiting."

"Let's go sit down first," the deflated oldster muttered weakly.

"Sure."

They walked up the flight of stairs and entered a dingy parlor. He glanced around, sniffed at the smell of cabbage boiling and sweaty bedclothing. An orange-haired neutroid lay sleeping on a dirty rug in the corner. Norris stared down at it curiously. O'Reilley made a whining sound and slumped into a chair, his breath coming in little whiffs that suggested inward sobbing. Norris gazed at him expressionlessly for a moment, then went to kneel beside the newt.

"K-99-LJZ-35i," he read aloud, peering at the sole of the tattooed foot. The newt stirred in its sleep at the sound of a strange voice. When Norris looked at O'Reilley again, the old man was staring at his feet, his forehead supported by a leathery old hand that shielded his eyes.

"Lots of good explanations, O'Reilley?"

"Ye've seen what ye've seen; now do what ye must. I'll say nothing to ye."

"Look, O'Reilley, the newt is what I'm after. So I found it. I don't know what else I've found, but juggling serial numbers is a serious offense. If you've got a story, you better tell it. Otherwise, you'll be telling it behind bars. I'm willing to listen here and now. You'd better grab the chance."

O'Reilley sighed, looked at the sleeping newt in the corner. "What'll ye do with her?"

"The newt? Take her in."

O'Reilley sat in gloomy silence while he thought things over. "We were class-B, me and the missus," he mumbled suddenly, "allowed a child of our own if we could have 'un. Fancy that, eh? Ugly old coot like me—class-B."

"So?"

"The government said we could have a child, but Nature said we couldn't."

"Tough."

"But since we were class B, we weren't entitled to own a newt. See?"

"Yeah. Where's your wife?"

"With the saints, let's hope."

Norris wondered what sort of sob-story this was getting to be. The oldster went on quietly, all the while staring at the sleep-ing figure in the corner.

"Couldn't have a kid, couldn't own a newt either—so we opened the pet shop. It wasn't like havin' yer own, though. Missus always blubbered when I sold a newt she'd got to feeling like a mother to. Never swiped one, though—not till Peony came along. Last year this Bermuda shipment come in, and I sold most of 'em pretty quick, but Peony here was puny. People 'fraid she'd not last long. Couldn't sell her. Kept her around so long that we both loved her. Missus died last year. 'Don't let anybody take Peony,' she kept saying afore she passed on. I promised I wouldn't. So I switched 'em around and moved her up here."

"That all?"

O'Reilley hesitated, then nodded.

"Ever done this before?"

O'Reilley shook his head.

There was a long silence while Norris stared at the child-thing. "Your license could be revoked," he said absently.

"I know."

He ground his fist thoughtfully in his palm, thought it over some more. If O'Reilley told the truth, he couldn't live with himself if he reported the old man . . . unless it wasn't the whole truth.

"I want to take your books home with me tonight."

"Help yourself."

"I'm going to make a complete check, investigate you from stem to stern."

He watched O'Reilley closely. The oldster was unaffected. He seemed concerned—grief-stricken—only by the thought of losing the neutroid.

"If plucking a newt out of stock to keep you company was the only thing you did, O'Reilley, I won't report you."

O'Reilley was not consoled. He continued to gaze hungrily at the little being on the rug.

"And if the newt turns out not to be a deviant," he added gently, "I'll send it back. We'll have to attach a correction to that invoice, of course, and you'll just have to take your chances about somebody wanting to buy it, but . . ." He paused. O'Reilley was staring at him strangely.

"And if she is a deviant, Mr. Norris?"

He started to reply, hesitated.

"Is she, O'Reilley?"

The oldster said nothing. His face tightened slowly. His shoulders shook slightly, and his squinted eyes were brimming. He choked.

"I see."

O'Reilley shook himself, produced a red bandana, dabbed at his eyes, blew his nose loudly, regathered his composure. "How do you know she's deviant?"

O'Reilley gave him a bitter glance, chuckled hoarsely, shuffled across the room and sat on the floor beside the sleeping newt. He patted a small bare shoulder.

"Peony? . . . Peony-girl . . . Wake up, me child, wake up."

Its fluffy tail twitched for a moment. It sat up, rubbed its eyes, and yawned. There was a lazy casualness about its movements that caused Norris to lean closer to stare. Neutroids usually moved in bounces and jerks and scrambles. This one stretched, arched its back, and smiled—like a two year old with soft brown eyes. It glanced at Norris. The eyes went wider for a moment, then it studiously ignored him.

"Shall I play bouncey, Daddy?" it piped.

Norris sucked in a long slow breath and sat frozen.

"No need to, Peony." O'Reilley glanced at the inspector. "Bouncey's a game we play for visitors," he explained. "Making believe we're a neutroid."

The inspector could find nothing to say.

Peony licked her lips. "Wanna glass of water, Daddy."

O'Reilley nodded and hobbled away to the kitchen, leaving the man and the neutroid to stare at each other in silence. She was quite a deviant. Even a fully age-set K-108 could not have spoken the two sentences that he had heard, and Peony was still a long way from age-set, and a K-99 at that.

O'Reilley came back with the water. She drank it greedily, holding the glass herself while she peered up at the old man. "Daddy's eyes all wet," she observed.

O'Reilley began trembling again. "Never mind, child. You go get your coat."

"Whyyyy?"

"You're going for a ride with Mr. Norris."

She whirled to stare hostilely at the stunned visitor. "I don't *want* to!"

The old man choked out a sob and flung himself down to seize her in his arms and hug her against his chest. He tearfully uttered a spasmodic babble of reassurances that would have frightened even a human

child.

The deviant neutroid began to cry. Standard neutroids never cried; they whimpered and yeped. Norris felt weak inside. Slowly, the old man lifted his head to peer at the inspector, blinking away tears. He began loosening Peony from the embrace. Suddenly he put her down and stood up.

"Take her quickly," he hissed, and strode away to the kitchen. He slammed the door behind him. The latch clicked.

Peony scampered to the door and began beating on it with tiny fists. "Daddy . . . *Daddy!!!* Open 'a door!" she wailed.

Norris licked his lips and swallowed a dry place. Still he did not budge from the sofa, his gaze fastened on the child-thing. Disjointed phrases tumbled through his mind . . . what Man hath wrought . . . out of the slime of an ape . . . fat legs and baby fists and a brain to know . . . and the State spoke to Job out of a whirlwind, saying . . .

"*Take her!*" came a roaring bellow from the kitchen. "*Take her before I lose me wits and kill ye!*"

Norris got unsteadily to his feet and advanced toward the frightened child-thing. He carried her, kicking and squealing, out into the early evening. By the time he turned into his own driveway, she had subsided a little, but she was still crying.

He saw Anne coming down from the porch to meet him. She was staring at the neutroid who sat on the front seat beside him, while seven of its siblings chattered from their cages in the rear of the truck. She said nothing, only stared through the window at the small tear-stained face.

"Home . . . I want to go home!" it whined.

Norris lifted the newt and handed it to his wife. "Take it inside. Keep your mouth shut about it. I'll be in as soon as I chuck the others in their cages."

She seemed not to notice his curtness as she cradled the being in her arms and walked away. The truck lurched on to the kennels.

He thought the whole thing over while he worked. When he was finished, he went back in the house and stopped in the hall to call Chief Franklin. It was the only thing to do: get it over with as quickly as possible. The operator said, "His office fails to answer. No taped readback. Shall I give you the locator?"

Anne came into the hall and stood glaring at him, her arms clenched across her bosom, one foot tapping the floor angrily. Peony stood behind her, no longer crying, and peering at him curiously around Anne's skirt.

"Are you doing what I think you're doing, Terry?"

He gulped. "Cancel the call," he told the operator. "It'll wait till tomorrow." He dropped the phone hard and sank down in the straight chair. It was the only thing to do: delay it as long as he could.

"We'd better have a little talk," she said.

"Maybe we'd better," he admitted.

They went into the living room. Peony's world had evidently been restricted to the pet shop, and she seemed awed by the clean, neat house, no longer frightened, and curious enough about her surroundings to forget to cry for O'Reilley. She sat in the center of the rug, occasionally twitching her tail as she blinked around at the furniture and the two humans who sat in it.

"The deviant?"

"A deviant."

"Just what are you going to do?"

He squirmed. "You know what I'm supposed to do."

"What you were going to do in the hall?"

"Franklin's bound to find out anyway."

"How?"

"Do you imagine that Franklin would trust *anybody*?"

"So?"

"So, he's probably already got a list of all serial numbers from the District Anthropos Wholesalers. As



a double check on us. And we'd better deliver."

"I see. That leaves you in a pinch, doesn't it?"

"Not if I do what I'm supposed to."

"By whose law?"

He tugged nervously at his collar, stared at the child-thing who was gazing at him fixedly. "Heh heh," he said weakly, waggled a finger at it, held out his hands invitingly. The child-thing inched away nervously.

"Don't evade, Terry."

"I wanna go home . . . I want Dadda."

"I gotta think. Gotta have time to think."

"Listen, Terry, you know what calling Franklin would be? It would be M, U, R, D, E, R."

"She's just a newt."

"*She?*"

"Probably. Have to examine her to make sure."

"Great. Intelligent, capable of reproduction. Just great."

"Well, what they do with her after I'm finished with the normalcy tests is none of my affair."

"It's not? *Look* at me, Terry . . . No, not with that patiently suffering. . . . *Terry!*"

He stopped doing it and sat with his head in his hands, staring at the patterns in the rug, working his toes anxiously. "Think—gotta think."

"While you're thinking, I'll feed the child," she said crisply. "Come on, Peony."

"How'd you know her name?"

"*She* told me, naturally."

"Oh." He sat trying grimly to concentrate, but the house was infused with Anne-ness, and it influenced him. After a while, he got up and went out to the kennels where he could think objectively. But that was wrong too. The kennels were full of Franklin and the system he represented. Finally he went out into the back yard and lay on the cool grass to stare up at the twilight sky. The problem shaped up quite formidably. Either he turned her over to Franklin to be studied and ultimately destroyed, or he didn't. If he didn't, he was guilty of Delmont's crime. Either he lost Anne and maybe something of himself, or his job and maybe his freedom.

A big silence filled the house during dinner. Only Peony spoke, demanding at irregular intervals to be taken home. Each time the child-thing spoke, Anne looked at him, and each time she looked at him, her eyes said "See?"—until finally he slammed down his fork and marched out to the porch to sulk in the gloom. He heard their voices faintly from the kitchen.

"You've got a good appetite, Peony."

"I like Dadda's cooking better."

"Well, maybe mine'll do for awhile."

"I wanna go home."

"I know—but I think your dadda wants you to stay with us for awhile."

"I don't want to."

"Why don't you like it here?"

"I want Dadda."

"Well maybe we can call him on the phone, eh?"

"Phone?"

"After you get some sleep."

The child-thing whimpered, began to cry. He heard Anne walking with it, murmuring softly. When he had heard as much as he could take, he trotted down the steps and went for a long walk in the night, stalking slowly along cracked sidewalks beneath overhanging trees, past houses and scattered lights of the suburbs. Suburbs hadn't changed much in a century, only grown more extensive. Some things underwent drastic revision with the passing years, other things—like walking sticks and garden hoes and carving knives and telephones and bicycles—stayed pretty much as they were. Why change something that worked well as it was? Why bother the established system?

He eyed the lighted windows through the hedges as he wandered past. Fluorescent lights, not much different than those of a century ago. But once they had been campfires, the fires of shivering hunters in the forest, when man was young and the world was sparsely planted with his seed. Now the world was choked with his riotous growth, glittering with his lights and his flashing signs, full of the sound of his engines and the roar of his rockets. He had inherited it and filled it—filled it too full, perhaps.

There was no escaping from the past. The last century had glutted the Earth with its children and grandchildren, had strained the Earth's capacity to feed, and the limit had been reached. It had to be guarded. There was no escape into space, either. Man's rockets had touched two planets, but they were sorry worlds, and even if he made them better, Earth could beget children—if allowed—faster than ships could haul them away. The only choice: increase the death rate, or decrease the birth rate—or, as a dismal third possibility—do nothing, and let Nature wield the scythe as she had once done in India and China. But letting-Nature-do-it was not in the nature of Man, for he could always do it better. If his choice robbed his wife of a biological need, then he would build her a disposable baby to pacify her. He would give it a tail and only half a mind, so that she would not confuse it with her own occasional children.

Peony, however, was a grim mistake. The mistake had to be quickly corrected before anyone noticed.

What was he, Norris, going to do about it, if anything? Defy the world? Outwit the world? The world was made in the shape of Franklin, and it snickered at him out of the shadows. He turned and walked back home.

Anne was rocking on the porch with Peony in her arms when he came up the sidewalk. The small creature dozed fitfully, muttered in its sleep.

"How old is she, Terry?" Anne asked.

"About nine months, or about two years, depending on what you mean."

"Born nine months ago?"

"Mmmh. But two years by the development scale, human equivalent. Newts would be fully mature at nine or ten, if they didn't stop at an age-set. Fast maturation."

"But she's brighter than most two year olds."

"Maybe."

"You've heard her talk."

"You can't make degree-comparisons between two species, Anne. Not easily anyhow."

"Bright"—signifying I.Q.?—by what yardstick."

"Bright—signifying on-the-ball—by my yardstick. And if you turn her over to Franklin, I'll leave you."

"Car coming," he grunted tonelessly. "Get in the house. It's slowing down."

Anne slipped out of her chair and hurried inside. Norris lingered only a moment, then followed. The headlights paused in front of a house down the block, then inched ahead. He watched from deep in the hall.

"Shall I take her out to the kennels right quick?" Anne called tensely.

"Stick where you are," he muttered, and a moment later regretted it. The headlights stopped in front. The beam of a powerful flashlight played over the porch, found the house-number, winked out. The driver cut the engine. Norris strode to the living room.

"Play bouncey!" he growled at Peony.

"Don't want to," she grumbled back.

"There's a man coming, and you'd better play bouncey if you ever want to see your Dadda again!" he hissed.

Peony yipped and backed away from him, whimpering. "Terry! What're you talking about? You should be ashamed!"

"Shut up. . . . Peony, play bouncey."

Peony chattered and leaped to the back of the sofa with monkey-like grace.

"She's frightened! She's acting like a common newt!" "That's bouncey," he grunted. "That's good."

The car door slammed. Norris went to put on the porch light and watch the visitor come up the

steps—a husky, bald gentleman in a black suit and Roman collar. He blinked and shook his head. Clergyman? The fellow must have the wrong house.

"Good evening."

"Uh—yeah."

"I'm Father Mulreany. Norris residence?" The priest had a slight brogue; it stirred a vague hunch in Norris' mind, but failed to clear it.

"I'm Norris. What's up?"

"Uh, well, one of my parishioners—I think you've met him—"

"Countryman of yours?"

"Mmm."

"O'Reilley?"

"Yes."

"What'd he do, hang himself?"

"Nothing that bad. May I come in?"

"I doubt it. What do you want?"

"Information."

"Personal or official?"

The priest paused, studied Norris's silhouette through the screen. He seemed not taken aback by the inspector's brusque-ness, perhaps accepting it as normal in an era that had little regard for the cloth.

"O'Reilley's in bad shape, Inspector," Mulreany said quietly. "I don't know whether to call a doctor, a psychiatrist, or a cop." Norris stiffened. "A cop?"

"May I come in?"

Norris hesitated, feeling a vague hostility, and a less vague suspicion. He opened the screen, let the priest in, led him to the living room. Anne muttered half-politely, excused herself, snatched Peony, and headed for the rear of the house. The priest's eyes followed the neutroid intently.

"So O'Reilley did something?"

"Mmm."

"What's it to you?"

Mulreany frowned. "In addition to things you wouldn't understand—he was my sister's husband."

Norris waved him into a chair. "Okay, so—?"

"He called me tonight. He was loaded. Just a senseless babble, but I knew something was wrong. So I went over to the shop." Mulreany stopped to light a cigaret and frown at the floor. He looked up suddenly. "You see him today?"

Norris could think of no reason not to admit it. He nodded irritably.

Mulreany leaned forward curiously. "Was he sober?"

"Yeah."

"Sane?"

"How should I know?"

"Did he impress you as the sort of man who would suddenly decide to take a joint of pipe and a meat cleaver and mass-slaughter about sixty helpless animals?"

Norris felt slightly dazed. He sank back, shaking his head and blinking. There was a long silence. Mulreany was watching him carefully.

"I can't help you," Norris muttered. "I've got nothing to say." "Look, Inspector, forget this, will you?" He touched his collar. Norris shook his head, managed a sour smile. "I can't help you."

"All right," Mulreany sighed, starting to his feet. "I'm just try-ing to find out if what he says . . ."

"Men talking about Dadda?" came a piping voice from the kitchen.

Mulreany shot a quick glance toward it. ". . . is true," he finished softly.

There was a sudden hush. He could hear Anne whispering in the kitchen, saw her steal a glance through the door. "So it is true," Mulreany murmured.

Face frozen, Norris came to his feet. "Anne," he called in a bitter voice. "Bouncey's off."

She came in carrying Peony and looking murderous. "Why did you ask him in?" she demanded in a

hiss.

Mulreany stared at the small creature. Anne stared at the priest.

"It's poison to you, isn't it!" she snapped, then held Peony up toward him. "Here! Look at your enemy. Offends your humano-centrism, doesn't she?"

"Not at all," he said rather wistfully.

"You condemn them."

He shook his head. "Not *them*. Only what they're used for by society." He looked at Norris, a bit puzzled. "I'd better leave."

"Maybe not. Better spill it. What do you want?"

"I told you. O'Reilley went berserk, made a butcher shop out of his place. When I got there, he was babbling about a talking neutroid—'his baby'—said you took it to the pound to destroy it. Threatened to kill you. I got a friend to stay with him, came over to see if I could find out what it's all about."

"The newt's a deviant. You've heard of the Delmont case?"

"Rumors."

"She's it."

"I see." Mulreany looked glum, grim, gloomy. "Nothing more I need to know I guess. Well—"

Norris grabbed his arm as he turned. "Sit a spell," he grunted ominously.

The priest looked puzzled, let himself be guided back to the chair. Norris stood looking down at him.

"What's the matter with Dadda?" Peony chirped. "I wanna go see Dadda."

"Well?" Norris growled. "What about her?"

"I don't understand."

"You people are down on Anthropos, aren't you?"

Mulreany kept patience with an effort. "To make nitroglyc-erin for curing heart trouble is good, to make it for blowing open safes is bad. The stuff itself is morally neutral. The same goes for mutant animals. As pets, okay; as replacements for humans, no."

"Yeah, but you'd just as soon see them dead, eh?"

Mulreany hesitated. "I admit a personal dislike for them."

"This one?"

"What about her?"

"Better dead, eh?"

"You couldn't admit she might be human?"

"Don't know her that well. Human? How do you mean—bio-logically? Obviously not. Theologically? Why should you care?"

"I'm interested in your particular attitude, buster."

Mulreany gazed at him, gathering a glower. "I'm a little doubtful about my status here," he growled. "I came for infor-mation; the roles got switched somewhere. Okay, Norris, but I'm sick of neo-pagan innocents like you. Now sit down, or show me the door."

Norris sat down slowly.

The priest watched the small neutroid for a moment before speaking. "She's alive, performs the function of living, is evi-dently aware. Life—a kind of functioning. A specific life—an in-variant kind of functioning—with sameness-of-self about it. Invariance of functioning—a principle. Self, soul, call it what you like. Whatever's alive has it." He paused to watch Norris doubtfully.

Norris nodded curtly. "Go on."

"Doesn't have to be anything immortal about it. Not unless she were known to be human. Or intelligent."

"You heard her," Anne snapped.

"I've heard metal boxes speak with great wisdom," Mulreany said sourly. "And if I were a Hottentot, a vocalizing computer would . . ."

"Skip the analogies. Go on."

"What's intelligence? A function of Man, immortal. What's Man? An intelligent immortal creature, capable of choice."

"Quit talking in circles."

"That's the point. I can't—not where Peony's concerned. What do you want to know? If I think she's equal to Man? Give me all the intelligence test results, and all the data you can get—I still couldn't decide."

"Whattaya need? Mystic writings in the sky?"

"Precisely."

"I feel a bush being beat about," Anne said suddenly. "Is this guy going to make things tough, or isn't he?"

Mulreany looked puzzled again.

"To the point, then," Norris said. "Would you applaud if she gets the gasser?"

"Hardly."

"If you had it to decide for yourself—"

"What? Whether to destroy her or not?" Mulreany snorted irritably. "Not if there was the least doubt in my mind about her. She's a shadow in the brush. Maybe it's ten to one that the shadow's a bear and not a man—but on the one chance, don't shoot, son, don't shoot."

"You think the authorities have a right to kill her, maybe?" Anne asked.

"Who, him?" Mulreany jerked his head toward Norris.

"Well, say him."

"I'd have to think about it. But I don't think so."

"Why? The government made her. Why can't it un-make her?"

"Made her? *Did* it now?"

"Delmont did," Norris corrected.

"*Did* he now?" said Mulreany.

"Why not?" Anne snorted.

"I, the State, am Big Fertility," Norris said sourly; then baiting

Mulreany: "Thou shalt accept no phallus but the evolvotron." Mulreany reddened, slapped his knee, and chortled. The Norrises exchanged puzzled glances.

"I feel an affinity," Anne murmured suspiciously.

Norris came slowly to his feet. "If you talk to anybody about Peony, you may be responsible for her death."

"I don't quite see—"

"You don't need to."

Mulreany shrugged.

"Tell O'Reilley the same."

Mulreany nodded. "You've got my word."

"Your which?"

"Sorry, I forgot. Ancient usage. I won't mention Peony. I'll see that O'Reilley doesn't."

Norris led him to the door. The priest was obviously suppressing large quantities of curiosity, but contained it well. On the steps, he paused to look back, wearing a curious smirk.

"It just occurred to me—if the child is 'human' in the broad sense, she's rather superior to you and I."

"Why?"

"Hasn't picked an apple yet." Norris shrugged slightly.

"And Inspector—if Delmonte made her—ask yourself: Just what was it that he 'made'?" He nodded quickly. "Goodnight."

"What do you make of him?" Anne hissed nervously.

"Backworldsman. Can't say."

"Fool, why'd you bring him in?"

"I'm no good at conspiracies."

"Then you *will* do it?"

"What?"

"Hide her, or something."

He stared at her doubtfully. "The only thing I can hope to do is falsify the test reports and send her back to O'Reilley as a standard model."

"That's better than nothing."

"And then spend the rest of our days waiting for it to be un-covered," he added grimly.

"You've got to, Terry."

Maybe, he thought, maybe.

If he gave her back to O'Reilley, there was a good chance she'd be discovered when the auditor came to microfilm the rec-ords and check inventory. He certainly couldn't keep her himself—not with other Bio-agents wandering in and out every few days. She could not be hidden.

He sat down for a smoke and watched Anne tiptoe to the sofa with the sleeping Peony. It would be easy to obey the law, turn her over to Franklin, and tell Anne that he had done something else with her, something like ...

He shuddered and chopped the thought off short. She glanced at him curiously.

"I don't like the way you're looking at me," she muttered. "You imagine things."

"Uh-uh. Listen to me, Terry, if you let that baby . . ."

"I'm sick of your ifs!" he barked. "If I hear another goddam threat of your leaving *if*, then to hell with it, you can leave any time!"

"Terry!"

She puzzled in his direction for a moment, then slowly wan-dered out, still puzzling. He sank lower in the chair, brooding. Then it hit him. It wasn't Anne that worried him; it was a piece of himself. It was a piece of himself that threatened to go, and if he let Peony be packed off to Central Lab, it *would* go, and thereafter he would not be able to stomach anything, even himself.

The morning news from the Scriber was carefully folded be-side his plate when he came to the table for breakfast. It was so deliberately folded that he bothered to notice the advertisement in the center of the displayed portion.

"You lay this out for my benefit?" he asked.

"Not particularly," she said casually.

He read it with a suspicious frown:

## BIOLOGISTS WANTED

by

ANTHROPOS INCORPORATED

for

Evolvotron Operators

Incubator Tenders

Nursery Supervisors

Laboratory Personnel

in

NEW ATLANTA PLANT

Call or write:

Personnel Manager

ANTHROPOS INCORPORATED

Atlanta, Georgia

Note: Secure Labor Department release from present job before applying.

"What's this supposed to mean to me?" he demanded.

"Nothing in particular. Why? Does it mean something to you?"

He brushed the paper aside and decided to ignore the sub-tlety, if any. She picked it up, glanced at it as if she had not seen it before. "New jobs, new places to live," she murmured.

After breakfast, he went down to police headquarters to sign a statement concerning the motive in

Doctor Georges' murder. Sarah Glubbes had been stashed away in a psychopathic ward, according to Chief Miler, and would probably stay awhile.

"Funny thing, Norris," the cop said. "What people won't do over a newt! You know, it's a wonder you don't get your head blown off. I don't covet your job."

"Good." He signed the paper and glanced at Miler coolly. "Must take an iron gut, huh, Norris?"

"Sure. Just a matter of adaptation."

"Guess so." Miler patted his paunch and yawned. "How you coming on this Delmont business? Picked up any deviants yet?"

Norris pitched the fountain pen on the desk, splattering ink. "What made you ask that?" he said stiffly.

"Nothing *made* me. I did it myself. Touchy today?"

"Maybe."

Miler shrugged. "Something made you jump when I said `deviants.'"

"Nothing made me. I—"

"Ya, ya, sure, but—"

"Save it for a suspect, Fat." He stalked out of the office, leaving Miler tapping his pencil and gazing curiously after him. A phone rang somewhere behind him. He hurried on—angry with himself for jumpiness and for indecisiveness. He had to make a choice, and make it soon. It was the lack of a choice that left him jumpy, susceptible to a jolt from either side.

"Norris . . . Hey, Norris . . ."

Miler's voice. He whirled to see the cop trotting down the steps behind him, his pudgy face glistening in the morning sun. "Your wife's on the phone, Norris. Says it's urgent."

When he got back to the office, he heard the faint, "Hello, *hello!*" coming from the receiver on the desk, caught it up quickly.

"Anne? What's wrong?"

Her voice was low and strained beneath a cheerful overnote. "Nothing's wrong, darling. We have a visitor. Come right home. Chief Franklin's here."

It knocked the breath out of him. He felt himself going white. He glanced at Chief Miler, sitting calmly nearby.

"Can you tell me about it now?" he asked her.

"Not very well. Please hurry home. He wants to talk to you about the K-99s."

"Have the two of them met?"

"Yes, they have." She paused, as if waiting for him to speak, then said, "Oh, *that!* Bouncey, honey—remember bouncey?"

"Good, I'll be right home." He hung up and started out.

"Troubles?" the chief called after him.

"Just a sick newt, if it's any of your business," he called back.

Franklin's helicopter was parked in the empty lot next door when Norris drove up in front of the house. The departmental chief heard the truck and came out on the porch to watch his agent walk up the path. His bulky body was loosely draped in gray tweeds, and his hawk face was a dark solemn mask. He greeted Norris with a slow, almost sarcastic nod.

"I see you don't read your mail. If you'd looked at it, you'd have known I was coming. I wrote you yesterday."

"Sorry, Chief, I didn't have a chance to stop by the message office this morning."

Franklin grunted. "Then you don't know why I'm here?"

"No, sir."

"Let's sit out on the porch," Franklin said, and perched his bony frame on the railing. "We've got to get busy on these Bermuda-K-99s, Norris. How many have you got?"

"Thirty-four, I think."

"I counted thirty-five."

"Maybe you're right. I—I'm not sure."

"Found any deviants yet?"

"Uh—I haven't run any tests yet, sir."

Franklin's voice went sharp. "Do you need a test to know when a neutroid is talking a blue streak?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just this. We've found at least a dozen of Delmont's units that have mental ages that correspond to their physical age. What's more, they're functioning females, and they have normal pituitaries. Know what that means?"

"They won't take an age-set then," Norris said. "They'll grow to adulthood."

"And have children."

Norris frowned. "How can they have children? There aren't any males."

"No? Guess what we found in one of Delmont's incubators."

"Not a—"

"Yeah. And it's probably not the first. This business about padding his quota is baloney! Hell, man, he was going to start his own black market! He finally admitted it, after twenty-hours' questioning without a letup. He was going to raise them, Norris. He was stealing them right out of the incubators before an inspec-tor ever saw them. The K-99s—the numbered ones—are just the ones he couldn't get back. Lord knows how many males he's got hidden away someplace!"

"What're you going to do?"

"Do! What do you *think* we'll do? Smash the whole scheme, that's what! Find the deviants and kill them. We've got enough now for lab work."

Norris felt sick. He looked away. "I suppose you'll want me to handle the destruction, then."

Franklin gave him a suspicious glance. "Yes, but why do you ask? You *have* found one, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir," he admitted.

A moan came from the doorway. Norris looked up to see his wife's white face staring at him in horror, just before she turned and fled into the house. Franklin's bony head lifted.

"I see," he said. "We have a fixation on our deviant. Very well, Norris, I'll take care of it myself. Where is it?"

"In the house, sir. My wife's bedroom."

"Get it."

Norris went glumly in the house. The bedroom door was locked.

"Honey," he called softly. There was no answer. He knocked gently.

A key turned in the lock, and his wife stood facing him. Her eyes were weeping ice.

"Stay back!" she said. He could see Peony behind her, sitting in the center of the floor and looking mystified.

Then he saw his own service revolver in her trembling hand. "Look, honey—it's *me*."

She shook her head. "No, it's not you. It's a man that wants to kill a little girl. Stay back."

"You'd shoot, wouldn't you?" he asked softly.

"Try to come in and find out," she invited.

"Let me have Peony."

She laughed, her eyes bright with hate. "I wonder where Terry went. I guess he died. Or adapted. I guess I'm a widow now. Stay back, Mister, or I'll kill you."

Norris smiled. "Okay, I'll stay back. But the gun isn't loaded."

She tried to slam the door; he caught it with his foot. She struck at him with the pistol, but he dragged it out of her hand. He pushed her aside and held her against the wall while she clawed at his arm.

"Stop it!" he said. "Nothing will happen to Peony, I promise you!" He glanced back at the child-thing, who had begun to cry. Anne subsided a little, staring at him angrily.

"There's no other way out, honey. Just trust me. She'll be all right."

Breathing quickly, Anne stood aside and watched him. "Okay, Terry. But if you're lying—tell me, is it murder to kill a man to protect a child?"

Norris lifted Peony in his arms. Her wailing ceased, but her tail switched nervously.



"In whose law book?" he asked his wife. "I was wondering the same thing." Norris started toward the door. "By the way—find my instruments while I'm outside, will you?"

"The dissecting instruments?" she gasped. "If you intend—"

"Let's call them surgical instruments, shall we? And get them sterilized."

He went on outside, carrying the child. Franklin was waiting for him in the kennel doorway.

"Was that Mrs. Norris I heard screaming?"

Norris nodded. "Let's get this over with. I don't stomach it so well." He let his eyes rest unhappily on the top of Peony's head.

Franklin grinned at her and took a bit of candy out of his pocket. She refused it and snuggled closer to Norris.

"When can I go home?" she piped. "I want Daddy."

Franklin straightened, watching her with amusement. "You're going home in a few minutes, little newt. Just a few minutes."

They went into the kennels together, and Franklin headed straight for the third room. He seemed to be enjoying the situation. Norris hating him silently, stopped at a workbench and pulled on a pair of gloves. Then he called after Franklin.

"Chief, since you're in there, check the outlet pressure while I turn on the main line, will you?"

Franklin nodded assent. He stood outside the gas-chamber, watching the dials on the door. Norris could see his back while he twisted the main-line valve.

"Pressure's up!" Franklin called.

"Okay. Leave the hatch ajar so it won't lock, and crack the intake valves. Read it again."

"Got a mask for me?"

Norris laughed. "If you're scared, there's one on the shelf. But just open the hatch, take a reading, and close it. There's no danger."

Franklin frowned at him and cracked the intakes. Norris quietly closed the main valve again.

"Drops to zero!" Franklin called.

"Leave it open, then. Smell anything?"

"No. I'm turning it off, Norris." He twisted the intakes. Simultaneously, Norris opened the main line.

"Pressure's up again!"

Norris dropped his wrench and walked back to the chamber, leaving Peony perched on the workbench.

"Trouble with the intakes," he said gruffly. "It's happened before. Mind getting your hands dirty with me, Chief?"

Franklin frowned irritably. "Let's hurry this up, Norris. I've got five territories to visit."

"Okay, but we'd better put on our masks." He climbed a metal ladder to the top of the chamber, leaned over to inspect the intakes. On his way down, he shouldered a light-bulb over the door, shattering it. Franklin cursed and stepped back, brushing glass fragments from his head and shoulders.

"Good thing the light was off," he snapped.

Norris handed him the gasmask and put on his own. "The main switch is off," he said. He opened the intakes again. This time the dials fell to normal open-line pressure. "Well, look—it's okay," he called through the mask. "You sure it was zero before?"

"Of course I'm sure!" came the muffled reply.

"Leave it on for a minute. We'll see. I'll go get the newt. Don't let the door close, sir. It'll start the automatics and we can't get it open for half an hour."

"I know, Norris. Hurry up."

Norris left him standing just outside the chamber, propping the door open with his foot. A faint wind was coming through the opening. It should reach an explosive mixture quickly with the hatch ajar.

He stepped into the next room, waited a moment, and jerked the switch. The roar was deafening as the exposed tungsten filament flared and detonated the escaping anesthetic vapor. Norris went to cut off the main line. Peony was crying plaintively. He moved to the door and glanced at the smouldering remains of Franklin.

Feeling no emotion whatever, Norris left the kennels, carrying the sobbing child under one arm. His wife stared at him without understanding.

"Here, hold Peony while I call the police," he said.

"Police? What's happened?"

He dialed quickly. "Chief Miler? This is Norris. Get over here quick. My gas chamber exploded—killed Chief Agent Frank-lin. Man, it's awful! Hurry."

He hung up and went back to the kennels. He selected a normal Bermuda-K-99 and coldly killed it with a wrench. "You'll serve for a deviant," he said, and left it lying in the middle of the floor.

Then he went back to the house, mixed a sleeping capsule in a glass of water, and forced Peony to drink it.

"So she'll be out when the cops come," he explained to Anne. She stamped her foot. "Will you tell me what's happened?"

"You heard me on the phone. Franklin accidentally died. That's all you have to know."

He carried Peony out and locked her in a cage. She was too sleepy to protest, and she was dozing when the police came.

Chief Miler strode about the three rooms like a man looking for a burglar at midnight. He nudged the body of the neutroid with his foot. "What's this, Norris?"

"The deviant we were about to destroy. I finished her with a wrench."

"I thought you said there weren't any deviants."

"As far as the public's concerned, there aren't. I couldn't see that it was any of your business. It still isn't."

"I see. It may become my business, though. How'd the blast happen?"

Norris told him the story up to the point of the detonation. "The light over the door was loose. Kept flickering on and off. Franklin reached up to tighten it. Must have been a little gas in the socket. Soon as he touched it—wham!"

"Why was the door open with the gas on?"

"I told you—we were checking the intakes. If you close the door, it starts the automatics. Then you can't get it open till the cycle's finished."

"Where were you?"

"I'd gone to cut off the gas again."

"Okay, stay in the house until we're finished out here." When Norris went back in the house, his wife's white face turned slowly toward him.

She sat stiffly by the living room window, looking sick. Her voice was quietly frightened.

"Terry, I'm sorry about everything."

"Skip it."

"What did you do?"

He grinned sourly. "I adapted to an era. Did you find the instruments?"

She nodded. "What are they for?"

"To cut off a tail and skin a tattooed foot. Go to the store and buy some brown hair-dye and a pair of boy's trousers, age two.

Peony's going to get a crewcut. From now on, she's Mike."

"We're class-C, Terry! We can't pass her off as our own."

"We're class-A, honey. I'm going to forge a heredity certificate."

Anne put her face in her hands and rocked slowly to and fro. "Don't feel bad, baby. It was Franklin or a little girl. And from now on, it's society or the Norrises."

"What'll we do?"

"Go to Atlanta and work for Anthropos. I'll take up where Delmont left off."

"Terry!"

"Peony will need a husband. They may find all of Delmont's males. I'll *make* her one. Then we'll see if a pair of chimp-Ks can do better than their makers."

Wearily, he stretched out on the sofa.

"What about that priest? Suppose he tells about Peony. Suppose he guesses about Franklin and tells the police?"

"The police," he said, "would then smell a motive. They'd fig-ure it out and I'd be finished. We'll wait and see. Let's don't talk; I'm tired. We'll just wait for Miler to come in."

She began rubbing his temples gently, and he smiled.

"So we wait," she said. "Shall I read to you, Terry?"

"That would be pleasant," he murmured, closing his eyes.

She slipped away, but returned quickly. He heard the rustle of dry pages and smelled musty leather. Then her voice came, speaking old words softly. And he thought of the small child-thing lying peacefully in her cage while angry men stalked about her. A small life with a mind; she came into the world as quietly as a thief, a burglar in the crowded house of Man.

*"I will send my fear before thee, and I will destroy the peoples before whom thou shalt come, sending hornets to drive out the Hevite and the Canaanite and the Hethite before thou enterest the land. Little by little I will drive them out before thee, till thou be increased, and dost possess the land. Then shalt thou be to me a new people, and I to thee a God . . ."*

And on the quiet afternoon in May, while he waited for the police to finish puzzling in the kennels, it seemed to Terrell Nor-ris that an end to scheming and pushing and arrogance was not too far ahead. It should be a pretty good world then.

He hoped Man could fit into it somehow.

## **THE CORPSE IN YOUR BED IS ME** **by WALTER M. MILLER, JR. & LINCOLN BOONE**

Snyder was a top comedian, and we hated his guts. That pleased Snyder.

Freddy the Martian thought he was hiffling sad. That killed Snyder. —

IT WAS BACK AROUND 2045, I think. The West Coast was infested with Martin Snyder fan clubs in those days, but our club was a little different. We called it the *I Hate Snyder's Guts Club*. Its members were Snyder's supporting cast, Snyder's production people, and a few technical men who worked for the network. Oh yes, and Snyder—he belonged to it too. "No one can possibly hate me as much as I hate myself," he said with icy arrogance when he found out about the group, "and I demand to be admitted as a member."

We elected him president. He presided over most of our weekly meetings in the back room of the Bongo Bar, just across the street from the telecast studio, and just after the *Martin Snyder Hour*. The main business on the agenda was gin, How-Rotten-Was-the-Show, and hating Snyder's guts. The club's name was no gag. Snyder, of course, pretended it was.

We hated the man, not the comedian. As a comedian, he was on his way to join the ranks of Comedy's Immortals. As a man, he was a bully. He had the savage instincts of a fighter, but the physique of a consumptive vegetarian just released from a concentration camp. I like to think that as a kid, Snyder was maybe The Boy Anybody Can Whip Anytime, and that he compensated for it with comedy. "You can lick me, but I can make you laugh when I push your button," he might have thought, "and that makes you a jack-in-the-box."

As a grown man, he still seemed to think that way. "I can make you laugh anytime I want you to laugh," he would boast, "and at a bumpkin's joke at that." And what's more, he could do it.

And then he would groan: "*Please!* Won't somebody find me a sensible fellow who doesn't have to laugh like an idiot whenever I open my mouth? If he can sneer at my dull material, I'll pay a bounty for him! I'll *breed* the scoundrel! We'll raise the master race."

Plenty of people had tried to call his hand, but Snyder had never lost a bet. By usage, the wager had acquired the form of a contest. The challenger must be sober, mentally competent, English-speaking, and not deaf, dumb, or blind. He must sit with an audience of at least four others who would laugh as they

pleased while Snyder ran through a monolog. If he could sit attentive but poker-faced for three minutes, the challenger won the bet. But no challenger ever won . . .

Until we found Freddy.

Freddy was a Martian. Freddy fitted the conditions of the contest, as Snyder was unhappily forced to admit. He spoke English—with a lisp. He was mentally competent—in his own way. And he had the sense of humor for which his species is widely known. "That," said Snyder later, "is the hell of it."

We had been hating Snyder's guts with more than usual intensity for several weeks, mostly because of Felicity Larkin. Felicity was script editor for the show, and everyone loved her with one variety of love or another. Except Snyder, of course. Nick Sheldon had been after her to marry him, but Felicity—alone among the cast and crew—had eyes for no man but Martin Snyder. She worshipped the arrogant clown. Perhaps she saw something beyond the brittle exterior that none of the rest of us saw. Or perhaps she only thought she did. Snyder scarcely acknowledged her existence. And Nick Sheldon, after a long and trying courtship, got her to say "yes." Snyder, however, said "no." If they married, he would fire them both. They decided to postpone it a while. As soon as he got the chance, Snyder made love to Felicity. And as soon as he had gotten her safely away from Nick, he dropped her. She protested. He fired her. A month later, she married Nick. Snyder fired Nick. And that was the end of it, except that we hated his guts a little more.

Freddy seemed like a way to hurt him without hurting the show, which was our meal ticket as well as Snyder's.

Joe Grayber found Freddy behind a soda fountain not far from Hollywood and Vine when he stopped there for a bromo one night. Joe was our technical director, which explains his frequent need of a bromo. When he walked in, the soda counter was empty and Freddy was watching the *Laugh of Your Life* show—it rated close to Snyder's then—on a portable set while he sat on the freezer and nibbled dainties. The dainties were gummy little cubes. He plucked them out of a box labelled GROOVER'S SUPER-ATOMIC RAT POISON—*Sure Death in Ten Seconds to Pests*. He tried to set it out of sight when Joe came in, but saw Joe gaping at it and shrugged.

"Try one," he whinnied in that odd Martian voice. "Very delithiouth." (Remember for yourself, after this, that he lisps.) He offered Joe the box across the counter. Joe recoiled. "Don't worry," said Freddy. "I can mix you the antidote for a quarter. Either cherry or lime."

"Thanks," said Joe. "I'll take a bromo, if you don't mind."

Freddy shrugged and turned to get it.

"Wash your hands first!" Joe yelled. "Get that sticky candy off."

Freddy helped himself to another of Groover's gumdrops, then washed his hands. "Not candy," he confided. "Medicine. I need more phosphorous on Earth than I do back home. The extra arsenic helps too. Boss doesn't like it on duty. Won't tell?"

"Won't tell."

"Hoo hoo hoo!" Freddy's laugh made Joe Grayber shudder. It made no sense, and reminded him of an owl hooting into a rain barrel. He sipped his bromo and eyed Freddy.

It might occur to some people—mostly to those who have seen Martians only in photographs—that Freddy would be an unappetizing thing to see behind a soda counter, and not exactly good for business. True, the Martian skin is mottled brown and yellow, slick and hairless. The eyes are like the eyes of the great horned owl—lemon colored irises with little white showing, and very round. But as the Martian explorers frequently remarked after the first expeditions to that planet, a live Martian has a certain edible look. One might think of Freddy lightly fried in olive oil and served up with herbs and a red wine sauce.

"Hiffle," said Freddy, watching the *Laugh of Your Life* show. "Hiffle hiffle hiffle . . ."

Joe Grayber sat suddenly straighter. "What did you say?"

"Nothing. I was only hiffing."

Grayber rubbed his chin and tried to think. A Martian hiffled at Martian funerals. It was not an expression of grief like crying, however. There was no precise human equivalent of it. It was a release, like laughter or tears, but the emotion behind it was not felt nor understood by humans. It seemed allied with sadness, boredom, indignation, pity, and aloofness—but it did not seem unpleasant to them.

Joe listened more closely to the program. The comedian came to a punch line. The audience laughed.

"Hiffle," said Freddy, and ate another bite of rat poison.

"Listen," said Joe, leaning eagerly across the counter. "Do you ever watch the Martin Snyder show?"

"Oh no!" said Freddy. "He's *too* sad. He's even sadder than this guy."

Joe pulled out his wallet and extracted a pair of twenties. He waved them toward the Martian. "Like to make a little of this stuff?" he asked.

"Hoo!" Freddy hooted. "Hoo hoo hoo."

Snyder was rather cross about the whole thing. "How do I know Martians even laugh?" he snapped. "Undoubtedly Martians have no funnybone or you wouldn't even have thought of it."

Joe handed him a pamphlet. "Look this over and you'll change your mind. It's a translation of a Martian joke scroll I picked up at the library. Better study it. We invited Freddy over tonight."

"After the *show*?" Snyder quickly thumbed through the book, stopped to read snatches here and there. "But there's nothing funny here!"

"So what? You always said your material isn't funny. He's coming, anyhow. He wants to bet. We don't own the Bongo Bar. You don't have to bet him just because he's there, of course."

Snyder was at his best during that night's show. His voice was honey laced with battery acid. When he told a story, the butt of it was usually the common citizen, but Snyder made him seem such a sub-human automaton and so incredibly stupid that the common citizen laughed heartily and failed to recognize himself.

Snyder wore a monocle during the show, and used it to punctuate his monologs. It seemed to fit his haughty personality and his thin arrogant face. It had become his trademark. When he approached the climax of a joke, he removed the monocle from his eye. When he came to the gag line, he paused to breathe on the lens before he delivered the pitch. Then while the audience laughed, he polished it on his sleeve.

There was nothing funny about the monocle ritual in itself, but it was a cue.

One night, he had stood before the cameras and looked around at the studio, audience without saying anything for thirty seconds. At last he removed his monocle. The audience seemed to tense. He held it up to his lips and breathed a silent *hah!* on the lens. He snorted at them, then polished the lens on his sleeve. The audience roared.

"My, you'll drool at anything tonight," Snyder told them pleasantly. . .

"Pavlovian dogs!" he remarked after the show. "I *told* you they'll laugh at anything. They'll even laugh at nothing. You see?"

He never tried it again. A new viewer would not laugh, and an old Snyder fan might be annoyed at realizing he had laughed by a conditioned reflex. Snyder used it on us instead. Infuriatingly, it worked. We were conditioned. He used it on us again that night.

About a dozen members of the *I Hate Snyder Club* had already convened at the Bongo after the show. Freddy was there, but Snyder was late. We dragged four tables together and sat around sipping drinks and nervously eyeing Freddy while he munched rat killers and blinked owlishly at the neon. He could not drink in the humidity of Earth's atmosphere.

Coreen tried to get Freddy to talk about himself, with only dubious success. His remarks often seemed weird, startling, or incongruous to a human. Several times we thought he was being extremely witty, and laughed, only to notice that the laughter hurt his feelings, or shocked him. We did not understand a Martian. And although Freddy had been three years on Earth, it was clear that he did not understand us.

He had wanted to see the sights of the third planet, and had come here on a thirteen-week NGN contract when they were hiring Martian extras for the filming of *Brides of a Martian Harem* in the Nevada Desert. He had been assured by a shady talent scout that the producer would exercise the contract's option and extend the contract to a year. The producer had not done so. Freddy lacked the wherewithal to buy a ticket home. If he lived frugally as a soda jerk, he calculated that he might save enough to go home after fourteen years.

This made Coreen very sad. She sniffled and patted his four-jointed arm. Freddy looked at her in surprise and blew thin wisps of smoke from both ears. He had not been smoking. He took her hand and bent over it with his lips pursed out into a conical shape as if he meant to kiss it. A quiver passed over him, and then he spat a pearl into her palm. At least it looked like a pearl. Later we learned that it was Martian equivalent of a kidney stone. Coreen accepted it as a gift, with only a small shudder, and even thanked him for it. Later we learned that it was a rebuke for what Freddy thought was an insult.

Snyder came in late and took a seat at the end of the table. He was still wearing his monocle and traces of make-up. He smiled haughtily over us and looked at Freddy. Freddy blinked at him.

"Hiffle," he said.

Snyder scrutinized him, readjusting his monocle. "Hiffle yourself. Whose little delirium tremen are you? This is the *I Hate Snyder Club*, sonny. You've got the wrong place?"

Freddy hiffled again and ate a cube of rat killer. Snyder saw the box and jumped a bit.

"Clever gag, Catmeat," he said. "I could use you on the show sometime." It was the first time I had ever heard Snyder pay anyone a compliment. He quickly dropped all awareness of Freddy and looked around at the rest of us. "The meeting is now in session. We will now bow our heads for two minutes of solemn silent hatred for Martin Snyder. All together now—hate Martin Snyder."

We all sat there and glowered at him. Loftily imperious, he sat drumming a forefinger and eyeing us critically. After fifteen seconds, he removed his monocle. We all stiffened. He blew on the lens. Coreen giggled. Freddy hiffled. Coreen giggled again. The giggle triggered it. We all laughed while Snyder polished the monocle on his sleeve and looked disgusted.

"Idiots! At least you could have the decency to hate me silently for two short minutes. Or even a minute." He glanced peculiarly at Freddy.

"You see? It's indecent. What would you do for it if you were me?"

Freddy shoved the rat poison at him.

Involuntarily Snyder laughed. It was only an explosive snort, but it was a laugh. We all stared at him in amazement. Freddy hiffled and looked sad. "That sound he makes—is that a laugh?" Snyder wanted to know. Grayber shook his head. "Laugh for him, Freddy?"

"Can't," said the Martian, "Nothing funny."

"Like crying, you mean?" asked Coreen. "Most people can't cry unless there's really something sad."

"Same opposite. You make stupid remarks. Congratulations." Freddy said it to her almost admiringly. Coreen blinked and looked baffled.

"I want to hear him laugh," said Snyder.

"Do something funny," Freddy suggested helpfully.

"Wait!" Grayber interrupted. "I want to lay a bet. I want to make it for Freddy. He doesn't dig our gambling. I want to bet fifty bucks you can't make him laugh in three minutes." He turned to Freddy. "I'll pay you fifty dollars for not laughing. You understand that, don't you?"

"Hoo hoo hoo! I dig."

"There, Snyder, you heard him! I don't know what I said that was funny, but you heard him laugh. Satisfied?"

Snyder looked around at the eager fury in a dozen faces and gathered his arrogance about him. "You little dullwits really believe I can't make this codfish hoot, don't you? Very well, you are about to be chastened. Grayber, consult your timepiece."

The director laid his watch on the table. "Time," he said finally.

Snyder went into his routine. It was one of his old monologs, and I recognized it as the classic performance that had put him on the way to fame. He spoke directly to Freddy with that intimate confidential contempt that is his specialty. Within thirty seconds, we were all roaring and pounding the table with glee.

Freddy merely hiffled.

I watched Snyder for nervousness, but there was no sign of it. He was perfectly in character and completely self-assured,

"Riffle hiffle hiffle . . ."

"Time!" snapped Grayber.

"Riff-hiff-hiffle," said Freddy.

It took Snyder about ten seconds to sink out of the comedian role. While he sank out of it, he went slowly livid. He seethed with hate.

"So very touching," said Freddy. "It was beautiful, Mister Snyder. Hiffle." He meant it too. We all laughed.

Snyder seemed to shrink to half his size. He looked around at us with blank eyes.

"Pay off," said Grayber.

Snyder stood up. His throat was working. "You bastards!" he shouted. "You're fired! All of you! Do you hear?"

"Pay off, Snyder."

He snatched out his wallet and flung it down on the table. He stalked out.

"Are we really fired?" Coreen asked.

"Don't be silly, doll," Grayber told her with a smile. "What would he do for a show?" He paid Freddy out of Snyder's wallet and gave it to Coreen to hold for the boss.

We went home that night feeling triumphant but somehow uncomfortable. It was a little like kicking a dog.

We saw nothing of Snyder for three days. He was missing at the first rehearsal for the next week's show. He showed up at the second rehearsal looking haggard. He needed a shave. His arrogance was still with him, but there was a defensive irritability about it that made him a little pathetic. It was the worst rehearsal we ever had.

The next rehearsal was dress, and it came off no better. Snyder sat around between scenes reading the translation of the Martian joke scroll and shaking his head over it. He asked Grayber for Freddy's address.

"Sure, but why?"

"You really gave me the business," Snyder told him. "I wasn't prepared. What's funny to a Martian is something else. I've been studying up on them. I can get a laugh out of that creep any time I want to."

"Sure."

"Look, Gray, it's like this. 'I'll pay you fifty dollars for not laughing,' you told him. He thought that was funny—to get paid for a *not*. I think I've got their humor figured out."

It was preying on Snyder. It was preying on him during the show that week. The studio audience roared just as loudly as usual, but it was purely conditioned reflex. We sat in the production booth and held our hands over our eyes and groaned. Snyder was pathetic. It was the worst night in years.

The next week's show was nearly as bad. Snyder had worked hard on it, and there had been two very hopeful rehearsals. But when he got up before the cameras and the audience, he seemed to wilt. The audience laughed as much as usual, but there was only ominous silence in the production booth.

There was gloom at the Bongo Bar that night. Snyder didn't show up. He never came to another club meeting after the affair with Freddy. We stopped calling them "club meetings" anyhow.

"Maybe he'll snap out of it next time," I said. "He can't stay in a stew about it forever."

"I just found out something," Grayber told me. "He's seeing Freddy. They've gotten together three times since it happened. Real pally, see? But he still can't get a chuckle out of that guy."

I whistled. "That sounds bad, Gray." "Yeah? Well, that's not the worst of it. Freddy's taken to watching the show. And Snyder *knows* he's watching it."

"And hiffling."

"And hiffling."

"We ought to take up a collection and send Freddy back where he came from, Gray. If Snyder goes on many more weeks like this, we'll be out of work."

"Hah! You know what's the price of passage to Mars?"

"Well, maybe we could pay him to leave town."

We tried it the next day. It was too late. Freddy was quitting his job. Snyder had hired him as a chauffeur at double his drugstore salary. Grayber and I just groaned.

After four weeks, we knew the show was on the skids. The clients knew it, the agency knew it, and the network knew it. Everyone but the audience knew it, and they would catch on soon. Conditioned behavior could not sustain it forever. It was decided the only thing to do about it for the moment was to cut down on Snyder's camera time and play up the musicals, variety acts, and skits, until the star's slump had passed. Reluctantly, Snyder consented. But we all knew it couldn't go on for long without his personality to tie it together.

"It's Freddy that's doing it to you, Snyder," Grayber told him. "Get away from that guy. Fire him. Give him two months pay and . . ."

Snyder exploded. I never saw him so furious. Freddy was his friend, his bosom chum, his own very special affinity. Besides, Freddy laughed at him now, and so Grayber's theory was all wet.

"That's a lie," Grayber told me when Snyder was gone. "I saw them sitting on a bench in the park the other day. Snyder was telling jokes and Freddy was hiffling. Snyder had tears in his eyes. Oh, Freddy laughs now and then when Snyder says something, but never when Snyder means for him to laugh, and never at a joke. It's driving him batty."

"And driving us out of a job."

The show kept slipping and the clients became ominously silent, but nothing happened. It went on for nine weeks that way.

Snyder spent more time in the microfilm library than he spent at the studio. He studied Mars and the Martian's legends, customs, habits, and folkways. Frantically he sought a pattern in their humor.

"Look, Snyder," Grayber kept telling him, "nobody has *really* found out what human humor is yet. There are dozens of theories about humor, and the only impressive thing about any of them is—they're so damned humorless. You can't figure out what humor is in a Martian. You can't even say what it is in a man."

Snyder wouldn't listen. He tried telling Martian jokes. Freddy hiffled. He tried giving a hotfoot to a sleeping prop-man while Freddy looked on. Freddy hiffled. He tried shaggy dog stories, lewd yarns, practical jokes, and even degenerated to puns. Freddy was very touched by it all. He explained the point of every gag to Freddy after Freddy failed to laugh. Freddy saw the point, all right, saw it very clinically. The worst of it was that Freddy was beginning to condition Snyder. Freddy had only to open his box of rat poison and offer it to Snyder like popcorn, and Snyder would pound his knees and chortle. It worked like Snyder's monocle worked on us. Freddy didn't see what was funny about it, but he did it to hear Snyder laugh.

One day they were walking across the park and saw a group of children giving a play funeral to a dead puppy. They watched for awhile and Freddy began to laugh. To Snyder's consternation, Freddy laughed over the incident the rest of the afternoon.

Snyder got me by the lapels that night after rehearsal. "Listen!" he said. "I've finally figured it out. A Martian hiffles at a Martian funeral. He laughs at a funeral here. When it's done by humans, tragedy is comedy to him, and comedy is tragedy. See?"

"No." I didn't see. It didn't fit some of the facts.

"Idiot!" he snapped. "That's the way it is. There's a reversal at work somehow. It even works the other way a little. I scanned through some films of their stylized shadow-play tragedies. They were a little funny—to me. Not to Freddy. And their comedy leaves me feeling glum. I've got it figured now."

"Why tell me?"

He said he needed my help. He had a plan. It sounded crazy to me. He figured it was sure to get a laugh out of Freddy. I told him it wouldn't work. He blew up. Finally I agreed to go along. If he once got a laugh out of Freddy, it might salvage Snyder's ego and thereby save the show.

Snyder hired a couple of stage hands as accomplices, and for three days they kept calling Freddy's apartment and asking: "Are you the guy that keeps calling about shipping a dead body to Mars?" And Freddy would say, "No, who is this?"

"Solar Shipping Enterprises," the voice would answer. "Look, you'll have to show us the death certificate and the embalmer's record on it, or we can't handle it. Is it a Martian or a human, anyway?"

Freddy would hang up and "hiffle."



Finally Snyder manufactured a convincing Solar Shipping letterhead with the help of a handilith office printing machine and wrote Freddy a letter saying that the death certificate and embalmer's receipt were in good order, and that the shipping men would pick up the casket at the time and place Freddy had allegedly designated.

We went over to Freddy's place that afternoon. Snyder had gotten a duplicate key somehow, and we let ourselves into the shabby two-room apartment the Martian called home. Snyder had brought with him a plastic sack filled with such props as he needed for the so-called "gag." He dumped it on the bed and we went to wrestle Freddy's wardrobe trunk out of the closet.

"How do you know he won't show up before we're ready?"

"I sent him on an errand, if you must know," Snyder said crossly. "He's to call me at the studio in half an hour. The girl who answers the phone will tell him I'm gone for the day. She'll tell him Solar Shipping just called for him, and that two men are on their way over here to pick up a trunk. He'll come running in about forty minutes from now."

I shrugged and we set about the job of unpacking the trunk and dumping its contents on the bed. We moved the trunk into the other room, closer to the entrance. We plastered the trunk with shipping labels: CONTENTS PERISHABLE, REFRIGERATE . USE NO HOOKS . SPECIAL DELIVERY . . . and so on. The shipping tag was addressed to the chief matriarch of Freddy's home clan on the Mare Cinnmerium. Some of the labels were in Martian, one of which Snyder affixed to the inside of the lid.

"Why on the *inside* of the box?" I asked him.

"It's a note to his clan matriarch," he said irritably.

"What does it say?"

"It says, 'Beloved Ancestress, I have discovered they are quite tasty. Try this one and see.' Then there's a recipe."

"For roast Snyder? Good Lord, and you think he'll find *that* funny?"

"I am quite certain of it. Now give me a hand."

We finished what we had to do. Snyder went into the bathroom with the make-up kit and came out in his underwear. He was chalk white from head to toe and covered with dried blood. He made a convincing corpse. When he crawled inside, I got the trunk closed and locked and tied with rope. It looked all ready to go. I went downstairs.

The two "Solar Shipping men" were waiting in the alley. "Go on up," I told them. "It's all set. He should be here in about five minutes."

It came out the way Snyder planned—up to a point.

Freddy came rushing in on schedule. When he got upstairs, the two shipping men were pounding on his door, and arguing with each other.

"Lissen, I tell you this is where we get the stiff."

"You're mixed up, Joe. We get the trunk here. The coffin's at the other place."

"Hey! Owl face! Is this your joint?"

"My joint. Stupid confusion. Hiffle. I got nothing shipping out. Wrong place."

They stood aside while he unlocked the door and threw it open. He started inside, but stopped. There sat the trunk, brightly labelled for a long journey. Freddy blew twin jets of smoke from his ears.

"There it is!" said one of the porters and shouldered past Freddy into the room. "Come on, Joe. Let's get a move on."

"My trunk," said Freddy. "Not going to Mars. Gladly wish so. Stupid confusion. You wait." He rushed into the bedroom, saw the trunk's contents on the bed, and rushed back. The porters stood there undecided.

"The boss says pick it up . . ."

"Wait. See what's inside first. Is maximum confusion." Freddy began tearing off the ropes. He found the key and got it unlocked. The lid was stuck. The two porters got it open for him. The "corpse" toppled out and lay on its side. Joe leaped back with a howl.

"*Murder!*"

"Run for the cops!"

"Hiffle," said Freddy sadly, his ears leaking smoke.

The porters burst out of the room. Freddy glanced at the body, then bent over to read the note pasted inside the lid. He spat three pearls, gargled, and ran for the door, hiffing on his way.

The "corpse" climbed to its feet, dressed hurriedly, and washed its face. It hung a sign on the lid of the open trunk, then raced out of the room and headed for the freight elevator. The sign on the trunk said: OUT TO LUNCH.

The porters came back with a cop. The cop looked around, took the porters' names, and let them go. After a few minutes, another officer came in with Freddy.

"He was running down the alley when I caught. . ." He stopped talking and looked at the trunk, and the sign on the trunk.

Both cops looked solemnly at the Martian.

"Hiffle," Freddy said weakly.

"He never even giggled," Snyder whispered weakly and gulped another round of gin. "Not even a smile."

"He can't smile," I reminded him. "Martians can't . . ."

"Get out!" he told me savagely. It was his kitchen we were sitting in, so I got up to go. He threw an ash tray at me. I went. Snyder was due at the studio by eight o'clock. At eight-fifteen, Grayber called his home. No one answered. At eight-thirty, Grayber called an aircab and flew out to Snyder's place. He was back at ten till nine, looking rather white.

"Not there. Doors all open—I went through the whole house. No Snyder."

We called half a dozen of the most likely places, but still no Snyder. By then it was five minutes before nine. The situation was beyond rescue. We got Mike Ferris to m.c. the show, and told the world that Martin Snyder had been stricken with appendicitis. The show that night was a wretched hodgepodge.

In the morning the client served notice of six weeks as required by the contract. And if Snyder missed another night's appearance, the client intended to sue for breach of contract.

We didn't see Snyder again for ten days, when Sue Obregon said she had spotted him falling into a Greeno Quarter dive. I went looking for him. It took four days to find him, but I hit pay on the night of his own show. It was too late to get him to the studio, and he was in no condition. He was sprawled in a booth toward the rear of a dingy tavern with his cheek on the table in a puddle of beer. He had at least a week's beard, and wore five pounds of dirt on his clothes. He was sleeping at the moment.

I went over and shook him. It took a while to get him awake.

"What the hell you want?" he muttered. "Who you anyway?"

"Look, Snyder, it's me. Snap out of it. You've got to straighten up."

"Got the wrong fellow," he said. "My name's not Snyder. Who in hell are you? Don't know you, never saw you. Freddy's my name. Frederick Bismarck Charlemagne. Nice name, eh? Picked it myself. Real name's Martian name. You can't pronounce. Sounds like sitting down on a piano keyboard. My real name, I mean. Just call me Freddy. I make 'em laugh."

"Yeah." I wondered if he had heard what we had cooked up to cover his absence on the show tonight. I glanced at my watch. Nine-twenty. I went over to the bar, glanced up at the Telescreen.

"Mind switching over to channel fifty-three?" I asked the bartender.

He nodded and switched channels. There stood Freddy, telling Snyder's jokes. The audience was howling with glee. They weren't laughing at the jokes. They were laughing at Freddy who obviously saw nothing at all amusing in what he was saying and spoke Snyder's lines with funereal solemnity—and even paused to make little clinical explanations of why each gag was supposed to be funny, as Snyder had explained to him.

A piercing scream came from the direction of the booths. I looked around. Snyder was on his feet and staring wild-eyed at the Teleset. He screamed again and ran for the door.

"Hey! You owe me for two drinks!" yelled the bartender.

"I'll get it," I told him and reached for my wallet.

Brakes screeched and tires howled on the pavement outside. We bolted for the door, expecting to

find Snyder a flattened imprint on the concrete. But the comedian was not in sight.

The day of the next show Grayber and I got a note from him. There was no return address on it. The note said: "Go home with Freddy after the show. Need witnesses. This time he'll really howl."

The audience was not so amused by Freddy that night. It was funny once, but no more. When we got to Freddy's place, there were no lights on, and no sound from inside. Freddy unlocked the door. Grayber went in first and found the light switch.

"Snyder?"

No answer.

"Turn off the lights again," I told him. "I thought I noticed a glow from the bedroom."

He snapped the switch. We stood there for awhile waiting for our eyes to adapt to the dark.

Freddy's adapted first.

"Goofy dim light. Hiffle."

We headed for the bedroom and stopped, crowding the doorway. There was a candle burning at the foot of the bed. There was a body, or a facsimile of a body, stretched out on the bed. It was covered head to toe by a sheet. Freddy hiffled.

"Get up, Snyder. Twice is too much."

I turned on the light. Snyder—or what we assumed was Snyder—didn't stir. A box of GROOVER'S SUPER-ATOMIC RAT POISON—*Sure Death in Ten Seconds to Pests*—lay open on a small table beside the bed. There was a note under the box. Freddy went over to read it. He hiffled and handed it to me. The note said:

Dear Freddy,

The corpse in your bed is me. Snyder.

Freddy's ears were leaking smoke. "Get up, Snyder," he shrilled. "Not funny a bit. Hiffle hiffle . . ."

The figure on the bed lay motionless. Freddy ripped the sheet back. It was Snyder, all right. He was as chalky as he had looked before, but this time there was no blood. He managed to look deader now, though. His face was gray blue, and his lips were drawn back.

"Hiffle."

"Snyder, get up! It's no damn good!"

He didn't move. Freddy's ears jetted smoke. He grabbed Snyder by the shoulders and shook him angrily. Snyder's head didn't wobble the way it should have. Nor could he have held his breath that long.

Rigor mortis had already set in. Freddy shook him harder. "Snyder, Snyder, wake up . . . hoo hoo! Hoo hoo hoo! *H000 hoo hoo hoo hoo*. . ."

Grayber went to the bed and bent over Snyder's face. He sniffed, then glanced at me. "Rat poison," he said.

"Hoo hoo hoo hoo!" Freddy was chortling. "Hoo hoo hoo! Now I get it, Snyder. Now I get it! Hoo hoo hoo hoo . . ." He was alternately shaking the corpse and stamping his feet in wild hilarity. Snyder had been right. He could make *anybody* laugh. We stood there with our hats in our hands, listening to Freddy's unrestrained gaiety. We held our hats over our hearts, and it seemed a touching thing to hear Freddy laugh.

Too bad Snyder couldn't have heard it.

## Crucifixes Etium

Manue Nanti joined the project to make some dough. Five dollars an hour was good pay, even in A.D. 2134 and there was no way to spend it while on the job. Everything would be furnished: housing, chow, clothing, toiletries, medicine, cigarettes, even a daily ration of one hundred eighty proof beverage alcohol, locally distilled from fer-mented Martian mosses as fuel for the project's vehicles. He figured that if he avoided crap games, he could finish his five-year contract with fifty thousand dollars in the bank, return to Earth, and retire at the age of twenty-four. Manue wanted to travel, to see the far corners of the world, the strange cultures, the simple people, the small towns, deserts, mountains,

jungles—for until he came to Mars, he had never been farther than a hundred miles from Cerro de Pasco, his birthplace in Peru.

A great wistfulness came over him in the cold Martian night when the frost haze broke, revealing the black, gleam-stung sky, and the blue-green Earth-star of his birth. *El mundo de mi carne, de mi alma*, he thought—yet, he had seen so little of it that many of its places would be more alien to him than the homogenously ugly vistas of Mars. These he longed to see: the volcanoes of the South Pacific, the monstrous mountains of Tibet, the concrete cyclops of New York, the radioactive craters of Russia, the artificial islands in the China Sea, the Black Forest, the Ganges, the Grand Canyon—but most of all, the works of human art: the pyramids, the Gothic cathedrals of Europe, Notre Dame du Chartres, Saint Peter's, the tile-work wonders of Anacapri. But the dream was still a long labour from realization.

Manue was a big youth, heavy-boned and built for labour, clever in a simple mechanical way, and with a wistful good humour that helped him take a lot of guff from whisky-breathed foremen and sharp-eyed engineers who made ten dollars an hour and figured ways for making more, legitimately or otherwise.

He had been on Mars only a month, and it hurt. Each time he swung the heavy pick into the red-brown sod, his face winced with pain. The plastic aerator valves, surgically stitched in his chest, pulled and twisted and seemed to tear with each lurch of his body. The mechanical oxygenator served as a lung, sucking blood through an artificially grafted network of veins and plastic tubing, frothing it with air from a chemical generator, and returning it to his circulatory system. Breathing was unnecessary, except to provide wind for talking, but Manue breathed in desperate gulps of the 4.0 psi Martian air; for he had seen the wasted, atrophied chests of the men who had served four or five years, and he knew that when they returned to Earth—if ever—they would still need the auxiliary oxygenator equipment.

"If you don't stop breathing," the surgeon told him, "you'll be all right. When you go to bed at night, turn the oxy down low—so you feel like panting. There's a critical point that's just right for sleeping. If you get it too low, you'll wake up screaming, and you'll get claustrophobia. If you get it too high, your reflex mechanisms will go to pot and you won't breathe; your lungs'll dry up after a time. Watch it."

Manue watched it carefully, although the oldsters laughed at him—in their dry wheezing chuckles. Some of them could scarcely speak more than two or three words at a shallow breath.

"Breathe deep, boy," they told him. "Enjoy it while you can. You'll forget how pretty soon. Unless you're an engineer."

The engineers had it soft, he learned. They slept in a pressurized barracks where the air was ten psi and twenty-five per cent oxygen, where they turned their oxies off and slept in peace. Even their oxies were self-regulating, controlling the output according to the carbon dioxide content of the input blood. But the Commission could afford no such luxuries for the labour gangs. The payload of a cargo rocket from Earth was only about two per cent of the ship's total mass, and nothing superfluous could be carried. The ships brought the bare essentials, basic industrial equipment, big reactors, generators, engines, heavy tools.

Small tools, building materials, foods, non-nuclear fuels—these things had to be made on Mars. There was an open pit mine in the belly of Syrtis Major where a "lake" of nearly pure iron-rust was scooped into smelter, and processed into various grades of steel for building purposes, tools, and machinery. A quarry in the Flathead Mountains dug up large quantities of cement rock, burned it and crushed it to make concrete.

It was rumoured that Mars was even preparing to grow her own labour force. An old-timer told him that the Commission had brought five hundred married couples to a new underground city in the Mare Erythraeum, supposedly as personnel for a local commission headquarters, but according to the old-timer, they were to be paid a bonus of three thousand dollars for every child born on the red planet. But Manue knew that the old "troffies" had a way of inventing such stories, and he reserved a certain amount of scepticism.

As for his own share in the Project, he knew—and needed to know—very little. The encampment was at the north end of the Mare Cimmerium, surrounded by the bleak brown and green landscape of

rock and giant lichens, stretching towards sharply defined horizons except for one mountain range in the distance, and hung over by a blue sky so dark that the Earth-star occasionally became dimly visible during the dim daytime. The encampment consisted of a dozen double-walled stone huts, windowless, and roofed with flat slabs of rock covered over by a tarry resin boiled out of the cactuslike spineplants. The camp was ugly, lonely, and dominated by the gaunt skeleton of a drill rig set up in its midst.

Manue joined the excavating crew in the job of digging a yard-wide, six-feet-deep foundation trench in a hundred-yard square around the drill rig, which day and night was biting deeper through the crust of Mars in a dry cut that necessitated frequent stoppages for changing rotary bits. He learned that the geologists had predicted a subterranean pocket of tritium oxide ice at sixteen thousand feet, and that it was for this that they were drilling. The foundation he was helping to dig would be for a control station of some sort.

He worked too hard to be very curious. Mars was a nightmare, a grim, womanless, frigid, disinterestedly evil world. His digging partner was a sloe-eyed Tibetan nick-named "Gee" who spoke the Omnalingua clumsily at best. He followed two paces behind Manue with a shovel, scooping up the broken ground, and humming a mono-tonous chant in his own tongue. Manue seldom heard his own language, and missed it; one of the engineers, a haughty Chilean, spoke the modern Spanish, but not to such as Manue Nanti. Most of the other labourers used either Basic English or the Omnalingua. He spoke both, but longed to hear the tongue of his people. Even when he tried to talk to Gee, the cultural gulf was so wide that satisfying communication was nearly impossible. Peruvian jokes were unfunny to Tibetan ears, although Gee bent double with gales of laughter when Manue nearly crushed his own foot with a clumsy stroke of the pick.

He found no close companions. His foreman was a narrow-eyed, orange-browed Low German named Vogeli, usually half-drunk, and intent upon keeping his lung-power by bellowing at his crew. A meaty, florid man, he stalked slowly along the lip of the excavation, pausing to stare coldly down at each pair of labourers who, if they dared to look up, caught a guttural tongue lashing for the moment's pause. When he had words for a digger, he called a halt by kicking a small avalanche of dirt back into the trench about the man's feet.

Manue learned about Vogeli's disposition before the end of his first month. The aerator tubes had become nearly unbearable; the skin, in trying to grow fast to the plastic, was beginning to form a tight little neck where the tubes entered his flesh, and the skin stretched and burned and stung with each movement of his trunk. Suddenly he felt sick. He staggered dizzily against the side of the trench, dropped the pick, and swayed heavily, bracing himself against collapse. Shock and nausea rocked him, while Gee stared at him and giggled foolishly.

"Hoy!" Vogeli bellowed from across the pit. "Get back on that pick! Hoy, there! Get with it—"

Manue moved dizzily to recover the tool, saw patches of black swimming before him, sank weakly back to pant in shallow gasps. The nagging sting of the valves was a portable hell that he carried with him always. He fought an impulse to jerk them out of his flesh; if a valve came loose, he would bleed to death in a few minutes.

Vogeli came stamping along the heap of fresh earth and lumbered up to stand over the sagging Manue in the trench. He glared down at him for a moment, then nudged the back of his neck with a heavy boot. "Get to work!"

Manue looked up and moved his lips silently. His forehead glinted with moisture in the faint sun, although the temperature was far below freezing.

"Grab that pick and get started."

"Can't," Manue gasped. "Hoses—hurt."

Vogeli grumbled a curse and vaulted down into the trench beside him. "Unzip that jacket," he ordered.

Weakly, Manue fumbled to obey, but the foreman knocked his hand aside and jerked the zipper down. Roughly he unbuttoned the Peruvian's shirt, laying open the bare brown chest to the icy cold.

"No!—not the hoses, please!"

Vogeli took one of the thin tubes in his blunt fingers and leaned close to peer at the puffy, calloused nodule of irritated skin that formed around it where it entered the flesh. He touched the nodule lightly, causing the digger to whimper.

"No, please!"

"Stop snivelling!"

Vogeli laid his thumbs against the nodule and exerted a sudden pressure. There was slight popping sound as the skin slid back a fraction of an inch along the tube. Manue yelped and closed his eyes.

"Shut up! I know what I'm doing." He repeated the process with the other tube. Then he seized both tubes in his hands and wiggled them slightly in and out, as if to ensure a proper resetting of the skin. The digger cried weakly and slumped in a dead faint.

When he awoke, he was in bed in the barracks, and a medic was painting the sore spots with a bright yellow solution that chilled his skin.

"Woke up, huh?" the medic grunted cheerfully. "How do you feel?"

"Maio!" he hissed.

"Stay in bed for the day, son. Keep your oxy up high. Make you feel better."

The medic went away, but Vogeli lingered, smiling at him grimly from the doorway. "Don't try goofing off tomorrow too."

Manue hated the closed door with silent eyes, and listened until Vogeli's footsteps left the building. Then, following the medic's instructions, he turned his oxy to maximum, even though the faster flow of blood made the chest-valves ache. The sickness fled, to be replaced with a weary afterglow. Drowsiness came over him, and he slept.

Sleep was a dread black-robed phantom on Mars. Mars pressed the same incubus upon all newcomers to her soil: a nightmare of falling, falling, falling into bottomless space. It was the faint gravity, they said, that caused it. The body felt buoyed up, and the subconscious mind recalled down-going elevators, and diving aeroplanes, and a fall from a high cliff. It suggested these things in dreams, or if the dreamer's oxy were set too low, it conjured up a nightmare of sinking slowly deeper, and deeper in cold, black water that filled the victim's throat. Newcomers were segregated in a separate barracks so that their nightly screams would not disturb the old-timers who had finally adjusted to Martian conditions.

But now, for the first time since his arrival, Manue slept soundly, airily, and felt borne up by beams of bright light.

When he awoke again, he lay clammy in the horrifying knowledge that he had not been breathing! It was so comfortable not to breathe. His chest stopped hurting because of the stillness of his rib-cage. He felt refreshed and alive. Peaceful sleep.

Suddenly he was breathing again in harsh gasps, and cursing himself for the lapse, and praying amid quiet tears as he visualized the wasted chest of a troffie.

"Heh heh!" wheezed an oldster who had come in to readjust the furnace in the rookie barracks.

"You'll get to be a Martian pretty soon, boy. I been here seven years. Look at me."

Manue heard the gasping voice and shuddered; there was no need to look.

"You just as well not fight it. It'll get you. Give in, make it easy on yourself. Go crazy if you don't."

"Stop it! Let me alone!"

"Sure. Just one thing. You wanna go home, you think. I went home. Came back. You will, too. They all do, 'cept engineers. Know why?"

"Shut up!" Manue pulled himself erect on the cot and hissed anger at the old-timer, who was neither old nor young, but only withered by Mars. His head suggested that he might be around thirty-five, but his body was weak and old.

The veteran grinned. "Sorry," he wheezed. "I'll keep my mouth shut." He hesitated, then extended his hand. "I'm Sam Donnell, mech-repairs."

Manue still glowered at him. Donnell shrugged and dropped his hand.

"Just trying to be friends," he muttered and walked away.

The digger started to call after him but only closed his mouth again, tightly. Friends? He needed friends, but not a troffie. He couldn't even bear to look at them, for fear he might be looking into the

mirror of his own future.

Manue climbed out of his bunk and donned his fleece-skins. Night had fallen, and the temperature was already twenty below. A soft sift of icedust obscured the stars. He stared about in the darkness. The mess hall was closed, but a light burned in the canteen and another in the foremen's club, where the men were playing cards and drinking. He went to get his alcohol ration, gulped it mixed with a little water, and trudged back to the barracks alone.

The Tibetan was in bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. Manue sat down and gazed at his flat, empty face. "Why did you come here, Gee?"

"Come where?"

"To Mars."

Gee grinned, revealing large black-streaked teeth. "Make money. Good money on Mars."

"Everybody make money, huh?"

"Sure."

"Where's the money come from?"

Gee rolled his face toward the Peruvian and frowned "You crazy? Money come from Earth, where all money come from."

"And what does Earth get back from Mars?"

Gee looked puzzled for a moment, then gathered anger because he found no answer. He grunted a monosyllable in his native tongue, then rolled over and went to sleep.

Manue was not normally given to worrying about such things, but now he found himself asking, "What am doing here?"—and then, "What is anybody doing here?"

The Mars Project had started eighty or ninety years ago, and its end goal was to make Mars habitable for colonists without Earth support, without oxies and insulated suits and the various gadgets a man now had to use to keep himself alive on the fourth planet. But thus far, Earth had planted without reaping. The sky was a bottomless well into which Earth poured her tools, dollars, manpower, and engineering skill. And there appeared to be no hope for the near future.

Manue felt suddenly trapped. He could not return to Earth before the end of his contract. He was trading five years of virtual enslavement for a sum of money which would buy a limited amount of freedom. But what if he lost his lungs, became a servant of the small aerator for the rest of his days? Worst of all: whose ends was he serving? The contractors were getting rich—on government contracts. Some of the engineers and foremen were getting rich—by various forms of embezzlement of government funds. But what were the people back on Earth getting for their money?

Nothing.

He lay awake for a long time, thinking about it. Then he resolved to ask someone tomorrow, someone smarter than himself.

But he found the question brushed aside. He summoned enough nerve to ask Vogeli, but the foreman told him harshly to keep working and quit wondering. He asked the structural engineer who supervised the building, but the man only laughed, and said: "What do you care? You're making good money."

They were running concrete now, laying the long strips of Martian steel in the bottom of the trench and dumping in great slobbering wheelbarrowfuls of grey-green mix. The drillers were continuing their tedious dry cut deep into the red world's crust. Twice a day they brought up a yard-long cylindrical sample of the rock and gave it to a geologist who weighed it, roasted it, weighed it again, and tested a sample of the condensed steam—if any—for tritium content. Daily, he chalked up the results on a blackboard in front of the engineering hut, and the technical staff crowded around for a look. Manue always glanced at the figures, but failed to understand.

Life became an endless routine of pain, fear, hard work, anger. There were few diversions. Sometimes a crew of entertainers came out from the Mare Erythraeum, but the labour gang could not all crowd in the pressurized staff-barracks where the shows were presented, and when Manue managed to catch a glimpse of one of the girls walking across the clearing, she was bundled in fleece-skins and

hooded by a parka.

Itinerant rabbis, clergymen, and priests of the world's major faiths came occasionally to the camp: Buddhist, Moslem, and the Christian sects. Padre Antonio Selni made monthly visits to hear confessions and offer Mass. Most of the gang attended all services as a diversion from routine, as an escape from nostalgia. Somehow it gave Manue a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach to see the Sacrifice of the Mass, two thousand years old, being offered in the same ritual under the strange dark sky of Mars—with a section of the new foundation serving as an altar upon which the priest set crucifix, candles, relic-stone, missal, chalice, paten, ciborium, cruets, et cetera. In filling the wine-cruet before the service, Manue saw him spill a little of the red-clear fluid upon the brown soil—wine, Earth-wine from sunny Sicilian vineyards, trampled from the grapes by the bare stamping feet of children. Wine, the rich red blood of Earth, soaking slowly into the crust of another planet.

Bowing low at the consecration, the unhappy Peruvian thought of the prayer a rabbi had sung the week before: "Blessed be the Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who makest bread to spring forth out of the Earth."

Earth chalice, Earth blood, Earth God, Earth wor-shippers—with plastic tubes in their chests and a great sickness in their hearts.

He went away saddened. There was no faith here, Faith needed familiar surroundings, the props of culture. Here there were only swinging picks and rumbling machinery and sloshing concrete and the clatter of tools and the wheezing of troffies. Why? For five dollars an hour and keep?

Manue, raised in a back-country society that was almost a folk-culture, felt deep thirst for a goal. His father had been a stonemason, and he had laboured lovingly to help build the new cathedral, to build houses and mansions and commercial buildings, and his blood was mingled in their mortar. He had built for the love of his community and the love of the people and their customs, and their gods. He knew his own ends, and the ends of those around him. But what sense was there in this endless scratching at the face of Mars? Did they think they could make it into a second Earth, with pine forests and lakes and snow-capped mountains and small country villages? Man was not that strong. No, if he were labouring for any cause at all, it was to build a world so unearthlike that he could not love it.

The foundation was finished. There was very little more to be done until the drillers struck pay. Manue sat around the camp and worked at breathing. It was becoming a conscious effort now and if he stopped thinking about it for a few minutes, he found himself inspiring shallow, meaningless little sips of air that scarcely moved his diaphragm. He kept the aerator as low as possible, to make himself breathe great gasps that hurt his chest, but it made him dizzy, and he had to increase the oxygenation lest he faint.

Sam Donnell, the troffie mech-repairman, caught him about to slump dizzily from his perch atop a heap of rocks, pushed him erect, and turned his oxy back to nor-mal. It was late afternoon, and the drillers were about to change shifts. Manue sat shaking his head for a moment, then gazed at Donnell gratefully.

"That's dangerous, kid," the troffie wheezed. "Guys can go psycho doing that. Which you rather have: sick lungs or sick mind?"

"Neither."

"I know, but—"

"I don't want to talk about it."

Donnell stared at him with a faint smile. Then he shrugged and sat down on the rock heap to watch the drilling.

"Oughta be hitting the tritium ice in a couple of days," he said pleasantly. "Then we'll see a big blow."

Manue moistened his lips nervously. The troffies always made him feel uneasy. He stared aside.

"Big blow?"

"Lotta pressure down there, they say. Something about the way Mars got formed. Dust cloud hypothesis." Manue shook his head. "I don't understand."

"I don't either. But I've heard them talk. Couple of billion years ago, Mars was supposed to be a moon of Jupiter. Picked up a lot of ice crystals over a rocky core. Then it broke loose and picked up a



rocky crust—from another belt of the dust cloud. The pockets of tritium ice catch a few neutrons from uranium ore—down under. Some of the tritium goes into helium. Frees oxygen. Gases form pressure. Big blow."

"What are they going to do with the ice?"

The troffie shrugged. "The engineers might know." Manue snorted and spat. "They know how to make money."

"Heh! Sure, everybody's gettin' rich."

The Peruvian stared at him speculatively for a moment. "Senor Donnell, I—"

"Sam'll do."

"I wonder if anybody knows why ... well . . . why we're really here."

Donnell glanced up to grin, then wagged his head. He fell thoughtful for a moment, and leaned forward to write in the earth. When he finished, he read it aloud.

"A plough plus a horse plus land equals the necessities of life." He glanced up at Manue. "Fifteen hundred A.D."

The Peruvian frowned his bewilderment. Donnell rubbed out what he had written and wrote again.

"A factory plus steam turbines plus raw materials equals necessities plus luxuries. Nineteen hundred A.D."

He rubbed it out and repeated the scribbling. "All those things plus nuclear power and computer controls equal a surplus of everything. Twenty-one hundred A.D."

"So?"

"So, it's either cut production or find an outlet. Mars is an outlet for surplus energies, manpower, money. Mars Project keeps money turning over, keeps everything turn-ing over. Economist told me that. Said if the Project folded, surplus would pile up—big depression on Earth."

The Peruvian shook his head and sighed. It didn't sound right somehow. It sounded like an explanation somebody figured out after the whole thing started. It wasn't the kind of goal he wanted.

Two days later, the drill hit ice, and the "big blow" was only a fizzle. There was talk around the camp that the whole operation had been a waste of time. The hole spewed a frosty breath for several hours, and the drill crews crowded around to stick their faces in it and breathe great gulps of the helium-oxygen mixture. But then the blow subsided, and the hole leaked only a wisp of steam.

Technicians came, and lowered sonar "cameras" down to the ice. They spent a week taking internal soundings and plotting the extent of the ice-dome on their charts. They brought up samples of ice and tested them. The engineers worked late into the Martian nights.

Then it was finished. The engineers came out of their huddles and called to the foremen of the labour gangs. They led the foremen around the site, pointing here, pointing there, sketching with chalk on the foundation, explaining in solemn voices. Soon the foremen were bellowing at their crews.

"Let's get the derrick down!"

"Start that mixer going!"

"Get that steel over here!"

"Unroll that dip-wire!"

"Get a move on! Shovel that fill!"

Muscles tightened and strained, machinery clamoured and rang. Voices grumbled and shouted. The operation was starting again. Without knowing why, Manue shov-elled fill and stretched dip-wire and poured concrete for a big slab to be run across the entire hundred-yard square, broken only by the big pipe-casing that stuck up out of the ground in the centre and leaked a thin trail of steam.

The drill crew moved their rig half a mile across the plain to a point specified by the geologists and began sinking another hole. A groan went up from structural boys: "Not another one of these things!"

But the supervisory staff said, "No, don't worry about it."

There was much speculation about the purpose of the whole operation, and the men resented the quiet secrecy connected with the project. There could be no excuse for secrecy, they felt, in time of peace. There was a certain arbitrariness about it, a hint that the Commission thought of its employees as

children, or enemies, or servants. But the supervisory staff shrugged off all questions with : "You know there's tritium ice down there. You know it's what we've been looking for. Why? Well—what's the difference? There are lots of uses for it. Maybe we'll use it for one thing, maybe for something else. Who knows?"

Such a reply might have been satisfactory for an iron mine or an oil well or a stone quarry, but tritium suggested hydrogen-fusion. And no transportation facilities were being installed to haul the stuff away—no pipelines nor railroad tracks nor glider ports.

Manue quit thinking about it. Slowly he came to adopt a grim cynicism towards the tediousness, the back-break-ing labour of his daily work; he lived from day to day like an animal, dreaming only of a return to Earth when his contract was up. But the dream was painful because it was distant, as contrasted with the immediacies of Mars: the threat of atrophy, coupled with the discomforts of continued breathing, the nightmares, the barrenness of the landscape, the intense cold, the harshness of men's tempers, the hardship of labour, and the lack of a cause.

A warm, sunny Earth was still over four years distant, and tomorrow would be another back-breaking, throat-parching, heart-tormenting, chest-hurting day. Where was there even a little pleasure in it? It was so easy, at least, to leave the oxy turned up at night, and get a pleasant restful sleep. Sleep was the only recourse from harshness, and fear robbed sleep of its quiet sensuality—unless a man just surrendered and quit worrying about his lungs.

Manue decided that it would be safe to give himself two completely restful nights a week.

Concrete was run over the great square and trowelled to a rough finish. A glider train from Mare Erythraeum brought in several huge crates of machinery, cut-stone masonry for building a wall, a shipful of new personnel, and a real rarity: lumber, cut from the first Earth-trees to be grown on Mars.

A building began going up with the concrete square for foundation and floor. Structures could be flimsier on Mars; because of the light gravity, compression-stresses were smaller. Hence, the work progressed rapidly, and as the flat-roofed structure was completed, the technicians began uncrating new machinery and moving it into the building. Manue noticed that several of the units were computers. There was also a small steam-turbine generator driven by an atomic-fired boiler.

Months passed. The building grew into an integrated mass of power and control systems. Instead of using the well for pumping, the technicians were apparently going to lower something into it. A bomb-shaped cylinder was slung vertically over the hole. The men guided it into the mouth of the pipe casing, then let it down slowly from a massive cable. The cylinder's butt was a multi-contact socket like the female receptacle for a hundred-pin elec-tron tube. Hours passed while the cylinder slipped slowly down beneath the hide of Mars. When it was done, the men hauled out the cable and began lowering stiff sections of pre-wired conduit, fitted with a receptacle at one end and a male plug at the other, so that as the sections fell into place, a continuous bundle of control cables was built up from "bomb" to surface.

Several weeks were spent in connecting circuits, setting up the computers, and making careful tests. The drillers had finished the second well hole, half a mile from the first, and Manue noticed that while the testing was going on, the engineers sometimes stood atop the building and stared anxiously towards the steel skeleton in the distance. Once while the tests were being conducted, the second hole began squirting a jet of steam high in the thin air, and a frantic voice bellowed from the roof top.

"Cut it! Shut it off! Sound the danger whistle!"

The jet of steam began to shriek a low-pitched whine across the Martian desert. It blended with the rising and falling Oooooowwww of the danger siren. But gradually it subsided as the men in the control station shut down the machinery. All hands came up cursing from their hiding places, and the engineers stalked out to the new hole carrying Geiger counters. They came back wearing pleased grins.

The work was nearly finished. The men began crating up the excavating machinery and the drill rig and the tools. The control-building devices were entirely auto-matic, and the camp would be deserted when the station began operation. The men were disgruntled. They had spent a year of hard labour on what they had thought to be a tritium well, but now that it was done, there were no facilities for pumping

the stuff or hauling it away. In fact, they had pumped various solutions into the ground through the second hole, and the control station shaft was fitted with pipes that led from lead-lined tanks down into the earth.

Manue had stopped trying to keep his oxy properly adjusted at night. Turned up to a comfortable level, it was like a drug, ensuring comfortable sleep—and like addict or alcoholic, he could no longer endure living without it. Sleep was too precious, his only comfort. Every morning he awoke with a still, motionless chest, felt frightening re-morse, sat up gasping, choking, sucking at the thin air with whining rattling lungs that had been idle too long. Sometimes he coughed violently, and bled a little. And then for a night or two he would correctly adjust the oxy, only to wake up screaming and suffocating. He felt hope sliding grimly away.

He sought out Sam Donnell, explained the situation, and begged the troffie for helpful advice. But the mech-repairman neither helped nor consoled nor joked about it. He only bit his lip, muttered something noncommittal, and found an excuse to hurry away. It was then that Manue knew his hope was gone. Tissue was withering, tubercules forming, tubes growing closed. He knelt abjectly beside his cot, hung his face in his hands, and cursed softly, for there was no other way to pray an unanswerable prayer.

A glider train came in from the north to haul away the disassembled tools. The men lounged around the barracks or wandered across the Martian desert, gathering strange bits of rock and fossils, searching idly for a glint of metal or crystal in the wan sunshine of early fall. The lichens were growing brown and yellow, and the landscape took on the hues of Earth's autumn if not the forms.

There was a sense of expectancy around the camp. It could be felt in the nervous laughter, and the easy voices, talking suddenly of Earth and old friends and the smell of food in a farm kitchen, and old half-forgotten tastes for which men hungered: ham searing in the skillet, a cup of frothing cider from a fermenting crock, iced melon with honey and bits of lemon, onion gravy on homemade bread. But someone always remarked, "What's the matter with you guys? We ain't going home. Not by a long shot. We're going to another place just like this."

And the group would break up and wander away, eyes tired, eyes haunted with nostalgia.

"What're we waiting for?" men shouted at the super-visory staff. "Get some transportation in here. Let's get rolling."

Men watched the skies for glider trains or jet transports, but the skies remained empty, and the staff re-mained close-mouthed. Then a dust column appeared on the horizon to the north, and a day later a convoy of tractor-trucks pulled into camp.

"Start loading aboard, men!" was the crisp command. Surly voices: "You mean we don't go by air? We gotta ride those kidney bouncers? It'll take a week to get to Mare Ery! Our contract says—"

"Load aboard! We're not going to Mare Ery yet!" Grumbling, they loaded their baggage and their weary bodies into the trucks, and the trucks thundered and clat-tered across the desert, rolling towards the mountains.

The convoy rolled for three days towards the mountains, stopping at night to make camp, and driving on at sunrise. When they reached the first slopes of the foothills, the convoy stopped again. The deserted encampment lay a hundred and fifty miles behind. The going had been slow over the roadless desert.

"Everybody out!" barked the messenger from the lead truck. "Bail out! Assemble at the foot of the hill."

Voices were growling among themselves as the men moved in small groups from the trucks and collected in a milling tide in a shallow basin, overlooked by a low cliff and a hill. Manue saw the staff climb out of a cab and slowly work their way up the cliff. They carried a portable public address system.

"Gonna get a preaching," somebody snarled.

"Sit down, please!" barked the loud-speaker. "You men sit down there! Quiet—quiet, please!"

The gathering fell into a sulky silence. Will Kinley stood looking out over them, his eyes nervous, his hand holding the mike close to his mouth so that they could hear his weak troffie voice.

"If you men have questions," he said, "I'll answer them now. Do you want to know what you've been doing during the past year?"

An affirmative rumble arose from the group.

"You've been helping to give Mars a breathable atmosphere." He glanced briefly at his watch, then looked back at his audience. "In fifty minutes, a controlled chain reaction will start in the tritium ice. The computers will time it and try to control it. Helium and oxygen will come blasting up out of the second hole."

A rumble of disbelief arose from his audience. Someone shouted: "How can you get air to blanket a planet from one hole?"

"You can't," Kinley replied crisply. "A dozen others are going in, just like that one. We plan three hundred, and we've already located the ice pockets. Three hundred wells, working for eight centuries, can get the job done."

"Eight centuries! What good—"

"Wait!" Kinley barked. "In the meantime, we'll build pressurized cities close to the wells. If everything pans out, we'll get a lot of colonists here, and gradually condition them to live in a seven or eight psi atmosphere—which is about the best we can hope to get. Colonists from the Andes and the Himalayas—they wouldn't need much conditioning."

"What about us?"

There was a long plaintive silence. Kinley's eyes scanned the group sadly, and wandered towards the Martian horizon, gold and brown in the late afternoon. "Nothing—about us," he muttered quietly.

"Why did we come out here?"

"Because there's danger of the reaction getting out of hand. We can't tell anyone about it, or we'd start a panic." He looked at the group sadly. "I'm telling you now, because there's nothing you could do. In thirty minutes—"

There were angry murmurs in the crowd. "You mean there may be an explosion?"

"There will be a limited explosion. And there's very little danger of anything more. The worst danger is in having ugly rumours start in the cities. Some fool with a slip-stick would hear about it, and calculate what would happen to Mars if five cubic miles of tritium ice detonated in one split second. It would probably start a riot. That's why we've kept it a secret."

The buzz of voices was like a disturbed beehive. Manue Nanti sat in the midst of it, saying nothing, wearing a dazed and weary face, thoughts jumbled, soul drained of feeling.

Why should men lose their lungs that after eight centuries of tomorrows, other men might breathe the air of Mars as the air of Earth?

Other men around him echoed his thoughts in jealous mutterings. They had been helping to make a world in which they would never live.

An enraged scream arose near where Manue sat. "They're going to blow us up! They're going to blow up Mars."

"Don't be a fool!" Kinley snapped.

"Fools they call us! We are fools! For ever coming here! We got sucked in! Look at me!" A pale dark-haired man came wildly to his feet and tapped his chest. "Look! I'm losing my lungs! We're all losing our lungs! Now they take a chance on killing everybody."

"Including ourselves," Kinley called coldly.

"We oughta take him apart. We oughta kill everyone who knew about it—and Kinley's a good place to start!"

The rumble of voices rose higher, calling both agreement and dissent. Some of Kinley's staff were looking nervously towards the trucks. They were unarmed.

"You men sit down!" Kinley barked.

Rebellious eyes glared at the supervisor. Several men who had come to their feet dropped to their hunches again. Kinley glowered at the pale upriser who called for his scalp.

"Sit down, Handell!"

Handell turned his back on the supervisor and called out to the others. "Don't be a bunch of cowards! Don't let him bully you!"

"You men sitting around Handell. Pull him down."

There was no response. The men, including Manue, stared up at the wild-eyed Handell gloomily, but made no move to quiet him. A pair of burly foremen started through the gathering from its outskirts.

"Stop!" Kinley ordered. "Turpin, Schultz—get back. Let the men handle this themselves."

Half a dozen others had joined the rebellious Handell. They were speaking in low tense tones among themselves, "For the last time, men! Sit down!"

The group turned and started grimly towards the cliff. Without reasoning why, Manue slid to his feet quietly as Handell came near him. "Come on, fellow, let's get him," the leader muttered.

The Peruvian's fist chopped a short stroke to Handell's jaw, and the dull thunk echoed across the clearing. The man crumpled, and Manue crouched over him like a hiss-ing panther. "Get back!" he snapped at the others. "Or I'll jerk his hoses out."

One of the others cursed him.

"Want to fight, fellow?" the Peruvian wheezed. "I can jerk several hoses out before you drop me!"

They shuffled nervously for a moment.

"The guy's crazy!" one complained in a high voice. "Get back or he'll kill Handell!"

They sidled away, moved aimlessly in the crowd, then sat down to escape attention. Manue sat beside the fallen man and gazed at the thinly smiling Kinley.

"Thank you, son. There's a fool in every crowd." He looked at his watch again. "Just a few minutes, men. Then you'll feel the earth-tremor, and the explosion, and the wind. You can be proud of that wind, men. It's new air for Mars, and you made it."

"But we can't breathe it!" hissed a troffie.

Kinley was silent for a long time, as if listening to the distance. "What man ever made his own salvation?" he murmured.

They packed up the public address amplifier and came down the hill to sit in the cab of a truck, waiting.

It came as an orange glow in the south, and the glow was quickly shrouded by an expanding white cloud. Then, minutes later the ground pulsed beneath them, quivered and shook. The quake subsided, but remained as a hint of vibration. Then after a long time, they heard the dull-throated thundering across the Martian desert. The roar continued steadily, grumbling and growling as it would do for several hundred years.

There was only a hushed murmur of awed voices from the crowd. When the wind came, some of them stood up and moved quietly back to the trucks, for now they could go back to a city for reassignment. There were other tasks to accomplish before their contracts were done.

But Manue Nanti still sat on the ground, his head sunk low, desperately trying to gasp a little of the wind he had made, the wind out of the ground, the wind of the future. But his lungs were clogged, and he could not drink of the racing wind. His big calloused hand clutched slowly at the ground, and he choked a brief sound like a sob.

A shadow fell over him. It was Kinley, come to offer his thanks for the quelling of Handell. But he said nothing for a moment as he watched Manue's desperate Geth-semene.

"Some sow, others reap," he said.

"Why?" the Peruvian choked.

The supervisor shrugged. "What's the difference? But if you can't be both, which would you rather be?"

Nanti looked up into the wind. He imagined a city to the south, a city built on tear-soaked ground, filled with people who had no ends beyond their culture, no goal but within their own society. It was a good sensible question: which would he rather be—sower or reaper?

Pride brought him slowly to his feet, and he eyed Kinley questioningly. The supervisor touched his shoulder. "Go on to the trucks."

Nanti nodded and shuffled away. He had wanted something to work for, hadn't he? Something more than the reasons Donnell had given. Well, he could smell a reason, even if he couldn't breathe it.

Eight hundred years was a long time, but then—long time, big reason. The air smelled good, even with its clouds of boiling dust.

He knew now what Mars was—not a ten-thousand-a--year job, not a garbage can for surplus production. But an eight-century passion of human faith in the destiny of the race of Man. He paused short of the truck. He had wanted to travel, to see the sights of Earth, the handiwork of Nature and of history, the glorious places of his planet.

He stooped, and scooped up a handful of the red-brown soil, letting it sift slowly between his fingers. Here was Mars—his planet now. No more of Earth, not for Manue Nanti. He adjusted his aerator more comfortably and climbed into the waiting truck.

## THE DARFSTELLER

"Judas, Judas" was playing at the Universal on Fifth Street, and the cast was entirely human. Ryan Thornier had been saving up for, it for several weeks, and now he could afford the price of a matinee ticket. It had been a race for time between his piggy bank and the wallets of several "public-spirited" angels who kept the show alive, and the *piggy* bank had won. He could see the show before the wallets went flat and the show folded, as any such show was bound to do after a few limping weeks. A glow of anticipation suffused him. After watching the wretched mockery of dramaturgical art every day at the New Empire Theater where he worked as janitor, the chance to see real theater again would be like a breath of clean air.

He came to work an hour early on Wednesday morn-ing and sped through his usual chores on overdrive. He finished his work before one o'clock, had a shower back-stage, changed to street clothes, and went nervously up-stairs to ask Imperio D'Uccia for the rest of the day off.

D'Uccia sat enthroned at a rickety desk before a wall plastered with photographs of lightly clad female stars of the old days. He heard the janitor's petition with a faint, almost oriental smile of apparent sympathy, then drew himself up to his full height of sixty-five inches, leaned on the desk with chubby hands to study Thornier with beady eyes.

"Off? So you wanna da day off? Mmmph-" He shook his head as if mystified by such an incomprehensible request.

The gangling janitor shifted his feet uneasily. "Yes, sir. I've finished up, and Jigger'll come over to stand by in case you need anything special." He paused. D'Uccia was studying his nails, frowning gravely. "I haven't asked for a day off in two years, Mr. D'Uccia," he added, "and I was sure you wouldn't mind after all the overtime I've-"

"Jigger," D'Uccia grunted. "Whoosa t'is Jigger?"

"Works at the Paramount. It's closed for repairs, and he doesn't mind-"

The theater manager grunted abruptly and waved his hands. "I don' pay no Jigger, I pay you. Whassa this all about? You swip the floor, you putsa things away, you *all* finish now, ah? You wanna day off. Thatsa whass wrong with the world, too mucha time loaf. Letsa machines work. More time to mek trouble." The theater manager came out from behind his desk and waddled to the door. He thrust his fat neck outside and *looked* up and down the corridor, then waddled back to confront Thornier with a short fat finger aimed at the employee's long and majestic nose.

"Whensa lass time you waxa the upstairs floor, hah?" Thornier's jaw sagged forlornly. "Why, I---"

"Don'ta tell me no lie. Looka that hall. Sheeza feelth. *Look!* I want you to look." He caught Thornier's arm, tugged him to the doorway, pointed excitedly at the worn and ancient oak flooring. "Sheeza feelth ground in! See? When you wax, hah?"

A great shudder seemed to pass through the thin elder-ly man. He sighed resignedly and turned to look down at D'Uccia with weary gray eyes.

"Do I get the afternoon off, or don't I?" he asked hopelessly, knowing the answer in advance.

But D'Uccia was not content with a mere refusal. He began to pace. He was obviously deeply moved. He defended the system of free enterprise and the cherished traditions of the theater. He spoke eloquently of the golden virtues of industriousness and dedication to duty.

He bounced about like a furious Pekingese yapping hap-pily at a scarecrow. Thornier's neck

reddened, his mouth went tight.

"Can I go now?"

"When you waxa da floor? Palisha da seats, fixa da lights? When you clean op the dressing room, hah?" He stared up at Thornier for a moment, then turned on his heel and charged to the window. He thrust his thumb into the black dirt of the window box, where several prize lilies were already beginning to bloom. "Ha!" he snorted. "Dry, like I thought! You think the bulbs a don't need a drink, hah?"

"But I watered them this morning. The sun-

"Hah! You letsa little *fiori* wilt and die, hah? And you wanna the day off?"

It was hopeless. When D'Uccia drew his defensive mantle of calculated deafness or stupidity about himself, he became impenetrable to any request or honest explanation. Thornier sucked in a slow breath between his teeth, stared angrily at his employer for a moment, and seemed briefly ready to unleash an angry blast. Thinking better of it, he bit his lip, turned, and stalked wordlessly out of the office. D'Uccia followed him trimphantly to e door. "Don' you go sneak off, now!" he called ominously, and stood smiling down the corridor until the janitor van-ished at the head of the stairs. Then he sighed and went back to get his hat and coat. He was just preparing to leave when Thornier came back upstairs with a load of buckets, mops, and swabs.

The janitor stopped when he noticed the hat and coat, and his seamed face went curiously blank. "Going home, Mr. D'Uccia?" he asked icily.

"Yeh! I'ma works too hard, the doctor say. I'ma need the sunshine. More frash air. I'ma go relax on the beach a while."

Thornier leaned on the mop handle and smiled nastily. "Sure," he said. "Letsa machines do da work."

The comment was lost on D'Uccia. He waved airily, strode off toward the stairway, and called an airy "A *rivederci*!" over his shoulder.

"A *rivederci, padrone*," Thornier muttered softly, his pale eyes glittering from their crow's-feet wrappings. For a moment his face seemed to change-and once again le was Chaubrec's Adolfo, at the exit of the Comman-Jant, Act II, scene iv, from "A Canticle for the Marsman."

Somewhere downstairs, a door slammed behind D'Uc-cia.

"Into death!" hissed Adolfo-Thornier, throwing back his head to laugh Adolfo's laugh. It rattled the walls. When its reverberations had died away, he felt a little better. He picked up his buckets and brooms and walked on down the corridor to the door of D'Uccia's office.

Unless "Judas-Judas" hung on through the weekend, he wouldn't get to see it, since he could not afford a ticket to the evening performance, and there was no use asking D'Uccia for favors. While he waxed the hall, he burned. He waxed as far as D'Uccia's doorway, then stood staring into the office for several vacant minutes.

"I'm fed up," he said at last.

The office remained silent. The window-box lilies bowed to the breeze.

"You little creep!" he growled. "I'm through!"

The office was speechless. Thornier straightened and tapped his chest.

"I, Ryan Thornier, am walking out, you hear? The show is finished!"

When the office failed to respond, he turned on his heel and stalked downstairs. Minutes later, he came back with a small can of gold paint and a pair of artists' brushes from the storeroom. Again he paused in the doorway.

"Anything else I can do, Mr. D'Uccia?" he purred. Traffic murmured in the street; the breeze rustled the lilies; the building creaked.

"Oh? You want me to wax in the wall-cracks, too? How could I have forgotten!"

He clucked his tongue and went over to the window. Such lovely lilies. He opened the paint can, set it on the window ledge, and then very carefully he glided each of the prize lilies, petals, leaves, and stalks, until the flow-ers glistened like the work of Midas' hands in the sun-light. When he finished, he stepped back to smile at them in admiration for a moment, then went to finish waxing the hall.

He waxed it with particular care in front of D'Uccia's office. He waxed under the throw rug that

covered the worn spot on the floor where D'Uccia had made a sharp left turn into his sanctum every morning for fifteen years, and then he turned the rug over and dusted dry wax powder into the pile. He replaced it carefully and pushed at it a few times with his foot to make certain the lubri-cation was adequate. The rug slid about as if it rode on a bed of bird-shot.

Thornier smiled and went downstairs. The world was suddenly different somehow. Even the air smelled differ-ent. He paused on the landing to glance at himself in the decorative mirror.

Ah! the old trouper again. No more of the stooped and haggard menial. None of the wistfulness and weariness of self-perpetuated slavery. Even with the gray at the temples and the lines in the face, here was something of the old Thornier-or one of the *many* old Thorniers of earlier days. Which one? Which one'll it be? Adolfo? Or Hamlet? Justin, or J. J. Jones, from "The Electrocu-tioner"? Any of them, all of them; for he was Ryan Thornier, star, in the old days.

"Where've you been, baby?" he asked his image with a tight smile of approval, winked, and went on home for the evening. Tomorrow, he promised himself, a new life would begin.

"But you've been making that promise for years, Thorny," said the man in the control booth, his voice edged with impatience. "What do you mean, `you quit'? Did you tell D'Uccia you quit?"

Thornier smiled loftily while he dabbed with his broom at a bit of dust in the corner. "Not exactly, Richard," he said. "But the *padrone* will find it out soon enough."

The technician grunted disgust. "I don't understand you, Thorny. Sure, if you *really* quit, that's swell-if you don't just turn around and get another job like this one."

"Never!" the old actor proclaimed resonantly, and glanced up at the clock. Five till ten. Nearly time for D'Uccia to arrive for work. He smiled to himself.

"If you really quit, what are you doing here today?" Rick Thomas demanded, glancing up briefly from the Maestro. His arms were thrust deep into the electronic entrails of the machine, and he wore a pencil-sized screwdriver tucked behind one ear. "Why don't you go home, if you quit?"

"Oh, don't worry, Richard. This time it's for real."

"Pssss!" An amused hiss from the technician. "Yeah, it was for real when you quit at the Bijou, too. Only then a week later you came to work here. So what now, Mercutio?"

"To the casting office, old friend. A bit part somewhere, perhaps." Thornier smiled on him benignly. "Don't concern yourself about me."

"Thorny, can't you get it through your head that theater's *dead*? There isn't any theater! No movies, no tele-vision either-except for dead men and the Maestro here." He slapped the metal housing of the machine.

"*I meant*," Thorny explained patiently, "'employment office,' and 'small job,' you . . . you machine-age flint-smith. Figures of speech, solely."

"Yah."

"I thought you *wanted* me to resign my position, Rich-ard."

"Yes! If you'll do something worthwhile with yourself. Ryan Thornier, star of 'Walkaway,' playing martyr with a scrub-bucket! Aaaaak! You give me the gripes. And you'll do it again. You can't stay away from the stage, even if all you can do about it is mop up the oil drippings."

"You couldn't possibly understand," Thornier said stiffly.

Rick straightened to look at him, took his arms out of the Maestro and leaned on top of the cabinet. "I dunno, Thorny," he said in a softer voice. "Maybe I do. You're an actor, and you're always playing roles. Living them, even. You can't help it, I guess. But you *could* do a saner job of picking the parts you're going to play."

"The world has cast me in the role I play," Thornier announced with a funereal face.

Rick Thomas clapped a hand over his forehead and drew it slowly down across his face in exasperation. "I give up!" he groaned. "Look at you! Matinee idol, push-ing a broom. Eight years ago, it made sense-your kind of sense, anyhow. Dramatic gesture. Leading actor de-fies autodrama offer, takes janitor's job. Loyal to tradi-tion, and the guild-and all that. It made small headlines, maybe even helped the legit stage limp along a little longer. But the audiences stopped bleeding for you after a while, and then it stopped making even *your* kind of sense!"



Thornier stood wheezing slightly and glaring at him. "What would *you* do," he hissed, "if they started making a little black box that could be attached to the wall up there"-he waved to a bare spot above the Maestro's bulky housing-"that could repair, maintain, operate, and adjust-do all the things you do to that . . . that con-traption. Suppose nobody needed electronics any more."

Rick Thomas thought about it a few moments, then grinned. "Well, I guess I'd get a job making the little black boxes, then."

"You're not funny, Richard!"

"I didn't intend to be."

"You're . . . you're not an artist." Flushed with fury, Thornier swept viciously at the floor of the booth.

A door slammed somewhere downstairs, far below the above-stage booth. Thorny set his broom aside and moved to the window to watch. The *clop, clop, clop* of bustling footsteps came up the central aisle.

"Hizzoner, da Imperio," muttered the technician, glancing up at the clock. "Either that clock's two min-utes fast, or else this was his morning to take a bath."

Thornier smiled sourly toward the main aisle, his eyes traveling after the waddling figure of the theater manager. When D'Uccia disappeared beneath the rear balcony, he resumed his sweeping.

"I don't see why you don't get a sales job, Thorny," Rick ventured, returning to his work. "A good salesman is just an actor, minus the temperament. There's *lots* of demand for good actors, come to think of it. Politicians, top executives, even generals-some of them seem to make out on nothing *but* dramatic talent. History affirms it."

"Bah! I'm no schauspieler." He paused to watch Rick adjusting the Maestro, and slowly shook his head. "Ease your conscience, Richard," he said finally.

Startled the technician dropped his screwdriver, looked up quizzically. "My conscience? What the devil is uneasy about my conscience?"

"Oh, don't pretend. That's why you're always so concerned about me. I know *you* can't help it that your ... your trade has perverted a great art."

Rick gaped at him in disbelief for a moment. "*You* think I--" He choked. He colored angrily. He stared at the old ham and began to curse softly under his breath.

Thornier suddenly lifted a finger to his mouth and went *shhhhh!* His eyes roamed toward the back of the theater.

"That was only D'Uccia on the stairs," Rick began. "What-?"

"*Shhhhh!*"

They listened. The janitor wore a rancid smile. Seconds later it came-first a faint yelp, then *Bbbrrroommmmb!*

It rattled the booth windows. Rick started up frowning.

"What the-?"

"*Shhhhh!*"

The jolting jar was followed by a faint mutter of profanity.

"That's D'Uccia. What happened?"

The faint mutter suddenly became a roaring stream of curses from somewhere behind the balconies.

"Hey!" said Rick. "He must have hurt himself."

"Naah. He just found my resignation, that's all. See? I told you I'd quit."

The profane bellowing grew louder to the accompaniment of an elephantine thumping on carpeted stairs.

"He's not *that* sorry to see you go," Rick grunted, looking baffled.

D'Uccia burst into view at the head of the aisle. He stopped with his feet spread wide, clutching at the base of his spine with one hand and waving a golden lily aloft in the other.

"Lily gilder!" he screamed. "Pansy painter! You fancy-pantsy bona! Come out, you fonny fenny boy!"

Thornier thrust his head calmly through the control-booth window, stared at the furious manager with arched brows. "You calling me, Mr. D'Uccia?"

D'Uccia sucked in two or three gasping breaths before he found his bellow again.

"Thornya!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Itsa finish, you hear?"

"What's finished, boss?"

"Itsa finish. I'ma go see the servo man. Pma go get me a swip-op machine. You gotta two wiks notice."

"Tell him you don't want any notice," Rick grunted softly from nearby. "Walk out on him."

"All right, Mr. D'Uccia," Thornier called evenly. D'Uccia stood there sputtering, threatening to charge, waving the lily helplessly. Finally he threw it down in the aisle with a curse and whirled to limp painfully out. "Whew!" Rick breathed. "What did you do?" Thornier told him sourly. The technician shook his head.

"He won't fire you. He'll change his mind. It's too hard to hire anybody to do dirty-work these days."

"You heard him. He can buy an autojan installation. `Swip-op' machine."

"Baloney! Dooch is too stingy to put out that much dough. Besides, he can't get the satisfaction of scream-ing at a machine."

Thornier glanced up wryly. "Why *can't* he?"

"Well-" Rick paused. "Ulp! ... You're right. He can. He came up here and bawled out the Maestro once. Kicked it, yelled at it, shook it-like a guy trying to get his quarter back out of a telephone. Went away looking pleased with himself, too."

"Why not?" Thorny muttered gloomily. "People are machines to D'Uccia. And he's *fair* about it. He's willing to treat them all alike."

"But you're not going to stick around two weeks, are you?"

"Why not? It'll give me time to put out some feelers for a job."

Rick grunted doubtfully and turned his attention back to the machine. He removed the upper front panel and set it aside. He opened a metal canister on the floor and lifted out a foot-wide foot-thick roll of plastic tape. He mounted it on a spindle inside the Maestro, and began feeding the end of the tape through several sets of rollers and guides. The tape appeared wormeaten-covered with thousands of tiny punch-marks and wavy grooves. The janitor paused to watch the process with cold hostility.

"Is that the script-tape for the `Anarch?' " he asked stiffly.

The technician nodded. "Brand new tape, too. Got to be careful how I feed her in. It's still got fuzz on it from the recording cuts." He stopped the feed mechanism briefly, plucked at a punchmark with his awl, blew on it, then started the feed motor again.

"What happens if the tape gets nicked or scratched?" Thorny grunted curiously. "Actor collapse on stage?"

Rick shook his head. "Naa, it happens all the time. A scratch or a nick'll make a player muff a line or maybe stumble, then the Maestro catches the goof, and com-pensates. Maestro gets feedback from the stage, contin-uously directs the show. It can do a lot of compensat-ing, too."

"I thought the whole show came from the tape"

The technician smiled. "It does, in a way. But it's more than a recorded mechanical puppet show, Thorny. The Maestro watches the stage . . . no, more than that ... the Maestro is the stage, an electronic analogue of it." He patted the metal housing. "All the actors' personality patterns are packed in here. It's more than a remote controller, the way most people think of it. It's a creative directing machine. It's even got pickups out in the audi-ence to gauge reactions to--"

He stopped suddenly, staring at the old actor's face. He swallowed nervously. "Thorny *don't* look that way. I'm sorry. Here, have a cigarette."

Thorny accepted it with trembling fingers. He stared down into the gleaming maze of circuitry with narrowed eyes, watched the script-belt climb slowly over the rollers and down into the bowels of the Maestro.

"Art!" he hissed. "Theater! What'd they give you your degree in, Richard? Dramaturgical engineering?"

He shuddered and stalked out of the booth. Rick lis-tened to the angry rattle of his heels on the iron stairs that led down to stage level. He shook his head sadly, shrugged, went back to inspecting the tape

for rough cuts.

Thorny came back after a few minutes with a bucket and a mop. He looked reluctantly repentant. "Sorry, lad," he grunted. "I know you're just trying to make a living, and-

"Skip it," Rick grunted curtly.

"It's just . . . well . . . this particular show. It gets me."

"This-? `The Anarch,' you mean? What about it, Thorny? You play in it once?"

"Uh-uh. It hasn't been on the stage since the Nineties, except-well, it was almost revived ten years ago. We rehearsed for weeks. Show folded before opening night. No dough."

"You had a good part in it?"

"I was to play Andreyev," Thornier told him with a faint smile.

Rick whistled between his teeth. "The lead. That's too bad." He hoisted his feet to let Thorny mop under them. "Big disappointment, I guess."

"It's not that. It's just . . . well . . . `The Anarch' re-hearsals were the last time Mela and I were on stage together. That's all."

"Mela?" The technician paused, frowning. "Mela *Stone*?"

Thornier nodded.

Rick snatched up a copy of the uncoded script, waved it at him. "But she's in *this* version, Thorny! Know that! She's playing Marka."

Thornier's laugh was brief and brittle.

Rick reddened slightly. "Well, I mean her mannequin's playing it."

Thorny eyed the Maestro distastefully. "Your me-mechanical Svengali's playing its airfoam zombies in *all* roles, you mean."

"Oh, cut it out, Thorny. Be sore at the world if you want to, but don't blame me for what audiences want. And I didn't invent autodrama anyhow."

"I don't blame anybody. I merely detest that . . . that-" He punched at the base of the Maestro with his wet plop.

"You and D'Uccia," Rick grunted disgustedly. "Except--D'Uccia loves it when it's working O.K. It's just a machine, Thorny. Why hate it?"

"Don't need a reason to hate it," he said snarly-petulant. "I hate air-cabs, too. It's a matter of taste, that's all."

"All right, but the public likes autodrama-whether it's by TV, stereo, or on stage. And they get what they want."

"*Why?*"

Rick snickered. "Well, it's their dough. Autodrama's portable, predictable, duplicatable. And flexible. You can run `Macbeth' tonight, the `Anarch' tomorrow night, and `King of the Moon' the next night-in the same house. No actor-temperament problems. No union problems. Rent the packaged props, dolls, and tapes from Smithfield. Packaged theater. Systematized, mass-produced. In Coon Creek, Georgia, yet."

"Bah!"

Rick finished feeding in the script tape, closed the panel, and opened an adjacent one. He ripped the lid from a cardboard carton and dumped a heap of smaller tape-spools on the table.

"Are *those* the souls they sold to Smithfield?" Thorn-ier asked, smiling at them rather weirdly.

The technician's stool scraped back and he exploded: "You know what they are!"

Thornier nodded, leaned closer to stare at them as if fascinated. He plucked one of them out of the pile, sighed down at it.

"If you say `Alas, poor Yorick,' I'll heave you out of here!" Rick grated.

Thornier put it back with a sigh and wiped his hand on his coveralls. Packaged personalities. Actor's egos, analogized on tape. Real actors, once, whose dolls were now cast in the roles. The tapes contained complex psy-chophysiological data derived from months of psychic and somatic testing, after the original actors had signed their Smithfield contracts. Data for the Maestro's per-sonality matrices. Abstractions from the human psyche, incarnate in glass, copper, chromium. The souls they rented to Smithfield on a

royalty basis, along with their flesh and blood likenesses in the dolls.

Rick loaded a casting spool onto its spindle, started it feeding through the pickups.

"What happens if we leave out a vital ingredient? Such as Mela Stone's tape, for instance," Thornier wanted to know.

"The doll'd run through its lines like a zombie, that's all," Rick explained. "No zip. No interpretation. Flat, deadpan, like a robot."

"They are robots."

"Not exactly. Remote marionettes for the Maestro, but interpreted. We did a run-through on 'Hamlet' once, without any actor tapes. Everybody talked in flat monotones, no expressions. It was a scream."

"Ha, ha," Thornier said grimly.

Rick slipped another tape on the spindle, clicked a dial to a new setting, started the feed again. "This one's Andreyev, Thornier-played by Peltier." He cursed suddenly, stopped the feed, inspected the tape anxiously, flipped open the pickup mechanism, and inspected it with a magnifier.

"What's wrong?" asked the janitor.

"Take-offs about worn out. Hard to keep its spacing right. I'm nervous about it getting hung up and chewing up the tape."

"No duplicate tapes?"

"Yeah. One set of extras. But the show opens tonight." He cast another suspicious look at the pickup glideway, then closed it and switched the feed again. He was replacing the panel when the feed mechanism stalled. A ripping sound came from inside. He muttered fluent profanity, shut off the drive, jerked away the panel. He held up a shredded ribbon of tape for Thorny to see, then flung it angrily across the booth. "Get out of here! You're a jinx!"

"Not till I finish mopping."

"Thorny, get D'Uccia for me, will you? We'll have to get a new pickup flown in from Smithfield before this afternoon. This is a helluva mess."

"Why not hire a human stand-in?" he asked nastily, then added: "Forgive me. That would be a perversion of your art, wouldn't it? Shall I get D'Uccia?"

Rick threw the Peltier spool at him. He ducked out with a chuckle and went to find the theater manager. Halfway down the iron stairs, he paused to look at the wide stage that spread away just beyond the folded curtains. The footlights were burning and the gray-green floor looked clean and shimmering, with its checkerboard pattern of imbedded copper strips. The strips were electrified during the performance, and they fed the mannequins' energy-storage packs. The dolls had metallic disks in their soles, and rectifiers in their insteps. When batteries drained low, the Maestro moved the actor's foot an inch or so to contact the floor electrodes for periodic recharging during the play, since a doll would grow wobbly and its voice indistinct after a dozen minutes on internal power alone.

Thorny stared at the broad expanse of stage where no humans walked on performance night. D'Uccia's Siamese tomcat sat licking itself in the center of the stage. It glanced up at him haughtily, seemed to sniff, began lick-ing itself again. He watched it for a moment, then called back upstairs to Rick.

"Energize the floor a minute, will you, Rick?"

"Huh? Why?"--a busy grunt.

"Want to check something."

"O.K., but then fetch D'Uccia."

He heard the technician snap a switch. The cat's calm hauteur exploded. The cat screamed, scrambled, barrel-rolled, amid a faint sputter of sparks. The cat did an Immelmann turn over the footlights, landed in the pit with a clawing crash, then scampered up the aisle with fur erect toward its haven beneath Imperio's desk.

"Whatthehell?" Rick growled, and thrust his head out of the booth.

"Shut it off now," said the janitor. "D'Uccia'll be here in a minute."

"With fangs showing!"

Thornier went to finish his routine clean-up. Gloom had begun to gather about him. He was

leaving-leaving even this last humble role in connection with the stage. A fleeting realization of his own impotence came to him. Helpless. Helpless enough to seek petty revenges like vandalizing D'Uccia's window box and tormenting D'Uccia's cat, because there was not any real enemy at which he could strike out.

He put the realization down firmly, and stamped on it. *He* was Ryan Thornier, and never helpless, unless he willed it so. I'll make them know who I am just *once* he thought, before I go. I'll make them remember, and they won't ever forget.

But that line of thought about playing one last great role, one last masterful interpretation, he knew was no good. "Thorny, if you ever played a one-last-great," Rick had said to him once, "there wouldn't be a thing left to live for, would there?" Rick had said it cynically, but it was true anyhow. And the pleasant fantasy was somehow alarming as well as pleasant.

The chic little woman in the white-plumed hat was ex-plain-ing things carefully-with round vowels and precise enunciation-to the Playwright of the Moment, up-and-coming, with awed worshipfulness in his gaze as he lis-tened to the pert little producer. "Stark realism, you see, is the milieu of autodrama," she said. "Always remember, Bernie, that consideration for the actors is a thing of the past. Study the drama of Rome-ancient Rome. If a play had a crucifixion scene, they got a slave for the part and crucified him. On stage, but *really!*"

The Playwright of the Moment laughed dutifully around his long cigarette holder. "So that's where they got the line: 'It's superb, but it's hell on the actors.' I must re-write the murder scene in my 'George's Wake.' Do it with a hatchet, this time."

"Oh, now, Bernie! Mannequins don't bleed."

They both laughed heartily. "And they *are* expensive. Not hell on the actors, but hell on the budget."

"The Romans probably had the same problem. I'll bear it in mind."

Thornier saw them-the producer and the Playwright of the Moment-standing there in the orchestra when he came from backstage and across toward the center aisle. They lounged on the arms of their seats, and a crowd of production personnel and technicians milled about them. The time for the first run-through was approaching.

The small woman waved demurely to Thorny when she saw him making his way slowly through the throng, then turned to the playwright again. "Bernie, be a lamb and get me a drink, will you? I've got a butterfly."

"Surely. Hard, or soft?"

"Oh, hard. Scotch mist in a paper cup, please. There's a bar next door."

The playwright nodded a nod that was nearly a bow and shuffled away up the aisle. The woman caught at the janitor's sleeve as he passed.

"Going to snub me, Thorny?"

"Oh, hello, Miss Ferne," he said politely.

She leaned close and muttered: "Call me 'Miss Ferne again and I'll claw you.'" The round vowels had vanished.

"O.K., Jade, but-" He glanced around nervously. Technicians milled about them. Ian Feria, the producer, watched them curiously from the wings.

"What's been doing with you, Thorny? Why haven't I seen you?" she complained.

He gestured with the broom handle, shrugged. Jade Ferne studied his face a moment and frowned. "Why the agonized look, Thorny? Mad at me?"

He shook his head. "This play, Jade-The Anarch,' well-" He glanced miserably toward the stage.

Memory struck her suddenly. She breathed a compas-sionate *ummm*. "The attempted revival, ten years ago-you were to be Andreyev. Oh, Thorny, I'd forgotten."

"It's all right." He wore a carefully tailored martyr's smile.

She gave his arm a quick pat. "I'll see you after the run-through, Thorny. We'll have a drink and talk old times."

He glanced around again and shook his head. "You've got new friends now, Jade. They wouldn't like

it."

"The crew? Nonsense! They're not snobs."

"No, but they want your attention. Feria's trying to catch your eye right now. No use making them sore."

"All right, but after the run-through I'll see you in the mannequin room. I'll just slip away."

"If you want to."

"I do, Thorny. It's been so long."

The playwright returned with her Scotch mist and gave Thornier a hostilely curious glance.

"Bless your heart, Bernie," she said, the round vowels returning, then to Thornier: "Thorny, would you do me a favor? I've been trying to corner D'Uccia, but he's tied up with a servo salesman somewhere. Somebody's got to run and pick up a mannequin from the depot. The ship-ment was delivered, but the trucker missed a doll crate. We'll need it for the runthrough. Could you-"

"Sure, Miss Ferne. Do I need a requisition order?"

"No, just sign the delivery ticket. And Thorny, see if the new part for the Maestro's been flown in yet. Oh, and one other thing-the Maestro chewed up the Peltier tape. We've got a duplicate, but we should have two, just to be safe."

"I'll see if they have one in stock," he murmured, and turned to go.

D'Uccia stood in the lobby with the salesman when he passed through. The theater manager saw him and smirked happily.

"...Certain special features, of course," the salesman was saying. "It's an old building, and it wasn't designed with autojanitor systems in mind, like buildings are now. But we'll tailor the installation to fit your place, Mr. D'Uccia. We want to do the job *right*, and a packaged unit wouldn't do it."

"Yah, you gimme da price, hah?"

"We'll have an estimate for you by tomorrow. I'll have an engineer over this afternoon to make the survey, and he'll work up a layout tonight."

"Whatsa 'bout the demonstration, uh? Whatsa 'bout you show how da swhip-op machine go?"

The salesman hesitated, eying the janitor who waited nearby. "Well, the floor-cleaning robot is only a small part of the complete service, but . . . I tell you what I'll do. I'll bring a packaged char-all over this afternoon, and let you have a look at it."

"Fine. Datsa fine. You bring her, den we see."

They shook hands. Thornier stood with his arms folded, haughtily inspecting a bug that crawled across the frond of a potted palm, and waiting for a chance to ask D'Uccia for the keys to the truck. He felt the theater manager's triumphant gaze, but gave no indication that he heard.

"We can do the job for you all right, Mr. D'Uccia. Cut your worries in half. And that'll cut your doctor bills in half, too, like you say. Yes, sir! A man in your position gets ground down with just plain human inef-ficiency-other people's inefficiency. You'll never have to worry about that, once you get the building autojanitored, no sir!"

"T'ank you kindly."

"Thank you, Mr. D'Uccia, and I'll see you later this afternoon."

The salesman left.

"Well, bom?" D'Uccia grunted to the janitor.

"The keys to the truck. Miss Ferne wants a pickup from the depot."

D'Uccia tossed them to him. "You hear what the man say? Letsa machines do alla work, hah? Always you wantsa day off. O.K., you takka da day off, ever'day pretty soon. Nice for you, hah, ragazzo?"

Thornier turned away quickly to avoid displaying the surge of unwanted anger. "Be back in an hour," he grunted, and hurried away on his errand, his jaw working in sullen resentment. Why wait around for two humiliat-ing weeks? Why not just walk out? Let D'Uccia do his own chores until the autojan was installed. He'd never be able to get another job around the theater anyhow, so D'Uccia's reaction wouldn't matter.

*I'll walk out now*, he thought-and immediately knew that he wouldn't. It was hard to explain to himself, but when he thought of the final moment when he would be free to look for a decent job and a comfortable living-he felt a twinge of fear that was hard to understand.

The janitor's job had paid him only enough to keep him alive in a fourth floor room where he cooked his own meager meals and wrote memoirs of the old days, but it had kept him close to the lingering remnants of something he loved.

"Theater," they called it. Not *the* theater-as it was to the scalper's victim, the matinee housewife, or the awestruck hick-but just "theater." It wasn't a place, wasn't a business, wasn't the name of an art. "Theater" was a condition of the human heart and soul. Jade Ferne was theater. So was Ian FERIA. So was Mela, poor kid, before her deal with Smithfield. Some had it, others didn't. In the old days, the ones that didn't have it soon got out. But the ones that had it, still had it, even after *the* theater was gobbled up by technological change. And they hung around. Some of them, like Jade and Ian and Mela, adapted to the change, profited by the prostitution of the stage, and developed ulcers and a guilty conscience. Still, they were theater, and because they were, he, Thornier, hung around, too, scrubbing the floors they walked on, and feeling somehow that he was still in theater. Now he was leaving. And now he felt the old bitterness boiling up inside again. The bitterness had been chronic and passive, and now it threatened to become active and acute.

If I could only give them one last performance! he thought. One last great role.

But *that* thought led to the fantasy-plan for revenge, the plan that came to him often as he wandered about the empty theater. Revenge was no good. And the plan was only a daydream. And yet-he wasn't going to get another chance.

He set his jaw grimly and drove on to the Smithfield depot.

The depot clerk had hauled the crated mannequin to the fore, and it was waiting for Thornier when he entered the stockroom. He rolled it out from the wall on a dolly, and the janitor helped him wrestle the coffin-sized packing case onto the counter.

"Don't take it to the truck yet," the clerk grunted around the fat stub of a cigar. "It ain't a new doll, and you gotta sign a release."

"What kind of a release?"

"Liability for malfunction. If the doll breaks down during the show, you can't sue Smithfield. It's standard prack for used-doll rentals."

"Why didn't they send a new one, then?"

"Discontinued production on this model. You want it, you take a used one, and sign the release."

"Suppose I don't sign?"

"No siggy, no dolly."

"Oh." He thought for a moment. Obviously, the clerk had mistaken him for production personnel. His signature wouldn't mean anything-but it was getting late, and Jade was rushed. Since the release wouldn't be valid anyhow he reached for the form.

"Wait," said the clerk. "You better look at what you're signing for." He reached for a wrecking claw and slipped it under a metal binding strap. The strap broke with a screechy snap. "It's been overhauled," the clerk continued. "New solenoid fluid injected, new cosmetic job. Nothing really wrong. A few fatigue spots in the padding, and one toe missing. But you oughta have a look, anyhow."

He finished breaking the lid-fastenings loose and turned to a wall-control board. "We don't have a complete Maestro here," he said as he closed a knife switch, "but we got the control transmitters, and some taped se-quences. It's enough to pre-flight a doll."

Equipment hummed to life somewhere behind the panel. The clerk adjusted several dials while Thornier waited impatiently.

"Let's see-" muttered the cleric. "Guess we'll start off with the Frankenstein sequence." He flipped a switch.

A purring sound came faintly from within the coffin-like box. Thornier watched nervously. The lid stirred, began to rise. A woman's hands came into view, pushing the lid up from within. The purring

increased. The lid clattered aside to hang by the metal straps.

The woman sat up and smiled at the janitor.

Thornier went white. "Mela!" he hissed.

"Ain't that a chiller?" chuckled the clerk. "Now for the hoochy-coochy sequence-"

"No-"

The clerk flipped another switch. The doll stood up slowly, chastely nude as a window-dummy. Still smiling at Thorny, the doll did a bump and a grind.

"Stop it!" he yelled hoarsely.

"Whassa matter, buddy?"

Thorny heard another switch snap. The doll stretched gracefully and yawned. It stretched out in its packing case again, closed its eyes and folded its hands over its bosom. The purring stopped.

"What's eating you?" the clerk grumbled, slapping the lid back over the case again. "You sick or something?"

"I ... I knew her," Ryan Thornier wheezed. "I used to work-" He shook himself angrily and seized the crate. "Wait, I'll give you a hand."

Fury awakened new muscles. He hauled the crate out on the loading dock without assistance and dumped it in the back of the truck, then came back to slash his name across the release forms.

"You sure get sore easy," the clerk mumbled. "You better take it easy. You sure better take it easy."

Thorny was cursing softly as he nosed the truck out into the river of traffic. Maybe Jade thought it was funny, sending him after Mela's doll. Jade remembered how it had been between them-if she bothered to think about it. Thornier and Stone-a team that had gotten constant attention from the gossip columnists in the old days. Ru-mors of engagement, rumors of secret marriage, rumors of squabbles and reunions, break-ups and patch-ups, and some of the rumors were almost true. Maybe Jade thought it was a howl, sending him to fetch the mannequin.

But no-his anger faded as he drove along the boulevards-she hadn't thought about it. Probably she tried hard not to think of old times any more.

Gloom settled over him again, replacing rage. Still it haunted him-the horrified shock of seeing her sit up like an awakened corpse to smile at him. *Mela . . . Mela*

They'd had it good together and bad together. Bit parts and beans in a cold-water flat. Starring roles and steaks at Sardi's. And-love? Was that what it was? He thought of it uneasily. Hypnotic absorption in each other, perhaps, and in the mutual intoxication of their success-but it wasn't necessarily love. Love was calm and even and lasting, and you paid for it with a dedicated lifetime, and Mela wouldn't pay. She'd walked out on them. She'd walked to Smithfield and bought security with sacrifice of principle. There'd been a name for what she'd done. "Scab," they used to say.

He shook himself. It was no good, thinking about those times. Times died with each passing minute. Now they paid \$8.80 to watch Mela's figurine move in her stead, wearing Mela's face, moving with Mela's gestures, walking with the same lilting walk. And the doll was still young, while Mela had aged ten years, years of collecting quarterly royalties from her dolls and living comfortably.

*Great Actors Immortalized*-that was one of Smithfield's little slogans. But they had discontinued production on Mela Stone, the depot clerk had said. Overstocked.

The promise of relative immortality had been quite a bait. Actors unions had resisted autodrama, for obviously the bit players and the lesser-knowns would not be in demand. By making dozens-even hundreds-of copies of the same leading star, top talent could be had for every role, and the same actor-mannequin could be playing simultaneously in dozens of shows all over the country. The unions had resisted-but only a few were wanted by Smithfield anyhow, and the lure was great. The promise of fantastic royalties was enticing enough, but in addition immortality for the actor, through duplication of mannequins. Authors, artists, playwrights had always been able to outlive the centuries, but actors were remembered only by professionals, and their names briefly recorded in the annals of the stage. Shakespeare would live another thousand years, but who remembered Dick Burbage who trouped in the day of the bard's premiers? Flesh and bone, heart and brain, these were the trouper's media, and his art could not outlive them.



Thorny knew the yearnings after lastingness, and he could no longer hate the ones who had gone over. As for himself, the autodrama industry had made him a tentative offer, and he had resisted—partly because he was reasonably certain that the offer would have been withdrawn during testing procedures. Some actors were not "cybergenic"—could not be adequately sculptured into electronic-robotic analogues. These were the portrayers, whose art was inward, whose roles had to be lived rather than played. No polygraphic analogue could duplicate their talents, and Thornier knew he was one of them. It had been easy for him to resist.

At the corner of Eighth Street, he remembered the spare tape and the replacement pickup for the Maestro. But if he turned back now, he'd hold up the ran-through, and Jade would be furious. Mentally he kicked himself, and drove on to the delivery entrance of the theater. There he left the crated mannequin with the stage crew, and headed back for the depot without seeing the producer.

"Hey, bud," said the clerk, "your boss was on the phone. Sounded pretty unhappy."

"Who ... D'Uccia?"

"No . . . well, yeah, D'Uccia, too. He wasn't unhappy, just having fits. I meant Miss Ferne."

"Oh ... where's your phone?"

"Over there. The lady was near hysterical."

Thorny swallowed hard and headed for the booth. Jade Ferne was a good friend, and if his absent-minded-ness had goofed up her production--

"I've got the pickup and the tape ready to go," the clerk called after him. "She told me about it on the phone. *Boy*, you're sure on the ball today, ain't ya---the greasy eight ball."

Thorny reddened and dialed nervously.

"Thank God!" she groaned. "Thorny, we did the run-through with Andreyev a walking zombie. The Maestro chewed up our duplicate Peltier tape, and we're running without an actor-analogue in the starring role. Baby, I could murder you!"

"Sorry, Jade. I slipped a cog, I guess."

"Never mind! Just get the new pickup mechanism over here for Thomas. And the Peltier tape. And don't have a wreck. It's two o'clock, and tonight's opening, and we're still short our leading man. And there's no time to get anything else flown in from Smithfield."

"In some ways, nothing's changed, has it, Jade?" he grunted, thinking of the eternal backstage hysteria that lasted until the lights went low and beauty and calm order somehow emerged miraculously out of the pre-vailing chaos.

"Don't philosophize, just *get* here!" she snapped, and hung up.

The clerk had the cartons ready for him as he emerged. "Look, chum, better take care of that Peltier tape," the clerk advised. "It's the last one in the place. I've got more on order, but they won't be here for a couple of days."

Thornier stared at the smaller package thoughtfully. The last Peltier?

The plan, he remembered the plan. *This* would make it easy. Of course, the plan was only a fantasy, a vengeful dream. He couldn't go through with it. To wreck the show would be a stab at Jade--

He heard his own voice like a stranger's, saying; "Miss Ferne also asked me to pick up a Wilson Granger tape, and a couple of three-inch splices."

The clerk looked surprised. "Granger? He's not in 'The Anarch,' is he?"

Thornier shook his head. "No-guess she wants it for a trial casting. Next show, maybe."

The clerk shrugged and went to get the tape and the splices. Thornier stood clenching and unclenching his fists. He wasn't going to go through with it, of course. Only a silly fantasy.

"I'll have to make a separate ticket on these," said the clerk, returning.

He signed the delivery slips in a daze, then headed for the truck. He drove three blocks from the depot, then parked in a loading zone. He opened the tape cartons carefully with his penknife, peeling back the glued flaps so that they could be sealed again. He removed the two rolls of pattern perforated tape from their small metal canisters, carefully plucked off the masking-tape seals and stuck them temporarily to the dashboard. He un-rolled the first half-yard of the Peltier tape; it was un-perforated,

and printed with identifying codes and manufacturer's data. Fortunately, it was not a brand-new tape; it had been used before, and he could see the wear-marks. A splice would not arouse suspicion.

He cut off the identifying tongue with his knife, laid it aside. Then he did the same to the Granger tape. Granger was fat, jovial, fiftyish. His mannequin played comic supporting roles.

Peltier was young, gaunt, gloomy-the intellectual vil-lain, the dedicated fanatic. A fair choice for the part of Andreyev.

Thornier's hands seemed to move of their own volition, playing reflexively in long-rehearsed roles. He cut the tapes. He took out one of the hot-splice packs and jerked the tab that started the chemical action. He clocked off fifteen seconds by his watch, then opened the pack and fitted into it the cut ends of the Granger tape and the Peltier identifying tongue, butted them carefully end to end, and closed the pack. When it stopped smoking, he opened it to inspect the splice. A neat patch, scarcely visible on the slick plastic tape. Granger's analogue, labeled as Peltier's. And the body of the mannequin was Peltier's. He resealed it in its canister.

He wadded the Peltier tape and the Granger label and the extra delivery receipt copy into the other box. Then he pulled the truck out of the loading zone and drove through the heavy traffic like a racing jockey, trusting the anti-crash radar to see him safely through. As he crossed the bridge, he threw the Peltier tape out the window into the river. And then there was no retreat from what he had done.

Jade and Fera sat in the orchestra, watching the final act of the run-through with a dud Andreyev. When Thorny slipped in beside them, Jade wiped mock sweat from her brow.

"Thank God you're back!" she whispered as he displayed the delayed packages. "Sneak backstage and run them up to Rick in the booth, will you? Thorny, I'm out of my mind!"

"Sorry, Miss Ferne." Fearing that his guilty nervousness hung about him like a ragged cloak, he slipped quickly backstage and delivered the cartons to Thomas in the booth. The technician hovered over the Maestro as the play went on, and he gave Thornier only a quick nod and a wave.

Thorny retreated into misty old corridors and unused dressing rooms, now heaped with junk and remnants of other days. He had to get a grip on himself, had to quit quaking inside. He wandered alone in the deserted sections of the building, opening old doors to peer into dark cubicles where great stars had preened in other days, other nights. Now full of trunks and cracked mirrors and tarpaulins and junked mannequins. Faint odors lingered-nervous smells-perspiration, make-up, dim perfume that pervaded the walls. Mildew and dust-the aroma of time. His footsteps sounded hollowly through the unpeopled rooms, while muffled sounds from the play came faintly through the walls-the hysterical pleading of Marka, the harsh laughter of Piotr, the marching boots of the revolutionist guards, a burst of music toward the end of the scene.

He turned abruptly and started back toward the stage. It was no good, hiding away like this. He must behave normally, must do what he usually did. The falsified Peltier tape would not wreak its havoc until after the first run-through, when Thomas fed it into the Maestro, reset the machine, and prepared to start the second trial run. Until then, he must remain casually himself, and afterwards-?

Afterwards, things would have to go as he had planned.

Afterwards, Jade would have to come to him, as he believed she would. If she didn't, then he had bungled, he had clumsily wrecked, and to no avail.

He slipped through the power-room where converters hummed softly, supplying power to the stage. He stood close to the entrance, watching the beginnings of scene *iii*, of the third act. Andreyev-the Peltier doll-was on alone, pacing grimly in his apartment while the low grumble of a street mob and the distant rattle of machine-gun fire issued from the Maestro-managed sound effect system. After a moment's watching, he saw that Andreyev's movements were not "grim" but merely methodical and lifeless. The tapeless mannequin, going through the required motions, robotlike, without interpretation of meaning. He heard a brief burst of laughter from someone in the production row, and after watching the zombie-like rendering of Andreyev in a suspenseful scene, he, too, found himself grinning faintly.

The pacing mannequin looked toward him suddenly with a dead-pan face. It raised both fists toward its face.

"Help," it said in a conversational monotone. "Ivan, where are you? Where? Surely they've come; they must come." It spoke quietly, without inflection. It ground its fists casually against its temples, paced mechanically again.

A few feet away, two mannequins that had been stand-ing frozen in the off-stage lineup, clicked suddenly to life. As ghostly calm as display window dummies, they galva-nized suddenly at a signal pulse command from the Maes-tro. Muscles-plastic sacs filled with oil-suspended mag-netic powder and wrapped with elastic coils of wire, like flexible solenoids-tightened and strained beneath the airfoam flesh, working spasmodically to the pulsing rhythms of the polychromatic u.h.f. commands of the Maestro. Expressions of fear and urgency leaped to their faces. They crouched, tensed, looked around, then burst on stage, panting wildly.

"Comrade, she's come, she's come!" one of them screamed. "She's come with *him*, with Boris!"

"What? She has him prisoner?" came the casual reply. "No, no, comrade. We've been betrayed. She's with him. She's a traitor, she's sold out to them."

There was no feeling in the uninterpreted Andreyev's responses, even when he shot the bearer of bad tidings through the heart.

Thornier grew fascinated with watching as the scene progressed. The mannequins moved gracefully, their movements sinuous and more evenly flowing than human, they seemed boneless. The ratio of mass-to-muscle power of their members was carefully chosen to yield the flow of a dance with their every movement. Not clanking me-chanical robots, not stumbling puppets, the dolls sustained patterns of movement and expression that would have quickly brought fatigue to a human actor, and the Maestro coordinated the events on stage in a way that would be impossible to a group of humans, each an individual and thinking independently.

It was as always. First, he looked with a shudder at the Machine moving in the stead of flesh and blood, at Mechanism sitting in the seat of artistry. But gradually his chill melted away, and the play caught him, and the actors were no longer machines. He lived in the role of Andreyev, and breathed the lines off-stage, and he knew the rest of them: Meta and Pettier, Sam Dion and Peter Repplewaite. He tensed with them, gritted his teeth in anticipation of difficult lines, cursed softly at the dud Andreyev, and forgot to listen for the faint crackle of sparks as the mannequins' feet stepped across the copper-studded floor, drinking energy in random bites to keep their storage packs near full charge.

Thus entranced, he scarcely noticed the purring and brushing and swishing sounds that came from behind him, and grew louder. He heard a quiet mutter of voices nearby, but only frowned at the distraction, kept his at-tention rooted to the stage.

*Then* a thin spray of water tickled his ankles. Some-thing soggy and spongelike slapped against his foot. He whirled.

A gleaming metal spider, three feet high came at him slowly on six legs, with two grasping claws extended. It clicked its way toward him across the floor, throwing out a thin spray of liquid which it promptly sucked up with the spongelike proboscis. With one grasping claw, it lifted a ten-gallon can near his leg, sprayed under it, swabbed, and set the can down again.

Thornier came unfrozen with a howl, leaped over the thing, hit the wet-soapy deck off balance. He skidded and sprawled. The spider scrubbed at the floor toward the edge of the stage, then reversed directions and came back toward him.

Groaning, he pulled himself together, on hands and knees. D'Uccia's cackling laughter spilled over him. He glanced up. The chubby manager and the servo salesman stood over him, the salesman grinning, D'Uccia chortling.

"Datsa ma boy, datsa ma boy! Always, he watcha the show, then he don't swip-op around, then he wantsa day off. Thatsa ma boy, for sure." D'Uccia reached down to pat the metal spider's chassis. "*Hey, ragazzo,*" he said again to Thornier, "want you should meet my new *boy* here. This one, he don't watcha the show like you."

He got to his feet, ghost-white and muttering. D'Uccia took closer note of his face, and his grin went sick. He inched back a step. Thornier glared at him briefly, then whirled to stalk away. He whirled into near collision with the Mela Stone mannequin, recovered, and started to pass in back of it.

Then he froze.

The Mela Stone mannequin was on stage, in the final scene. And this one looked older, and a little haggard. It wore an expression of shocked surprise as it looked him up and down. One hand darted to its mouth.

"Thorny-!" A frightened whisper.

"Mesa!" Despite the play, he shouted it, opening his arms to her. "Mela, how *wonderful!*"

And then, he noticed she winced away from his sodden coveralls. And she wasn't glad to see him at all.

"Thorny, how nice," she managed to murmur, extend-ing her hand gingerly. The hand flashed with jewelry.

He took it for an empty second, stared at her, then walked hurriedly away, knots twisting up inside him. Now he could play it through. Now he could go on with it, and even enjoy executing his plan against all of them.

Mela had come to watch opening night for her doll in "The Anarch," as if its performance were her own. *I'll arrange*, he thought, *for it not to be a dull show*.

"No, no, wool" came the monotone protest of the dud Andreyev, in the next-to-the-last scene. The bark of Marka's gun, and the Peltier mannequin crumpled to the stage; and except for a brief triumphant denouement, the play was over.

At the sound of the gunshot, Thornier paused to smile tightly over his shoulder, eyes burning from his hawklike face. Then he vanished into the wings.

She got away from them as soon as she could, and she wandered around backstage until she found him in the storage room of the costuming section. Alone, he was sorting through the contents of an old locker and mutter-ing nostalgically to himself. She smiled and closed the door with a thud. Startled, he dropped an old collapsible top-hat and a box of blank cartridges back into the trunk. His hand dived into his pocket as he straightened.

"Jade! I didn't expect-"

"Me to come?" She flopped on a dusty old chaise lounge with a weary sigh and fanned herself with a program, closing her eyes. She kicked off her shoes and muttered: "Infuriating bunch. I hate 'em!"-made a retching face, and relaxed into little-girlhood. A little girl who had trouped with Thornier and the rest of them-the *actress* Jade Ferne, who had begged for bit parts and haunted the agencies and won the roles through endless rehearsals and shuddered with fright before opening curtain like the rest of them. Now she was a pert little woman with shrewd eyes, streaks of gray at the temples, and hard lines around her mouth. As she let the executive cloak slip away, the shrewdness and the hard lines melted into weariness.

"Fifteen minutes to get my sanity back, Thorny," she muttered, glancing at her watch as if to time it.

He sat on the trunk and tried to relax. She hadn't seemed to notice his uneasiness, or else she was just too tired to attach any significance to it. If she found him out, she'd have him flayed and pitched out of the building on his ear, and maybe call the police. She came in a small package, but so did an incendiary grenade. *It won't hurt you, Jade, what I'm doing*, he told himself. *It'll cause a big splash, and you won't like it, but it won't hurt you, nor even wreck the show*.

He was doing it for show business, the old kind, the kind they'd both known and loved. And in that sense, he told himself further, he was doing it as much for her as he was for himself.

"How was the run-through, Jade?" he asked casually.

"Except for Andreyev, I mean." "Superb, simply superb," she said mechanically.

"I mean *really*."

She opened her eyes, made a sick mouth. "Like always, Thorny, like always. Nauseating, overplayed, per-fectly directed for a gum-chewing bag-rattling crowd. A crowd that wants it overplayed so that it won't have to think about what's going on. A crowd that doesn't want to reach *out* for a feeling or a meaning. It wants to be clubbed on the head with the meaning, so it doesn't have to reach. I'm sick of it."

He looked briefly surprised. "That figures," he grunted wryly.

She hooked her bare heels on the edge of the lounge, hugged her shins, rested her chin on her knees,

and blinked at him. "Hate me for producing the stuff, Thorny?"

He thought about it for a moment, shook his head. "I get sore at the setup sometimes, but I don't blame you for it."

"That's good. Sometimes I'd trade places with you. Sometimes I'd rather be a charwoman and scrub D'Uc-cia's floors instead."

"Not a chance," he said sourly. "The Maestro's rela-tives are taking *that* over, too."

"I know. I heard. You're out of a job, thank God. Now you can get somewhere."

He shook his head. "I don't know where. I can't do anything but act."

"Nonsense. I can get you a job tomorrow."

"Where?"

"With Smithfield. Sales promotion. They're hiring a number of old actors in the department."

"No." He said it flat and cold.

"Not so fast. This is something new. The company's expanding."

"Ha."

"Autodrama for the home. A four-foot stage in every living room. Miniature mannequins, six inches high. Centralized Maestro service. Great Plays piped to your home by concentric cable. Just dial Smithfield, make your request. Sound good?"

He stared at her icily. "Greatest thing in show busi-ness since Sarah Bernhardt," he offered tonelessly. "Thorny! Don't get nasty with me!"

"Sorry. But what's so new about having it in the home? Autodrama took over TV years ago."

"I know, but this is different. Real miniature theater. Kids go wild for it. But it'll take good promotion to make it catch on."

"Sorry, but you know me better than that."

She shrugged, sighed wearily, closed her eyes again. "Yes, I do. You've got portrayer's integrity. You're a darfsteller. A director's ulcer. You can't play a role without living it, and you won't live it unless you believe it. So go ahead and starve." She spoke crossly, but he knew there was grudging admiration behind it.

"I'll be O.K.," he grunted, adding to himself: *after tonight's performance.*

"Nothing I can do for you?"

"Sure. Cast me. I'll stand in for dud mannequins." She gave him a sharp glance, hesitated. "You know, I believe you *would!*"

He shrugged. "Why not?"

She stared thoughtfully at a row of packing cases, waggled her dark head. "Hmmp! What a spectacle that'd be-a human actor, incognito, playing in an autodrama."

"It's been done-in the sticks."

"Yes, but the audience knew it was being done, and that always spoils the show. It creates contrasts that don't exist or wouldn't be noticed otherwise. Makes the dolls seem snaky, birdlike, too rubbery quick. With no humans on stage for contrast, the dolls just seem wist-fully graceful, ethereal."

"But if the audience didn't know-"

Jade was smiling faintly. "I wonder," she mused. "I wonder if they'd guess. They'd notice a difference, of course-in one mannequin."

"But they'd think it was just the Maestro's interpre-tation of the part."

"Maybe-if the human actor were careful."

He chuckled sourly. "If it fooled the critics-"

"Some ass would call it 'an abysmally unrealistic interpretation' or 'too obviously mechanical.'" She glanced at her watch, shook herself, stretched wearily, and slipped into her shoes again. "Anyway," she added, "there's no reason to do it, since the Maestro's *really* capable of rendering a better-than-human performance anyhow."

The statement brought an agonized gasp from the jani-tor. She looked at him and giggled. "Don't be shocked, Thorny. I said 'capable of-not 'in the habit of.' Auto-drama entertains audiences on the level they *want* to be entertained on."

"But-"

"*Just*," she added firmly, "as show business has always done."

"But-"

"Oh, retract your eyeballs, Thorny. I didn't mean to blaspheme." She preened, began slipping back into her producer's mold as she prepared to return to her crowd. "The only thing wrong with autodrama is that it's scaled down to the moron-level-but show business always has been, and probably should be. Even if it gives us kids a pain." She smiled and patted his cheek. "Sorry I shocked you. Au 'voir, Thorny. And luck."

When she was gone, he sat fingering the cartridges in his pocket and staring at nothing. Didn't any of them have any sensibilities? Jade too, a seller of principle. And he had always thought of her as having merely com-promised with necessity, against her real wishes. The idea that she could really believe autodrama capable of ren-dering a better-than-human performance--

But she didn't. Of course she needed to rationalize, to excuse what she was doing--

He sighed and went to lock the door, then to recover the old "March" script from the trunk. His hands were trembling slightly. Had he planted enough of an idea in Jade's mind; would she remember it later? Or perhaps remember it too clearly, and suspect it?

He shook himself sternly. No apprehensions allowed. When Rick rang the bell for the second run-through, it would be his entrance-cue, and he must be in-character by then. Too bad he was no schauspieler, too bad he couldn't switch himself on-and-off the way Jade could do, but the necessity for much inward preparation was the burden of the darfsteller. He could not change into role without first changing himself, and letting the revision seep surfaceward as it might, reflecting the inner state of the man.

Strains of Moussorgsky pervaded the walls. He closed his eyes to listen and feel. Music for empire. Music at once brutal and majestic. It was the time of upheaval, of vengeance, of overthrow. Two times, superimposed. It was the time of opening night, with Ryan Thornier--ten years ago--cast in the starring role.

He fell into a kind of trance as he listened and clocked the pulse of his psyche and remembered. He scarcely no-ticed when the music stopped, and the first few lines of the play came through the walls.

"*Cut! Cut!*" A worried shout. Feria's.

It had begun.

Thornier took a deep breath and seemed to come awake. When he opened his eyes and stood up, the janitor was gone. The janitor had been a nightmare role, nothing more.

And Ryan Thornier, star of "Walkaway," favored of the critics, confident of a bright future, walked out of the storage room with a strange lightness in his step. He carried a broom, he still wore the dirty coveralls, but now as if to a masquerade.

The Peltier mannequin lay sprawled on the stage in a grotesque heap. Ryan Thornier stared at it calmly from behind the set and listened intently to the babble of stage hands and technicians that milled about him:

"Don't know. Can't tell yet. It came out staggering and gibbering-like it was drunk. It reached for a table, then it fell on its face--"

"Acted like the trouble might be a mismatched tape, but Rick rechecked it. Really Peltier's tape--"

"Can't figure it out. Miss Ferne's having kittens."

Thornier paused to size up his audience. Jade, Ian, and their staff milled about in the orchestra section. The stage was empty, except for the sprawled mannequin. Too much frantic conversation, all around. His entrance would go unnoticed. He walked slowly onstage and stood over the fallen doll with his hands in his pockets and his face pulled down in a somber expression. After a moment, he nudged the doll with his toe, paused, nudged it again. A faint giggle came from the orchestra. The corner of his eye caught Jade's quick glance toward the stage. She paused in the middle of a sentence.

Assured that she watched, he played to an imaginary audience-friend standing just off stage. He

glanced toward the friend, lifted his brows questioningly. The friend apparently gave him the nod. He looked around warily, then knelt over the fallen doll. He took its pulse, nodded eagerly to the offstage friend. Another giggle came from orchestra. He lifted the doll's head, sniffed its breath, made a face. Then, gingerly, he rolled it.

He reached deep into the mannequin's pocket, having palmed his own pocket watch beforehand. His hand paused there, and he smiled to his offstage accomplice and nodded eagerly. He withdrew the watch and held it up by its chain for his accomplice's approval.

A light burst of laughter came from the production personnel. The laughter frightened the thief. He shot an apprehensive glance around the stage, hastily returned the watch to the fallen dummy, felt its pulse again. He traded a swift glance with his confederate, whispered "Aha!" and smiled mysteriously. Then he helped the doll to its feet and staggered away with it—a friend leading a drunk home to its family. In the doorway, he paused to frame his exit with a wary backward glance that said he was taking it to a dark alley where he could rob it in safety.

Jade was gaping at him.

Three technicians had been watching from just off the set, and they laughed heartily and clapped his shoulder as he passed, providing the offstage audience to which he had seemed to be playing.

Good-natured applause came from Jade's people out front, and as Thorny carried the doll away to storage, he was humming softly to himself.

At five minutes till six, Rick Thomas and a man from the Smithfield depot climbed down out of the booth, and Jade pressed forward through the crowd to question him with her eyes.

"The tape," he said. "Defective"

"But it's too late to get another!" she squawked.

"Well, it's the tape, anyway."

"How do you *know*?"

"Well—trouble's bound to be in one of three places. The doll, the tape, or the analogue tank where the tape-data gets stored. We cleared the tank and tried it with another actor. Worked O.K. And the doll works O.K. on an uninterpreted run. So, by elimination, the tape."

She groaned and slumped into a seat, covering her face with her hands.

"No way at *all* to locate another tape?" Rick asked.

"We called every depot within five hundred miles. They'd have to cut one from a master. Take too long."

"So we call off the show!" Ian Feria called out re-signedly, throwing up his hands in disgust. "Refund on tickets, open tomorrow."

"Wait!" snapped the producer, looking up suddenly. "Dooch—the house is sold out, isn't it?"

"Yah," D'Uccia grunted irritably. "She'sa filled op. Wassa matter with you pipples, you don' getsa Maestro fix? Wassa matter? We lose the money, hah?"

"Oh, shut up. Change curtain time to nine, offer refunds if they won't wait. Ian, keep at it. Get things set up for tonight." She spoke with weary determination, glancing around at them. "There may be a slim chance. Keep at it. I'm going to try something." She turned and started away.

"Hey!" Feria called.

"Explain later," she muttered over her shoulder.

She found Thornier replacing burned-out bulbs in the wall fixtures. He smiled down at her while he reset the clamps of an amber glass panel. "Need me for something, Miss Ferne?" he called pleasantly from the stepladder.

"I might," she said tersely. "Did you mean that offer about standing in for dud mannequins?"

A bulb exploded at her feet after it slipped from his hand. He came down slowly, gaping at her.

"You're not serious!"

"Think you could try a run-through as Andreyev?" He shot a quick glance toward the stage, wet his lips, stared at her dumbly.

"Well—*can* you?"

"It's been ten years, Jade . . . I-"

"You can read over the script, and you can wear an earplug radio--so Rick can prompt you from the booth."

She made the offer crisply and matter-of-factly, and it made Thorny smile inwardly. It was theater-calmly ask-ing the outrageously impossible, gambling on it, and get-ting it.

"The customers-they're expecting Peltier."

"Right now I'm only asking you to try a runthrough, Thorny. After that, we'll see. But remember it's our only chance of going on tonight."

"Andreyev," he breathed. "The lead."

"Please, Thorny, will you try?"

He looked around the theater, nodded slowly. "I'll go study my lines," he said quietly, inclining his head with what he hoped was just the proper expression of humble bravery.

*I've got to make it good, I've got to make it great. The last chance, the last great role--*

Glaring footlights, a faint whisper in his ear, and the cold panic of the first entrance. It came and passed quickly. Then the stage was a closed room, and the audience-of technicians and production personnel--was only the fourth wall, somewhere beyond the lights. He was Andreyev, commissioner of police, party whip, loyal servant of the regime, now tottering in the revolutionary storm of the Eighties. The last Bolshevik, no longer a rebel, no longer a radical, but now the loyalist, the con-servatist, the defender of the status quo, champion of the Marxist ruling classes. No longer conscious of a self apart from that of the role, he lived the role. And the others, the people he lived it with, the people whose feet crackled faintly as they stepped across the floor, he acted and reacted with them and against them as if they, too, shared life, and while the play progressed he forgot their lifeless-ness for a little time.

Caught up by the magic, enfolded in scheme of the in-evitable, borne along by the tide of the drama, he felt once again the sense of belonging as a part in a whole, a known and predictable whole that moved as surely from scene i to the final curtain as man from womb to tomb, and there were no lost years, no lapse or sense of defeated purpose between the rehearsals of those many years ago and this the fulfillment of opening night. Only when at last he muffed a line, and Rick's correction whispered in his ear did the spell that was gathered about him briefly break--and he found himself unaccountably frightened, frightened by the sudden return of realization that all about him was Machine, and frightened, too, that he had forgotten. He had been conforming to the flighty mechanical grace of the others, reflexively imitating the characteristic lightness of the mannequins' movements, the dancelike qualities of their playing. To know suddenly, having forgotten it, that the mouth he had just kissed was not a woman's, but the rubber mouth of a doll, and that dancing patterns of high frequency waves from the Mae-stro had controlled the solenoid currents that turned her face lovingly up toward his, had lifted the cold soft hands to touch his face. The faint rubbery smell-taste hung about his mouth.

When his first exit came, he went off trembling. He saw Jade coming toward him, and for an instant, he felt a horrifying certainty that she would say, "Thorny, you were almost as good as a mannequin!" Instead, she said nothing, but only held out her hand to him.

"Was it too bad, Jade?"

"Thorny, you're in! Keep it up, and you might have more than a one-night stand. Even Ian's convinced. He squealed at the idea, but now he's sold."

"No kicks? How about the lines with Piotr."

"Wonderful. Keep it up. Darling, you were marvelous."

"It's settled, then?"

"Darling, it's *never* settled until the curtain comes up. You know that." She giggled. "We had one *kick* all right --or maybe I shouldn't tell you."

He stiffened slightly. "Oh? Who from?"

"Mela Stone. She saw you come on, turned white as a sheet, and walked out. I can't imagine!"

He sank slowly on a haggard looking couch and stared at her. "The hell you can't," he grated softly.

"She's here on a personal appearance contract, you know. To give an opening and an intermission



commentary on the author and the play." Jade smirked at him gleefully. "Five minutes ago she called back, tried to cancel her appearance. Of course, she can't pull a stunt like that. Not while Smithfield owns her."

Jade winked, patted his arm, tossed an uncoded copy of the script at him, then headed back toward the orchestra. Briefly he wondered what Jade had against Mela. Nothing serious, probably. Both had been actresses. Mela got a Smithfield contract; Jade didn't get one. It was enough.

By the time he had reread the scene to follow, his second cue was approaching, and he moved back toward the stage.

Things went smoothly. Only three times during the first act did he stumble over lines he had not rehearsed in ten years. Rick's prompting was in his ear, and the Maestro could compensate to some extent for his minor deviations from the script. This time he avoided losing himself so completely in the play; and this time the weird realization that he had become one with the machine-set pattern did not disturb him. This time he remembered, but when the first break came--

"Not quite so good, Thorny," Ian Feria called. "Whatever you were doing in the first scene, do it again. That was a little wooden. Go through that last bit again, and play it down. Andreyev's no mad bear from the Urals. It's Marka's moment, anyhow. Hold in."

He nodded slowly and looked around at the frozen dolls. He had to forget the machinery. He had to lose himself in it and live it, even if it meant being a replacement link in the mechanism. It disturbed him somehow, even though he was accustomed to subordinating himself to the total gestalt of the scene as in other days. For no apparent reason, he found himself listening for laughter from the production people, but none came.

"All right," Feria called. "Bring 'em alive again."

He went on with it, but the uneasy feeling nagged at him. There was self-mockery in it, and the expectation of ridicule from those who watched. He could not understand why, and yet--

There was an ancient movie--one of the classics--in which a man named Chaplin had been strapped into a seat on a production line where he performed a perfectly mechanical task in a perfectly mechanical fashion, a task that could obviously have been done by a few cams and a linkage or two, and it was one of the funniest comedies of all times---yet tragic. A task that made him a part in an over-all machine.

He sweated through the second and third acts in a state of compromise with himself--overplaying it for purposes of self-preparation, yet trying to convince Feria and Jade that he could handle it and handle it well. Overacting was necessary in spots, as a learning technique. Deliberately ham up the rehearsal to impress lines on memory, then underplay it for the real performance--it was an old trick of troupers who had to do a new show each night and had only a few hours in which to rehearse and learn lines. But would they know why he was doing it?

When it was finished, there was no time for another run-through, and scarcely time for a nap and a bite to eat before dressing for the show.

"It was terrible, Jade," he groaned. "I muffed it. I know I did."

"Nonsense. You'll be in tune tonight, Thorny. I knew what you were doing, and I can see past it."

"Thanks. I'll try to pull in."

"About the final scene, the shooting--"

He shot her a wary glance. "What about it?"

"The gun'll be loaded tonight, blanks, of course. And this time you'll have to fall."

"So?"

"So be careful where you fall. Don't go down on the copper bus-lugs. A hundred and twenty volts mightn't kill you, but we don't want a dying Andreyev bouncing up and spitting blue sparks. The stagehands'll chalk out a safe section for you. And one other thing--"

"Yes?"

"Marka fires from close range. Don't get burned."

"I'll watch it."

She started away, then paused to frown back at him steadily for several seconds. "Thorny, I've got a

queer feeling about you. I can't place it exactly."

He stared at her evenly, waiting.

"Thorny, are you going to wreck the show?"

His face showed nothing, but something twisted inside him. She looked beseeching, trusting, but worried. She was counting on him, placing faith in him--

"Why should I botch up the performance, Jade? Why should I do a thing like that?"

"I'm asking you."

"O.K. I promise you-you'll get the best Andreyev I can give you."

She nodded slowly. "I believe you. I didn't doubt *that*, exactly."

"Then what worries you?"

"I don't know. I know how you feel about autodrama. I just got a shuddery feeling that you had something up your sleeve. That's all. I'm sorry. I know you've got too much integrity to wreck your own performance, but-" She stopped and shook her head, her dark eyes searching him. She was still worried.

"Oh, all right. I was going to stop the show in the third act. I was going to show them my appendectomy scar, do a couple of card tricks, and announce that I was on strike. I was going to walk out." He clucked his tongue at her, looked hurt.

She flushed slightly, and laughed. "Oh, I know you wouldn't pull anything shabby. Not that you wouldn't do anything you *could* to take a swat at autodrama gener-ally, but . . . there's nothing you could do tonight that would accomplish anything. Except sending the customers home mad. That doesn't fit you, and I'm sorry I thought of it."

"Thanks. Stop worrying. If you lose dough, it won't be my fault."

"I believe you; but-"

"But what?"

She leaned close to him. "But you look too triumphant, that's what!" she hissed, then patted his cheek.

"Well, it's my last role. I-"

But she had already started away, leaving him with his sandwich and a chance for a nap.

Sleep would not come. He lay fingering the .32 caliber cartridges in his pocket and thinking about the impact of his final exit upon the conscience of the theater. The thoughts were pleasant.

It struck him suddenly as he lay drowsing that they would call it suicide. How silly. Think of the jolting effect, the dramatic punch, the audience reaction. Mannequins don't bleed. And later, the headlines: Robot Player Kills Old Trouper, Victim of Mechanized Stage, Still, they'd call it suicide. How silly.

But maybe that's what the paranoid on the twentieth-story window ledge thought about, too-the audience reaction. Wasn't every self-inflicted wound really aimed at the conscience of the world?

It worried him some, but--

"*Fifteen minutes until curtain,*" the sound system was croaking. "*Fifteen minutes-*"

"Hey, Thorny!" Feria called irritably. "Get back to the costuming room. They've been looking for you."

He got up wearily, glanced around at the backstage bustle, then shuffled away toward the makeup department. One thing was certain: he had to go on.

The house was less than packed. A third of the custom-ers had taken refunds rather than wait for the post-poned curtain and a substitute Andreyev, a substitute un-known or ill-remembered at best, with no Smithy index rating beside his name in lights. Nevertheless, the bulk of the audience had planned their evenings and stayed to claim their seats with only suppressed bad humor about the delay. Scalpers' customers who had overpaid and who could not reclaim more than half the bootleg price from the box-office were forced to accept the show or lose money and get nothing. They came, and shifted restlessly, and glanced at their watches while an m.c.'s voice made apologies and introduced orchestral numbers, mostly from the Russian composers. Then, finally--

"Ladies and gentlemen, tonight we have with us one of the best loved actresses of stage, screen, and auto-drama, co-star of our play tonight, as young and lovely as she was when first immortalized by Smithfield-Mela *Stone!*"

Thornier watched tight-lipped from shadows as she stepped gracefully into the glare of the footlights. She seemed abnormally pale, but makeup artistry had done a good job; she looked only slightly older than her doll, still lovely, though less arrogantly beautiful. Her flashing jewelry was gone, and she wore a simple dark gown with a deep-slit neck, and her tawny hair was wrapped high in a turbanlike coiffure that left bare a graceful neck.

"Ten years ago," she began quietly, "I rehearsed for a production of 'The Anarch' which never appeared, re-hearsed it with a man named Ryan Thornier in the starring role, the actor who fills that role tonight. I remember with a special sort of glow the times--"

She faltered, and went on lamely. Thorny winced. Obviously the speech had been written by Jade Feme and evidently the words were like bits of poisoned apples in Mela's mouth. She gave the impression that she was speaking them only because it wasn't polite to retch them. Mela was being punished for her attempt to back out, and Jade had forced her to appear only by threatening to fit out the Stone mannequin with a gray wig and have the doll read her curtain speeches. The small producer had a vicious streak, and she exercised it when crossed.

Mela's introductory lines were written to convince the audience that it was indeed lucky to have Thornier instead of Peltier, but there was nothing to intimate his flesh-and-blood status. She did not use the words "doll" or "mannequin," but allowed the audience to keep its preconceptions without confirming them. It was short. After a few anecdotes about the show's first presentation more than a generation ago, she was done.

"And with no further delay, my friends, I give you-Pruchev's 'The Anarch.'"

She bowed away and danced behind the curtains and came off crying. A majestic burst of music heralded the opening scene. She saw Thornier and stopped, not yet off stage. The curtain started up. She darted toward him, hesitated, stopped to stare up at him apprehensively. Her eyes were brimming, and she was biting her lip.

On stage, a telephone jangled on the desk of Commissioner Andreyev. His cue was still three minutes away. A lieutenant came on to answer the phone.

"Nicely done, Mela," he whispered, smiling sourly.

She didn't hear him. Her eyes drifted down to his costume-very like the uniform he'd worn for a dress rehearsal ten years ago. Her hand went to her throat. She wanted to run from him, but after a moment she got control of herself. She looked at her own mannequin waiting in the line-up, then at Thornier.

"Aren't you going to say something appropriate?" she hissed.

"I-" His icy smile faded slowly. The first small triumph-triumph over Mela, a sick and hag-ridden Mela who had bought security at the expense of integrity and was still paying for it in small installments like this, Mela whom he once had loved. The first small "triumph" coiled into a sick knot in his throat.

She started away, but he caught her arm.

"I'm sorry, Mela," he muttered hoarsely. "I'm really sorry."

"It's not your fault."

But it was. She didn't know what he'd done, of course; didn't know he'd switched the tapes and steered his own selection as a replacement for the Peltier doll, so that she'd have to watch him playing opposite the doll-image of a Mela who had ceased to exist ten years ago, watch him relive a mockery of something.

"I'm sorry," he whispered again.

She shook her head, pulled her arm free, hurried away. He watched her go and went sick inside. Their frigid meeting earlier in the day had been the decisive moment, when in a surge of bitterness he'd determined to go through with it and even excuse himself for doing it. Maybe bitterness had fogged his eyesight, he thought. Her reaction to bumping into him that way hadn't been snobbery; it had been horror. An old ghost in dirty coveralls and motley, whose face she'd probably fought to forget, had sprung up to confront her in a place that was too full of memories anyhow. No wonder she seemed cold. Probably he symbolized some of her own self-accusations, for he knew he had affected others that way. The successful ones, the ones who had profited by autodrama---they often saw him with mop and

bucket, and if they remembered Ryan Thornier, turned quickly away. And at each turning away, he had felt a small glow of satisfaction as he imagined them thinking: *Thornier wouldn't compro-mise- and hating him, because they had compromised and lost something thereby. But being hated by Mela -was different somehow. He didn't want it.*

Someone nudged his ribs. "Your cue, Thorny!" hissed a tense voice. "You're on!"

He came awake with a grunt. Feria was shoving him frantically toward his entrance. He made a quick grab for his presence of mind, straightened into character, and strode on.

He muffed the scene badly. He knew that he muffed it even before he made his exit and saw their faces. He had missed two cues and needed prompting several times from Rick in the booth. His acting was wooden-he felt it.

"You're doing fine, Thorny, just fine!" Jade told him, because there was nothing else she *dared* tell him during a performance. Shock an actor's ego during rehearsal, and he had time to recover; shock it during a perform-ance, and he might go sour for the night. He knew, though, without being told, the worry that seethed behind her mechanical little smile. "But just calm down a little, eh?" she advised. "It's going fine."

She left him to seethe in solitude. He leaned against the wall and glowered at his feet and flagellated himself. *You failure, you miserable crumb, you janitor-at-heart, you stage-struck charwoman--*

He had to straighten out. If he ruined this one, there'd never be another chance. But he kept thinking of Mela, and how he had wanted to hurt her, and how now that she was being hurt he wanted to stop.

"Your cue, Thorny-wake up!"

And he was on again, stumbling over lines, being terri-fied of the sea of dim faces where a fourth wall should be.

She was waiting for him after his second exit. He came off pale and shaking, perspiration soaking his collar. He leaned back and lit a cigarette and looked at her bleakly. She couldn't talk. She took his arm in both hands and kneaded it while she rested her forehead against his shoul-der. He gazed down at her in dismay. She'd stopped feel-ing hurt; she couldn't feel hurt when she watched him make a fool of himself out there. She might have been vengefully delighted by it, and he almost wished that she were. Instead, she was pitying him. He was numb, sick to the core. He couldn't go on with it.

"Mela, I'd better tell *you*; I can't tell Jade what I-"

"Don't talk, Thorny. Just do your best." She peered up at him. "Please do your best?"

It startled him. Why should she feel that way?

"Wouldn't you really rather see me flop?" he asked.

She shook her head quickly, then paused and nodded it. "Part of me would, Thorny. A vengeful part. I've got to believe in the automatic stage. I . . . I do believe in it. But I don't want you to flop, not really." She put her hands over her eyes briefly. "You don't know what it's like seeing you out there ... in the middle of all that ... that-" She shook herself slightly. "It's a mockery, Thorny, you don't belong out there, but-as long as you're there, don't muff it. Do your best?"

"Yeah, sure."

"It's a precarious thing. The effect, I mean. If the audi-ence starts realizing you're not a doll-" She shook her head slowly.

"What if they do?"

"They'll laugh. They'll laugh you right off the stage."

He was prepared for anything but that. It confirmed the nagging hunch he'd had during the run-through.

"Thorny, that's all I'm really concerned about. I don't care whether you play it well or play it lousy, as long as they don't find out what you are. I don't want them to laugh at you; you've been hurt enough."

"They wouldn't laugh if I gave a good performance." "But they *would*! Not in the same way, but they would. Don't you see?"

His mouth fell open. He shook his head. It wasn't true. "Human actors have done it before," he protested. "In the sticks, on small stages with undersized Maestros."

"Have you ever seen such a play?"

He shook his head.

"I have. The audience knows about the human part of the cast in advance. So it doesn't strike them as funny. There's no jolt of discovering an incongruity. Listen to me Thorny-do your best, but you don't dare make it *better* than a doll could do."

Bitterness came back in a flood. Was this what he had hoped for? To give as machinelike a performance as possible, to do as good a job as the Maestro, but no better, and above all, *no different*? So that they wouldn't find out?

She saw his distressed expression and felt for his hand. "Thorny, don't you hate me for telling you. I want you to bring it off O.K., and I thought you ought to realize. I think I know what's been wrong. You're afraid-down deep-that they *won't* recognize you for who you are, and that makes your performance un-doll-like. You better start being afraid they will recognize you, Thorny."

As he stared at her it began to penetrate that she was still capable of being the woman he'd once known and loved. Worse, she wanted to save him from being laughed at. Why? If she felt motherly, she might conceivably want to shield him against wrath, criticism, or rotten to-matoes, but not against loss of dignity. Motherliness thrived on the demise of male dignity, for it sharpened the image of the child in the man.

"Mela-?"

"Yes, Thorny."

"I guess I never quite got over you." She shook her head quickly, almost angrily.

"Darling, you're living ten years ago. I'm not, and I won't. Maybe I don't like the present very well, but I'm in it, and I can only change it in little ways. I can't make it the past again, and I won't try." She paused a moment, searching his face. "Ten years ago, we weren't living in the present either. We were living in a mythical, magic, won-derful future. Great talent, just starting to bloom. We were living in dream-plans in those days. The future we lived in never happened, and you can't go back and make it happen. And when a dream-plan stops being possible, it turns into a pipe dream. I won't live in a pipe dream. I want to stay sane, even if it hurts."

"Too bad you had to come tonight," he said stiffly.

She wilted. "Oh, Thorny, I didn't mean that the way it sounded. And I wouldn't say it that strongly unless"-she glanced through the soundproof glass toward the stage where her mannequin was on in the scene with Piotr-"unless I had trouble too, with too much wishing."

"I wish you were with me out there," he said softly. "With no dolls and no Maestro. I know how it'd be then."

"Don't! Please, Thorny, don't."

"Mela, I loved you-"

"No!" She got up quickly. "I ... I want to see you after the show. Meet me. But don't talk that way. Es-pecially not here and not now."

"I can't help it."

"Please! Good-bye for now, Thorny, and-do your best." My best to be a mechanism, he thought bitterly as he watched her go.

He turned to watch the play. Something was wrong out there on the stage. Badly wrong. The Maestro's inter-pretation of the scene made it seem unfamiliar somehow.

He frowned. Rick had spoken of the Maestro's ability to compensate, to shift interpretations, to redirect. Was that what was happening? The Maestro compensating-for *his* performance?

His cue was approaching. He moved closer to the stage.

Act I had been a flop. Feria, Ferne, and Thomas con-ferred in an air of tension and a haze of cigarette smoke. He heard heated muttering, but could not distinguish words. Jade called a stagehand, spoke to him briefly, and sent him away. The stagehand wandered through the group until he found Mela Stone, spoke to her quickly and pointed. Thorny watched her go to join the produc-tion group, then turned away. He slipped out of their line of sight and stood behind some folded backdrops, waiting for the end of a brief intermission and trying not to think.

"Great act, Thorny," a costumer said mechanically, and clapped his shoulder in passing.

He suppressed an impulse to kick the costumer. He got out a copy of the script and pretended to read his lines. A hand tugged at his sleeve.

"Jade!" He looked at her bleakly, started to apologize. "Don't," she said. "We've talked it over. Rick, you tell him."

Rick Thomas who stood beside her grinned ruefully and wagged his head. "It's not altogether your fault, Thorny. Or haven't you noticed?"

"What do you mean?" he asked suspiciously.

"Take scene five, for example," Jade put in. "Suppose the cast had been entirely human. How would you feel about what happened?"

He closed his eyes for a moment and relived it. "I'd probably be sore," he said slowly. "I'd probably accuse Kovrin of jamming my lines and Aksinya of killing my exit-as an excuse," he added with a lame grin. "But I can't accuse the dolls. They can't steal."

"As a matter of fact, old man, they *can*," said the technician. "And your excuse is exactly right."

"Whh-what?"

"Sure. You *did* muff the first scene or two. The audi-ence reacted to it. And the Maestro reacts to audience -reaction--by compensating through shifts in interpretation. It sees the stage as a whole, you included. As far as the Maestro's concerned, you're an untaped dud-like the Peltier doll we used in the first run-through. It sends you only the script-tape signals, uninterpreted. Because it's got no analogue tape on you. Now without an audience, that'd be O.K. But with art audience reaction to go by, it starts compensating, and since it can't compensate through *you*, it works on the others."

"I don't understand."

"Bluntly, Thorny, the first scene or two stunk. The audience didn't like you. The Maestro started compen-sating by emphasizing other roles-and recharacterizing *you*, through the others."

"Recharacterize? How can it do that."

"Easily, darling," Jade told him. "When Marka says 'I hate him; he's a beast'-for example-she can say it like it's true, or she can say it like she's just temporarily furi-ous with Andreyev. And it affects the light in which the audience see you. Other actors affect *your* role. You know that's true of the old stage. Well, it's true of auto-drama, too."

He stared at them in amazement. "Can't you stop it? Readjust the Maestro, I mean?"

"Not without clearing the whole thing out of the machine and starting over. The effect is cumulative. The more it compensates, the tougher it gets for you. The tougher it gets for you, the worse you look to the crowd. And the worse you look to the crowd, the more it tries to compensate."

He stared wildly at the clock. Less than a minute until the first scene of Act II. "What'll I do?"

"Stick it," said Jade. "We've been on the phone to Smithfield. There's a programming engineer in town, and he's on his way over in a heliocab. Then we'll see."

"We may be able to nurse it back in tune," Rick added, "a little at a time-by feeding in a fake set of audience-restlessness factors, and cutting out its feeler circuits out in the crowd. We'll try, that's all."

The light flashed for the beginning of the act.

"Good luck, Thorny."

"I guess I'll need it." Grimly he started toward his entrance.

The thing in the booth was watching him. It watched and measured and judged and found wanting. *Maybe*, he thought wildly, *it even hated him*. It watched, it planned, it regulated, and it was wrecking him.

The faces of the dolls, the hands, the voices-belonged to it. The wizard circuitry in the booth rallied them against him. It saw him, undoubtedly, as one of them, but not answering to its pulsing commands. It saw him, per-haps, as a malfunctioning doll, and it tried to correct the effects of his misbehavior. He thought of the old conflict between director and darfstellar, the self-directed actor -and it was the same conflict, aggravated by an elec-tronic director's inability to understand that such things could be. The darfsteller, the undirectable portrayer whose acting welled from unconscious sources with no external strings-directors were inclined to hate them, even when the portrayal was superb. A mannequin,

however, was the perfect schauspieler, the actor that a director could play like an instrument.

It would have been easier for him now had he been a schauspieler, for perhaps he could adapt. But he was An-dreyev, *his* Andreyev, as he had prepared himself for the role. Andreyev was incarnate as an *alter anima* within him. He had never "played" a role. He had always become the role. And now he could adapt to the needs of the moment on stage only as Andreyev, in and through his identity with Andreyev, and without changing the feel of his portrayal. To attempt it, to try to fall into conformity with what the Maestro was doing, would mean utter confusion. Yet, the machine was forcing him-through the others.

He stood stonily behind his desk, listening coldly to the denials of the prisoner-a revolutionary, an arsonist associated with Piotr's guerrilla band.

"I tell you, comrade, I had nothing to do with it!" the prisoner shouted. "*Nothing!*"

"Haven't you questioned him thoroughly?" Andreyev growled at the lieutenant who guarded the man. "Hasn't he signed a confession?"

"There was no need, comrade. His accomplice con-fessed," protested the lieutenant.

Only it wasn't supposed to be a protest. The lieutenant made it sound like a monstrous thing to do-to wring another confession, by torture perhaps, from the prisoner, when there was already sufficient evidence to convict. The words were right, but their meaning was wrenched. It should have been a crisp statement of fact: No need, comrade; his accomplice confessed.

Thorny paused, reddening angrily. His next line was, "See that this one confesses, too." But he wasn't going to speak it. It would augment the effect of the lieutenant's tone of shocked protest. He thought rapidly. The lieutenant was a bit-player, and didn't come back on until the third act. It wouldn't hurt to jam him.

He glowered at the doll, demanded icily: "And what have you done with the accomplice?"

The Maestro could not invent lines, nor comprehend an ad lib. The Maestro could only interpret a deviation as a malfunction, and try to compensate. The Maestro backed up a line, had the lieutenant repeat his cue.

"I told you--he *confessed*."

"*Sol*" roared Andreyev. "You killed him, eh? Couldn't survive the questioning, eh? And you killed him."

*Thorny, what are you doing?* came Rick's frantic whisper in his earplug.

"He confessed," repeated the lieutenant.

"You're under arrest, Nichol!" Thorny barked. "Report to Major Malin for discipline. Return the prisoner to his cell." He paused. The Maestro couldn't go on until he cued it, but now there was no harm in speaking the line. "Now-see that this one confesses, too."

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant replied stonily, and started off-stage with the prisoner.

Thorny took glee in killing his exit by calling after him: "And see that he lives through it!"

The Maestro marched them out without looking back, and Thorny was briefly pleased with himself. He caught a glimpse of Jade with her hands clasped over her head, giving him a "the-winnah" signal from concealment. But he couldn't keep ad libbing his way out of it every time.

Most of all, he dreaded the entrance of Marka, Mela's doll. The Maestro was playing her up, ennobling her, subtly justifying her treachery, at the expense of Andreyev's character. He didn't want to fight back. Marka's role was too important for tampering, and besides, it would be like slapping at Mela to confuse the performance of her doll.

The curtain dipped. The furniture revolved. The stage became a living room. And the curtain rose again.

He barked: "No more arrests; after curfew, shoot on sight!" at the telephone, and hung up.

When he turned, she stood in the doorway, listening. She shrugged and entered with a casual walk while he watched her in suspicious silence. It was the consummation of her treachery. She had come back to him, but as a spy for Piotr. He suspected her only of infidelity and not of treason. It was a crucial scene, and the Maestro could play her either as a treacherous wench, or a reluctant traitor with Andreyev seeming a brute. He watched her warily.

"Well-hello," she said petulantly, after walking around the room.

He grunted coldly. She stayed flippant and aloof. So far, it was as it should be. But the vicious argument was yet to come.

She went to a mirror and began straightening her wind-blown hair. She spoke nervously, compulsively, rattling about trivia, concealing her anxiety in his presence after her betrayal. She looked furtive, haggard, somehow more like the real Mela of today; the Maestro's control of ex-pression was masterful.

"What are you doing here?" he exploded suddenly, in-terrupting her disjointed spiel.

"I still live here, don't I?"

"You got out."

"Only because you ordered me out."

"You made it clear you wanted to leave."

"Liar!"

"Cheat!"

It went on that way for a while; then he began dump-ing the contents of several drawers into a suitcase. "I live here, and I'm staying," she raged.

"Suit yourself, comrade."

"What're you doing?"

"Moving out, of course."

The battle continued. Still there was no attempt by the Maestro to revise the scene. Had the trouble been cor-rected? Had his exchange with the lieutenant somehow affected the machine? Something was different. It was becoming a good scene, his best so far.

She was still raving at him when he started for the door. She stopped in mid-sentence, breathless-then shrieked his name and flung herself down on the sofa, sobbing violently. He stopped. He turned and stood with his fists on his hips staring at her. Gradually, he melted. He put the suitcase down and walked back to stand over *her*, still gruff and glowering.

Her sobbing subsided. She peered up at him, saw his inability to escape, began to smile. She came up slowly, arms sliding around his neck.

"Sasha ... oh, my Sasha-"

The arms were warm, the lips moist, the woman alive in his embrace. For a moment he doubted his senses. She giggled at him and whispered, "You'll break a rib."

"Mela-"

"Let go, you fool-the scene!" Then, aloud: "Can I stay, darling?"

"Always," he said hoarsely.

"And you won't be jealous again?"

"Never."

"Or question me every time I'm gone an hour or two?"

"Or sixteen. It was sixteen hours."

"I'm sorry." She kissed him. The music rose. The scene ended.

"How did you swing it?" he whispered in the clench. "And why?"

"They asked me to. Because of the Maestro." She gig-gled. "You looked devastated. Hey, you can let go now. The curtain's down."

The mobile furniture had begun to rearrange itself. They scurried offstage, side-stepping a couch as it rolled past. Jade was waiting for them.

"Great!" she whispered, taking their hands. "That was just great."

"Thanks . . . thanks for sliding me in," Mela answered. "Take it from here out, Mela-the scenes with Thorny, at least."

"I don't know," she muttered. "It's been so long. Anybody could have ad libbed through that fight scene." "You can do it. Rick'll keen you cued and prompted. The engineer's here, and they're fussing around with the Maestro. But it'll straighten *itself* out, if you give it a couple more scenes like that to watch."



The second act had been rescued. The supporting cast was still a hazard, and the Maestro still tried to compensate according to audience reaction during Act I, but with a human Marka, the compensatory attempts had less effect, and the interpretive distortions seemed to diminish slightly. The Maestro was piling up new data as the play continued, and reinterpreting.

"It wasn't great," he sighed as they stretched out to relax between acts. "But it was passable."

"Act Three'll be better, Thorny," Mela promised. "We'll rescue it yet. It's just too bad about the first act."

"I wanted it to be tops," he breathed. "I wanted to give them something to think about, something to remember. But now we're fighting to rescue it from being a total flop."

"Wasn't it always like that? You get steamed up to make history, but then you wind up working like crazy just to keep it passable."

"Or to keep from ducking flying groceries sometimes."

She giggled. "Jiggle used to say, 'I went on like the main dish and came off like the toss salad.'" She paused, then added moodily: "The *tough* part of it is—you've *got* to aim high just to hit anywhere at all. It can get to be heartbreaking, too-trying for the sublime every time, and just escaping the ridiculous, or the mediocre."

"No matter how high you aim, you can't hit escape velocity. Ambition is a trajectory with its impact point in oblivion, no matter how high the throw."

"Sounds like a quote."

"It is. From the *Satyricon* of an ex-Janitor."

"Thorny-?"

"What?"

"I'm going to be sorry tomorrow-but I *am* enjoying it tonight-going through it all again I mean. Living it like a pipe dream. It's no good though. It's opium."

He stared at her for a moment in surprise, said nothing. Maybe it was opium for Mela, but she hadn't started out with a crazy hope that tonight would be the climax and the highpoint of a lifetime on the stage. She was filling in to save the show, and it meant nothing to her in terms of a career she had deliberately abandoned. He, however, had hoped for a great portrayal. It *wasn't* great, though. If he worked hard at Act III, it might-as-a whole-stand up to his performances of the past. Unless-

"Think anybody in the audience has guessed yet? About us, I mean?"

She shook her head. "Haven't seen any signs of it," she murmured drowsily. "People see what they expect to see. But it'll leak out tomorrow."

"Why?"

"Your scene with the lieutenant. When you ad libbed out of a jam. There's bound to be a drama critic or maybe a professor out there who read the play ahead of time, and started frowning when you pulled that off. He'll go home and look up his copy of the script just to make sure, and then the cat's out."

"It won't matter by then."

She wanted a nap or a drowse, and he fell silent. As he watched her relax, some of his bitter disappointment slipped away. It was good just to be acting again, even for one opiate evening. And maybe it was best that he wasn't getting what he wanted. He was even ready to admit to a certain insanity in setting out on such a course.

Perfection and immolation. Now that the perfection wasn't possible, the whole scheme looked like a sick fanatic's nightmare, and he was ashamed. Why had he done it-given in to what he had always been only a petulant fantasy, a childish dream? The wish, plus the opportunity, plus the impulse, in a framework of bitterness and in a time of personal transition-it had been enough to bring the crazy yearning out of its cortical wrinkle and start him acting on a dream. A child's dream.

And then the momentum had carried him along. The juggled tapes, the loaded gun, the dirty trick on Jade--and now fighting to keep the show from dying. He had gone down to the river and climbed up on the bridge rail and looked down at the black and swirling tide-and finally climbed down again because the wind would spoil his swan dive.

He shivered. It scared him a little, to know he could lose himself so easily. What had the years done to him, or what had he done to himself?

He had kept his integrity maybe, but what good was integrity in a vacuum? He had the soul of an actor, and he'd hung onto it when the others were selling theirs, but the years had wiped out the market and he was stuck with it. He had stood firm on principle, and the years had melted the cold glacier of reality *from* under the principle; still, he stood on it, while the reality ran on down to the sea. He had dedicated himself to the living stage, and carefully tended its grave, awaiting the resur-rection.

Old ham, he thought, you've been flickering into mad warps and staggering into dimensions of infrasanity. You took unreality by the hand and led her gallantly through peril and confusion and finally married her before you noticed that she was dead. Now the only decent thing to do was bury her, but her interment would do nothing to get him back through the peril and confusion and on the road again. He'd have to hike. Maybe it was too late to do anything with the rest of a lifetime. But there was only one way to find out. And the first step was to put some mileage between himself and the stage.

If a little black box took over my job, Rick had said, I'd go to work making little black boxes.

Thorny realized with a slight start that the technician had meant it. Mela had done it, in a sense. So had Jade. Especially Jade. But that wasn't the answer for him, not now. He'd hung around too long mourning the dead, and he needed a clean, sharp break. Tomorrow he'd fade out of sight, move away, pretend he was twenty-one again, and start groping for something to do with a lifetime. How to keep eating until he found it--that would be the pressing problem. Unskilled laborers were hard to find these days, but so were unskilled jobs. Selling his acting talent for commercial purposes would work only if he could find a commercial purpose he could believe in and live for, since his talent was not the surface talent of a schauspieler. It would be a grueling search, for he had never bothered to believe in anything but theater.

Mela stirred suddenly. "Did I hear somebody call me?" she muttered. "This racket--I" She sat up to look around.

He grunted doubtfully. "How long till curtain?" he asked.

She arose suddenly and said, "Jade's waving me over. See you in the act, Thorny."

He watched Mela hurry away, he glanced across the floor at Jade who waited for her in the midst of a small conference, he felt a guilty twinge. He'd cost them money, trouble, and nervous sweat, and maybe the per-formance endangered the run of the show. It was a rotten thing to do, and he was sorry, but it couldn't be un-done, and the only possible compensation was to deliver a best-possible Act III and then get out. Fast. Before Jade found him out and organized a lynch mob.

After staring absently at the small conference for a few moments, he closed his eyes and drowsed again.

Suddenly he opened them. Something about the con-ference group-something peculiar. He sat up and frowned at them again. Jade, Mela, Rick, and Fera, and three strangers. Nothing peculiar about that. Except . . . let's see . . . the thin one with the scholarly look-that would be the programming engineer, probably. The beefy, healthy fellow with the dark business suit and the wan-dering glance-Thorny couldn't place him-he looked out of place backstage. The third one seemed familiar some-how, but he, too, looked out of place-a chubby little man with no necktie and a fat cigar, he seemed more in-terested in the backstage rush than in the proceedings of the group. The beefy gent kept asking him questions, and he muttered brief answers around his cigar while watch-ing the stagehands' parade.

Once when answering he took his cigar out of his mouth and glanced quickly across the floor in Thorny's direction. Thorny stiffened, felt bristles rise along his spine. The chubby little gent was--

The depot clerk!

Who had issued him the extra tape and the splices. Who could put the finger on the trouble right away, and was undoubtedly doing it.

Got to get out. Got to get out fast. The beefy fellow was either a cop or a private investigator, one of several hired by Smithfield. Got to run, got to hide, got to-Lynch mob.

"Not through that door, buddy, that's the stage; what're you- Oh, Thorny! It's not time to go on."

"Sorry," he grunted at the prop man and turned away. The light flashed, the buzzer sounded faintly.

"Now it's time," the prop man called after him. Where was he going? And what good would it do?

"Hey, Thorny! The buzzer. Come back. It's line-up. You're on when the curtain lifts ... *hey!*"

He paused, then turned around and went back. He went on-stage and took his place. She was already there, staring at him strangely as he approached.

"You didn't do it, did you, Thorny?" she whispered. He gazed at her in tight-lipped silence, then nodded. She looked puzzled. She looked at him as if he were no longer a person, but a peculiar object to be studied.

Not scornful, nor angry, nor righteous-just puzzled. "Guess I was nuts," he said lamely.

"Guess you were."

"Not too much harm done, though," he said hopefully. "The wrong people saw the first act, Thorny. They walked out."

"Wrong people?"

"Two backers and a critic."

"Oh?"

He stood stunned. She stopped looking at him then and just stood waiting for the curtain to rise, her face showing nothing but a puzzled sadness. It wasn't her show, and she had nothing in it but a doll that would bring a royalty check or two, and now herself as a tem-porary substitute for the doll. The sadness was for him. Contempt he could have understood.

The curtain lifted. A sea of dim faces beyond the foot-lights. And he was Andrejev, chief of a Soviet police garrison, loyalist servant of a dying cause. It was easy to stay in the role this time, to embed his ego firmly in the person of the Russian cop and live a little of the last century. For the ego was more comfortable there than in the skin of Ryan Thornier-a skin that might soon be sent to the tannery, judging the furtive glances that were coming from backstage. It might even be *comfortable* to remain Andrejev after the performance, but that was a sure way to get Napoleon Bonaparte for a roommate.

There was no change of setting between scenes i and ii, but only a dip of the curtain to indicate a time-lapse and permit a change of cast. He stayed onstage, and it gave him a moment to think. The thoughts weren't pleasant.

Backers had walked out. Tomorrow the show would close unless the morning teleprint of the *Times* carried a rave review. Which seemed wildly improbable. Critics were jaded. Jaded tastes were apt to be impatient. They would not be eager to forgive the first act. He had wrecked it, and he couldn't rescue it.

Revenge wasn't sweet. It tasted like rot and a sour stomach.

*Give them a good third act. There's nothing more you can do.* But even that wouldn't take away the rotten taste.

*Why did you do it, Thorny?* Rick's voice, whispering from the booth and in his earplug prompter.

He glanced up and saw the technician watching him from the small window of the booth. He spread his hands in a wide shrugging gesture, as if to ask: How can I tell you, what can I do?

*Go on with it, what else?* Rick whispered, and withdrew from the window.

The incident seemed to confirm that Jade intended for him to finish it, anyhow. She could scarcely intend otherwise. She was in it with him, in a sense. If the audience found out the play had a human stand-in, and if the critics didn't like the show, they might pounce on the producer who "perpetrated such an impossible substitution"-even harder than they'd pounce on him. She had gambled on him, and in spite of his plot to force her into such a gamble, it was her show, and her responsibility, and she'd catch the brunt of it. Critics, owners, backers, and public-they didn't care about "blame," didn't care about excuses or reasons. They cared about the finished product, and if they didn't like it, the responsibility for it was clear.

As for himself? A cop waiting backstage. Why? He hadn't studied the criminal code, but he couldn't think of any neat little felonious label that could be pinned on what he'd done. Fraud? Not without an exchange of money or property, he thought. He'd been after intan-gibles, and the law was an earthy thing; it became confused when motives carried men beyond assaults on property or person, into assaults on ideas or principles. Then it passed the buck to psychiatry.

Maybe the beefy gent wasn't a cop at all. Maybe he was a collector of maniacs.

Thorny didn't much care. The dream had tumbled down, and he'd just have to let the debris keep

falling about him until he got a chance to start climbing out of the wreckage. It was the end of something that should have ended years ago, and he couldn't get out until it finished collapsing.

The curtain lifted. Scene ii was good. Not brilliant, but good enough to make them stop snapping their gum and hold them locked in their seats, absorbed in their identity with Andreyev.

Scene *iii* was his Gethsemane-when the mob besieged the public offices while he waited for word of Marka and an answer to his offer of a truce with the guerrilla forces. The answer came in one word.

"*Nyet.*"

His death sentence. The word that bound him over to the jackals in the streets, the word that cast him to the ravaging mob. The mob had a way: the mob was collect-ing officials and mounting them. He could see their col-lection from the window, looking across the square, and he discussed it with an aide. Nine men impaled on the steel spikes of the heavy grillwork fence in front of the Regional Soviet offices. The mob seized another speci-men with its thousand hands and mounted it carefully. It lifted the specimen into a sitting position over a two-foot spike, then dropped him on it. Two specimens still squirmed.

He'd cheat the mob, of course. There were the bar-ricades in the building below, and there would be plenty of time to meet death privately and chastely before the mob tore its way inside. But he delayed. He waited for word from Marka.

Word came. Two guards burst in.

"She's here, comrade, she's come!"

Come with the enemy, they said. Come betraying him, betraying the state. *Impossible!* But the guard insisted.

Berserk fury, and refusal to believe. With a low snarl, he drew the automatic, shot the bearer of bad tidings through the heart.

With the crash of the gunshot; the mannequin crumpled. The explosion startled a sudden memory out of hiding, and he remembered: the second cartridge in the clip-*not a blank!* He had forgotten to unload the deadly round.

For an instant he debated firing it into the fallen man-nequin as a way to get rid of it, then dismissed the no-tion and obeyed the script. He stared at his victim and wilted, letting the gun slip from his fingers and fall to the floor. He staggered to the window to stare out across the square. He covered his face with his hands, awaited the transition curtain.

The curtain came. He whirled and started for the gun. *No, Thorny, no!* came Rick's frantic whisper from the booth. *To the ikon . . . the ikon!*

He stopped in mid-stage. No time to retrieve the gun and unload. The curtain had only dipped and was starting up again. Let Mela get rid of the round, he thought. He crossed to the shrine, tearing open his collar, rumpling his hair. He fell to his knees before the ancient ikon, in dereliction before the God of an older Russia, a Russia that survived as firmly in fierce negation as it had survived in fierce affirmation. The cultural soul was a living thing, and it survived as well in downfall as in victory; it could never be excised, but only eaten away or slowly transmuted by time and gentle pressures of rain wearing the rock.

There was a bust of Lenin beneath the ikon. And there was a bust of Harvey Smithfield beneath the Greek players' masks on the wall of D'Uccia's office. The signs of the times, and the signs of the timeless, and the cultural heartbeat pulsed to the rhythm of centuries. He had re-sisted the times as they took a sharp turn in direction, but no man could swim long against the tide as it plodded its zigzag course into timelessness. And the sharp deflections in the course were deceptive-for all of them really wound their way downstream. No man ever added his bit to the flow by spending all his effort to resist the current. The tide would tire him and take him into oblivion while the world flowed on.

Marka, Boris, Piotr had entered, and he had turned to start at them without understanding. The mockery fol-lowed and the harsh laughter, as they pushed the once haughty but now broken chieftain about the stage like a dazed animal unable to respond. He rebounded from one to another of them, as they prodded him to dispel the trancelike daze.

"Finish your prayer, comrade," said Mela, picking up the gun he'd dropped.

As he staggered close to Mela, he found his chance, and whispered quickly: "The gun, Mela-eject the

first car-tridge. Eject it, quickly."

He was certain she heard him, although she showed no reaction-unless the slight flicker of her eyes had been a quick glance at the gun. Had she understood? A mo-ment later, another chance to whisper.

"The next bullet's real. Work the slide. Eject it."

He stumbled as Piotr pushed him, fell against a heavy couch, slid down, and stared at them. Piotr went to open the window and shout an offer to the mob below. A bull-roar arose from the herd outside. They hauled him to the window as a triumphal display.

"See, comrade?" growled the guerrilla. "Your faithful congregation awaits you."

Marka closed the windows. "I can't stand that sight!" she cried.

"Take him to his people," the leader ordered.

"No-" Marka brought up the gun, shook her head fiercely. "I won't let you do that. Not to the mob."

Piotr growled a curse. "They'll have him anyway. They'll be coming up here to search."

Thorny stared at the actress with a punted frown. Still she hadn't ejected the cartridge. And the moment was approaching-a quick bullet to keep him from the mob, a bit of hot mercy flung hastily to him by the woman who had enthralled him and used him and betrayed him.

She turned toward him with the gun, and he began to back away.

"All right, Piotr-if they'll get him anyway-"

She moved a few steps toward him as he backed to a corner. *The live round, Mela, eject it!*

Then her foot brushed a copper bus-lug, and he saw the faint little jet of sparks. Eyes of glass, flesh of airfoam plastic, nerves of twitching electron streams.

Mela was gone. This was her doll. Maybe the real Mela couldn't stomach it after she'd found what he'd done, or maybe Jade had called her off after the first scene of the third act. A plastic hand held the gun, and a tiny flexible solenoid awaited the pulse that would tighten the finger on the trigger. Terror lanced through him.

*Cue, Thorny, cue!* whispered his earplug.

The doll had to wait for his protest before it could fire. It had to be cued. His eyes danced about the stage, looking for a way out. Only an instant to decide.

He could walk over and take the gun out of the doll's hand without giving it a cue-betraying himself to the au-dience and wrecking the final moment of the show.

He could run for it, cue her, and hope she missed, fall-ing after the shot. But he'd fall on the lugs that way, and come up shrieking.

*For God's sake, Thorny!* Rick was howling. *The cue, the cue!*

He stared at the gun and swayed slightly from side to side. The gun swayed with him-slightly out of phase. A second's delay, no more

"Please, Marka-" he called, swaying faster.

The finger tensed on the trigger. The gun moved in a search pattern, as he shifted to and fro. It was risky. It had to be precisely timed. It was like dancing with a cobra. He wanted to flee.

*You faked the tape, you botched the show, you came out second best to a system you hated,* he reminded himself. *And you even loaded the gun. Now if you can't risk it-*

He gritted his teeth, kept up the irregular weaving mo-tion, then

"Please, Marka . . . no, no, nooo!"

A spiked fist hit him somewhere around the belt, spun him around, and dropped him. The sharp cough of the gun was only a part of the blow. Then he was lying crumpled on his side in the chalked safety area, bleeding and cursing softly. The scene continued. He started to cry out, but checked the shout in his throat. Through a haze, he watched the others move on toward the finale, saw the dim sea of faces beyond the lights. Bullet punched through his side somewhere.

Got to stop squirming. Can't have a dead Andreyev floundering about like a speared fish on the stage. Wait a minute-just another minute-hang on.

But he couldn't. He clutched at his side and felt for the wound. Hard to feel through all the stickiness. He wanted to tear his clothes free to get at it and stop the bleeding, but that was no good either. They'd

accept a mannequin fumbling slightly in a death agony, but the blood wouldn't go over so well. Mannequins didn't bleed. Didn't they see it anyway? They had to see it. Clever gimmick, they'd think, Tube of red ink, maybe. Realism is the milieu of--

He twisted his hand in his belt, drew it up strangle-tight around his waist. The pain got worse for a moment, but it seemed to slow the flow of blood. He hung onto it, grit-ting his teeth, waiting.

He knew about where it hit him, but it was harder to tell where it had come out. And what it had taken with it on the way. Thank God for the bleeding. Maybe he wasn't doing much of it inside.

He tried to focus on the rest of the stage. Music was rising somewhere. Had they all walked off and left him? But no--there was Piotr, through the haze. Piotr approached his chair of office heavy, ornate, antique. Once it had belonged to a noble of the czar. Piotr, perfectly cold young machine, in his triumph-inspecting the chair.

A low shriek came from backstage somewhere. Mela. Couldn't she keep her mouth shut for half a minute? Probably spotted the blood. Maybe the music drowned the squeal.

Piotr mounted the single step and turned. He sat down gingerly in the chair of empire, testing it, and smiling victory. He seemed to find the chair comfortable.

"I must keep this, Marka," he said.

Thorny wheezed a low curse at him. He'd keep it all right, until the times went around another twist in the long old river. And welcome to it--judging by the thun-dering applause.

And the curtain fell slowly to cover the window of the stage.

Feet tramped past him, and he croaked "Help!" a couple of times, but the feet kept going. The mannequins, marching off to their packing cases.

He got to his feet alone, and went black. But when the blackness dissolved, he was still standing there, so he staggered toward the exit. They were rushing toward him--Mela and Rick and a couple of the crew. Hands grabbed for him, but he fought them off.

"I'll walk by myself now!" he growled.

But the hands took him anyway. He saw Jade and the beefy gent, tried to lurch toward them and explain every-thing, but she went even whiter and backed away. *I must look a bloody mess*, he thought.

"I was trying to duck. I didn't want to--"

"Save your breath," Rick told him. "I saw you. Just hang on."

They got him onto a doll packing case, and he heard somebody yelling for a doctor from the departing audience, and then a lot of hands started scraping at his side and tugging at him.

"Mela--"

"Right here, Thorny. I'm here."

And after a while she was still there, but sunlight was spilling across the bed, and he smelled faint hospital odors. He blinked at her for several seconds before he found a voice.

"The show?" he croaked.

"They panned it," she said softly.

He closed his eyes again and groaned.

"But it'll make dough."

He blinked at her and gaped.

"Publicity. Terrific. Shall I read you the reviews?"

He nodded, and she reached for the papers. All about the madman who bled all over the stage. He stopped her halfway through the first article. It was enough. The audience had begun to catch on toward the last lines of the play, and the paging of a surgeon had confirmed the suspicion.

"You missed the bedlam backstage," she told him. "It was quite a mess."

"But the show won't close?"

"How can it? With all the morbidity for pulling power. If it closes, it'll be with the Peltier performance to blame."

"And Jade--?"

"Sore. Plenty sore. Can you blame her?"

He shook his head. "I didn't want to hurt anybody. I'm sorry."

She watched him in silence for a moment, then: "You can't flounder around like you've been doing, Thorny without somebody getting hurt, without somebody hating your guts, getting trampled on. You just can't."

It was true. When you hung onto a piece of the past, and just hung onto it quietly, you only hurt yourself. But when you started trying to bludgeon a place for it in the present, you began knocking over the bystanders.

"Theater's dead, Thorny. Can't you believe that now?"

He thought about it a little, and shook his head. It wasn't dead. Only the form was changed, and maybe not permanently at that. He'd thought of it first last night, before the ikon. There were things of the times, and a few things that were timeless. The times came as a result of a particular human culture. The timeless came as a result of any human culture at all. And Cultural Man was a showman. He created display windows of culture for an audience of men, and paraded his aspirations and ideals and purposes thereon, and the displays were necessary to the continuity of the culture, to the purposeful orientation of the species.

Beyond one such window, he erected an altar, and placed a priest before it to chant a liturgical description of the heart-reasoning of his times. And beyond another window, he built a stage and set his talking dolls upon it to live a dramaturgical sequence of wishes and woes of his times.

True, the priests would change, the liturgy would change, and the dolls, the dramas, the displays-but the windows would never-no never-be closed as long as Man outlived his members, for only through such windows could transient men see themselves against the back-ground of a broader sweep, see man encompassed by Man. A perspective not possible without the windows.

Dramaturgy. Old as civilized Man. Outlasting forms and techniques and applications. Outlasting even current popular worship of the Great God Mechanism, who was temporarily enshrined while still being popularly misunderstood. Like the Great God Commerce of an earlier century, and the God Agriculture before him.

Suddenly he laughed aloud. "If they used human actors today, it would be a pretty moldy display. Not even *true*, considering the times."

By the time another figure lounged in his doorway, he had begun to feel rather expansive and heroic about it all. When a small cough caused him to glance up, he stared for a moment, grinned broadly, then called: "Ho, Richard! Come in. Here ... sit down. Help me decide on a career, eh? Heh heh-" He waved the classified section and chuckled. "What kind of little black boxes can an old ham-"

He paused. Rick's expression was chilly, and he made no move to enter. After a moment he said: "I guess there'll always be a sucker to rerun this particular relay race."

"Race?" Thorny gathered a slow frown.

"Yeah. Last century, it was between a Chinese abacus operator and an IBM machine. They really had a race, you know."

"Now see here-"

"And the century before that, it was between a long-hand secretary and a typewriting machine."

"If you came here to-"

"And before that, the hand-weavers against the auto-matic looms."

"Nice to have seen you, Richard. On your way out, would you ask the nurse to-"

"Break up the looms, smash the machines, picket the offices with typewriters, keep adding machines out of China! So then what? Try to be a better tool than a tool?"

Thorny rolled his head aside and glowered at the wall. "All right. I was wrong. What do you want to do? Gloat? Moralize?"

"No. I'm just curious. It keeps happening-a specialist trying to compete with a higher-level specialist's tools. Why?"

"*Higher* level?" Thorny sat up with a snarl, groaned, caught at his side and sank back again, panting.

"Easy, old man," Rick said quietly. "Sorry. Higher or-ganizational-level, I meant. Why do you keep on doing it?"

Thorny lay silent for a few moments, then: "Status jealousy. Even hawks try to drive other hawks out of their hunting grounds. Fight off competition."

"But you're no hawk. And a machine isn't competi-tion."

"Cut it out, Rick. What did you come here for?"

Rick glanced at the toe of his shoe, snickered faintly, and came on into the room. "Thought you might need some help finding a job," he said. "When I looked in the door and saw you lying there looking like somebody's King Arthur, I got sore again." He sat restlessly on the edge of a chair and watched the old man with mingled sadness, irritation, and affection.

"You'd help me . . . find a job?"

"Maybe. A job, not a permanent niche."

"It's too late to find a permanent niche."

"It was too late when you were born, old man! There isn't any such thing-hasn't been, for the last century. Whatever you specialize in, another specialty will either gobble you up, or find a way to replace you. If you get what looks like a secure niche, somebody'll come along and wall you up is it and write your epitaph on it. And the more specialized a society gets, the more dangerous it is for the pure specialist. You think an electronic engineer is any safer than an actor? Or a ditch-digger?"

"I don't know. It's not fair. A man's career-"

"You've always got one specialty that's safe."

"What's that?"

"The specialty of creating new specialties. Contin-uously. Your own."

"But that's-" He started to protest, to say that such a concept belonged to the highly trained few, to the tech-nical elite of the era, and that it wasn't specialization, but generalization. But why to the few? The specialty of creating new specialties

"But that's-"

"More or less a definition of Man, isn't it?" Rick fin-ished for him. "Now about the job-"

"Yes, about the job-"

So maybe you don't start from the bottom after all, he decided. You start considerably above the lemur, the chimpanzee, the orangutan, the Maestro-if you ever start at all.

## **DARK BENEDICTION**

Always fearful of being set upon during the night, Paul slept uneasily despite his weariness from the long trek southward. When dawn broke, he rolled out of his blan-kets and found himself still stiff with fatigue. He kicked dirt over the remains of the campfire and breakfasted on a tough forequarter of cold boiled rabbit which he washed down with a swallow of earthy-tasting ditchwater. Then he buckled the cartridge belt about his waist, leaped the ditch, and climbed the embankment to the traf-ficless four-lane highway whose pavement was scattered with blown leaves and unsightly debris dropped by a long-departed throng of refugees whose only wish had been to escape from one another. Paul, with characteristic independence, had decided to go where the crowds had been the thickest—to the cities—on the theory that they would now be deserted, and therefore noncontagious.

The fog lay heavy over the silent land, and for a moment he paused groping for cognizance of direction. Then he saw the stalled car on the opposite shoulder of the road—a late model convertible, but rusted, flat-tired, with last year's license plates, and most certainly out of fuel. It obviously had been deserted by its owner during the exodus, and he trusted in its northward heading as he would have trusted the reading of a compass. He turned right and moved south on the empty highway. Somewhere just ahead in the gray vapor lay the outskirts of Houston. He had seen the high skyline before the set-ting of yesterday's sun, and knew that his journey would soon be drawing to a close.

Occasionally he passed a deserted cottage or a burned-out roadside tavern, but he did not pause to scrounge for food. The exodus would have stripped such buildings clean. Pickings should be better in the



heart of the metropolitan area, he thought—where the hysteria had swept humanity away quickly.

Suddenly Paul froze on the highway, listening to the fog. Footsteps in the distance—footsteps and a voice singing an absent-minded ditty to itself. No other sounds penetrated the sepulchral silence which once had growled with the life of a great city. Anxiety caught him with clammy hands. An old man's voice it was, crackling and tuneless. Paul groped for his holster and brought out the revolver he had taken from a deserted police station.

"Stop where you are, dermie!" he bellowed at the fog. "I'm armed."

The footsteps and the singing stopped. Paul strained his eyes to penetrate the swirling mist-shroud. After a moment, the oldster answered: "Sure foggy, ain't it, sonny? Can't see ya. Better come a little closer. I ain't no dermie."

Loathing choked in Paul's throat. "The hell you're not. Nobody else'd be crazy enough to sing. Get off the road! I'm going south, and if I see you I'll shoot. Now move!"

"Sure, sonny. I'll move. But I'm no dermie. I was just singing to keep myself company. I'm past caring about the plague. I'm heading north, where there's people, and if some dermie hears me a'singing . . . why, I'll tell him t'come jine in. What's the good o' being healthy if yer alone?"

While the old man spoke, Paul heard his sloshing across the ditch and climbing through the brush. Doubt assailed him. Maybe the old crank wasn't a dermie. An ordinary plague victim would have whimpered and pleaded for satisfaction of his strange craving—the laying-on of hands, the feel of healthy skin beneath moist gray palms. Nevertheless, Paul meant to take no chances with the oldster.

"Stay back in the brush while I walk past!" he called. "Okay, sonny. You go right by. I ain't gonna touch you. You aiming to scrounge in Houston?"

Paul began to advance. "Yeah, I figure people got out so fast that they must have left plenty of canned goods and stuff behind."

"Mmmm, there's a mite here and there," said the cracked voice in a tone that implied understatement. "Course, now, you ain't the first to figure that way, y'know."

Paul slacked his pace, frowning. "You *mean* . . . a lot of people are coming back?"

"Mmmm, no—not a lot. But you'll bump into people every day or two. Ain't my kind o' folks. Rough characters, mostly—don't take chances, either. They'll shoot first, then look to see if you was a dermie. Don't never come busting out of a doorway without taking a peek at the street first. And if two people come around a corner in opposite directions, somebody's gonna die. The few that's there is trigger happy. Just thought I'd warn ya."

"Thanks."

"D'mention it. Been good t'hear a body's voice again, tho I can't see ye."

Paul moved on until he was fifty paces past the voice. Then he stopped and turned. "Okay, you can get back on the road now. Start walking north. Scuff your feet until you're out of earshot."

"Taking no chances, are ye?" said the old man as he waded the ditch. "All right, sonny." The sound of his footsteps hesitated on the pavement. "A word of advice—your best scrounging'll be around the warehouses. Most of the stores are picked clean. Good luck!"

Paul stood listening to the shuffling feet recede northward. When they became inaudible, he turned to continue his journey. The meeting had depressed him, reminded him of the animal-level to which he and others like him had sunk. The oldster was obviously healthy; but Paul had been chased by three dermies in as many days. And the thought of being trapped by a band of them in the fog left him unnerved. Once he had seen a pair of the grinning, maddened compulsives seize a screaming young child while each of them took turns caressing the youngster's arms and face with the gray and slippery hands that spelled certain contraction of the disease—if disease it was. The dark pall of neuroderm was unlike any illness that Earth had ever seen.

The victim became the eager ally of the sickness that gripped him. Caught in its demoniac madness, the stricken human searched hungrily for healthy comrades, then set upon them with no other purpose than to paw at the clean skin and praise the virtues of the blind compulsion that drove him to do so. One touch, and infection was insured. It was as if a third of humanity had become night-prowling maniacs,

lurking in the shadows to seize the unwary, working in bands to trap the unarmed wanderer. And two-thirds of humanity found itself fleeing in horror from the mania, seeking the frigid northern climates where, according to rumor, the disease was less infectious. The normal functioning of civilization had been dropped like a hot potato within six months after the first alarm. When the man at the next lathe might be hiding gray discolorations beneath his shirt, industrial society was no place for humanity.

Rumor connected the onslaught of the plague with an unpredicted swarm of meteorites which had brightened the sky one October evening two weeks before the first case was discovered. The first case was, in fact, a machinist who had found one of the celestial cannon balls, handled it, weighed it, estimated its volume by fluid-displacement, then cut into it on his lathe because its low density suggested that it might be hollow. He claimed to have found a pocket of frozen jelly, still rigid from deep space, although the outer shell had been heated white-hot by atmospheric friction. He said he let the jelly thaw, then fed it to his cat because it had an unpleasant fishy odor. Shortly thereafter, the cat disappeared.

Other meteorites had been discovered and similarly treated by university staffs before there was any reason to blame them for the plague. Paul, who had been an engineering student at Texas U at the time of the incident, had heard it said that the missiles were purposefully manufactured by parties unknown, that the jelly contained microorganisms which under the microscope suggested a cross between a sperm-cell (because of a similar tail) and a Pucini Corpuscle (because of a marked resemblance to nerve tissue in subcellular detail).

When the meteorites were connected with the new and mushrooming disease, some people started a panic by theorizing that the meteor-swarm was a pre-invasion artillery attack by some space-horde lurking beyond telescope range, and waiting for their biological bombardment to wreck civilization before they moved in upon Earth. The government had immediately labeled all investigations "top-secret," and Paul had heard no news since the initial speculations. Indeed, the government might have explained the whole thing and proclaimed it to the country for all he knew. One thing was certain: the country had not heard. It no longer possessed channels of communication.

Paul thought that if any such invaders were coming, they would have already arrived—months ago. Civilization was not truly wrecked; it had simply been discarded during the crazed flight of the individual away from the herd. Industry lay idle and unmanned, but still intact. Man was fleeing from Man. Fear had destroyed the integration of his society, and had left him powerless before any hypothetical invaders. Earth was ripe for plucking, but it remained unplucked and withering. Paul, therefore, discarded the invasion hypothesis, and searched for nothing new to replace it. He accepted the fact of his own existence in the midst of chaos, and sought to protect that existence as best he could. It proved to be a full-time job, with no spare time for theorizing.

Life was a rabbit scurrying over a hill. Life was a warm blanket, and a secluded sleeping place. Life was ditchwater, and an unbloated can of corned beef, and a suit of clothing looted from a deserted cottage. Life, above all else, was an avoidance of other human beings. For no one had the grace to cry "unclean!" to the unsuspecting. If the dermatologist's discolorations were still in the concealable stage, then concealed they would be, while the lost creature deliberately sought to infect his wife, his children, his friends—whoever would not protest an idle touch of the hand. When the grayness touched the face and the backs of the hands, the creature became a feverish night wanderer, subject to strange hallucinations and delusions and desires.

The fog began to part toward midmorning as Paul drove deeper into the outskirts of Houston. The highway was becoming a commercial subcenter, lined with businesses and small shops. The sidewalks were showered with broken glass from windows kicked in by looters. Paul kept to the center of the deserted street, listening and watching cautiously for signs of life. The distant barking of a dog was the only sound in the once-growling metropolis. A flight of sparrows winged down the street, then darted in through a broken window to an inside nesting place.

He searched a small grocery store, looking for a snack, but the shelves were bare. The thoroughfare had served as a main avenue of escape, and the fugitives had looted it thoroughly to obtain provisions. He turned onto a side street, then after several blocks turned again to parallel the highway, moving through an old residential section. Many houses had been left open, but few had been looted. He entered

one old frame mansion and found a can of tomatoes in the kitchen. He opened it and sipped the tender delicacy from the container, while curiosity sent him prowling through the rooms.

He wandered up the first flight of stairs, then halted with one foot on the landing. A body lay sprawled across the second flight—the body of a young man, dead quite a while. A well-rusted pistol had fallen from his hand. Paul dropped the tomatoes and bolted for the street. Sui-cide was a common recourse, when a man learned that he had been touched.

After two blocks, Paul stopped running. He sat panting on a fire hydrant and chided himself for being overly cau-tious. The man had been dead for months; and infec-tion was achieved only through contact. Nevertheless, his scalp was still tingling. When he had rested briefly, he continued his plodding course toward the heart of the city. Toward noon, he saw another human being.

The man was standing on the loading dock of a warehouse, apparently enjoying the sunlight that came with the dissolving of the fog. He was slowly and solemnly spooning the contents of a can into a red-lipped mouth while his beard bobbed with appreciative chewing. Sud-denly he saw Paul who had stopped in the center of the street with his hand on the butt of his pistol. The man backed away, tossed the can aside, and sprinted the length of the platform. He bounded off the end, snatched a bicycle away from the wall, and pedalled quickly out of sight while he bleated shrill blasts on a police whistle clenched between his teeth.

Paul trotted to the corner, but the man had made another turn. His whistle continued bleating. A signal? A dermie summons to a touching orgy? Paul stood still while he tried to overcome an urge to break into panicked flight. After a minute, the clamor ceased; but the silence was ominous.

If a party of cyclists moved in, he could not escape on foot. He darted toward the nearest warehouse, seeking a place to hide. Inside, he climbed a stack of boxes to a horizontal girder, kicked the stack to topple it, and stretched out belly-down on the steel eye-beam to com-mand a clear shot at the entrances. He lay for an hour, waiting quietly for searchers. None came. At last he slid down a vertical support and returned to the loading platform. The street was empty and silent. With weapon ready, he continued his journey. He passed the next intersection without mishap.

Halfway up the block, a calm voice drawled a com-mand from behind him: "Drop the gun, dermie. Get your hands behind your head."

He halted, motionless. No plague victim would hurl the dermie-charge at another. He dropped the pistol and turned slowly. Three men with drawn revolvers were clambering from the back of a stalled truck. They were all bearded, wore blue jeans, blue neckerchiefs, and green woolen shirts. He suddenly recalled that the man on the loading platform had been similarly dressed. A uni-form?

"Turn around again!" barked the speaker.

Paul turned, realizing that the men were probably some sort of self-appointed quarantine patrol. Tow ropes sud-denly skidded out from behind and came to a stop near his feet on the pavement—a pair of lariat loops.

"One foot in each loop, dermie!" the speaker snapped. When Paul obeyed, the ropes were jerked taut about his ankles, and two of the men trotted out to the sides, stood thirty feet apart, and pulled his legs out into a wide straddle. He quickly saw that any movement would cost him his balance.

"Strip to the skin."

"I'm no dermie," Paul protested as he unbuttoned his shirt.

"We'll see for ourselves, Joe," grunted the leader as he moved around to the front. "Get the top off first. If your chest's okay, we'll let your feet go."

When Paul had undressed, the leader walked around him slowly, making him spread his fingers and display the soles of his feet. He stood shivering and angry in the chilly winter air while the men satisfied themselves that he wore no gray patches of neuroderm.

"You're all right, I guess," the speaker admitted; then as Paul stooped to recover his clothing, the man growled, "Not those! Jim, get him a probie outfit."

Paul caught a bundle of clean clothing, tossed to him from the back of the truck. There were jeans, a woolen shirt, and a kerchief, but the shirt and kerchief were red. He shot an inquiring glance at the leader, while he climbed into the welcome change.

"All newcomers are on two weeks probation," the man explained. "If you decide to stay in Houston, you'll get another exam next time the uniform code changes. Then you can join our outfit, if you don't show up with the plague. In fact, you'll have to join if you stay."

"What is the outfit?" Paul asked suspiciously.

"It just started. Schoolteacher name of Georgelle or-ganized it. We aim to keep dermies out. There's about six hundred of us now. We guard the downtown area, but soon as there's enough of us we'll move out to take in more territory. Set up road blocks and all that. You're welcome, soon as we're sure you're clean . . . and can take orders."

"Whose orders?"

"Georgelle's. We got no room for goof-offs, and no time for argument. Anybody don't like the setup, he's welcome to get out. Jim here'll give you a leaflet on the rules. Better read it before you go anywhere. If you don't, you might make a wrong move. Make a wrong move, and you catch a bullet."

The man called Jim interrupted, "Reckon you better call off the other patrols, Digger?" he said respectfully to the leader.

Digger nodded curtly and turned to blow three short blasts and a long with his whistle. An answering short-long-short came from several blocks away. Other posts followed suit. Paul realized that he had been sur-rounded by, a ring of similar ambushes.

"Jim, take him to the nearest water barrel, and see that he shaves," Digger ordered, then: "What's your name, probie? Also your job, if you had one."

"Paul Harris Oberlin. I was a mechanical engineering student when the plague struck. Part-time garage me-CHANIC while I was in school."

Digger nodded and jotted down the information on a scratchpad. "Good, I'll turn your name in to the regis-trar. Georgelle says to watch for college men. You might get a good assignment, later. Report to the Esperson Building on the seventeenth. That's inspection day. If you don't show up, we'll come looking for you. All loose probies'll get shot. Now Jim here's gonna see to it that you shave. Don't shave again until your two-weeker. That way, we can estimate how long you been in town—by looking at your beard. We got other ways that you don't need to know about. Georgelle's got a system worked out for everything, so don't try any tricks."

"Tell me, what do you do with dermies?"

Digger grinned at his men. "You'll find out, probie."

Paul was led to a rain barrel, given a basin, razor, and soap. He scraped his face clean while Jim sat at a safe dis-tance, munching a quid of tobacco and watching the oper-ation with tired boredom. The other men had gone.

"May I have my pistol back?"

"Uh-uh! Read the rules. No weapons for probies."

"Suppose I bump into a dermie?"

"Find yourself a whistle and toot a bunch of short blasts. Then run like hell. We'll take care of the dermies. Read the rules."

"Can I scrounge wherever I want to?"

"Probies have their own assigned areas. There's a map in the rules."

"Who wrote the rules, anyhow?"

"Jeezis!" the guard grunted disgustedly. "Read 'em and find out."

When Paul finished shaving, Jim stood up, stretched, then bounded off the platform and picked up his bicycle. "Where do I go from here?" Paul called.

The man gave him a contemptuous snort, mounted the bike, and pedalled leisurely away. Paul gathered that he was to read the rules. He sat down beside the rain barrel and began studying the mimeographed leaflet.

Everything was cut and dried. As a probie, he was confined to an area six blocks square near the heart of the city. Once he entered it, a blue mark would be stamped on his forehead. At the two-week inspection, the indelible brand would be removed with a special solution. If a branded probie were caught outside his area, he would be forcibly escorted from the city. He was warned against attempting

to impersonate permanent personnel, because a system of codes and passwords would ensnare him. One full page of the leaflet was devoted to propaganda. Hous-ton was to become a "Bulwark of health in a stricken world, and the leader of a glorious recovery." The paper was signed by Dr. Georgelle, who had given himself the title of Director.

The pamphlet left Paul with a vague uneasiness. The uniforms—they reminded him of neighborhood boys' gangs in the slums, wearing special sweaters and uttering secret passwords, whipping intruders and amputating the tails of stray cats in darkened garages. And, in another way, it made him think of frustrated little people, gather-ing at night in brown shirts around a bonfire to sing the *Horst Wessel Lied* and listen to grandiose oratory about glorious destinies. *Their* stray cats had been an unfavored race.

Of course, the dermies were not merely harmless alley prowlers. They were a real menace. And maybe Georgelle's methods were the only ones effective.

While Paul sat with the pamphlet on the platform, he had been gazing absently at the stalled truck from which the men had emerged. Suddenly it broke upon his con-sciousness that it was a diesel. He bounded off the platform, and went to check its fuel tank, which had been left un-capped.

He knew that it was useless to search for gasoline, but diesel fuel was another matter. The exodus had drained all existing supplies of high octane fuel for the escaping mo-torcade, but the evacuation had been too hasty and too fear-crazed to worry with out-of-the-ordinary methods. He sniffed tank. It smelled faintly of gasoline. Some un-knowing fugitive had evidently filled it with ordinary fuel, which had later evaporated. But if the cylinders had not been damaged by the trial, the truck might be useful. He checked the engine briefly, and decided that it had not been tried at all. The starting battery had been removed.

He walked across the street and looked back at the warehouse. It bore the sign of a trucking firm. He walked around the block, eyeing the streets cautiously for other patrolmen. There was a fueling platform on the opposite side of the block. A fresh splash of oil on the concrete told him that Georgelle's crew was using the fuel for some purpose—possibly for heating or cooking. He entered the building and found a repair shop, with several dismantled engines lying about. There was a rack of batteries in the corner, but a screwdriver placed across the terminals brought only a weak spark.

The chargers, of course, drew power from the city's electric service, which was dead. After giving the prob-lem some thought, Paul connected five of the batteries in series, then placed a sixth across the total voltage, so that it would collect the charge that the others lost. Then he went to carry buckets of fuel from the pumps to the truck. When the tank was filled, he hoisted each end of the truck with a roll-under jack and inflated the tires with a hand-pump. It was a long and laborious job.

Twilight was gathering by the time he was ready to try it. Several times during the afternoon, he had been forced to hide from cyclists who wandered past, lest they send him on to the probie area and use the truck for their own purposes. Evidently they had long since decided that automotive transportation was a thing of the past.

A series of short whistle-blasts came to his ears just as he was climbing into the cab. The signals were several blocks away, but some of the answering bleats were closer. Evidently another newcomer, he thought. Most new arrivals from the north would pass through the same area on their way downtown. He entered the cab, closed the door softly, and ducked low behind the dashboard as three cyclists raced across the intersection just ahead.

Paul settled down to wait for the all-clear. It came after about ten minutes. Apparently the newcomer had tried to run instead of hiding. When the cyclists returned, they were moving leisurely, and laughing among themselves. After they had passed the intersection, Paul stole quietly out of the cab and moved along the wall to the corner, to assure himself that all the patrolmen had gone. But the sound of shrill pleading came to his ears.

At the end of the building, he clung close to the wall and risked a glance around the corner. A block away, the nude figure of a girl was struggling between taut ropes held by green-shirted guards. She was a pretty girl, with a tousled mop of chestnut hair and clean white limbs —clean except for her forearms, which appeared dipped in dark stain. Then he saw the dark irregular splotch across her flank, like a splash of ink not quite washed clean. She was a dermie.

Paul ducked close to the ground so that his face was hidden by a clump of grass at the corner. A man—the leader of the group—had left the girl, and was advancing up the street toward Paul, who prepared to roll under the building out of sight. But in the middle of the block, the man stopped. He lifted a manhole cover in the pavement, then went back for the girl's clothing, which he dragged at the end of a fishing pole with a wire hook at its tip. He dropped the clothing, one piece at a time into the manhole. A cloud of white dust arose from it, and the man stepped back to avoid the dust. Quicklime, Paul guessed.

Then the leader cupped his hands to his mouth and called back to the others. "Okay, drag her on up here!" He drew his revolver and waited while they tugged the struggling girl toward the manhole.

Paul felt suddenly ill. He had seen dermies shot in self-defense by fugitives from their deathly gray hands, but here was cold and efficient elimination. Here was Dachau and Buchenwald and the nameless camps of Siberia. He turned and bolted for the truck.

The sound of its engine starting brought a halt to the disposal of the pest-girl. The leader appeared at the intersection and stared uncertainly at the truck, as Paul nosed it away from the building. He fidgeted with his revolver doubtfully, and called something over his shoulder to the others. Then he began walking out into the street and signaling for the truck to stop. Paul let it crawl slowly ahead, and leaned out the window to eye the man questioningly.

"How the hell you get that started?" the leader called excitedly. He was still holding the pistol, but it dangled almost unnoticed in his hand. Paul suddenly fed fuel to the diesel and swerved sharply toward the surprised guardsman.

The leader yelped and dived for safety, but the fender caught his hips, spun him off balance, and smashed him down against the pavement. As the truck thundered around the corner toward the girl and her captors, he glanced in the mirror to see the hurt man weakly trying to crawl out of the street. Paul was certain that he was not mortally wounded.

As the truck lumbered on, the girl threw herself prone before it, since the ropes prevented any escape. Paul swerved erratically, sending the girl's captors scurrying for the alley. Then he aimed the wheels to straddle her body. She glanced up, screamed, then hugged the pavement as the behemoth thundered overhead. A bullet ploughed a furrow across the hood. Paul ducked low in the seat and jammed the brake pedal down, as soon as he thought she was clear.

There were several shots, but apparently they were shooting at the girl. Paul counted three seconds, then gunned the engine again. If she hadn't climbed aboard, it was just tough luck, he thought grimly. He shouldn't have tried to save her anyway. But continued shooting told him that she had managed to get inside. The trailer was heaped with clothing, and he trusted the mound of material to halt the barrage of bullets. He heard the explosion of a blowout as he swung around the next corner, and the trailer lurched dangerously. It swayed from side to side as he gathered speed down the wide and trafficless avenue. But the truck had double wheels, and soon the dangerous lurching ceased.

He roared on through the metropolitan area, staying on the same street and gathering speed. An occasional scrounger or cyclist stopped to stare, but they seemed too surprised to act. And they could not have known what had transpired a few blocks away.

Paul could not stop to see if he had a passenger, or if she was still alive. She was more dangerous than the gunmen. Any gratitude she might feel toward her rescuer would be quickly buried beneath her craving to spread the disease. He wished fervently that he had let the patrolmen kill her. Now he was faced with the problem of getting rid of her. He noticed, however, that mirrors were mounted on both sides of the cab. If he stopped the truck, and if she climbed out, he could see, and move away again before she had a chance to approach him. But he decided to wait until they were out of the city.

Soon he saw a highway marker, then a sign that said "Galveston—58 miles." He bore ahead, thinking that perhaps the island-city would provide good scrounging, without the regimentation of Doctor Georgelle's efficient system with its plans for "glorious recovery."

Twenty miles beyond the city limits, he stopped the truck, let the engine idle, and waited for his passenger to climb out. He locked the doors and laid a jack-handle across the seat as an added precaution. Nothing happened. He rolled down the window and shouted toward the rear.

"All passengers off the bus! Last stop! Everybody out!"

Still the girl did not appear. Then he heard something—a light tap from the trailer, and a murmur ... or a moan. She was there all right. He called again, but she made no response. It was nearly dark outside.

At last he seized the jack-handle, opened the door, and stepped out of the cab. Wary of a trick, he skirted wide around the trailer and approached it from the rear. One door was closed, while the other swung free. He stopped a few yards away and peered inside. At first he saw nothing.

"Get out, but keep away or I'll kill you."

Then he saw her move. She was sitting on the floor, leaning back against a heap of clothing, a dozen feet from the entrance. He stepped forward cautiously and flung open the other door. She turned her head to look at him peculiarly, but said nothing. He could see that she had donned some of the clothing, but one trouser-leg was rolled up, and she had tied a rag tightly about her ankle.

"Are you hurt?"

She nodded. "Bullet . . ." She rolled her head dizzily and moaned.

Paul went back to the cab to search for a first aid kit. He found one, together with a flashlight and spare bat-teries in the glove compartment. He made certain that the cells were not corroded and that the light would burn feebly. Then he returned to the trailer, chiding himself for a prize fool. A sensible human would haul the dermie out at the end of a towing chain and leave her sitting by the side of the road.

"If you try to touch me, I'll brain you!" he warned, as he clambered into the trailer.

She looked up again. "Would you feel . . . like enjoying anything . . . if you were bleeding like this?" she muttered weakly. The flashlight beam caught the glitter of pain in her eyes, and accentuated the pallor of her small face. She was a pretty girl—scarcely older than twenty but Paul was in no mood to appreciate pretty women, especially dermies.

"So that's how you think of it, eh? Enjoying yourself!" She said nothing. She dropped her forehead against her knee and rolled it slowly.

"Where are you hit? Just the foot?"

"Ankle . . ."

"All right, take the rag off. Let's see."

"The wound's in back."

"All right, lie down on your stomach, and keep your hands under your head."

She stretched out weakly, and he shone the light over her leg, to make certain its skin was clear of neuroderm. Then he looked at the ankle, and said nothing for a time. The bullet had missed the joint, but had neatly severed the Achilles' tendon just above the heel.

"You're a plucky kid," he grunted, wondering how she had endured the self-torture of getting the shoe off and clothing herself.

"It was cold back here—without clothes," she muttered.

Paul opened the first aid packet and found an envelope of sulfa powder. Without touching her, he emptied it into the wound, which was beginning to bleed again. There was nothing else he could do. The tendon had pulled apart and would require surgical stitching to bring it together until it could heal. Such attention was out of the question.

She broke the silence. "I . . . I'm going to be crippled, aren't I?"

"Oh, not crippled," he heard himself telling her. "If we can get you to a doctor, anyway. Tendons can be sutured with wire. He'll probably put your foot in a cast, and you might get a stiff ankle from it."

She lay breathing quietly, denying his hopeful words by her silence.

"Here!" he said. "Here's a gauze pad and some tape. Can you manage it yourself?"

She started to sit up. He placed the first aid pack beside her, and backed to the door. She fumbled in the kit, and whimpered while she taped the pad in place.

"There's a tourniquet in there, too. Use it if the bleed-ing's worse."

She looked up to watch his silhouette against the dark-ening evening sky. "Thanks . . . thanks a lot, mister. I'm grateful. I promise not to touch you. Not if you don't want me to."

Shivering, he moved back to the cab. Why did they always get that insane idea that they were doing their vic-tims a favor by giving them the neural plague? *Not if you don't want me to.* He shuddered as he drove away. She felt that way now, while the pain robbed her of the craving, but later—unless he got

rid of her quickly—she would come to feel that she owed it to him—as a favor. The disease perpetuated itself by arousing such strange delusions in its bearer. The microorganisms' methods of survival were indeed highly specialized. Paul felt certain that such animalcules had not evolved on Earth.

A light gleamed here and there along the Alvin-Galveston highway—oil lamps, shining from lonely cottages whose occupants had not felt the pressing urgency of the crowded city. But he had no doubt that to approach one of the farmhouses would bring a rifle bullet as a welcome. Where could he find help for the girl? No one would touch her but another dermie. Perhaps he could unhitch the trailer and leave her in downtown Galveston, with a sign hung on the back—"Wounded dermie inside." The plague victims would care for their own—if they found her.

He chided himself again for worrying about her. Saving her life didn't make him responsible for her . . . did it?

After all, if she lived, and the leg healed, she would only prowl in search of healthy victims again. She would never be rid of the disease, nor would she ever die of it—so far as anyone knew. The death rate was high among dermies, but the cause was usually a bullet.

Paul passed a fork in the highway and *knew* that the bridge was just ahead. Beyond the channel lay Galveston Island, once brightly lit and laughing in its role as seaside resort—now immersed in darkness. The wind whipped at the truck from the southwest as the road led up onto the wide causeway. A faint glow in the east spoke of a moon about to rise. He saw the wide structure of the drawbridge just ahead.

Suddenly he clutched at the wheel, smashed furiously down on the brake, and tugged the emergency back. The tires howled ahead on the smooth concrete, and the force threw him forward over the wheel. Dusty water swirled far below where the upward folding gates of the drawbridge had once been. He skidded to a stop ten feet from the end. When he climbed out, the girl was calling weakly from the trailer, but he walked to the edge and looked over. Someone had done a job with dynamite.

Why, he wondered. To keep islanders on the island, or to keep mainlanders off? Had another Doctor Georgelle started his own small nation in Galveston? It seemed more likely that the lower island dwellers had done the demolition.

He looked back at the truck. An experienced truckster might be able to swing it around all right, but Paul was doubtful. Nevertheless, he climbed back in the cab and tried it. Half an hour later he was hopelessly jammed, with the trailer twisted aside and the cab wedged near the sheer drop to the water. He gave it up and went back to inspect his infected cargo.

She was asleep, but moaning faintly. He prodded her awake with the jack-handle. "Can you crawl, kid? If you can, come back to the door."

She nodded, and began dragging herself toward the flashlight. She clenched her lip between her teeth to keep from whimpering, but her breath came as a voiced mur-mur . . . *nnnnng* ... *nnnnng* ..

She sagged weakly when she reached the entrance, and for a moment he thought she had fainted. Then she looked up. "What next, skipper?" she panted.

"I . . . I don't know. Can you let yourself down to the pavement?"

She glanced over the edge and shook her head. "With a rope, maybe. There's one back there someplace. If you're scared of me, I'll try to crawl and get it."

"Hands to yourself?" he asked suspiciously; then he thanked the darkness for hiding the heat of shame that crawled to his face.

"I won't ..."

He scrambled into the trailer quickly and brought back the rope. "I'll climb up on top and let it down in front of you. Grab hold and let yourself down."

A few minutes later she was sitting on the concrete causeway looking at the wrecked draw. "Oh!" she muttered as he scrambled down from atop the trailer. "I thought you just wanted to dump me here. We're stuck, huh?"

"Yeah! We might swim it, but doubt if you could make it."

"I'd try . . ." She paused, cocking her head slightly. "There's a boat moored under the bridge. Right over there."



"What makes you think so?"

"Water lapping against wood. Listen." Then she shook her head. "I forgot. You're not hyper."

"I'm not what?" Paul listened. The water sounds seemed homogeneous.

"Hyperacute. Sharp senses. You know, it's one of the symptoms."

He nodded, remembering vaguely that he'd heard something to that effect—but he'd chalked it up as hallucina-tory phenomenon. He walked to the rail and shone his light toward the water. The boat was there—tugging its rope taut from the mooring as the tide swirled about it. The bottom was still fairly dry, indicating that a recent rower had crossed from the island to the mainland.

"Think you can hold onto the rope if I let you down?" he called.

She gave him a quick glance, then picked up the end she had previously touched and tied a loop about her waist. She began crawling toward the rail. Paul fought down a crazy urge to pick her up and carry her; plague be damned. But he had already left himself dangerously open to contagion. Still, he felt the drumming charges of conscience . . . *depart from me, ye accursed, for I was sick and you visited me not ...*

He turned quickly away, and began knotting the end of the rope about the rail. He reminded himself that any sane person would desert her at once, and swim on to safety. Yet, he could not. In the oversized clothing she looked like a child, hurt and helpless. Paul knew the demanding arrogance that could possess the wounded

*help me, you've got to help me, you damn merciless bastard! . . . No, don't touch me there, damn you!* Too many times, he had heard the sick curse the physician, and the injured curse the rescuer. Blind aggression, trying to strike back at pain.

But the girl made no complaint except the involuntary hurt sounds. She asked nothing, and accepted his aid with a wide-eyed gratitude that left him weak. He thought that it would be easier to leave her if she would only beg, or plead, or demand.

"Can you start me swinging a little?" she called as he lowered her toward the water.

Paul's eyes probed the darkness below, trying to sort the shadows, to make certain which was the boat. He used both hands to feed out the rope, and the light laid on the rail only seemed to blind him. She began swinging herself pendulum-wise somewhere beneath him.

"When I say 'ready,' let me go!" she shrielled.

"You're not going to drop!"

"Have to! Boat's out further. Got to swing for it. I can't swim, really."

"But you'll hurt your—"

"Ready!"

Paul still clung to the rope. "I'll let you down into the water and you can hang onto the rope. I'll dive, and then pull you into the boat."

"Uh-uh! You'd have to touch me. You don't want that, do you? Just a second now ... one more swing ... ready!"

He let the rope go. With a clatter and a thud, she hit the boat. Three sharp cries of pain clawed at him. Then—muffled sobbing.

"Are you all right?"

Sobs. She seemed not to hear him.

"Jeezis!" He sprinted for the brink of the drawbridge and dived out over the deep channel. How far . . . down ... down. . . . Icy water stung his body with sharp whips, then opened to embrace him. He fought to the sur-face and swam toward the dark shadow of the boat. The sobbing had subsided. He grasped the prow and hauled himself dripping from the channel. She was lying curled in the bottom of the boat.

"Kid . . . you all right, kid?"

"Sorry . . . I'm such a baby," she gasped, and dragged herself back to the stern.

Paul found a paddle, but no oars. He cast off and began digging water toward the other side, but the tide tugged them relentlessly away from the bridge. He gave it up and paddled toward the distant shore. "You know anything about Galveston?" he called—mostly to reassure himself that she was not approaching him in the darkness with the death-gray hands.

"I used to come here for the summer, I know a little about it."

Paul urged her to talk while he plowed toward the island. Her name was Willie, and she insisted that it was for Willow, not for Wilhelmina. She came from Dallas, and claimed she was a salesman's daughter who was done in by a traveling farmer. The farmer, she explained, was just a wandering dermie who had caught her napping by the roadside. He had stroked her arms until she awoke, then had run away, howling with glee.

"That was three weeks ago," she said. "If I'd had a gun, I'd have dropped him. Of course, I know better now."

Paul shuddered and paddled on. "Why did you head south?"

"I was coming here."

"Here? To Galveston?"

"Uh-huh. I heard someone say that a lot of nuns were coming to the island. I thought maybe they'd take me in."

The moon was high over the lightless city, and the tide had swept the small boat far east from the bridge by the time Paul's paddle dug into the mud beneath the shallow water. He bounded out and dragged the boat through thin marsh grass onto the shore. Fifty yards away, a ramshackle fishing cottage lay sleeping in the moonlight.

"Stay here, Willie," he grunted. "I'll find a couple of boards or something for crutches."

He rummaged about through a shed behind the cottage and brought back a wheelbarrow. Moaning and laughing at once, she struggled into it, and he wheeled her to the house, humming a verse of *Rickshaw Boy*.

"You're a funny guy, Paul. I'm sorry . . ." She jiggled her tousled head in the moonlight, as if she disapproved of her own words.

Paul tried the cottage door, kicked it open, then walked the wheelbarrow up three steps and into a musty room. He struck a match, found an oil lamp with a little kerosene, and lit it. Willie caught her breath.

He looked around. "Company," he grunted.

The company sat in a fragile rocker with a shawl about her shoulders and a shotgun between her knees. She had been dead at least a month. The charge of buckshot had sieved the ceiling and spattered it with bits of gray hair and brown blood.

"Stay here," he told the girl tonelessly. "I'll try to get a dermie somewhere—one who knows how to sew a tendon. Got any ideas?"

She was staring with a sick face at the old woman. "Here? With—"

"She won't bother you," he said as he gently disen-tangled the gun from the corpse. He moved to a cupboard and found a box of shells behind an orange teapot. "I may not be back, but I'll send somebody."

She buried her face in her plague-stained hands, and he stood for a moment watching her shoulders shiver. "Don't worry . . . I will send somebody." He stepped to the porcelain sink and pocketed a wafer-thin sliver of dry soap.

"What's that for?" she muttered, looking up again.

He thought of a lie, then checked it. "To wash you off of me," he said truthfully. "I might have got too close. Soap won't do much good, but I'll feel better." He looked at the corpse coolly. "Didn't do her much good. Buckshot's the best antiseptic all right."

Willie moaned as he went out the door. He heard her crying as he walked down to the waterfront. She was still crying when he waded back to shore, after a thorough scrubbing. He was sorry he'd spoken cruelly, but it was such a damned relief to get rid of her.

With the shotgun cradled on his arm, he began putting distance between himself and the sobbing. But the sound worried his ears, even after he realized that he was no longer hearing her.

He strode a short distance inland past scattered fishing shanties, then took the highway toward the city whose outskirts he was entering. It would be at least an hour's trek to the end of the island where he would be most likely to encounter someone with medical training. The hospitals were down there, the

medical school, the most likely place for any charitable nuns—if Willie's rumor were true. Paul meant to capture a dermie doctor or nurse and force the amorous-handed maniac at gun-point to go to Willie's aid. Then he would be done with her. When she stopped hurting, she would start craving—and he had no doubt that he would be the object of her manual affections.

The bay was wind-chopped in the moonglow, no longer glittering from the lights along 61st Street. The oleanders along Broadway were choked up with weeds. Cats or rabbits rustled in the tousled growth that had been a carefully tended parkway.

Paul wondered why the plague had chosen Man, and not the lower animals. It was true that an occasional dog or cow was seen with the plague, but the focus was upon humanity. And the craving to spread the disease was Man-directed, even in animals. It was as if the neural entity deliberately sought out the species with the most complex nervous system. Was its onslaught really connected with the meteorite swarm? Paul believed that it was.

In the first place, the meteorites had not been pre-dicted. They were not a part of the regular cosmic bom-bardment. And then there was the strange report that they were *manufactured* projectiles, teeming with frozen microorganisms which came alive upon thawing. In these days of tumult and confusion, however, it was hard. Nevertheless Paul believed it. Neuroderm had no first cousins among Earth diseases.

What manner of beings, then, had sent such a curse? Potential invaders? If so, they were slow in coming. One thing was generally agreed upon by the scientists: the mis-siles had not been "sent" from another solar planet. Their direction upon entering the atmosphere was wrong. They could conceivably have been fired from an interplanetary launching ship, but their velocity was about equal to the theoretical velocity which a body would obtain in fall-ing sunward from the near-infinite distance. This seemed to hint the projectiles had come from another star.

Paul was startled suddenly by the flare of a match from the shadow of a building. He stopped dead still in the street. A man was leaning against the wall to light a cigarette. He flicked the match out, and Paul watched the cigarette-glow make an arc as the man waved at him.

"Nice night, isn't it?" said the voice from the darkness.

Paul stood exposed in the moonlight, carrying the shot-gun at the ready. The voice sounded like that of an adoles-cent, not fully changed to its adult timbre. If the youth wasn't a dermie, why wasn't he afraid that Paul might be one? And if he was a dermie, why wasn't he advancing in the hope that Paul might be as yet untouched?

"I said, 'Nice night, isn't it?' Whatcha carrying the gun for? Been shooting rabbits?"

Paul moved a little closer and fumbled for his flash-light. Then he threw its beam on the slouching figure in the shadows. He saw a young man, perhaps sixteen, re-clining against the wall. He saw the pearl-gray face that characterized the final and permanent stage of neuroderm! He stood frozen to the spot a dozen feet away from the youth, who blinked perplexedly into the light. The kid was assuming automatically that he was another dermie! Paul tried to keep him blinded while he played along with the fallacy.

"Yeah, it's a nice night. You got any idea where I can find a doctor?"

The boy frowned. "Doctor? You mean you don't know?" "Know what? I'm new here."

"New? Oh . . ." the boy's nostrils began twitching slightly, as if he were sniffing at the night air. "Well, most of the priests down at Saint Mary's were missionaries. They're all doctors. Why? You sick?"

"No, there's a girl . . . But never mind. How do I get there? And are any of them dermies?"

The boy's eyes wandered peculiarly, and his mouth fell open, as if he had been asked why a circle wasn't square. "You are new, aren't you? They're all dermies, if you want to call them that. Wh—" Again the nostrils were flaring. He flicked the cigarette a w a y suddenly and inhaled a slow draught of the breeze. "I ... I smell a non-hyper," he muttered.

Paul started to back away. His scalp bristled a warning. The boy advanced a step toward him. A slow beam of anticipation began to glow in his face. He bared his teeth in a wide grain of pleasure.

"You're not a hyper yet," he hissed, moving forward. "I've never had a chance to touch a nonhyper . . ."

"Stay back, or I'll kill you!"

The lad giggled and came on, talking to himself. "The padre says it's wrong, but you smell so . . . so . . . ugh . . ." He flung himself forward with a low throaty cry.

Paul sidestepped the charge and brought the gun barrel down across the boy's head. The dermie sprawled howling in the street. Paul pushed the gun close to his face, but the youth started up again. Paul jabbed viciously with the barrel, and felt it strike and tear. "I don't want to have to blow your head off—"

The boy howled and fell back. He crouched panting on his hands and knees, head hung low, watching a dark puddle of blood gather on the pavement from a deep gash across his cheek. "Whatcha wanta do that for?" he whim-pered. "I wasn't gonna hurt you." His tone was that of a wronged and rejected suitor.

"Now, where's Saint Mary's? Is that one of the hos-pitals? How do I get there?" Paul had backed to a safe distance and was covering the youth with the gun.

"Straight down Broadway . . . to the Boulevard . . . you'll see it down that neighborhood. About the fourth street, I think." The boy looked up, and Paul saw the extent of the gash. It was deep and ragged, and the kid was crying.

"Get up! You're going to lead me there."

Pain had blanketed the call of the craving. The boy struggled to his feet, pressed a handkerchief against the wound, and with an angry glance at Paul, he set out down the road. Paul followed ten yards behind.

"If you take me through any dermie traps, I'll kill you."

"There aren't any traps," the youth mumbled.

Paul snorted disbelief, but did not repeat the warning.

"What made you think I was another dermie?" he snapped.

"Because there's no nonhypers in Galveston. This is a hyper colony. A nonhyper used to drift in occasionally, but the priests had the bridge dynamited. The nonhypers upset the colony. As long as there aren't *any* around to smell, nobody causes any trouble. During the day, there's a guard out on the causeway, and if any hypers come looking for a place to stay, the guard ferries them across. If nonhypers come, he tells them about the colony, and they go away."

Paul groaned. He had stumbled into a rat's nest. Was there no refuge from the gray curse? Now he would have to move on. It seemed a hopeless quest. Maybe the old man he met on his way to Houston had arrived at the only possible hope for peace: submission to the plague. But the thought sickened him somehow. He would have to find some barren island, find a healthy mate, and go to live a savage existence apart from all traces of civilization.

"Didn't the guard stop you at the bridge?" the boy asked. "He never came back today. He must be still out there."

Paul grunted "no" in a tone that warned against idle conversation. He guessed what had happened. The dermie guard had probably spotted some healthy wanderers; and instead of warning them away, he rowed across the drawbridge and set out to chase them. His body probably lay along the highway somewhere, if the hypothetical wanderers were armed.

When they reached 23rd Street, a few blocks from the heart of the city, Paul hissed at the boy to stop. He heard someone laugh. Footsteps were wandering along the sidewalk, overhung by trees. He whispered to the boy to take refuge behind a hedge. They crouched in the shadows several yards apart while the voices drew nearer.

"Brother James had a nice tenor," someone said softly. "But he sings his Latin with a western drawl. It sounds . . . well . . . peculiar, to say the least. Brother Johnis a stickler for pronunciation. He won't let Fra James solo. Says it gives a burlesque effect to the choir. Says it makes the sisters giggle."

The other man chuckled quietly and started to reply. But his voice broke off suddenly. The footsteps stopped a dozen feet from Paul's hiding place. Paul, peering through the hedge, saw a pair of brown-robed monks standing on the sidewalk. They were looking around suspiciously.

"Brother Thomas, do you smell—"

"Aye, I smell it."

Paul changed his position slightly, so as to keep the gun pointed toward the pair of plague-stricken

monastics. They stood in embarrassed silence, peering into the dark-ness, and shuffling their feet uneasily. One of them suddenly pinched his nose between thumb and forefinger. His companion followed suit.

"Blessed be God," quavered one.

"Blessed be His Holy Name," answered the other.

"Blessed be Jesus Christ, true God and true Man."

"Blessed be . . ."

Gathering their robes high about their shins, the two monks turned and scurried away, muttering the Litany of the Divine Praises as they went. Paul stood up and stared after them in amazement. The sight of dermies running from a potential victim was almost beyond belief. He questioned his young guide. Still holding the handkerchief against his bleeding face, the boy hung his head.

"Bishop made a ruling against touching nonhypers," he explained miserably. "Says it's a sin, unless the non-hyper submits of his own free will. Says even then it's wrong, except in the ordinary ways that people come in contact with each other. Calls it fleshly desire, and all that."

"Then why did you try to do it?"

"I ain't so religious."

"Well, sonny, you better get religious until we come to the hospital. Now, let's go."

They marched on down Broadway encountering no other pedestrians. Twenty minutes later, they were stand-ing in the shadows before a hulking brick building, some of whose windows were yellow with lamplight. Moonlight bathed the Statue of a woman standing on a ledge over the entrance, indicating to Paul that this was the hos-pital.

"All right, boy. You go in and send out a dermie doctor. Tell him somebody wants to see him, but if you say I'm not a dermie, I'll come in and kill you. Now move. And don't come back. Stay to get your face fixed."

The youth stumbled toward the entrance. Paul sat in the shadow of a tree, where he could see twenty yards in all directions and guard himself against approach. Soon a black-clad priest came out of the emergency entrance, stopped on the sidewalk, and glanced around.

"Over here!" Paul hissed from across the street.

The priest advanced uncertainly. In the center of the road he stopped again, and held his nose. "Y-you're a nonhyper," he said, almost accusingly.

"That's right, and I've got a gun, so don't try anything."

"What's wrong? Are you sick? The lad said—"

"There's a dermie girl down the island. She's been shot. Tendon behind her heel is cut clean through. You're going to help her."

"Of course, but . . ." The priest paused. "You? A non-hyper? Helping a so-called dermie?" His voice went high with amazement.

"So I'm a sucker!" Paul barked. "Now get what you need, and come on."

"The Lord bless you," the priest mumbled in embar-rassment as he hurried away.

"Don't sic any of your maniacs on me!" Paul called after him. "I'm armed."

"I'll have to bring a surgeon," the cleric said over his shoulder.

Five minutes later, Paul heard the muffled grunt of a starter. Then an engine coughed to life. Startled, he scur-ried away from the tree and sought safety in a clump of shrubs. An ambulance backed out of the driveway and into the street. It parked at the curb by the tree, engine run-ning. A pallid face glanced out curiously toward the shadows. "Where are you?" it called, but it was not the priest's voice.

Paul stood up and advanced a few steps.

"We'll have to wait on Father Mendelhaus," the driver called. "He'll be a few minutes."

"You a dermie?"

"Of course. But don't worry. I've plugged my nose and I'm wearing rubber gloves. I can't smell you. The sight of a nonhyper arouses some craving, of course. But it can be overcome with a little will power. I won't infect you, although I don't understand why you nonhypers fight so hard. You're bound to catch it sooner or later. And the world can't get back to normal until everybody has it."

Paul avoided the startling thought. "You the surgeon?"

"Uh, yes. Father Williamson's the name. I'm not really a specialist, but I did some surgery in Korea. How's the girl's condition? Suffering shock?"

"I wouldn't know."

They fell silent until Father Mendelhaus returned. He came across the street carrying a bag in one hand and a brown bottle in the other. He held the bottle by the neck with a pair of tongs and Paul could see the exterior of the bottle steaming slightly as the priest passed through the beam of the ambulance's headlights. He placed the flask on the curb without touching it, then spoke to the man in the shadows.

"Would you step behind the hedge and disrobe, young man? Then rub yourself thoroughly with this oil." "I doubt it," Paul snapped. "What is it?"

"Don't worry, it's been in the sterilizer. That's what took me so long. It may be a little hot for you, however. It's only an antiseptic and deodorant. It'll kill your odor, and it'll also give you some protection against picking up stray microorganisms."

After a few moments of anxious hesitation, Paul decided to trust the priest. He carried the hot flask into the brush, undressed, and bathed himself with the warm aromatic oil. Then he slipped back into his clothes and reapproached the ambulance.

"Ride in back," Mendelhaus told him. "And you won't be infected. No one's been in there for several weeks, and as you probably know, the microorganisms die after a few hours exposure. They have to be transmitted from skin to skin, or else an object has to be handled very soon after a hyper has touched it."

Paul warily climbed inside. Mendelhaus opened a slide and spoke through it from the front seat. "You'll have to show us the way."

"Straight out Broadway. Say, where did you get the gasoline for this wagon?"

The priest paused. "That has been something of a secret. Oh well . . . I'll tell you. There's a tanker out in the harbor. The people left town too quickly to think of it. Automobiles are scarcer than fuel in Galveston. Up north, you find them stalled everywhere. But since Galveston didn't have any through-traffic, there were no cars running out of gas. The ones we have are the ones that were left in the repair shop. Something wrong with them. And we don't have any mechanics to fix them."

Paul neglected to mention that he was qualified for the job. The priest might get ideas. He fell into gloomy silence as the ambulance turned onto Broadway and headed down-island. He watched the back of the priests' heads, silhouetted against the headlighted pavement. They seemed not at all concerned about their disease. Mendelhaus was a slender man, with a blond crew cut, and rather bushy eyebrows. He had a thin, aristocratic face—now plague-gray—but jovial enough. It might be the face of an ascetic, but for the quick blue eyes that seemed full of lively interest rather than inward-turning mysticism. Williamson, on the other hand, was a rather plain man, with a stolid tweedy look, despite his black cassock.

"What do you think of our plan here?" asked Father Mendelhaus.

"What plan?" Paul grunted.

"Oh, didn't the boy tell you? We're trying to make the island a refuge for hypers who are willing to sublimate their craving and turn their attentions toward reconstruction. We're also trying to make an objective study of this neural condition. We have some good scientific minds, too—Doctor Relmone of Fordham, Father Seyes of Notre Dame, two biologists from Boston College. . . ."

"Dermies trying to cure the plague?" Paul gasped.

Mendelhaus laughed merrily. "I didn't say cure it, son. I said 'study it.'"

"Why?"

"To learn how to live with it, of course. It's been pointed out by our philosophers that things become evil only through human misuse. Morphine, for instance, is a product of the Creator; it is therefore good when properly used for relief of pain. When mistreated by an addict, it becomes a monster. We bear this in mind as we study neuroderm."

Paul snorted contemptuously. "Leprosy is evil, I suppose, because Man mistreated bacteria?"

The priest laughed again. "You've got me there. I'm no philosopher. But you can't compare neuroderm with leprosy."

Paul shuddered. "The hell I can't! It's worse."

"Ah? Suppose you tell me what makes it worse? List the symptoms for me."

Paul hesitated, listing them mentally. They were: dis-coloration of the skin, low fever, hallucinations, and the insane craving to infect others. They seemed bad enough, so he listed them orally. "Of course, people don't die of it," he added. "But which is worse, insanity or death?"

The priest turned to smile back at him through the porthole. "Would you call me insane? It's true that vic-tims have frequently lost their minds. But that's not a di-rect result of neuroderm. Tell me, how would you feel if everyone screamed and ran when they saw you coming, or hunted you down like a criminal? How long would your sanity last?"

Paul said nothing. Perhaps the anathema was a con-tributing factor....

"Unless you were of very sound mind to begin with, you probably couldn't endure it."

"But the craving . . . and the hallucinations ..."

"True," murmured the priest thoughtfully. "The halluci-nations. Tell me something else, if all the world was blind save one man, wouldn't the world be inclined to call that man's sight a hallucination? And the man with eyes might even come to agree with the world."

Again Paul was silent. There was no arguing with Mendelhaus, who probably suffered the strange delusions and thought them real.

"And the craving," the priest went on. "It's true that the craving can be a rather unpleasant symptom. It's the condition's way of perpetuating itself. Although we're not certain how it works, it seems able to stimulate erotic sensations in the hands. We do know the microorganisms get to the brain, but we're not yet sure what they do there."

"What facts have you discovered?" Paul asked cau-tiously.

Mendelhaus grinned at him. "Tut! I'm not going to tell you, because I don't want to be called a 'crazy dermie.' You wouldn't believe me, you see."

Paul glanced outside and saw that they were ap-proaching the vicinity of the fishing cottage. He pointed out the lamplit window to the driver, and the ambulance turned onto a side road. Soon they were parked behind the shanty. The priests scrambled out and carried the stretcher toward the light, while Paul skulked to a safer distance and sat down in the grass to watch. When Willie was safe in the vehicle, he meant to walk back to the bridge, swim across the gap, and return to the mainland.

Soon Mendelhaus came out and walked toward him with a solemn stride, although Paul was sitting quietly in the deepest shadow—invisible, he had thought. He arose quickly as the priest approached. Anxiety tightened his throat. "Is she . . . is Willie . . . ?"

"She's irrational," Mendelhaus murmured sadly. "Almost . . . less than sane. Some of it may be due to high fever, but ..."

"Yes?"

"She tried to kill herself. With a knife. Said something about buckshot being the best way, or something . . ."

"Jeezis! Jeezis!" Paul sank weakly in the grass and cov-ered his face with his hands.

"Blessed be His Holy Name," murmured the priest by way of turning the oath aside. "She didn't hurt herself badly, though. Wrist's cut a little. She was too weak to do a real job of it. Father Will's giving her a hypo and a tetanus shot and some sulfa. We're out of penicillin."

He stopped speaking and watched Paul's wretchedness for a moment. "You love the girl, don't you?"

Paul stiffened. "Are you crazy? Love a little tramp dermie? Jeezis ..."

"Blessed be—"

"Listen! Will she be all right? I'm getting out of here!" He climbed unsteadily to his feet.

"I don't know, son. Infection's the real threat, and shock. If we'd got to her sooner, she'd have been safer. And if she was in the ultimate stage of neuroderm, it would help."

"Why?"

"Oh, various reasons. You'll learn, someday. But lis-ten, you look exhausted. Why don't you come back to the hospital with us? The third floor is entirely vacant. There's no danger of infection up there, and we keep a sterile room ready just in case we get a nonhyper case. You can lock the door inside, if

you want to, but it wouldn't be necessary. Nuns are on the floor below. Our male staff lives in the basement. There aren't any laymen in the building. I'll guarantee that you won't be both-ered."

"No, I've got to go," he growled, then softened his voice: "I appreciate it though, Father."

"Whatever you wish. I'm sorry, though. You might be able to provide yourself with some kind of transportation if you waited."

"Uh-uh! I don't mind telling you, your island makes me jumpy."

"Why?"

Paul glanced at the priest's gray hands. "Well . . . you still feel the craving, don't you?"

Mendelhaus touched his nose. "Cotton plugs, with a little camphor. I can't smell you." He hesitated. "No, I won't lie to you. The urge to touch is still there to some extent."

"And in a moment of weakness, somebody might—"

The priest straightened his shoulders. His eyes went chilly. "I have taken certain vows, young man. Sometimes when I see a beautiful woman, I feel desire. When I see a man eating a thick steak on a fast-day, I feel envy and hunger. When I see a doctor earning large fees, I chafe under the vow of poverty. But by denying desire's de-mands, one learns to make desire useful in other ways. Sublimation, some call it. A priest can use it and do more useful work thereby. I am a priest."

He nodded curtly, turned on his heel and strode away. Halfway to the cottage, he paused. "She's calling for someone named Paul. Know who it might be? Family perhaps?"

Paul stood speechless. The priest shrugged and con-tinued toward the lighted doorway.

"Father, wait . . ."

"Yes?"

"I—I am a little tired. The room . . . I mean, will you show me where to get transportation tomorrow?"

"Certainly."

Before midnight, the party had returned to the hos-pital. Paul lay on a comfortable mattress for the first time in weeks, sleepless, and staring at the moonlight on the sill. Somewhere downstairs, Willie was lying unconscious in an operating room, while the surgeon tried to repair the torn tendon. Paul had ridden back with them in the ambulance, sitting a few feet from the stretcher, avoiding her sometimes wandering arms, and listening to her delirious moaning.

Now he felt his skin crawling with belated hypochon-dria. What a fool he had been—touching the rope, the boat, the wheelbarrow, riding in the ambulance. There were a thousand ways he could have picked up a few stray microorganisms lingering from a dermie's touch. And now, he lay here in this nest of disease... .

But strange—it was the most peaceful, the sanest place he'd seen in months. The religious orders simply accepted the plague—with masochistic complacency perhaps—but calmly. A cross, or a penance, or something. But no, they seemed to accept it almost gladly. Nothing peculiar about that. All dermies went wild-eyed with happiness about the "lovely desire" they possessed. The priests weren't wild-eyed.

Neither was normal man equipped with socially-shaped sexual desire. Sublimation?

"Peace," he muttered, and went to sleep.

A knocking at the door awoke him at dawn. He grunted at it disgustedly and sat up in bed. The door, which he had forgotten to lock, swung open. A chubby nun with a breakfast tray started into the room. She saw his face, then stopped. She closed her eyes, wrinkled her nose, and framed a silent prayer with her lips. Then she backed slowly out.

"I'm sorry, sir!" she quavered through the door. "I—I knew *there* was a patient in here, but I didn't know ... you weren't a hyper. Forgive me."

He heard her scurrying away down the hall. Somehow, he began to feel safe. But wasn't that exactly what they wanted him to feel! He realized suddenly that he was trapped. He had left the shotgun in the emergency room. What was he—guest or captive? Months of fleeing from the gray terror had left him



suspicious.

Soon he would find out. He arose and began dressing. Before he finished, Mendelhaus came. He did not enter, but stood in the hallway beyond the door. He smiled a faint greeting, and said, "So you're Paul?"

He felt heat rising in his face. "She's awake, then?" he asked gruffly.

The priest nodded. "Want to see her?"

"No, I've got to be going."

"It would do her good."

He coughed angrily. Why did the black-cassocked dermie have to put it that way? "Well it wouldn't do me any good!" he snarled. "I've been around too many gray-leather hides already!"

Mendelhaus shrugged, but his eyes bore a hint of contempt. "As you wish. You may leave by the outside stair-way—to avoid disturbing the sisters."

"To avoid being touched, you mean!"

"No one will touch you."

Paul finished dressing in silence. The reversal of attitudes disturbed him. He resented the seeming "tolerance" that was being extended him. It was like asylum inmates being "tolerant" of the psychiatrist.

"I'm ready!" he growled.

Mendelhaus led him down the corridor and out onto a sunlit balcony. They descended a stone stairway while the priest talked over his shoulder.

"She's still not fully rational, and there's some fever. It wouldn't be anything to worry about two years ago, but now we're out of most of the latest drugs. If sulfa won't hold the infection, we'll have to amputate, of course. We should know in two or three days."

He paused and looked back at Paul, who had stopped on the stairway. "Coming?"

"Where is she?" Paul asked weakly. "I'll see her."

The priest frowned. "You don't have to, son. I'm sorry if I implied any obligation on your part. Really. You've done enough. I gather that you saved her life. Very few nonhypers would do a thing like that. I—"

"Where is she?" he snapped angrily.

The priest nodded. "Downstairs. Come on."

As they re-entered the building on the ground floor, the priest cupped his hands to his mouth and called out, "Nonhyper coming! Plug your noses, or get out of the way! Avoid circumstances of temptation!"

When they moved along the corridor, it was Paul who felt like the leper. Mendelhaus led him into the third room.

Willie saw him enter and hid her gray hands beneath the sheet. She smiled faintly, tried to sit up, and failed. Williamson and a nun-nurse who had both been standing by the bedside turned to leave the room. Mendelhaus followed them out and closed the door.

There was a long, painful pause. Willie tried to grin. He shuffled his feet.

"They've got me in a cast," she said conversationally.

"You'll be all right," he said hastily. "It won't be long before you'll be up. Galveston's a good place for you. They're all dermies here."

She clenched her eyes tightly shut. "God! God! I hope I never hear that word again. After last night . . . that old woman in the rocking chair . . . I stayed there all alone and the wind'd start the chair rocking. Ooh!" She looked at him with abnormally bright eyes. "I'd rather die than touch anybody now . . . after seeing that. Somebody touched her, didn't they, Paul? That's why she did it, wasn't it?"

He squirmed and backed toward the door. "Willie . . . I'm sorry for what I said. I mean—"

"Don't worry, Paul! I wouldn't touch you now." She clenched her hands and brought them up before her face, to stare at them with glittering hate. "I loathe myself!" she hissed.

What was it Mendelhaus had said, about the dermie going insane because of being an outcast rather than because of the plague? But she wouldn't be an outcast here. Only among nonhypers, like himself . . .

"Get well quick, Willie," he muttered, then hurriedly slipped out into the corridor. She called his name twice, then fell silent.

"That was quick," murmured Mendelhaus, glancing at his pale face.

"Where can I get a car?"

The priest rubbed his chin. "I was just speaking to Brother Matthew about that. Uh . . . how would you like to have a small yacht instead?"

Paul caught his breath. A yacht would mean access to the seas, and to an island. A yacht was the perfect solution. He stammered gratefully.

"Good," said Mendelhaus. "There's a small craft in dry dock down at the basin. It was apparently left there because there weren't any dock crews around to get her afloat again. I took the liberty of asking Brother Matthew to find some men and get her in the water."

"Dermies?"

"Of course. The boat will be fumigated, but it isn't really necessary. The infection dies out in a few hours. It'll take a while, of course, to get the boat ready. Tomorrow ... next day, maybe. Bottom's cracked; it'll need some patching."

Paul's smile weakened. More delay. Two more days of living in the gray shadow. Was the priest really to be trusted? Why should he even provide the boat? The jaws of an invisible trap, slowly closing.

Mendelhaus saw his doubt. "If you'd rather leave now, you're free to do so. We're really not going to as much trouble as it might seem. There are several yachts at the dock; Brother Matthew's been preparing to clean one or two up for our own use. And we might as well let you have one. They've been deserted by their owners. And ... well ... you helped the girl when nobody else would have done so. Consider the boat as our way of returning the favor, eh?"

A yacht. The open sea. A semitropical island, uninhabited, on the brink of the Caribbean. And a woman, of course—chosen from among the many who would be willing to share such an escape. Peculiarly, he glanced at Willie's door. It was too bad about her. But she'd get along okay. The yacht . . . if he were only certain of Mendelhaus' intentions ...

The priest began frowning at Paul's hesitation. "Well?" "I don't want to put you to any trouble. . . ."

"Nonsense! You're still afraid of us! Very well, come with me. There's someone I want you to see." Mendelhaus turned and started down the corridor.

Paul lingered. "Who . . . what—"

"Come on!" the priest snapped impatiently.

Reluctantly, Paul followed him to the stairway. They descended to a gloomy basement and entered a smelly laboratory through a double-door. Electric illumination startled him; then he heard the sound of a gasoline engine and knew that the power was generated locally.

"Germicidal lamps," murmured the priest, following his ceilingward gaze. "Some of them are. Don't worry about touching things. It's sterile in here."

"But it's not sterile for your convenience," growled an invisible voice. "And it won't be sterile at all if you don't stay out! Beat it, preacher!"

Paul looked for the source of the voice, and saw a small, short-necked man bending his shaggy gray head over a microscope at the other end of the lab. He had spoken without glancing up at his visitors.

"This is Doctor Seevers, of Princeton, son," said the priest, unruffled by the scientist's ire. "Claims he's an atheist, but personally I think he's a puritan. Doctor, this is the young man I was telling you about. Will you tell him what you know about neuroderm?"

Seevers jotted something on a pad, but kept his eye to the instrument. "Why don't we just give it to him, and let him find out for himself?" the scientist grumbled sardonically.

"Don't frighten him, you heretic! I brought him here to be illuminated."

"Illuminate him yourself. I'm busy. And stop calling me names. I'm not an atheist; I'm a biochemist."

"Yesterday you were a biophysicist. Now, entertain my young man." Mendelhaus blocked the doorway with his body. Paul, with his jaw clenched angrily, had turned to leave.

"That's all I can do, preacher," Seevers grunted. "Entertain him. I know nothing. Absolutely nothing. I have some observed data. I have noticed some correlations. I have seen things happen. I have traced the patterns of the happenings and found some probable common denominators. And that is all! I admit it. Why don't you preachers admit it in your racket?"

"Seevers, as you can see, is inordinately proud of his humility—if that's not a paradox," the priest said to Paul.

"Now, Doctor, this young man—"

Seevers heaved a resigned sigh. His voice went sour-sweet. "All right, sit down, young man. I'll entertain you as soon as I get through counting free nerve-endings in this piece of skin."

Mendelhaus winked at his guest. "Seevers calls it maso-chism when we observe a fast-day or do penance. And there he sits, ripping off patches of his own hide to look at through his peeping glass. Masochism—heh!"

"Get out, preacher!" the scientist bellowed.

Mendelhaus laughed mockingly, nodded Paul toward a chair, and left the lab. Paul sat uneasily watching the back of Seevers' lab jacket.

"Nice bunch of people really—these black-frocked ya-hoos," Seevers murmured conversationally. "If they'd just stop trying to convert me."

"Doctor Seevers, maybe I'd better—"

"Quiet! You bother me. And sit still, I can't stand to have people running in and out of here. You're in; now stay in."

Paul fell silent. He was uncertain whether or not Seevers was a dermie. The small man's lab jacket bunched up to hide the back of his neck, and the sleeves covered his arms. His hands were rubber-gloved, and a knot of white cord behind his head told Paul that he was wearing a gauze mask. His ears were bright pink, but their color was meaningless; it took several months for the gray coloring to seep to all areas of the skin. But Paul guessed he was a dermie—and wearing the gloves and mask to keep his equipment sterile.

He glanced idly around the large room. There were several glass cages of rats against the wall. They seemed airtight, with ducts for forced ventilation. About half the rats were afflicted with neuroderm in its various stages. A few wore shaved patches of skin where the disease had been freshly and forcibly inflicted. Paul caught the fleet-ing impression that several of the animals were staring at him fixedly. He shuddered and looked away.

He glanced casually at the usual maze of laboratory glassware, then turned his attention to a pair of hemispheres, suspended like a trophy on the wall. He recognized them as the twin halves of one of the meteorites, with the small jelly-pocket in the center. Beyond it hung a large picture frame containing several typewritten sheets. Another frame held four pictures of bearded scientists from another century, obviously clipped from magazine or textbook. There was nothing spectacular about the lab. It smelled of clean dust and sour things. Just a small respectable workshop.

Seevers' chair creaked suddenly. "It checks," he said to himself. "It checks again. Forty per cent increase." He threw down the stub pencil and whirled suddenly. Paul saw a pudgy round face with glittering eyes. A dark splotch of neuroderm had crept up from the chin to split his mouth and cover one cheek and an eye, giving him the appearance of a black and white bulldog with a mixed color muzzle.

"It checks," he barked at Paul, then smirked content-edly.

"What checks?"

The scientist rolled up a sleeve to display a patch of adhesive tape on a portion of his arm which had been dis-colored by the disease. "Here," he grunted. "Two weeks ago this area was normal. I took a centimeter of skin from right next to this one, and counted the nerve endings. Since that time, the derm's crept down over the area. I took another square centimeter today, and recounted. Forty per cent increase."

Paul frowned with disbelief. It was generally known that neuroderm had a sensitizing effect, but new nerve endings . . . No. He didn't believe it.

"Third time I've checked it," Seevers said happily. "One place ran up to sixty-five per cent. Heh! Smart little bugs, aren't they? Inventing new somesthetic receptors that way!"

Paul swallowed with difficulty. "What did you say?" he gasped.

Seevers inspected him serenely. "So you're a non-hyper, are you? Yes, indeed, I can smell that you are. Vile, really. Can't understand why sensible hypers would want to paw you. But then, I've insured

myself against such foolishness."

He said it so casually that Paul blinked before he caught the full impact of it. "Y-y-you've done what?"

"What I said. When I first caught it, I simply sat down with a velvet-tipped stylus and located the spots on my hands that gave rise to pleasurable sensations. Then I burned them out with an electric needle. There aren't many of them, really—one or two points per square centimeter." He tugged off his gloves and exhibited pick-marked palms to prove it. "I didn't want to be bothered with such silly urges. Waste of time, chasing nonhypers, -for me it is. I never learned what it's like, so I've never missed it." He turned his hands over and stared at them. "Stubborn little critters keep growing new ones, and I keep burning them out."

Paul leaped to his feet. "Are you trying to tell me that the plague causes new nerve cells to grow?"

Seevers looked up coldly. "Ah, yes. You came here to be illooominated, as the padre put it. If you wish to be de-idiotized, please stop shouting. Otherwise, I'll ask you to leave."

Paul, who had felt like leaving a moment ago, now sub-sided quickly. "I'm sorry," he snapped, then softened his tone to repeat: "I'm sorry."

Seevers took a deep breath, stretched his short meaty arms in an unexpected yawn, then relaxed and grinned. "Sit down, sit down, m'boy. I'll tell you what you want to know, if you really want to know anything. Do you?"

"Of course!"

"You don't! You just want to know how you—what-ever your name is—will be affected by events. You don't care about understanding for its own sake. Few people do. That's why we're in this mess. The padre now, he cares about understanding events—but not for their own sake. He cares, but for his flock's sake and for his God's sake—which is, I must admit, a better attitude than that of the common herd, whose only interest is in their own safety. But if people would just want to understand events for the understanding's sake, we wouldn't be in such a pickle."

Paul watched the professor's bright eyes and took the lecture quietly.

"And so, before I illuminate you, I want to make an impossible request."

"Yes, sir."

"I ask you to be completely objective," Seevers con-tinued, rubbing the bridge of his nose and covering his eyes with his hand. "I want you to forget you ever heard of neuroderm while you listen to me. Rid yourself of all preconceptions, especially those connected with fear. Pretend these are purely hypothetical events that I'm going to discuss." He took his hands down from his eyes and grinned sheepishly. "It always embarrasses me to ask for that kind of cooperation when I know damn well I'll never get it."

"I'll try to be objective, sir."

"Bah!" Seevers slid down to sit on his spine, and hooked the base of his skull over the back of the chair. He blinked thoughtfully at the ceiling for a moment, then folded his hands across his small paunch and closed his eyes.

When he spoke again, he was speaking to himself: "Assume a planet, somewhat earthlike, but not quite. It has carboniferous life forms, but not human. Warm blooded, probably, and semi-intelligent. And the planet has something else—it has an overabundance of parasite forms. Actually, the various types of parasites are the dominant species. The warm blooded animals are the parasites' vegetables, so to speak. Now, during two billion years, say, of survival contests between parasite species, some parasites are quite likely to develop some curious methods of adaption. Methods of insuring the food sup-ply—animals, who must have been taking a beating."

Seevers glanced down from the ceiling. "Tell me, youngster, what major activity did Man invent to secure his vegetable food supply?"

"Agriculture?"

"Certainly. Man is a parasite, as far as vegetables are concerned. But he learned to eat his cake and have it, too. He learned to perpetuate the species he was devour-ing. A very remarkable idea, if you stop to think about it. Very!"

"I don't see—"

"Hush! Now, let's suppose that one species of micro-parasites on our hypothetical planet learned, through long evolutionary processes, to stimulate regrowth in the animal tissue they devoured. Through exuding controlled amounts of growth hormone, I think. Quite an advance-ment, eh?"

Paul had begun leaning forward tensely.

"But it's only the first step. It let the host live longer, although not pleasantly, I imagine. The growth control would be clumsy at first. But soon, all parasite-species either learned to do it, or died out. Then came the contest for the best kind of control. The parasites who kept their hosts in the best physical condition naturally did a better job of survival—since the parasite-ascendancy had cut down on the food supply, just as Man wastes his own resources. And since animals were contending among themselves for a place in the sun, it was to the parasite's advantage to help insure the survival of his host-species—through growth control."

Seevers winked solemnly. "Now begins the downfall of the parasites—their decadence. They concentrated all their efforts along the lines of . . . uh . . . scientific farm-ing, you might say. They began growing various sorts of defense and attack weapons for their hosts—weird bio-devices, perhaps. Horns, swords, fangs, stingers, poison-throwers—we can only guess. But eventually, one group of parasites hit upon—what?"

Paul, who was beginning to stir uneasily, could only stammer. Where was Seevers getting all this?

"Say it!" the scientist demanded.

"The ... nervous system?"

"That's right. You don't need to whisper it. The nerv-ous system. It was probably an unsuccessful parasite at first, because nerve tissue grows slowly. And it's a long stretch of evolution between a microspecies which could stimulate nerve growth and one which could direct and utilize that growth for the host's advantage—and for its own. But at last, after a long struggle, our little species gets there. It begins sharpening the host's senses, building up complex senses from aggregates of old style recep-tors, and increasing the host's intelligence within limits."

Seevers grinned mischievously. "Comes a planetary shake-up of the first magnitude. Such parasites would nat-urally pick the host species with the highest intelligence to begin with. With the extra boost, this brainy animal quickly beats down its own enemies, and consequently the enemies of its microbenefactor. It puts itself in much the same position that Man's in on Earth—lord it over the beasts, divine right to run the place, and all that. Now understand—it's the animal who's become intelligent, not the parasites. The parasites are operating on complex in-stinct patterns, like a hive of bees. They're wonderful neurological engineers—like bees are good structural engineers; blind instinct, accumulated through evolution."

He paused to light a cigarette. "If you feel ill, young man, there's drinking water in that bottle. You look ill."

"I'm all right!"

"Well, to continue: The intelligent animal became master of his planet. Threats to his existence were over-come—unless he was a threat to himself, like we are. But now, the parasites had found a safe home. No new threats to force readaption. They sat back and sighed and became stagnant—as unchanging as horseshoe crabs or amoeba or other Earth ancients. They kept right on working in their neurological beehives, and now they became cultivated by the animal, who recognized their benefactors. They didn't know it, but they were no longer the dominant species. They had insured their survival by leaning on their animal prop, who now took care of them with godlike charity—and selfishness. The parasites had achieved biological heaven. They kept on working, but they stopped fighting. The host was their welfare state, you might say. End of a sequence."

He blew a long breath of smoke and leaned forward to watch Paul, with casual amusement. Paul suddenly real-ized that he was sitting on the edge of his chair and gap-ing. He forced a relaxation.

"Wild guesswork," he breathed uncertainly.

"Some of it's guesswork," Seevers admitted. "But none of it's wild. There is supporting evidence. It's in the form of a message."

"Message?"

"Sure. Come, I'll show you." Seevers arose and moved toward the wall. He stopped before the two

hemispheres. "On second thought, you better show yourself. Take down that sliced meteorite, will you? It's sterile."

Paul crossed the room, climbed unsteadily upon a bench, and brought down the globular meteorite. It was the first time he had examined one of the things, and he inspected it curiously. It was a near-perfect sphere, about eight inches in diameter, with a four-inch hollow in the center. The globe was made up of several concentric shells, tightly fitted, each apparently of a different metal. It was not seemingly heavier than aluminum, although the outer shell was obviously of tough steel.

"Set it face down," Seevers told him. Both halves. Give it a quick little twist. The shells will come apart. Take out the center shell—the hard, thin one between the soft protecting shells."

"How do you know their purposes?" Paul growled as he followed instructions. The shells came apart easily.

"Envelopes are to protect messages," snorted Seevers.

Paul sorted out the hemispheres, and found two mirror-polished shells of paper-thin tough metal. They bore no inscription, either inside or out. He gave Seevers a puzzled frown.

"Handle them carefully while they're out of the protectors. They're already a little blurred ..."

"I don't see any message."

"There's a small bottle of iron filings in that drawer by your knee. Sift them carefully over the outside of the shells. That powder isn't fine enough, really, but it's the best I could do. Felger had some better stuff up at Princeton, before we all got out. This business wasn't my discovery, incidentally."

Baffled, Paul found the iron filings and dusted the mirror-shells with the powder. Delicate patterns appeared—latitudinal circles, etched in iron dust and laced here and there with diagonal lines. He gasped. It looked like the map of a planet.

"I know what you're thinking," Seevers said. "That's what we thought too, at first. Then Felger came up with this very fine dust. Fine as they are, those lines are rows of pictograph symbols. You can make them out vaguely with a good reading glass, even with this coarse stuff. It's magnetic printing—like two-dimensional wire-recording. Evidently, the animals that printed it had either very powerful eyes, or a magnetic sense."

"Anyone understand it?"

"Princeton staff was working on it when the world went crazy. They figured out enough to guess at what I've just told you. They found five different shell-messages among a dozen or so spheres. One of them was a sort of a key. A symbol equated to a diagram of a carbon atom. Another symbol equated to a pi in binary numbers. Things like that—about five hundred symbols, in fact. Some we couldn't figure. Then they defined other symbols by what amounted to blank-filling quizzes. Things like—'A star is ... and there would be the unknown symbol. We would try to decide whether it meant 'hot,' 'white,' 'huge,' and so forth."

"And you managed it?"

"In part. The ruthless way in which the missiles were opened destroyed some of the clarity. The senders were guilty of their own brand of anthropomorphism. They projected their own psychology on us. They expected us to open the things shell by shell, cautiously, and figure out the text before we went further. Heh! What happens? Some machinist grabs one, shakes it, weighs it, sticks it on a lathe, and—brrrrr! Our curiosity is still rather apelike. Stick our arm in a gopher hole to see if there's a rattlesnake inside."

There was a long silence while Paul stood peering over the patterns on the shell. "Why haven't people heard about this?" he asked quietly.

"Heard about it!" Seevers roared. "And how do you propose to tell them about it?"

Paul shook his head. It was easy to forget that Man had scurried away from his presses and his broadcasting stations and his railroads, leaving his mechanical creatures to sleep in their own rust while he fled like a bee-stung bear before the strange terror.

"What, exactly, do the patterns say, Doctor?"

"I've told you some of it—the evolutionary origin of the neuroderm parasites. We also pieced together their reasons for launching the missiles across space—several thousand years ago. Their sun was about

to flare into a supernova. They worked out a theoretical space-drive, but they couldn't fuel it—needed some element that was scarce in their system. They could get to their outer planet, but that wouldn't help much. So they just cultured up a batch of their parasite-benefactors, rolled them into these balls, and fired them like charges of buckshot at various stars. Interception-course, naturally. They meant to miss just a little, so that the projectiles would swing into lone elliptical orbits around the suns—close enough in to intersect the radiational 'life-belt' and eventually cross paths with planets whose orbits were near-circular. Looks like they hit us on the first pass."

"You mean they weren't aiming at Earth in particular?"

"Evidently not. They couldn't know we were here. Not at a range like that. Hundreds of light-years. They just took a chance on several stars. Shipping off their pets was sort of a last ditch stand against extinction—symbolic, to be sure—but a noble gesture, as far as they were concerned. A giving away of part of their souls. Like a man writing his will and leaving his last worldly possession to some unknown species beyond the stars. Imagine them standing there—watching the projectiles being fired out toward deep space. There goes their inheritance, to an unknown heir, or perhaps to no one. The little creatures that brought them up from beasthood."

Seevers paused, staring up at the sunlight beyond the high basement window. He was talking to himself again, quietly: "You can see them turn away and silently go back . . . to wait for their collapsing sun to reach the critical point, the detonating point. They've left their last mark—a dark and uncertain benediction to the cosmos."

"You're a fool, Seevers," Paul grunted suddenly.

Seevers whirled, whitening. His hand darted out forgetfully toward the young man's arm, but he drew it back as Paul sidestepped.

"You actually regard this thing as desirable, don't you?" Paul asked. "You can't see that you're under its effect. Why does it affect people that way? And you say I can't be objective."

The professor smiled coldly. "I didn't say it's desirable. I was simply pointing out that the beings who sent it saw it as desirable. They were making some unwarranted assumptions."

"Maybe they just didn't care."

"Of course they cared. Their fallacy was that we would open it as they would have done—cautiously. Perhaps they couldn't see how a creature could be both brash and intelligent. They meant for us to read the warning on the shells before we went further."

"Warning . . . ?"

Seevers smiled bitterly. "Yes, warning. There was one group of oversized symbols on all the spheres. See that pattern on the top ring? It says, in effect—'Finder-creatures, you who destroy your own people—if you do this thing, then destroy this container without penetrating deeper. If you are self-destroyers, then the contents will only help to destroy you.'"

There was a frigid silence.

"But somebody would have opened one anyway," Paul protested.

Seevers turned his bitter smile on the window. "You couldn't be more right. The senders just didn't foresee our monkey-minded species. If they saw Man digging out the nuggets, braying over them, chortling over them, cracking them like walnuts, then turning tail to run howling for the forests—well, they'd think twice before they fired another round of their celestial buckshot."

"Doctor Seevers, what do you think will happen now? To the world, I mean?"

Seevers shrugged. "I saw a baby born yesterday—to a woman down the island. It was fully covered with neuro-derm at birth. It has some new sensory equipment—small pores in the finger tips, with taste buds and olfactory cells in them. Also a nodule above each eye sensitive to infrared."

Paul groaned.

"It's not the first case. Those things are happening to adults, too, but you have to have the condition for quite a while. Brother Thomas has the finger pores already. Hasn't learned to use them yet, of course. He gets sensations from them, but the receptors aren't connected to olfactory and taste centers of the brain. They're still linked with the somesthetic interpretive centers. He can touch various substances and get different perceptive combinations of heat, pain, cold, pressure, and so forth. He says vinegar feels

ice-cold, quinine sharp-hot, cologne warm--velvet-prickly, and . . . he blushes when he touches a musky perfume."

Paul laughed, and the hollow sound startled him.

"It may be several generations before we know all that will happen," Seevers went on. "I've examined sections of rat brain and found the microorganisms. They may be working at rerouting these new receptors to proper brain areas. Our grandchildren—if Man's still on Earth by then—can perhaps taste analyze substances by touch, qualitatively determine the contents of a test tube by sticking a finger in it. See a warm radiator in a dark room—by infrared. Perhaps there'll be some ultraviolet sensitization. My rats are sensitive to it."

Paul went to the rat cages and stared in at three gray-pelted animals that seemed larger than the others. They retreated against the back wall and watched him warily. They began squeaking and exchanging glances among themselves.

"Those are third-generation hypers," Seevers told him. "They've developed a simple language. Not intelligent by human standards, but crafty. They've learned to use their sensory equipment. They know when I mean to feed them, and when I mean to take one out to kill and dissect. A slight change in my emotional odor, I imagine. Learning's a big hurdle, youngster. A hyper with finger pores gets sensations from them, but it takes a long time to attach meaning to the various sensations—through learning. A baby gets visual sensations from his un-trained eyes—but the sensation is utterly without significance until he associates milk with white, mother with a face shape, and so forth."

"What will happen to the brain?" Paul breathed.

"Not too much, I imagine. I haven't observed much happening. The rats show an increase in intelligence, but not in brain size. The intellectual boost apparently comes from an ability to perceive things in terms of more senses. Ideas, concepts, precepts—are made of memory collections of past sensory experiences. An apple is red, fruity-smelling, sweet-acid flavored—that's your sensory idea of an apple. A blind man without a tongue couldn't form such a complete idea. A hyper, on the other hand, could add some new adjectives that you couldn't understand. The fully-developed hyper—I'm not one yet—has more sensory tools with which to grasp ideas. When he learns to use them, he'll be mentally more efficient. But there's apparently a hitch.

"The parasite's instinctive goal is to insure the host's survival. That's the substance of the warning. If Man has the capacity to work together, then the parasites will help him shape his environment. If Man intends to keep fighting with his fellows, the parasite will help him do a better job of that, too. Help him destroy himself more efficiently."

"Men have worked together—"

"In small tribes," Seevers interrupted. "Yes, we have group spirit. Ape-tribe spirit, not race spirit."

Paul moved restlessly toward the door. Seevers had turned to watch him with a cool smirk.

"Well, you're illuminated, youngster. Now what do you intend to do?"

Paul shook his head to scatter the confusion of ideas. "What can anyone do? Except run. To an island, per-haps."

Seevers hoisted a cynical eyebrow. "Intend taking the condition with you? Or will you try to stay nonhyper?"

"Take ... are you crazy? I mean to stay healthy!"

"That's what I thought. If you were objective about this, you'd give yourself the condition and get it over with. I did. You remind me of a monkey running away from a hypodermic needle. The hypo has serum health-insurance in it, but the needle looks sharp. The monkey chatters with fright."

Paul stalked angrily to the door, then paused. "There's a girl upstairs, a dermie. Would you—"

"Tell her all this? I always brief new hypers. It's one of my duties around this ecclesiastical leper ranch. She's on the verge of insanity, I suppose. They all are, before they get rid of the idea that they're damned souls. What's she to you?"

Paul strode out into the corridor without answering. He felt physically ill. He hated Seevers' smug bulldog face with a violence that was unfamiliar to him. The man had given the plague to himself! So he said. But was it true? Was any of it true? To claim that the hallucinations were new sensory phenomena,



to pose the plague as possibly desirable—Seevers had no patent on those ideas. Every dermie made such claims; it was a symptom. Seevers had simply invented clever rationalizations to support his de-lusions, and Paul had been nearly taken in. Seevers was clever. *Do you mean to take the condition with you when you go?* Wasn't that just another way of suggesting, "Why don't you allow me to touch you?" Paul was shivering as he returned to the third floor room to recoat himself with the pungent oil. Why not leave now? he thought.

But he spent the day wandering along the waterfront, stopping briefly at the docks to watch a crew of monks scrambling over the scaffolding that surrounded the hulls of two small sea-going vessels. The monks were caulking split seams and trotting along the platforms with buckets of tar and paint. Upon inquiry, Paul learned which of the vessels was intended for his own use. And he put aside all thoughts of immediate departure.

She was a fifty-footer, a slender craft with a weighted fin-keel that would cut too deep for bay navigation. Paul guessed that the colony wanted only a flat-bottomed ves-sel for hauling passengers and cargo across from the mainland. They would have little use for the trim seaster with the lines of a baby destroyer. Upon closer examina-tion, he guessed that it had been a police boat, or Coast Guard craft. There was a gun-mounting on the forward deck, minus the gun. She was built for speed, and pow-ered by diesels, and she could be provisioned for a nice long cruise.

Paul went to scrounge among the warehouses and lo-cate a stock of supplies. He met an occasional monk or nun, but the gray-skinned monastics seemed only desir-ous of avoiding him. The dermie desire was keyed principally by smell, and the deodorant oil helped preserve him from their affections. Once he was approached by a wild-eyed layman who startled him amidst a heap of warehouse crates. The dermie was almost upon him before Paul heard the footfall. Caught without an escape route, and assailed by startled terror, he shattered the man's arm with a shotgun blast, then fled from the warehouse to escape the dermie's screams.

Choking with shame, he found a dermie monk and sent him to care for the wounded creature. Paul had shot at other plague victims when there was no escape, but never with intent to kill. The man's life had been spared only by hasty aim.

"It was self-defense," he reminded himself.

But defense against what? Against the inevitable?

He hurried back to the hospital and found Mendel-haus outside the small chapel. "I better not wait for your boat," he told the priest. "I just shot one of your people. I better leave before it happens again."

Mendelhaus' thin lips tightened. "You shot—"

"Didn't kill him," Paul explained hastily. "Broke his arm. One of the brothers is bringing him over. I'm sorry, Father, but he jumped me."

The priest glanced aside silently, apparently wrestling against anger. "I'm glad you told me," he said quietly. "I suppose you couldn't help it. But why did you leave the hospital? You're safe here. The yacht will be provisioned for you. I suggest you remain in your room until it's ready. I won't vouch for your safety any far-ther than the building." There was a tone of command in his voice, and Paul nodded slowly. He started away.

"The young lady's been asking for you," the priest called after him.

Paul stopped. "How is she?"

"Over the crisis, I think. Infection's down. Nervous condition not so good. Deep depression. Sometimes she goes a little hysterical." He paused, then lowered his voice. "You're at the focus of it, young man. Sometimes she gets the idea that she touched you, and then sometimes she raves about how she wouldn't do it."

Paul whirled angrily, forming a protest, but the priest continued: "Seevers talked to her, and then a psycholo-gist—one of our sisters. It seemed to help some. She's asleep now. I don't know how much of Seevers' talk she understood, however. She's dazed—combined effects of pain, shock, infection, guilt feelings, fright, hysteria—and some other things, Morphine doesn't make her mind any clearer. Neither does the fact that she thinks you're avoiding her."

"It's the plague I'm avoiding!" Paul snapped. "Not her."

Mendelhaus chuckled mirthlessly. "You're talking to me, aren't you?" He turned and entered the chapel through a swinging door. As the door fanned back and forth, Paul caught a glimpse of a candlelit altar and a stark wooden crucifix, and a sea of monk-robos flowing over the pews, waiting for the celebrant priest to enter the sanctuary and begin the Sacrifice of the Mass. He re-alized vaguely that it was Sunday.

Paul wandered back to the main corridor and found himself drifting toward Willie's room. The door was ajar, and he stopped short lest she see *him*. But after a moment he inched forward until he caught a glimpse of her dark mass of hair unfurled across the pillow. One of the sisters had combed it for her, and it spread in dark waves, gleaming in the candlelight. She was still asleep. The candle startled him for an instant—suggesting a deathbed and the sacrament of the dying. But a dog-eared magazine lay beneath it; someone had been read-ing to her.

He stood in the doorway, watching the slow rise of her breathing. Fresh, young, shapely—even in the crude cotton gown they had given her, even beneath the blue-white pallor of her skin—soon to become gray as a cloudy sky in a wintery twilight. Her lips moved slightly, and he backed a step away. They paused, parted moistly, showing thin white teeth. Her delicately carved face was thrown back slightly on the pillow. There was a sudden tightening of her jaw.

A weirdly pitched voice floated unexpectedly from down the hall, echoing the semisinging of Gregorian chant: "*Asperges me, Domine, hyssopo, et mundabor...*" The priest was beginning Mass.

As the sound came, the girl's hands clenched into rigid fists beneath the sheet. Her eyes flared open to stare wildly at the ceiling. Clutching the bedclothes, she pressed the fists up against her face and cried out: "No! NOOOO! God, I won't!"

Paul backed out of sight and pressed himself against the wall. A knot of desolation tightened in his stomach. He looked around nervously. A nun, hearing the outcry, came scurrying down the hall, murmuring anxiously to herself. A plump mother hen in a dozen yards of starched white cloth. She gave him a quick challenging glance and waddled inside.

"Child, my child, what's wrong! Nightmares again?"

He heard Willie breathe a nervous moan of relief. Then her voice, weakly— "They . . . they made me . . . touch . . . Ooo, God! I want to cut off my hands!"

Paul fled, leaving the nun's sympathetic reassurance to fade into a murmur behind him.

He spent the rest of the day and the night in his room. On the following day, Mendelhaus came with word that the boat was not yet ready. They needed to finish caulk-ing and stock it with provisions. But the priest assured him that it should be afloat within twenty-four hours. Paul could not bring himself to ask about the girl.

A monk brought his food—unopened cans, still steam-ing from the sterilizer, and on a covered tray. The monk wore gloves and mask, and he had oiled his own skin. There were moments when Paul felt as if he were the diseased and contagious patient from whom the others protected themselves. Like Omar, he thought, wonder-ing—"which is the Potter, pray, and which the Pot?"

Was Man, as SeEVERS implied, a terrorized ape-tribe fleeing illogically from the gray hands that only wanted to offer a blessing? How narrow was the line dividing blessing from curse, god from demon! The parasites came in a devil's mask, the mask of disease. "Diseases have often killed me," said Man. "All disease is therefore evil." But was that necessarily true? Fire had often killed Man's club-bearing ancestors, but later came to serve him. Even diseases had been used to good advantage—artificially induced typhoid and malaria to fight venereal infections.

But the gray skin . . . taste buds in the fingertips . . . alien microorganisms tampering with the nerves and the brain. Such concepts caused his scalp to bristle. Man—made over to suit the tastes of a bunch of supposedly beneficent parasites—was he still Man, or something else? Little bacteriological farmers imbedded in the skin, rais-ing a crop of nerve cells—eat one, plant two, sow an old actor in a new field, reshuffle the feeder-fibers to the brain.

Monday brought a cold rain and stiff wind from the Gulf. He watched the water swirling through littered gutters in the street. Sitting in the window, he watched the gloom and waited, praying that the

storm would not delay his departure. Mendelhaus smiled politely, through his doorway once. "Willie's ankle seems healing nicely," he said. "Swelling's gone down so much we had to change casts. If only she would—"

"Thanks for the free report, Padre," Paul growled irritably.

The priest shrugged and went away.

It was still raining when the sky darkened with evening. The monastic dock-crew had certainly been unable to finish. Tomorrow ... perhaps.

After nightfall, he lit a candle and lay awake watching its unflickering yellow tongue until drowsiness lolled his head aside. He snuffed it out and went to bed.

Dreams assailed him, tormented him, stroked him with dark hands while he lay back, submitting freely. Small hands, soft, cool, tender—touching his forehead and his cheeks, while a voice whispered caresses.

He awoke suddenly to blackness. The feel of the dream-hands was still on his face. What had aroused him? A sound in the hall, a creaking hinge? The dark-ness was impenetrable. The rain had stopped—perhaps its cessation had disturbed him. He felt curiously tense as he lay listening to the humid, musty corridors. A ... faint ... rustle ... and ..

*Breathing! The sound of soft breathing was in the room with him!*

He let out a hoarse shriek that shattered the unearth-ly silence. A high-pitched scream of fright answered him! From a few feet away in the room. He groped toward it and fumbled against a bare wall. He roared curses, and tried to find first matches, then the shotgun. At last he found the gun, aimed at nothing across the room, and jerked the trigger. The explosion deafened him. The win-dow shattered, and a sift of plaster rustled to the floor.

The brief flash had illuminated the room. It was empty. He stood frozen. Had he imagined it all? But no, the visitor's startled scream had been real enough.

A cool draft fanned his face. The door was open. Had he forgotten to lock it again? A tumult of sound was beginning to arise from the lower floors. His shot had aroused the sleepers. But there was a closer sound—sobbing in the corridor, and an irregular creaking noise.

At last he found a match and rushed to the door. But the tiny flame revealed nothing within its limited aura. He heard a doorknob rattle in the distance; his visitor was escaping via the outside stairway. He thought of pursuit and vengeance. But instead, he rushed to the washbasin and began scrubbing himself thoroughly with harsh brown soap. Had his visitor touched him—or had the hands been only dream-stuff? He was frightened and sickened.

Voices were filling the corridor. The light of several candles was advancing toward his doorway. He turned to see monks' faces peering anxiously inside. Father Men-delhaus shouldered his way through the others, glanced at the window, the wall, then at Paul.

"What—"

"Safety, eh?" Paul hissed. "Well, I had a prowler! A woman! I think I've been touched."

The priest turned and spoke to a monk. "Go to the stairway and call for the Mother Superior. Ask her to make an immediate inspection of the sisters' quarters. If any nuns have been out of their rooms—"

A shrill voice called from down the hallway: "Father, Father! The girl with the injured ankle! She's not in her bed! She's gone!"

"Willie!" Paul gasped.

A small nun with a candle scurried up and panted to recover her breath for a moment. "She's gone, Father. I was on night duty. I heard the shot, and I went to see if it disturbed her. She wasn't there!"

The priest grumbled incredulously. "How could she get out? She can't walk with that cast."

"Crutches, Father. We told her she could get up in a few days. While she was still irrational, she kept saying they were going to amputate her leg. We brought the crutches in to prove she'd be up soon. It's my fault, Fa-ther. I should have—"

"Never mind! Search the building for her."

Paul dried his wet skin and faced the priest angrily. "What can I do to disinfect myself?" he demanded.

Mendelhaus called out into the hallway where a crowd had gathered. "Someone please get Doctor

Seevers."

"I'm here, preacher," grunted the scientist. The monastics parted ranks to make way for his short chubby body. He grinned amusedly at Paul. "So, you decided to make your home here after all, eh?"

Paul croaked an insult at him. "Have you got any effective—"

"Disinfectants? Afraid not. Nitric acid will do the trick on one or two local spots. Where were you touched?"

"I don't know. I was asleep."

Seevers' grin widened. "Well, you can't take a bath in nitric acid. We'll try something else, but I doubt if it'll work for a direct touch."

"That oil—"

"Uh-uh! That'll do for exposure-weakened parasites you might pick up by handling an object that's been touched. But with skin to skin contact, the bugs're pretty stout little rascals. Come on downstairs, though, we'll make a pass at it."

Paul followed him quickly down the corridor. Behind him, a soft voice was murmuring: "I just can't understand why nonhypers are so..." Mendelhaus said something to Seevers, blotting out the voice. Paul chafed at the thought that they might consider him cowardly.

But with the herds fleeing northward, cowardice was the social norm. And after a year's flight, Paul had accepted the norm as the only possible way to fight.

Seevers was emptying chemicals into a tub of water in the basement when a monk hurried in to tug at Mendelhaus' sleeve. "Father, the sisters report that the girl's not in the building."

"What? Well, she can't be far! Search the grounds. If she's not there, try the adjoining blocks."

Paul stopped unbuttoning his shirt. Willie had said some mournful things about what she would rather do than submit to the craving. And her startled scream when he had cried out in the darkness—the scream of someone suddenly awakening to reality—from a dream-world.

The monk left the room. Seevers sloshed more chemicals into the tub. Paul could hear the wind whipping about the basement windows and the growl of an angry surf not so far away. Paul rebuttoned his shirt.

"Which way's the ocean?" he asked suddenly. He backed toward the door.

"No, you fool!" roared Seevers. "You're not going to —get *him*, preacher!"

Paul sidestepped as the priest grabbed for him. He darted outside and began running for the stairs. Mendelhaus bellowed for him to stop.

"Not me!" Paul called back angrily. "Willie!"

Moments later, he was racing across the sodden lawn and into the street. He stopped on the corner to get his bearings. The wind brought the sound of the surf with it.

He began running east and calling her name into the night.

The rain had ceased, but the pavement was wet and water gurgled in the gutters. Occasionally the moon peered through the thinning veil of clouds, but its light failed to furnish a view of the street ahead. After a minute's running, he found himself standing on the seawall. The breakers thundered a stone's throw across the sand. For a moment they became visible under the coy moon, then vanished again in blackness. He had not seen her.

"Willie!"

Only the breakers' growl responded. And a glimmer of phosphorescence from the waves.

"Willie!" he slipped down from the seawall and began feeling along the jagged rocks that lay beneath it. She could not have gotten down without falling. Then he remembered a rickety flight of steps just to the north, and he trotted quickly toward it.

The moon came out suddenly. He saw her, and stopped. She was sitting motionless on the bottom step, holding her face in her hands. The crutches were stacked neatly against the handrail. Ten yards across the sand slope lay the hungry, devouring surf. Paul approached her slowly. The moon went out again. His feet sucked at the rain-soaked sand.

He stopped by the handrail, peering at her motionless shadow. "Willie?"

A low moan, then a long silence. "I did it, Paul," she muttered miserably. "It was like a dream at first,

but then . . . you shouted . . . and ..."

He crouched in front of her, sitting on his heels. Then he took her wrists firmly and tugged her hands from her face.

"Don't."

He pulled her close and kissed her. Her mouth was frightened. Then he lifted her—being cautious of the now-sodden cast. He climbed the steps and started back to the hospital. Willie, dazed and weary and still uncomprehending, fell asleep in his arms. Her hair blew about his face in the wind. It smelled warm and alive. He wondered what sensation it would produce to the finger-pore receptors. "Wait and see," he said to himself.

The priest met him with a growing grin when he brought her into the candlelit corridor. "Shall we forget the boat, son?"

Paul paused. "No . . . I'd like to borrow it anyway." Mendelhaus looked puzzled.

SeEVERS snorted at him: "Preacher, don't you know any reasons for traveling besides running away?"

Paul carried her back to her room. He meant to have a long talk when she awoke. About an island—until the world sobered up.

## MEMENTO HOMO

*... quia pulvis es et in pulverem reverteris.*

Old Donegal was dying. They had all known it was coming, and they watched it come—his haggard wife, his daughter, and now his grandson, home on emergency leave from the pre-astronautics academy. Old Donegal knew it too, and had known it from the beginning, when he had begun to lose control of his legs and was forced to walk with a cane. But most of the time, he pretended to let them keep the secret they shared with the doctors—that the operations had all been failures, and that the cancer that fed at his spine would gnaw its way brainward until the paralysis engulfed vital organs, and then Old Donegal would cease to be. It would be cruel to let them know that he knew. Once, weeks ago, he had joked about the approaching shadows.

"Buy the plot back where people won't walk over it, Martha," he said. "Get it way back under the cedars—next to the fence. There aren't many graves back there yet. I want to be alone."

"Don't *talk* that way, Donny!" his wife had choked. "You're not dying."

His eyes twinkled maliciously. "Listen, Martha, I want to be buried face-down. I want to be buried with my back to space, understand? Don't let them lay me out like a lily."

"Donny, *please!*"

"They oughta face a man the way he's headed," Donegal grunted. "I been up—way up. Now I'm going straight down."

Martha had fled from the room in tears. He had never done it again, except to the interns and nurses, who, while they insisted that he was going to get well, didn't mind joking with him about it.

Martha can bear my death, he thought, can bear pre-knowledge of it. But she couldn't bear thinking that he might take it calmly. If he accepted death gracefully, it would be like deliberately leaving her, and Old Donegal had decided to help her believe whatever would be comforting to her in such a troublesome moment.

"When'll they let me out of this bed again?" he complained. "Be patient, Donny," she sighed. "It won't be long. You'll be up and around before you know it."

"Back on the moon-run, maybe?" he offered, "Listen, Martha, I been planet-bound too long. I'm not too old for the moon-run, am I? Sixty-three's not so old."

That had been carrying things too far. She knew he was hoaxing, and dabbed at her eyes again. The dead must humor the mourners, he thought, and the sick must comfort the visitors. It was always so.

But it was harder, now that the end was near. His eyes were hazy, and his thoughts unclear. He could move his arms a little, clumsily, but feeling was gone from them. The rest of his body was lost to him.

Sometimes he seemed to feel his stomach and his hips, but the sensation was mostly an illusion offered by higher nervous centers, like the "ghost-arm" that an amputee continues to feel. The wires were down, and he was cut off from himself.

He lay wheezing on the hospital bed, in his own room, in his own rented flat. Gaunt and unshaven, gray as winter twilight, he lay staring at the white net curtains that billowed gently in the breeze from the open window. There was no sound in the room but the sound of breathing and the loud ticking of an alarm clock. Occasionally he heard a chair scrap-ing on the stone terrace next door, and the low mutter of voices, sometimes laughter, as the servants of the Keith man-sion arranged the terrace for late afternoon guests.

With considerable effort, he rolled his head toward Martha who sat beside the bed, pinchfaced and weary.

"You ought to get some sleep," he said.

"I slept yesterday. Don't talk, Donny. It tires you."

"You ought to get more sleep. You never sleep enough. Are you afraid I'll get up and run away if you go to sleep for awhile?"

She managed a brittle smile. "There'll be plenty of time for sleep when . . . when you're well again." The brittle smile fled and she swallowed hard, like swallowing a fish-bone. He glanced down, and noticed that she was squeezing his hand spasmodically.

There wasn't much left of the hand, he thought. Bones and ugly tight-stretched hide spotted with brown. Bulging knuckles with yellow cigarette stains. My hand. He tried to tighten it, tried to squeeze Martha's thin one in return. He watched it open and contract a little, but it was like operating a remote-control mechanism. Goodbye, hand, you're leaving me the way my legs did, he told it. I'll see you again in hell. How hammy can you get, Old Donegal? You maudlin ass.

"Requiescat," he muttered over the hand, and let it lie in peace.

Perhaps she heard him. "Donny," she whispered, leaning closer, "won't you let me call the priest now? Please."

He rattled a sigh and rolled his head toward the window again. "Are the Keiths having a party today?" he asked. "Sounds like they're moving chairs out on the terrace."

"Please, Donny, the priest?"

He let his head roll aside and closed his eyes, as if asleep. The bed shook slightly as she quickly caught at his wrist to feel for a pulse.

"If I'm not dying, I don't need a priest," he said sleepily. "That's not right," she scolded softly. "You know that's not right, Donny. You know better."

Maybe I'm being too rough on her? he wondered. He hadn't minded getting baptized her way, and married her way, and occasionally priest-handled the way she wanted him to when he was home from a space-run, but when it came to dying, Old Donegal wanted to do it his own way.

He opened his eyes at the sound of a bench being dragged across the stone terrace. "Martha, what kind of a party are the Keiths having today?"

"I wouldn't know," she said stiffly. "You'd think they'd have a little more respect. You'd think they'd put it off a few days."

"Until—?"

"Until you feel better."

"I feel fine, Martha. I like parties. I'm glad they're having one. Pour me a drink, will you? I can't reach the bottle anymore."

"It's empty."

"No it isn't, Martha, it's still a quarter full. I know. I've been watching it."

"You shouldn't have it, Donny. Please don't."

"But this is a party, Martha. Besides, the doctor says I can have whatever I want. Whatever I want, you hear? That means I'm getting well, doesn't it?"

"Sure, Donny, sure. Getting well."

"The whiskey, Martha. Just a finger in a tumbler, no more. I want to feel like it's a party."

Her throat was rigid as she poured it. She helped him get the tumbler to his mouth. The liquor seared his throat, and he gagged a little as the fumes clogged his nose. Good whiskey, the best—but he couldn't take it any more. He eyed the green stamp on the neck of the bottle on the bedtable and grinned. He hadn't had whiskey like that since his spacedays. Couldn't afford it now, not on a blastman's pension.

He remembered how he and Caid used to smuggle a couple of fifths aboard for the moon-run. If they caught you, it meant suspension, but there was no harm in it, not for the blastroom men who had nothing much to do from the time the ship acquired enough velocity for the long, long coaster ride until they started the rockets again for lunar landing. You could drink a fifth, jettison the bottle through the trash lock, and sober up before you were needed again. It was the only way to pass the time in the cramped cubicle, unless you ruined your eyes trying to read by the glow-lamps. Old Donegal chuckled. If he and Caid had stayed on the run, Earth would have a ring by now, like Saturn—a ring of Old Granddad bottles.

"You said it, Donny-boy," said the misty man by the billow-ing curtains. "Who else knows the Geggenschein is broken glass?"

Donegal laughed. Then he wondered what the man was doing there. The man was lounging against the window, and his unzipped space rig draped about him in an old familiar way. Loose plug-in connections and hose-ends dangled about his lean body. He was freckled and grinning.

"Caid," Old Donegal breathed softly.

"What did you say, Donny?" Martha answered.

Old Donegal blinked hard and shook his head. Something let go with a soggy snap, and the misty man was gone. I'd better take it easy on the whiskey, he thought. You got to wait, Donegal, old lush, until Nora and Ken get here. You can't get drunk until they're gone, or you might get them mixed up with memories like Caid's.

Car doors slammed in the street below. Martha glanced toward the window.

"Think it's them? I wish they'd get here. I wish they'd hurry."

Martha arose and tiptoed to the window. She peered down toward the sidewalk, put on a sharp frown. He heard a distant mutter of voices and occasional laughter, with group-footsteps milling about on the sidewalk. Martha murmured her dis-approval and closed the window.

"Leave it open," he said.

"But the Keiths' guests are starting to come. There'll be such a racket." She looked at him hopefully, the way she did when she prompted his manners before company came.

Maybe it wasn't decent to listen in on a party when you were dying, he thought. But that wasn't the reason. Donegal, your chamber-pressure's dropping off. Your brains are in your butt-end, where a spacer's brains belong, but your butt-end died last month. She wants the window closed for her own sake, not yours.

"Leave it closed," he grunted. "But open it again before the moon-run blasts off. I want to listen."

She smiled and nodded, glancing at the clock. "It'll be an hour and a half yet. I'll watch the time."

"I hate that clock. I wish you'd throw it out. It's loud."

"It's your medicine-clock, Donny." She came back to sit down at his bedside again. She sat in silence. The clock filled the room with its clicking pulse.

"What time are they coming?" he asked.

"Nora and Ken? They'll be here soon. Don't fret."

"Why should I fret?" He chuckled. "That boy—he'll be a good spacer, won't he, Martha?"

Martha said nothing, fanned at a fly that crawled across his pillow. The fly buzzed up in an angry spiral and alighted on the ceiling. Donegal watched it for a time. The fly had natural-born space-legs. I know your tricks, he told it with a smile, and I learned to walk on the bottomside of things before you were a maggot. You stand there with your magna-soles hanging to the hull, and the rest of you's in free fall. You jerk a sole lose, and your knee flies up to your belly, and reaction spins you half-around and near throws your other hip out of joint if you don't jam the foot down fast and jerk up the other. It's worse'n trying to run through knee-deep mud with snow-shoes, and a man'll go nuts trying to keep his arms and legs from

taking off in odd directions. I know your tricks, fly. But the fly was born with his magnasoles, and he trotted across the ceiling like Donegal never could.

"That boy Ken—he ought to make a damn good space-engineer," wheezed the old man.

Her silence was long, and he rolled his head toward her again. Her lips tight, she stared down at the palm of his hand, unfolded his bony fingers, felt the cracked calluses that still welted the shrunken skin, calluses worn there by the linings of space gauntlets and the handles of fuel valves, and the rungs of get-about ladders during free fall.

"I don't know if I should tell you," she said.

"Tell me what, Martha?"

She looked up slowly, scrutinizing his face. "Ken's changed his mind, Nora says. Ken doesn't like the academy. She says he wants to go to medical school."

Old Donegal thought it over, nodded absently. "That's fine. Space medics get good pay." He watched her carefully.

She lowered her eyes, rubbed at his calluses again. She shook her head slowly. "He doesn't want to go to space."

The clock clicked loudly in the closed room.

"I thought I ought to tell you, so you won't say anything to him about it," she added.

Old Donegal looked grayer than before. After a long si-lence, he rolled his head away and looked toward the limp curtains.

"Open the window, Martha," he said.

Her tongue clucked faintly as she started to protest, but she said nothing. After frozen seconds, she sighed and went to open it. The curtains billowed, and a babble of conversa-tion blew in from the terrace of the Keith mansion. With the sound came the occasional brassy discord of a musician tuning his instrument. She clutched the window-sash as if she wished to slam it closed again.

"Well! Music!" grunted Old Donegal. "That's good. This is some shebang. Good whiskey and good music and you." He chuckled, but it choked off into a fit of coughing.

"Donny, about Ken—"

"No matter, Martha," he said hastily. "Space-medic's pay is good."

"But Donny—" She turned from the window, stared at him briefly, then said, "Sure, Donny, sure," and came back to sit down by his bed.

He smiled at her affectionately. She was a man's woman, was Martha—always had been, still was. He had married her the year he had gone to space—a lissome, wistful, old-fashioned lass, with big violet eyes and gentle hands and gentle thoughts—and she had never complained about the long and lonely weeks between blast-off and glide-down, when most spacers' wives listened to the psychiatrists and soap-operas and soon developed the symptoms that were expected of them, either because the symptoms were *chic*, or because they felt they should do something to earn the pity that was extended to them. "It's not so bad," Martha had assured him. "The house keeps me busy till Nora's home from school, and then there's a flock of kids around till dinner. Nights are a little empty, but if there's a moon, I can always go out on the porch and look at it and know where you are. And Nora gets out the telescope you built her, and we make a game of it. `Seeing if Daddy's still at the office' she calls it."

"Those were the days," he muttered.

"What, Donny?"

"Do you remember that Steve Farran song?"

She paused, frowning thoughtfully. There were a lot of Steve Farran songs, but after a moment she picked the right one, and sang it softly . . .

"O moon whereo'er the clouds fly,

Beyond the willow tree,

There is a ramblin' space guy

I wish you'd save for me.

*Mare Tranquilitatis,*



O dark and tranquil sea,  
Until he drops from heaven,  
Rest him there with thee ...”

Her voice cracked, and she laughed. Old Donegal chuckled weakly.

"Fried mush," he said. "That one made the cats wilt their ears and wail at the moon."

"I feel real crazy," he added. "Hand me the king kong, fluff muff."

"Keep cool, Daddy-O, you've had enough." Martha red-denied and patted his arm, looking pleased. Neither of them had talked that way, even in the old days, but the outdated slang brought back memories—school parties, dances at the Rocketport Club, the early years of the war when Donegal had jockeyed an R-43 fighter in the close-space assaults against the Soviet satellite project. The memories were good.

A brassy blare of modern "slide" arose suddenly from the Keith terrace as the small orchestra launched into its first number. Martha caught an angry breath and started toward the window.

"Leave it," he said. "It's a party. Whiskey, Martha. Please —just a small one."

She gave him a hurtful glance.

"Whiskey. Then you can call the priest."

"Donny, it's not right. You know it's not right—to bargain for such as that."

"All right. Whiskey. Forget the priest."

She poured it for him, and helped him get it down, and then went out to make the phone-call. Old Donegal lay shud-dering over the whiskey taste and savoring the burn in his throat. Jesus, but it was good.

You old bastard, he thought, you got no right to enjoy life when nine-tenths of you is dead already, and the rest is foggy as a thermal dust-rise on the lunar *mare* at hell-dawn. But it wasn't a bad way to die. It ate your consciousness away from the feet up; it gnawed away the Present, but it let you keep the Past, until everything faded and blended. Maybe that's what Eternity was, he thought—one man's subjective Past, all wrapped up and packaged for shipment, a single space-time entity, a one-man microcosm of memories, when nothing else remains.

"If I've got a soul, I made it myself," he told the gray nun at the foot of his bed.

The nun held out a pie pan, rattled a few coins in it. "Contribute to the Radiation Victims' Relief?" the nun purred softly.

"I know you," he said. "You're my conscience. You hang around the officer's mess, and when we get back from a sortie, you make us pay for the damage we did. But that was forty years ago."

The nun smiled, and her luminous eyes were on him softly. "Mother of God!" he breathed, and reached for the whiskey. His arm obeyed. The last drink had done him good. He had to watch his hand to see where it was going, and squeezed the neck until his fingers whitened so that he knew that he had it, but he got it off the table and onto his chest, and he got the cork out with his teeth. He had a long pull at the bottle, and it made his eyes water and his hands grow weak. But he got it back to the table without spilling a bit, and he was proud of himself.

The room was spinning like the cabin of a gyro-gravved ship. By the time he wrestled it to a standstill, the nun was gone. The blare of music from the Keith terrace was louder, and laughing voices blended with it. Chairs scraping and glasses rattling. A fine party, Keith, I'm glad you picked today. This shebang would be the younger Keith's affair. Ronald Tonwyler Keith, III, scion of Orbital Engineering and Construction Company—builders of the moonshuttle ships, that made the run from the satellite station to Luna and back.

It's good to have such important neighbors, he thought. He wished he had been able to meet them while he was still up and about. But the Keiths' place was walled-in, and when a Keith came out, he charged out in a limousine with a chauffeur at the wheel, and the iron gate closed again. The Keiths built the wall when the surrounding neighborhood began to grow shabby with age. It had once been the best of neighborhoods, but that was before Old Donegal lived in it. Now it consisted of sooty old houses and rented flats, and the Keith place was really not a part of it anymore. Nevertheless, it was really something

when a pensioned blastman could say, "I live out close to the Keiths—you know, the *Ronald* Keiths." At least, that's what Martha always told him.

The music was so loud that he never heard the doorbell ring, but when a lull came, he heard Nora's voice downstairs, and listened hopefully for Ken's. But when they came up, the boy was not with them.

"Hello, skinny-britches," he greeted his daughter.

Nora grinned and came over to kiss him. Her hair dangled about his face, and he noticed that it was blacker than usual, with the gray streaks gone from it again.

"You smell good," he said.

"You don't, Pops. You smell like a sot. Naughty!" "Where's Ken?"

She moistened her lips nervously and looked away. "He couldn't come. He had to take a driver's lesson. He really couldn't help it. If he didn't go, he'd lose his turn, and then he wouldn't finish before he goes back to the academy." She looked at him apologetically.

"It's all right, Nora."

"If he missed it, he wouldn't get his copter license until summer."

"It's okay. Copters! Hell, the boy should be in jets by now!" Several breaths passed in silence. She gazed absently toward the window and shook her head. "No jets, Pop. Not for Ken." He glowered at her. "Listen! How'll he get into space? He's got to get his jet licenses first. Can't get in rockets without 'em."

Nora shot a quick glance at her mother. Martha rolled her eyes as if sighing patiently. Nora went to the window to stare down toward the Keith terrace. She tucked a cigarette between scarlet lips, lit it, blew nervous smoke against the pane.

"Mom, can't you call them and have that racket stopped?"

"Donny says he likes it."

Nora's eyes flitted over the scene below. "Female butterflies and puppydogs in sport jackets. And the cadets." She snorted. "Cadets! Imagine Ron Keith the Third ever going to space. The old man buys his way into the academy, and they throw a brawl as if Ronny passed the Compets."

"Maybe he did," growled Old Donegal.

"Hah!"

"They live in a different world, I guess," Martha sighed.

"If it weren't for men like Pops, they'd never've made their fortune."

"I like the music, I tell you," grumbled the old man.

"I'm half-a-mind to go over there and tell them off," Nora murmured.

"Let them alone. Just so they'll stop the racket for blast-away."

"Look at them!—polite little pattern-cuts, all alike. They take pre-space, because it's the thing to do. Then they quit before the payoff comes."

"How do you know they'll quit?"

"That party—I bet it cost six months' pay, spacer's pay," she went on, ignoring him. "And what do real spacers get? Oley gets killed, and Pop's pension wouldn't feed the Keiths' cat."

"You don't understand, girl."

"I lost Oley. I understand enough."

He watched her silently for a moment, then closed his eyes. It was no good trying to explain, no good trying to tell her the dough didn't mean a damn thing. She'd been a spacer's wife, and that was bad enough, but now she was a spacer's widow. And Oley? Oley's tomb revolved around the sun in an eccentric orbit that spun-in close to Mercury, then reached out into the asteroid belt, once every 725 days. When it came within rocket radius of Earth, it whizzed past at close to fif-teen miles a second.

You don't rescue a ship like that, skinny-britches, my dar-ling daughter. Nor do you salvage it after the crew stops screaming for help. If you use enough fuel to catch it, you won't get back. You just leave such a ship there forever, like an asteroid, and it's a damn shame about the men trapped aboard. Heroes all, no doubt—but the smallness of the wid-ow's monthly check failed to confirm the heroism, and Nora was bitter about the price of Oley's memory, perhaps.

Ouch! Old Donegal, you know she's not like that. It's just that she can't understand about space. You

ought to make her understand.

But did he really understand himself? You ride hot in a roaring blast-room, hands tense on the mixer controls and the pumps, eyes glued to instruments, body sucked down in a four-gravity thrust, and wait for the command to choke it off. Then you float free and weightless in a long nightmare as the beast coasts moonward, a flung javelin.

The "romance" of space—drivel written in the old days. When you're not blasting, you float in a cramped hotbox, crawl through dirty mazes of greasy pipe and cable to tighten a lug, scratch your arms and bark your shins, get sick and choked up because no gravity helps your gullet get the food down. Liquid is worse, but you gag your whiskey down because you have to.

Stars?—you see stars by squinting through a viewing lens, and it's like a photo-transparency, and if you aren't careful, you'll get an eyeful of Old Blinder and back off with a punch-drunk retina.

Adventure?—unless the skipper calls for course-correction, you float around in the blast-cubicle with damn little to do between blast-away and moon-down, except sweat out the omniscient accident statistics. If the beast blows up or gets gutted in space, a statistic had your name on it, that's all, and there's no fighting back. You stay outwardly sane because you're a hog for punishment; if you weren't, you'd never get past the psychologists.

"Did you like horror movies when you were a kid?" asked the psych. And you'd damn well better answer "yes," if you want to go to space.

Tell her, old man, you're her pop. Tell her why it's worth it, if you know. You jail yourself in a coffin-size cubicle, and a crazy beast thunders berserk for uncontrollable seconds, and then you soar in ominous silence for the long long hours. Grow sweaty, filthy, sick, miserable, idle—somewhere out in Big Empty, where Man's got no business except the trouble he always makes for himself wherever he goes. Tell her why it's worth it, for pay less than a good bricklayer's. Tell her why Oley would do it again.

"It's a sucker's run, Nora," he said. "You go looking for kicks, but the only kicks you get to keep is what Oley got. God knows why—but it's worth it."

Nora said nothing. He opened his eyes slowly. Nora was gone. Had she been there at all?

He blinked around at the fuzzy room, and dissolved the shifting shadows that sometimes emerged as old friendly faces, grinning at him. He found Martha.

"You went to sleep," said Martha. "She had to go. Kennie called. He'll be over later, if you're not too tired."

"I'm not tired. I'm all head. There's nothing much to get tired."

"I love you, Old Donegal."

"Hold my hand again."

"I'm holding it, old man."

"Then hold me where I can feel it."

She slid a thin arm under his neck, and bent over his face to kiss him. She was crying a little, and he was glad she could do it now without fleeing the room.

"Can I talk about dying now?" he wondered aloud. She pinched her lips together and shook her head.

"I lie to myself, Martha. You know how much I lie to myself?"

She nodded slowly and stroked his gray temples.

"I lie to myself about Ken, and about dying. If Ken turned spacer, I wouldn't die—that's what I told myself. You know?" She shook her head. "Don't talk, Donny, please."

"A man makes his own soul, Martha."

"That's not true. You shouldn't say things like that."

"A man makes his own soul, but it dies with him, unless he can pour it into his kids and his grandchildren before he goes. I lied to myself. Ken's a yellow-belly. Nora made him one, and the boots won't fit."

"Don't, Donny. You'll excite yourself again."

"I was going to give him the boots—the over-boots with magnasoles. But they won't fit him. They won't ever fit him. He's a lily-livered lap-dog, and he whines. Bring me my boots, woman."

"Donny!"

"The boots, they're in my locker in the attic. I want them."

"What on earth!"

"Bring me my goddam space boots and put them on my feet. I'm going to wear them."

"You can't; the priest's coming."

"Well, get them anyway. What time is it? You didn't let me sleep through the moon-run blast, did you?"

She shook her head. "It's half an hour yet ... I'll get the boots if you promise not to make me put them on you."

"I want them on."

"You can't, until Father Paul's finished."

"Do I have to get my feet buttered?"

She sighed. "I wish you wouldn't say things like that. I wish you wouldn't, Donny. It's sacrilege, you know it is."

"All right—'anointed'," he corrected wearily.

"Yes, you do."

"The boots, woman, the boots."

She went to get them. While she was gone, the doorbell rang, and he heard her quick footsteps on the stairs, and then Father Paul's voice asking about the patient. Old Donegal groaned inwardly. After the priest, the doctor would come, at the usual time, to see if he were dead yet. The doctor had let him come home from the hospital to die, and the doctor was getting impatient. Why don't they let me alone? he growled. Why don't they let me handle it in my own way, and stop making a fuss over it? I can die and do a good job of it without a lot of outside interference, and I wish they'd quit picking at me with syringes and sacraments and enemas. All he wanted was a chance to listen to the orchestra on the Keith terrace, to drink the rest of his whiskey, and to hear the beast blast-away for the satellite on the first lap of the run to Luna.

It's going to be my last day, he thought. My eyes are go-ing fuzzy, and I can't breathe right, and the throbbing's hurt-ing my head. Whether he lived through the night wouldn't matter, because delirium was coming over him, and then there would be the coma, and the symbolic fight to keep him pumping and panting. I'd rather die tonight and get it over with, he thought, but they probably won't let me go.

He heard their voices coming up the stairs ...

"Nora tried to get them to stop it, Father, but she couldn't get in to see anybody but the butler. He told her he'd tell Mrs. Keith, but nothing happened. It's just as loud as before."

"Well, as long as Donny doesn't mind—"

"He just says that. You know how he is."

"What're they celebrating, Martha?"

"Young Ronald's leaving—for pre-space training. It's a go-ing-away affair." They paused in the doorway. The small priest smiled in at Donegal and nodded. He set his black bag on the floor inside, winked solemnly at the patient.

"I'll leave you two alone," said Martha. She closed the door and her footsteps wandered off down the hall.

Donegal and the young priest eyed each other warily.

"You look like hell. Donegal," the padre offered jovially. "Feeling nasty?"

"Skip the small talk. Let's get this routine over with."

The priest humphed thoughtfully, sauntered across to the bed, gazed down at the old man disinterestedly. "What's the matter? Don't want the 'routine'? Rather play it tough?"

"What's the difference?" he growled. "Hurry up and get out. I want to hear the beast blast off."

"You won't be able to," said the priest, glancing at the win-dow, now closed again. "That's quite a racket next door."

"They'd better stop for it. They'd better quiet down for it. They'll have to turn it off for five minutes or so."

"Maybe they won't."

It was a new idea, and it frightened him. He liked the music, and the party's gaiety, the nearness of youth and good times—but it hadn't occurred to him that it wouldn't stop so he could hear the beast.

"Don't get upset, Donegal. You know what a blast-off sounds like."

"But it's the last one. The last time. I want to hear."

"How do you know it's the last time?"

"Hell, don't I know when I'm kicking off?"

"Maybe, maybe not. It's hardly your decision."

"It's not, eh?" Old Donegal fumed. "Well, bigawd you'd think it wasn't. You'd think it was Martha's and yours and that damfool medic's. You'd think I got no say-so. Who's do-ing it anyway?"

"I would guess," Father Paul grunted sourly, "that Prov-idence might appreciate His fair share of the credit."

Old Donegal made a surly noise and hunched his head back into the pillow to glower.

"You want me?" the priest asked. "Or is this just a case of wifely conscience?"

"What's the difference? Give me the business and scram."

"No soap. Do you want the sacrament, or are you just being kind to your wife? If it's for Martha, I'll go now."

Old Donegal glared at him for a time, then wilted. The priest brought his bag to the bedside.

"Bless me, father, for I have sinned."

"Bless you, son."

"I accuse myself ..."

Tension, anger, helplessness—they had piled up on him, and now he was feeling the after-effects. Vertigo, nausea, and the black confetti—a bad spell. The whiskey—if he could only reach the whiskey. Then he remembered he was receiv-ing a Sacrament, and struggled to get on with it. Tell him, old man, tell him of your various rottennesses and vile transgres-sions, if you can remember some. A sin is whatever you're sorry for, maybe. But Old Donegal, you're sorry for the wrong things, and this young jesuitical gadget wouldn't like listening to it. I'm sorry I didn't get it instead of Oley, and I'm sorry I fought in the war, and I'm sorry I can't get out of this bed and take a belt to my daughter's backside for making a puny whelp out of Ken, and I'm sorry I gave Martha such a rough time all these years—and wound up dying in a cheap flat, instead of giving her things like the Keiths had. I wish I had been a sharpster, contractor, or thief . . . instead of a common laboring spacer, whose species lost its glamor after the war.

Listen, old man, you made your soul yourself, and it's yours. This young dispenser of oils, Substances, and myster-ies wishes only to help you scrape off the rough edges and gouge out the bad spots. He will not steal it, nor distort it with his supernatural chisels, nor make fun of it. He can take nothing away, but only cauterize and neutralize, he says, so why not let him try? Tell him the rotten messes.

"Are you finished, my son?"

Old Donegal nodded wearily, and said what he was asked to say, and heard the soft mutter of Latin that washed him inside and behind his ghostly ears . . . *ego to absolvo in Nom-ine Patric* . . . and he accepted the rest of it lying quietly in the candlelight and the red glow of the sunset through the win-dow, while the priest anointed him and gave him Bread, and read the words of the soul in greeting its Spouse: "I was asleep, but my heart waked; it is the voice of my beloved call-ing: come to me my love, my dove, my undefiled . . ." and from beyond the closed window came the sarcastic wail of a clarinet painting hot slides against a rhythmic background.

It wasn't so bad, Old Donegal thought when the priest was done. He felt like a schoolboy in a starched shirt on Sunday morning, and it wasn't a bad feeling, though it left him weak.

The priest opened the window for him again, and re-packed his bag. "Ten minutes till blast-off," he said. "I'll see what I can do about the racket next door."

When he was gone, Martha came back in, and he looked at her face and was glad. She was smiling when she kissed him, and she looked less tired.

"Is it all right for me to die now?" he grunted.

"Donny, don't start that again."

"Where's the boots? You promised to bring them?" "They're in the hall. Donny, you don't want them."

"I want them, and I want a drink of whiskey, and I want to hear them fire the beast." He said it slow and hard, and he left no room for argument.

When she had got the huge boots over his shrunken feet, the magnasoles clanged against the iron bedframe and clung there, and she rolled him up so that he could look at them, and Old Donegal chuckled inside. He felt warm and clean and pleasantly dizzy.

"The whiskey, Martha, and for God's sake, make them stop the noise till after the firing. Please!"

She went to the window and looked out for a long time. Then she came back and poured him an insignificant drink. "Well?"

"I don't know," she said. "I saw Father Paul on the terrace, talking to somebody."

"Is it time?"

She glanced at the clock, looked at him doubtfully, and nodded. "Nearly time."

The orchestra finished a number, but the babble of laugh-ing voices continued. Old Donegal sagged. "They won't do it. They're the Keiths, Martha. Why should I ruin their party?"

She turned to stare at him, slowly shook her head. He heard someone shouting, but then a trumpet started softly, in-troducing a new number. Martha sucked in a hurt breath, pressed her hands together, and hurried from the room.

"It's too late," he said after her.

Her footsteps stopped on the stairs. The trumpet was alone. Donegal listened; and there was no babble of voices, and the rest of the orchestra was silent. Only the trumpet sang—and it puzzled him, hearing the same slow bugle-notes of the call played at the lowering of the colors.

The trumpet stopped suddenly. Then he knew it had been for him.

A brief hush—then thunder came from the blast-station two miles to the west. First the low reverberation, rattling the windows, then the rising growl as the sleek beast knifed skyward on a column of blue-white hell. It grew and grew until it drowned the distant traffic sounds and dominated the silence outside.

*Quit crying, you old fool, you maudlin ass ...*

"My boots," he whispered, "my boots . . . please . . ."

"You've got them on, Donny."

He sank quietly then. He closed his eyes and let his heart go up with the beast, and he sank into the gravity padding of the blastroom, and Caid was with him, and Oley. And when Ronald Keith, III, instructed the orchestra to play Blastroom Man, after the beast's rumble had waned, Old Donegal was on his last moon-run, and he was grinning. He'd had a good day.

Martha went to the window to stare out at the thin black trail that curled starward above the blast station through the twilight sky. Guests on the terrace were watching it too.

The doorbell rang. That would be Ken, too late. She closed the window against the chill breeze, and went back to the bed. The boots, the heavy, clumsy boots—they clung to the bedframe, with his feet half out of them. She took them off gently and set them out of company's sight. Then she went to answer the door.

## Dumb Waiter

He came riding a battered bicycle down the bullet-scarred highway that wound among the hills, and he whistled a tortuous flight of the blues. Hot August sunlight glistened on his forehead and sparkled in droplets that collected in his week's growth of blond beard. He wore faded khaki trousers and a ragged shirt, but his clothing was no shabbier than that of the other occasional travelers on the road. His eyes were half closed against the glare of the road, and his head swayed listlessly to the rhythm of the melancholy song. Distant artillery was rumbling gloomily, and there were black flecks of smoke in the northern sky. The young cyclist watched with only casual interest.

The bombers came out of the east. The ram jet fighters thundered upward from the outskirts of the

city. They charged, spitting steel teeth and coughing rockets at the bombers. The sky snarled and slashed at itself. The bombers came on in waves, occasionally loosing an earthward trail of black smoke. The bombers leveled and opened their bays. The bays yawned down at the city. The bombers aimed. Releases clicked. No bombs fell. The bombers closed their bays and turned away to go home. The fighters followed them for a time, then returned to land. The big guns fell silent. And the sky began cleaning away the dusky smoke.

The young cyclist rode on toward the city, still whistling the blues. An occasional pedestrian had stopped to watch the battle.

"You'd think they'd learn someday," growled a chubby man at the side of the road. "You'd think they'd know they didn't drop anything. Don't they realize they're out of bombs?"

"They're only machines, Edward," said a plump lady who stood beside him. "How can they know?"

"Well, they're supposed to think. They're supposed to be able to learn."

The voices faded as he left them behind. Some of the wanderers who had been walking toward the city now turned around and walked the other way. Urbanophiles looked at the city and became urbanophobes. Occasionally a wanderer who had gone all the way to the outskirts came trudging back. Occasionally a phobe stopped a phile and they talked. Usually the phile became a phobe and they both walked away together. As the young man moved on, the traffic became almost nonexistent. Several travelers warned him back, but he continued stubbornly. He had come a long way. He meant to return to the city. Permanently.

He met an old lady on top of a hill. She sat in an antique chair in the center of the highway, staring north. The chair was light and fragile, of hand-carved cherry wood. A knitting bag lay in the road beside her. She was muttering softly to herself: "Crazy machines! War's over. Crazy machines! Can't quit fightin'. Somebody oughta—"

He cleared his throat softly as he pushed his bicycle up beside her. She looked at him sharply with haggard eyes set in a seamy mask.

"Hi!" he called, grinning at her.

She studied him irritably for a moment. "Who're you, boy?" "Name's Mitch Laskell, Grandmaw. Hop on behind. I'll give you a ride."

"Hm-m-m! I'm going t'other way. You will, too, if y'got any sense."

Mitch shook his head firmly. "I've been going the other way too long. I'm going back, to stay."

"To the city? Haw! You're crazier than them machines." His face fell thoughtful. He kicked at the bike pedal and stared at the ground. "You're right, Grandmaw."

"Right?"

"Machines—they aren't crazy. It's just people."

"Go on!" she snorted. She popped her false teeth back in her mouth and chomped them in place. She hooked withered hands on her knees and pulled herself wearily erect. She hoisted the antique chair lightly to her shoulder and shuffled slowly away toward the south.

Mitch watched her and marveled at the tenacity of life. Then he resumed his northward journey along the trash-littered road where motor vehicles no longer moved. But the gusts of wind brought faint traffic noises from the direction of the city, and he smiled. The sound was like music, a deep-throated whisper of the city's song.

There was a man watching his approach from the next hill. He sat on an apple crate by the side of the road, and a shotgun lay casually across his knees. He was a big, red-faced man, wearing a sweat-soaked undershirt, and in the sun his eyes were narrowed to slits. He peered fixedly at the approaching cyclist, then came slowly to his feet and stood as if blocking the way.

"Hi, fellow," he grunted.

Mitch stopped and gave him a friendly nod while he mopped his face with a kerchief. But he eyed the shotgun suspiciously. "If this is a stickup—"

The big man laughed. "Naw, no heist. Just want to talk to you a minute. I'm Frank Ferris." He offered a burly paw. "Mitch Laskell."

They shook hands gingerly and studied each other. "Why you heading north, Laskell?"

"Going to the city."

"The planes are still fighting. You know that?"

"Yeah. I know they've run out of bombs, too."

"You know the city's still making the Geigers click?"

Mitch frowned irritably. "What is this? There can't be much radioactivity left. It's been three years since they scattered the dust. I'm not corn-fed, Ferris. The half-life of that dust is five months. It should be less than one per cent—"

The big man chuckled. "Okay, you win. But the city's not safe anyhow. The Central Computer's still at work."

"So what?"

"Ever think what would happen to a city if every ordinance was kept in force after the people cleared out?"

Mitch hesitated, then nodded. "I see. Thanks for the warning." He started away.

Frank Ferris caught the handlebars in a big hand. "Hold on!" he snapped. "I ain't finished talking."

The smaller man glanced at the shotgun and swallowed his anger.

"Maybe your audience isn't interested, Buster," he said with quiet contempt.

"You will be. Just simmer down and listen!"

"I don't hear anything."

Ferris glowered at him. "I'm recruitin' for the Sugarton crowd, Laskell. We need good men."

"Count me out. I'm a wreck."

"Cut the cute stuff, boy! This is serious. We've got two dozen men now. We need twice that many. When we get them we'll go into the city and dynamite the Computer installations. Then we can start cleaning it up."

"Dynamite? *Why?*" Mitch Laskell's face slowly gathered angry color.

"So people can live in it, of course. So we can search for food without having a dozen mechanical cops jump us when we break into a store."

"How much did Central cost?" Mitch asked stiffly. It was a rhetorical question.

Ferris shook his head irritably. "What does that matter now? Money's no good anyway. You can't sell Central for junk. Heh, heh! Wake up, boy!"

The cyclist swallowed hard. A jaw muscle tightened in his cheek, but his voice came calmly.

"You help build Central, Ferris? You help design her?"

"Wh-why, no! What kind of a question is that?"

"You know anything about her? What makes her work? How she's rigged to control all the subunits? You know that?" "No, I—"

"You got any idea about how much sweat dripped on the drafting boards before they got her plans drawn? How many engineers slaved over her, and cussed her, and got drunk when their piece of the job was done?"

Ferris was sneering faintly. "You *know*, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Well that's all too bad, boy. But she's no good to anybody now. She's a hazard to life and limb. Why, you can't go inside the city without—"

"She's a machine, Ferris. An intricate machine. You don't destroy a tool just because you're finished with it for a while." They glared at each other in the hot sunlight.

"Listen, boy—people built Central. People got the right to wreck her, too."

"I don't care about rights," Mitch snapped. "I'm talking about what's sensible, sane. But nobody's got the right to be stupid."

Ferris stiffened. "Watch your tongue, smart boy."

"I didn't ask for this conversation."

Ferris released the handlebars. "Get off the bicycle," he grunted ominously.

"Why? You want to settle it the hard way?"

"No. We're requisitioning your bicycle. You can walk from here on. The Sugarton crowd needs



transportation. We need good men, but I guess you ain't one. Start walking."

Mitch hesitated briefly. Then he shrugged and dismounted on the side away from Ferris. The big man held the shotgun cradled lazily across one forearm. He watched Mitch with a mocking grin.

Mitch grasped the handlebars tightly and suddenly rammed the front wheel between Ferris's legs. The fender made a tearing sound. The shotgun exploded skyward as the big man fell back. He sat down screaming and doubling over. The gun clattered into the road. He groped for it with a frenzied hand. Mitch kicked him in the face and a tooth slashed at his toe through the boot leather. Ferris fell aside, his mouth spitting blood and white fragments.

Mitch retrieved the shotgun and helped himself to a dozen shells from the other's pockets, then mounted the bicycle and pedaled away. When he had gone half a mile, a rifle slug spanged off the pavement beside him. Looking back, he saw three tiny figures standing beside Ferris in the distance. The "Sugarton crowd" had come to take care of their own, no doubt. He pedaled hard to get out of range, but they wasted no more ammunition.

He realized uneasily that he might meet them again if they came to the city intending to sabotage Central. And Ferris wouldn't miss a chance to kill him, if the chance came. Mitch didn't believe he was really hurt, but he was badly humiliated. And for some time to come he would dream of pleasant ways to murder Mitch Laskell.

Mitch no longer whistled as he rode along the deserted highway toward the sun-drenched skyline in the distance. To a man born and bred to the tune of mechanical thunder, amid vistas of concrete and steel, the skyline looked good—looked good even with several of the buildings twisted into ugly wreckage. It had been dusted in the radiological attack, but not badly bombed. Its defenses had been more than adequately provided for—which was understandable, since it was the capi-tal and the legislators appropriated freely.

It seemed unreasonable to him that Central was still working. Why hadn't some group of engineers made their way into the main power vaults to kill the circuits temporarily? Then he remembered that the vaults were self-defending and that there were probably very few technicians left who knew how to handle the job. Technicians had a way of inhabiting industrial regions, and wars had a way of destroying those regions. Dirt farmers usually had the best survival value.

Mitch had been working with aircraft computers before he became displaced, but a city's Central Service Coordinator was a far cry from a robot pilot. Centrals weren't built all at once; they grew over a period of years. At first, small units were set up in power plants and waterworks to regulate voltages and flows and circuit conditions automatically. Small units replaced switchboards in telephone exchanges. Small computers measured traffic flow and regulated lights and speed limits accordingly. Small computers handled bookkeeping where large amounts of money were exchanged. A computer checked books in and out at the library, also assessing the fines. Com-puters operated the city buses and eventually drove most of the routine traffic.

That was the way the city's Central Service grew. As more computers were assigned to various tasks, engineers were hired to coordinate them, to link them with special circuits and to set up central "data tanks," so that a traffic regulator in the north end would be aware of traffic conditions in the main thoroughfares to the south. Then, when the micro-learner relay was invented, the engineers built a central unit to be used in conjunction with the central data tanks. With the learning units in operation, Central was able to perform most of the city's routine tasks without attention from human supervisors.

The system had worked well. Apparently it was still working well three years after the inhabitants had fled before the chatter of the Geiger counters. In one sense Ferris had been right: A city whose machines carried on as if nothing had happened—that city might be a dangerous place for a lone wanderer.

But dynamite certainly wasn't the answer, Mitch thought. Most of man's machinery was already wrecked or lying idle. Humanity had waited a hundred thousand years before deciding to build a technological civilization. If it wrecked this one completely, it might never build another.

Some men thought that a return to the soil was desirable. Some men tried to pin their guilt on the machines, to lay their own stupidity on the head of a mechanical scapegoat and absolve themselves with

dynamite. But Mitch Laskell was a man who liked the feel of a wrench and a soldering iron—liked it better than the feel of even the most well-balanced stone ax or wooden plow. And he liked the purr of a pint-sized nuclear engine much better than the braying of a harnessed jackass.

He was willing to kill Frank Ferris or any other man who sought to wreck what little remained. But gloom settled over him as he thought, "If everybody decides to tear it down, what can I do to stop it?" For that matter, would he then be right in trying to stop it?

At sundown he came to the limits of the city, and he stopped just short of the outskirts. Three blocks away a robot cop rolled about in the center of the intersection, rolled on tricycle wheels while he directed the thin trickle of traffic with candy-striped arms and with "eyes" that changed color like a stoplight. His body was like an oil drum, painted fire-engine red. The head, however, had been cast in a human mold, with a remarkably Irish face and a perpetual predatory smile. A short radar antenna grew from the center of his head, and the radar was his link with Central.

Mitch sat watching him with a nostalgic smile, even though he knew such cops might give him considerable trouble once he entered the city. The "skaters" were incapable of winking at petty violations of ordinance.

As the daylight faded, photronic cells notified Central, and the streetlights winked on promptly. A moment later, a car without a taillight whisked by the policeman's corner. A siren wailed in the policeman's belly. He skated away in hot pursuit, charging like a mechanical bull. The car screeched to a stop. "O'Reilly" wrote out a ticket and offered it to any empty back seat. When no one took it, the cop fed it into a slot in his belly, memorized the car's license number, and came clattering back to his intersection, where the traffic had automatically begun obeying the ordinances governing nonpoliced intersections.

The cars were empty, computer-piloted. Their destinations were the same as when they had driven regular daily routes for human passengers: salesmen calling on regular customers, inspectors making their rounds, taxis prowling their assigned service areas.

Mitch Laskell stood shivering. The city sounded sleepy but alive. The city moved and grumbled. But as far as he could see down the wide boulevard, no human figure was visible. The city was depopulated: There was a Geiger on a nearby lamppost. It clucked idly through a loudspeaker. But it indicated no danger. The city should be radiologically safe.

But after staring for a long time at the weirdly active streets, Mitch muttered, "It'll wait for tomorrow."

He turned onto a side road that led through a residential district just outside the city limits. Central's jurisdiction did not extend here, except for providing water and lights. He meant to spend the night in a deserted house, then enter the city at dawn.

Here and there a light burned in one of the houses, indicating that he was not alone in his desire to return. But the pavement was scattered with rusty shrapnel, with fragments fallen from the sky battles that still continued. Even by streetlight he could see that some of the roofs were damaged. Even though the bombers came without bombs, there was still danger from falling debris and from fire. Most former city dwellers who were still alive preferred to remain in the country.

Once he passed a house from which music floated softly into the street, and he paused to listen. The music was scratchy—a worn record. When the piece was finished there was a moment of silence, and the player played it again—the last record on the stack, repeating itself. Otherwise the house was still.

Mitch frowned, sensing some kind of trouble. He wheeled the bicycle toward the curb, meaning to investigate.

"I live there," said a woman's voice from the shadows.

She had been standing under a tree that overhung the side-walk, and she came slowly out into the streetlight. She was a dark, slender girl with haunted eyes, and she was holding a baby in her arms.

"Why don't you turn off your record player?" he asked. "Or change to the other side?"

"My husband's in there," she told him. "He's listening to it. He's been listening to it for a long time. His name is George. Why don't you go say hello to him?"

Mitch felt vaguely disturbed. There was a peculiar note in the girl's quiet Spanish accent. Still, he wanted to talk to someone who had ventured into the city. He nodded and smiled at the girl.

"I'd like to."

"You just go on in. I'll stay out here. The baby needs fresh air."

He thanked her and strolled up on the porch. The record player stopped, tried to change, and played the same piece again. Mitch knocked once. Hearing no answer, he entered and moved along the hallway toward the light in the kitchen. But suddenly he stopped.

The house smelled musty. And it smelled of something else. Many times he had smelled the syrup-and-stale-fish odor of death. He advanced another step toward the kitchen.

He saw a porcelain-topped table. He saw a hand lying across the table. The hand was bloated, lying amid brown stains that also covered the forearm and sleeve. The hand had dropped a butcher knife.

"Dead several days," he thought—and backed away.

He turned the record player off as he left the house. The girl was standing at the curb gazing down at his bicycle. She glanced at him amiably and spoke.

"I'm glad you turned that record off, George. A man just came by and wanted to know why you played it so often. You must have been asleep."

Mitch started. He moistened his lips and stared at her wonderingly. "I'm not—" He fell silent for a moment, then stuttered, "You haven't been in the house?"

"Yes, but you were asleep in the kitchen. Did the man come talk to you?"

"Look, I'm not—" He choked and said nothing. The dark-eyed baby was eyeing him suspiciously. He lifted the bicycle and swung a long leg across the saddle.

"George, where are you going?"

"Just for a little ride," he managed to gasp.

"On the man's bicycle?"

Something was twisting cruelly at his insides. He stared at the girl's wide brown eyes for a moment. And then he said it. "Sure, it's all right. He's asleep—at the kitchen table."

Her mouth flickered open, and for an instant sanity threatened to return. She rocked dizzily. Then, after a deep breath, she straightened.

"Don't be gone too long, George."

"I won't! Take good care of the baby."

He pedaled away on wings of fright. For a time he cursed himself, and then he fell to cursing the husband who had taken an easy road, leaving his wife to stumble alone. Mitch wondered if he should have stayed to help her. But there was nothing to be done for her, nothing at least that was in his power to do. Any gesture of help might become an irreparable blunder. At least she still had the child.

A few blocks away he found another house with an intact roof, and he prepared to spend the night. He wheeled the bicycle into the parlor and fumbled for the lights. They came on, revealing a dusty room and furniture with frayed upholstery. He made a brief tour of the house. It had been recently occupied, but there was still unopened cans in the kitchen, and still crumpled sheets on the bed. He ate a cold supper, shaved, and prepared to retire. Tomorrow would be a dangerous day.

Sleep came slowly. Sleep was full of charging ram jets in flak-scarred skies, full of tormented masses of people that swarmed in exodus from death-sickened cities. Sleep was full of babies wailing, and women crying in choking sobs. Sleep became white arms and soft caresses.

The wailing and sobbing had stopped. It was later. Was he awake? Or still asleep? He was warm, basking in a golden glow, steeped in quiet pleasure. Something—something was there, something that breathed.

"What—"

"Sshhh!" purred a quiet voice. "Don't say anything."

Some of the warmth fled before a sudden shiver. He opened his eyes. The room was full of blackness. He shook his head dizzily and stuttered.

"Sshhh!" she whispered again.

"What is this?" he gasped. "How did you get—?"

"Be quiet, George. You'll wake the baby."

He sank back in utter bewilderment, with winter frosts gathering along his spine.

Night was dreamlike. And dawn came, washing the shadows with grayness. He opened his eyes briefly and went back to sleep. When he opened them again, sunlight was flooding the room.

He sat up. *He was alone.* Of course! It had only been a dream.

He muttered irritably as he dressed. Then he wandered to the kitchen for breakfast.

Warm biscuits waiting in the oven! The table was set! There was a note on his plate. He read it and slowly flushed.

There's jam in the cupboard, and I hope you like the biscuits. I know he's dead. Now I think I can go on alone. Thanks for the shotgun and bicycle. Marta.

He bellowed a curse and charged into the parlor. The bike was gone. He darted to the bedroom. The shotgun was gone. He ran shouting to the porch, but the street was empty.

Sparrows fluttered about the eaves. The skyline of the busi-ness district lay lonesome in the morning sun. Squirrels were rustling in the branches of the trees. He looked at the weedy lawns where no children played, the doors askew on their hinges, at a bit of aircraft wreckage jutting from the roof of a fire-gutted home—the rotting porches—the emptiness.

He rubbed his cheek ruefully. It was no world for a young mother and her baby. The baby would fit nicely in the bicycle's basket. The shotgun would offer some protection against the human wolf packs that prowled everywhere these days.

"Little thief!" he growled halfheartedly.

But when the human animal would no longer steal to protect its offspring, then its prospects for survival would be bleak indeed. He shrugged gloomily and wandered back to the kitchen. He sat down and ate the expensive biscuits—and decided that George couldn't have cut his throat for culinary reasons. Marta was a good cook.

He entered the city on foot and unarmed, later in the morning.

He chose the alleyways, avoiding the thoroughfares where traffic purred and where the robot cops enforced the letter of the law. At each corner he paused to glance in both directions for possible mechanical observers before darting across the open street to the next alley. The Geigers on the lampposts were clicking faster as he progressed deeper into the city, and twice he paused to inspect the readings of their integrating dials. The radioactivity was not yet dangerous, but it was higher than he had anticipated. Perhaps it had been dusted again after the exodus.

He stopped to prowl through an empty house and an empty garage. He came out with a flashlight, a box of tools, and a crowbar. He had no certain plan, but tools would be needed if he meant to call a temporary halt to Central's activities. It was dangerous to enter any building, however; Central would call it burglary, unless the prowler could show legitimate reason for entering. He needed some kind of identification.

After an hour's search through several houses in the residen-tial district, he found a billfold containing a union card and a pass to several restricted buildings in the downtown area. The billfold belonged to a Willie Jesser, an air-conditioning and refrigeration mechanic for the Howard Cooler Company. He pocketed it after a moment's hesitation. It might not be enough to satisfy Central, but for the time being it would have to do.

By early afternoon he had reached the beginnings of the commercial area. Still he had seen no signs of human life. The thinly scattered traffic moved smoothly along the streets, carrying no passengers. Once he saw a group of robot climbers working high on a telephone pole. Some of the telephone cables carried the coordinating circuits for the city's network of com-puters. He detoured several blocks to avoid them and wandered on glumly. He began to realize that he was wandering aimlessly.

The siren came suddenly from half a block away. Mitch stopped in the center of the street and glanced fearfully toward it. A robot cop was rolling toward him at twenty miles an hour! He broke into a run.

"You will halt, please!" croaked the cop's mechanical voice. "The pedestrian with the toolbox will please halt!"

Mitch stopped at the curb. Flight was impossible. The skater could whisk along at forty miles an hour

if he chose.

The cop's steel wheels screeched to a stop a yard away. The head nodded a polite but jerky greeting. Mitch stared at the creature's eyes, even though he knew the eyes were duds; the cop was seeing him by the heat waves from his bodily warmth, and touching him with a delicate aura of radar.

"You are charged with jaywalking, sir. I must present you with a summons. Your identification, please."

Mitch nervously produced the billfold and extracted the cards. The cop accepted them in a pair of tweezerlike fingers and instantly memorized the information.

"This is insufficient identification. Have you nothing else?" "That's all I have with me. What's wrong with it?" "The pass and the union card expired in 1987."

Mitch swallowed hard and said nothing. He had been afraid of this. Now he might be picked up for vagrancy.

"I shall consult Central Coordinator for instructions," croaked the cop. "One moment, please."

A dynamotor purred softly in the policeman's cylindrical body. Then Mitch heard the faint twittering of computer code as the cop's radio spoke to Central. There was a silence lasting several seconds. Then an answer twittered back. Still the cop said nothing. But he extracted a summons form from a pad, inserted it in a slot in his chassis, and made chomping sounds like a small typesetter. When he pulled the ticket out again, it was neatly printed with a summons for Willie Jesser to appear before Traffic Court on July 29, 1989. The charge was jaywalking.

Mitch accepted it with bewilderment. "I believe I have a right to ask for an explanation," he muttered.

The cop nodded crisply. "Central Service units are required to furnish explanations of decisions when such explanations are demanded."

"Then why did Central regard my identification as sufficient?"

"Pause for translation of Central's message," said the cop. He stood for a moment, making burring and clicking sounds. Then: "Referring to arrest of Willie Jesser by unit Six-Baker. Do not book for investigation. Previous investigations have revealed no identification papers dated later than May 1987 in the possession of any human pedestrian. Data based on one hundred sample cases. Tentative generalization by Central Service: It has become impossible for humans to produce satisfactory identification. Therefore, 'satisfactory identification' is temporarily redefined, pending instruction from authorized human legislative agency."

Mitch nodded thoughtfully. The decision indicated that Central was still capable of "learning," of gathering data and making generalizations about it. But the difficulty was still apparent. She was allowed to act on such generalizations only in certain very minor matters. Although she might very well realize the situation in the city, she could do nothing about it without authority from an authorized agency. That agency was a department of the city government, currently nonexistent.

The cop croaked a courteous, "Good day, sir!" and skated smoothly back to his intersection.

Mitch stared at his summons for a moment. The date was still four days away. If he weren't out of the city by then, he might find himself in the lockup, since he had no money to pay a fine. Reassured now that his borrowed identity gave him a certain amount of safety, he began walking along the sidewalks instead of using the alleys. Still, he knew that Central was observing him through a thousand eyes. Counters on every corner were set to record the passage of pedestrian traffic and to relay the information to Central, thus helping to avoid congestion. But Mitch *was* the pedestrian traffic. And the counters clocked his passage. Since the data were available to the logic units, Central might make some unpleasant deductions about his presence in the city.

Brazenness, he decided, was probably the safest course to steer. He stopped at the next intersection and called to another mechanical cop, requesting directions to City Hall.

But the cop paused before answering, paused to speak with Central, and Mitch suddenly regretted his question. The cop came skating slowly to the curb.

"Six blocks west and four blocks north, sir," croaked the cop. "Central requests the following information, which you may refuse to furnish if you so desire: As a resident of the city, how is it that you

do not know the way to City Hall, Mr. Jesser?"

Mitch whitened and stuttered nervously, "Why, I've been gone three years. I ...I had forgotten."

The cop relayed the information, then nodded. "Central thanks you. Data have been recorded."

"Wait," Mitch muttered. "Is there a direct contact with Central in City Hall?"

"Affirmative."

"I want to speak to Central. May I use it?"

The computer code twittered briefly. "Negative. You are not listed among the city's authorized computer personnel. Central suggests you use the Public Information Unit, also in City Hall, ground floor rotunda."

Grumbling to himself, Mitch wandered away. The P.I.U. was better than nothing, but if he had access to the direct service contact, perhaps to some extent he could have altered Central's rigid behavior pattern. The P.I.U. however would be well guarded.

A few minutes later he was standing in the center of the main lobby of the City Hall. The great building had suffered some damage during an air raid, and one wing was charred by fire. But the rest of it was still alive with the rattle of machinery. A headless servo-secretary came rolling past him, carrying a trayful of pink envelopes. Delinquent utility bills, he guessed.

Central would keep sending them out, but of course human authority would be needed to suspend service to the delinquent customers. The servo-secretary deposited the envelopes in a mailbox by the door, then rolled quickly back to its office.

Mitch looked around the gloomy rotunda. There was a desk at the far wall. Recessed in a panel behind the desk were a microphone, a loudspeaker, and the lens of a television camera. A sign hung over the desk, indicating that here was the place to complain about utility bills, garbage-disposal service, taxes, and inaccurate weather forecasts. A citizen could also request any information contained in Central Data except information relating to defense or to police records.

Mitch crossed the rotunda and sat at the desk facing the panel. A light came on overhead. The speaker crackled for a moment.

"Your name, please?" it asked.

"Willie Jesser."

"What do you wish from Information Service, please?" "A direct contact with Central Data."

"You have a screened contact with Central Data. Unauthorized personnel are not permitted an unrestricted contact, for security reasons. Your contact must be monitored by this unit."

Mitch shrugged. It was as he had expected. Central Data was listening and speaking, but the automatics of the P.I.U. would be censoring the exchange.

"All right," he grumbled. "Tell me this: Is Central aware that the city has been abandoned? That its population is gone?" "Screening, screening, screening," said the unit. "Question relates to civil defense."

"Is Central aware that her services are now interfering with human interests?"

There was a brief pause. "Is this question in the nature of a complaint?"

"Yes," he grated acidly. "It's a complaint."

"About your utility services, Mr. Jesser?"

Mitch spat an angry curse. "About all services!" he bellowed. "Central has got to suspend all operations until new ordinances are fed into Data."

"That will be impossible, sir."

"Why?"

"There is no authorization from Department of City Services."

He slapped the desk and groaned. "There is no such department now! There is no city government! The city is abandoned!"

The speaker was silent.

"Well?" he snapped.

"Screening," said the machine.

"Listen," he hissed. "Are you screening what I say, or are you just blocking Central's reply?"

There was a pause. "Your statements are being recorded in Central Data. Replies to certain

questions must be blocked for security reasons."

"The war is over!"

"Screening."

"You're trying to maintain a civil status quo that went out of existence three years ago. Can't you use your logic units to correct present conditions?"

"The degree of self-adjustment permitted to Central Service is limited by ordinance number—"

"Never mind!"

"Is there anything else?"

"Yes! What will you do when fifty men come marching in to dynamite the vaults and destroy Central Data?"

"Destroying city property is punishable by a fine of—" Mitch cursed softly and listened to the voice reading the applicable ordinance.

"Well, they're planning to do it anyway," he snapped. "Conspiracy to destroy city property is punishable by—" Mitch stood up and walked away in disgust. But he had taken perhaps ten steps when a pair of robot guards came skating out from their wall niches to intercept him.

"One moment sir," they croaked in unison.

"Well?"

"Central wishes to question you in connection with the alleged conspiracy to destroy city property. You are free to refuse. However, if you refuse, and if such a conspiracy is shown to exist, you may be charged with complicity. Will you accompany us to Interrogation?"

A step closer to jail, he thought gloomily. But what was there to lose? He grunted assent and accompanied the skaters out the entrance, down an inclined ramp, and past a group of heavily barred windows. They entered the police court, where a booking computer clicked behind its desk. Several servo-secretaries and robot cops were waiting quietly for task assignments.

Mitch stopped suddenly. His escorts waited politely.

"Will you come with us, please?"

He stood staring around at the big room—at the various doorways, one leading to traffic court, and at the iron gate to the cellblock.

"I hear a woman crying," he muttered.

The guards offered no comment.

"Is someone locked in a cell?"

"We are not permitted to answer."

"Suppose I wanted to go bail," he snapped. "I have a right to know."

"You may ask at the booking desk whether a specific individual is being held. But generalized information cannot be released."

"Mitch strode to the booking computer. "Are you holding a woman in jail?"

"Screening."

It was only a vague suspicion, but he said, "A woman named Marta."

"Full name, please."

"I don't know it. Can't you tell me?"

"Screening."

"Listen! I loaned my bicycle to a woman named Marta. If you have the bicycle, I want it!"

"License number, please."

"A 1987 license—number six zero five zero."

"Check with Lost and Found, please."

Mitch controlled himself slowly. "Look—you check. I'll wait."

The computer paused. "A bicycle with that license number has been impounded. Can you produce proof of ownership?"

"*On a bicycle?* I knew the number. Isn't that enough?"

"Describe it, please?"

Mitch described it wearily. He began to understand Ferris's desire to retire Central permanently and

forcibly. At the moment he longed to convert several subcomputers to scrap metal.

"Then," said the speaker, "if vehicle is yours, you may have it by applying for a new license and paying the required fee."

"Refer that to Central Data," Mitch groaned.

The booking computer paused to confer with the Coordinator. "Decision stands, sir."

"But there aren't any new licenses!" he growled. "A while ago Central said— Oh, never mind!"

"That decision applied to identification, sir. This applies to licensing of vehicles. Insufficient data have been gathered to permit generalization."

"Sure, sure. All right, what do I do to get the girl out of jail?"

There was another conference with the Coordinator, then: "She is being held for investigation. She may not be released for seventy-two hours."

Mitch dropped the toolbox that he had been carrying since morning. With a savage curse he rammed the crowbar through a vent in the device's front panel and slashed it about in the opening. There was a crash of shattering glass and a shower of sparks. Mitch yelped at the electric jolt and lurched away. Steel fingers clutched his wrists.

Five minutes later he was being led through the gate to the cellblocks, charged with maliciously destroying city property; and he cursed himself for a hot-tempered fool. They would hold him until a grand jury convened, which would probably be never.

The girl's sobbing grew louder as he was led along the iron corridors toward a cell. He passed three cells and glanced inside. The cells were occupied by dead men's bones. *Why?* The rear wall was badly cracked, and bits of loose masonry were scattered on the floor. Had they died of concussion during an attack? Or been gassed to death?

They led him to the fifth cell and unlocked the door. Mitch stared inside and grinned. The rear wall had been partially wrecked by a bomb blast, and there was room to crawl through the opening to the street. The partition that separated the adjoining cell was also damaged, and he caught a glimpse of a white, frightened face peering through the hole. Marta.

He glanced at his captors. They were pushing him gently through the door. Evidently Central's talents did not extend to bricklaying, and she could not judge that the cell was less than escape proof.

The door clanged shut behind him.

"Marta," he called.

Her face had disappeared from the opening. There was no answer.

"Marta."

"Let me alone," grumbled a muffled voice.

"I'm not angry about the bicycle."

He walked to the hole and peered through the partition into the next cell. She crouched in a corner, peering at him with frightened, tear-reddened eyes. He glanced at the opening in the rear wall.

"Why haven't you gone outside?" he asked.

She giggled hysterically. "Why don't you go look down?" He stepped to the opening and glanced twenty feet down to a concrete sidewalk. He went back to stare at the girl. "Where's your baby?"

"They took him away," she whimpered.

Mitch frowned and thought about it for a moment. "To the city nursery, probably—while you're in jail."

"They won't take care of him! They'll let him die!" "Don't scream like that. He'll be all right."

"Robots don't give milk!"

"No, but there are such things as bottles, you know," he chuckled.

"Are there?" Her eyes were wide with horror. "And what will they put in the bottles?"

"Why—" He paused. Central certainly wasn't running any dairy farms.

"Wait'll they bring you a meal," she said. "You'll see."

"Meal?"

"Empty tray," she hissed. "Empty tray, empty paper cup, paper fork, clean paper napkin. No food."

Mitch swallowed hard. Central's logic was sometimes hard to see. The servo-attendants probably



went through the motions of ladling stew from an empty pot and drawing coffee from an empty urn. Of course, there weren't any truck farmers to keep the city supplied with produce.

"So that's why... the bones...in the other cells," he muttered.

"They'll starve us to death!"

"Don't scream so. We'll get out. All we need is something to climb down on."

"There isn't any bedding."

"There's our clothing. We can plait a rope. And if necessary we can risk a jump."

She shook her head dully and stared at her hands. "It's no use. They'd catch us again."

Mitch sat down to think. There was bound to be a police arsenal somewhere in the building, probably in the basement. The robot cops were always unarmed. But of course there had been a human organization for investigation purposes and to assume command in the event of violence. When one of the traffic units faced a threat, it could do nothing but try to handcuff the offender and call for human help. There were arms in the building somewhere, and a well-placed rifle shot could penetrate the thin sheet-steel bodies.

He deplored the thought of destroying any of the city's service machinery, but if it became necessary to wreck a few subunits, it would have to be done. He must somehow get access to the vaults where the central data tanks and the coordinators were located—get to them before Ferris's gang came to wreck them completely, so that they might be free to pick the city clean.

An hour later he heard the cellblock gate groan open, and he arose quickly. Interrogation, he thought. They were coming to question him about the plot to wreck Central. He paused to make a hasty decision, then scrambled for the narrow opening and clambered through it into the adjoining cell while the skater came rolling down the corridor.

The girl's eyes widened. "Wh-what are you—"

"*Shhh!*" he hissed. "This might work."

The skater halted before his cell while he crouched against the wall beyond the opening.

"Willie Jesser, please," the robot croaked.

There was silence. He heard the door swing open. The robot rolled around inside his cell for a few seconds, repeating his name and brushing rubble aside to make way. If only he failed to look through the opening!

Suddenly a siren growled and the robot went tearing down the corridor again. Mitch stole a quick glance. The robot had left the door ajar. He dragged the girl to her feet and snapped, "Let's go."

They squeezed through the hole and raced out into the corridor. The cellblock gate was closed. The girl moaned weakly. There was no place to hide.

The door bolts were operated from remote boxes placed in the corridor so as to be beyond the reach of the inmates. Mitch dragged the girl quickly toward another cell, opened the control panel, and threw the bolt. He closed the panel, leaving the bolt open. They slipped quickly inside the new cell, and he pulled the door quietly closed. The girl made a choking sound as she stumbled over the remains of a former inmate.

"Lie down in the corner," he hissed, "and keep still. They're coming back in force."

"What if they notice the bolt is open?"

"Then we're sunk. But they'll be busy down at our end of the hall. Now shut up."

They rolled under the steel cot and lay scarcely breathing. The robot was returning with others. The faint twitter of computer code echoed through the cellblocks. Then the skaters rushed past and screeched to a stop before the escapee's cell. He heard them enter. He crawled to the door for a look, then pushed it open and stole outside.

He beckoned the girl to his side and whispered briefly. Then they darted down the corridor on tiptoe toward the investigators. They turned as he raced into view. He seized the bars and jerked the door shut. The bolt snapped in place as Marta tugged at the remote.

Three metal bodies crashed simultaneously against the door and rebounded. One of them spun around three times before recovering.

"Release the lock, please."

Mitch grinned through the bars. "Why don't you try the hole in the wall?"

The robot who had spun crazily away from the door now turned. He went charging across the cell floor at full acceleration—and sailed out wildly into space.

An ear-splitting crash came from the street. Shattered metal skidded across pavement. A siren wailed and brakes shrieked. The others went to look—and began twittering.

Then they turned. "You will surrender, please. We have summoned armed guards to seize you if you resist." Mitch laughed and tugged at the whimpering girl.

"Wh-where—?"

"To the gate. Come on."

They raced swiftly along the corridor. And the gate was opening to admit the "armed guards." But of course no human bluecoats charged through. The girl muttered in frightened bewilderment, and he explained on the run.

"Enforced habit pattern. Central has to do it, even when no guards are available."

Two repair units were at work on the damaged booking computer as the escapees raced past. The repair units paused, twittered a notation to Central, then continued with their work.

Minutes later they found the arsenal, and the mechanical attendant had set out a pair of .45's for the "armed guards." Mitch caught up one of them and fired at the attendant's sheet-metal belly. The robot careened crazily against the wall, emitted a shower of blue sparks, and stood humming while the metal around the hole grew cherry red. There was a dull cough. The machine smoked and fell silent.

Mitch vaulted across the counter and caught a pair of submachine guns from the rack. But the girl backed away, shaking her head.

"I couldn't even use your shotgun," she panted.

He shrugged and laid it aside. "Carry as much ammunition as you can, then," he barked.

Alarm bells were clanging continuously as they raced out of the arsenal, and a loudspeaker was thundering a request for all human personnel to be alert and assist in their capture. Marta was staggering against him as they burst out of the building into the street. He pushed her back against the wall and fired a burst at two skaters who raced toward them down the sidewalk. One crashed into a fireplug; the other went over the curb and fell in the street.

"To the parking lot!" he called over his shoulder.

But the girl had slumped in a heap on the sidewalk. He grumbled a curse and hurried to her side. She was semicon-scious, but her face was white and drawn. She shivered uncontrollably.

"What's wrong?" he snapped.

There was no answer. Fright had dazed her. Her lips moved, seemed to frame a soundless word: "George."

Muttering angrily, Mitch stuffed a fifty-round drum of ammunition in his belt, took another between his teeth, and lifted the girl over one shoulder. He turned in time to fire a one-handed burst at another skater. The burst went wide. But the skater stopped. Then the skater ran away.

He gasped and stared after it. The blare of the loudspeaker was furnishing the answer.

All human personnel. Central patrol service has reached the limit of permissible subunit expenditure. Responsibility for capture no longer applies without further orders to expend subunits. Please instruct. Commissioner of Police, please instruct. Waiting. Waiting."

Mitch grinned. Carrying the girl, he stumbled toward a car on the parking lot. He dumped her in the back seat and started in behind her, but a loudspeaker in the front protested.

"Unauthorized personnel. This is Mayor Sarquist's car. Unauthorized personnel. Please use an extra."

Mitch looked around. There were no extras on the lot. And if there had been one, it would refuse to carry him unless he could identify himself as authorized to use it.

Mayor Sarquist's car began twittering a radio protest to Central. Mitch climbed inside and wrenched loose the cable that fed the antenna. The loudspeaker began barking complaints about sabotage. Mitch found a toolbox under the back seat and removed several of the pilot-computer's panels. He tugged a wire loose, and the speaker ceased complaining. He ripped at another, and a bank of tubes went dead.

He drove away, using a set of dial controls for steering. The girl in the back seat began to recover her wits. She sat up and stared out the window at the thin traffic. The sun was sinking and the great city was immersing itself in gloom.

"You're worthless!" he growled at Marta. "The world takes a poke at you, and you jump into your mental coffin and nail the lid shut. How do you expect to take care of your baby?"

She continued to stare gloomily out the window. She said nothing. The car screeched around a corner, narrowly missing a mechanical cop. The cop skated after them for three blocks, siren wailing; then it abandoned the chase.

"You're one of the machine age's spoiled children," he fumed. "Technologists gave you everything you could possibly want. Push a button, and you get it. Instead of taking part in the machine age, you let it wait on you. You spoiled yourself. When the machine age cracks up, you crack up, too. Because you never made yourself its master; you just let yourself be mechanically pampered."

She seemed not to hear him. He swung around another corner and pulled to the curb. They were in front of a three-story brick building set in the center of a green-lawned block and surrounded by a high iron fence. The girl stared at it for a moment and raised her chin slowly from her fist.

"The city orphanage!" she cried suddenly and bounded outside. She raced across the sidewalk and beat at the iron gate with her fists.

Mitch climbed out calmly and opened it for her. She darted up toward the porch, but a servo-attendant came rolling out to intercept her. Its handcuff hand was open to grasp her wrist.

"Drop low!" he bellowed at her.

She crouched on the walkway, then rolled quickly aside on the lawn. A burst of machine-gun fire brightened the twilight. The robot spun crazily and stopped, hissing and sputtering. Wrecking a robot could be dangerous. If a bullet struck the tiny nuclear reactor just right, there would be an explosion.

They skirted wide around it and hurried into the building. Somewhere upstairs a baby was crying. A servo-nurse sat behind a desk in the hall, and she greeted them as if they were guests.

"Good evening, sir and madam. You wish to see one of the children?"

Marta started toward the stairs, but Mitch seized her arm. "No! Let *me* go up. It won't be pretty."

But she tore herself free with a snarl and bounded up the steps toward the cry of her child. Mitch shrugged to himself and waited. The robot nurse protested the illegal entry but did nothing about it.

"Nooo—!"

A horrified shriek from the girl! He glanced up the staircase, knowing what was wrong but unable to help her. A moment later he heard her vomiting. He waited.

A few minutes later she came staggering down the stairway, sobbing and clutching her baby tightly against her. She stared at Mitch with tear-drenched eyes, gave him a wild shake of her head, and babbled hysterically.

"Those cribs! They're full of little bones. Little bones—all over the floor. Little bones—"

"Shut up!" he snapped. "Be thankful yours is all right. Now let's get out of here."

After disposing of another robotic interfeerer they reached the car, and Mitch drove rapidly toward the outskirts. The girl's sobbing ceased, and she purred a little unsung lullaby to her child, cuddling it as if it had just returned from the dead. Remorse picked dully at Mitch's heart, for having growled at her. Motherwise, she was still a good animal, despite her lack of success in adjusting to the reality of a ruptured world.

"Marta—?"

"What?"

"You're not fit to take care of yourself."

He said it gently. She only stared at him as he piloted the car. "You ought to find a big husky gal who wants a baby, and let her take care of it for you."

"No."

"It's just a suggestion. None of my business. You want your baby to live, don't you?"

"George promised he'd take care of us. George always took care of us."

"George killed himself."

She uttered a little whimper. "Why did he do it? Why? I went to look for food. I came back, and there he was. Why, *why*?"

"Possibly because he was just like you. What did he do—before the war?"

"Interior decorator. He was good, a real artist."

"Yeah."

"Why do you say it *that* way? He *was*."

"Was he qualified to live in a mechanical culture?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I mean—could he control his slice of mechanical civilization, or did it control him?"

"I don't see—"

"Was he a button-pusher and a switch-puller? Or did he care what made the buttons and switches work? Men misuse their tools because they don't understand the principles of the tools. A man who doesn't know how a watch works might try to fix it with a hammer. If the watch is communal property, he's got no right to fool with it. A nontechnologist has no right to take part in a technological civilization. He's a bull in a china shop. That's what happened to our era. Politicians were given powerful tools. They failed to understand the tools. They wrecked our culture with them."

"You'd have a scientist in the White House?"

"If all men were given a broad technical education, there could be nothing else there, could there?"

"Technocracy—"

"No. Simply a matter of education."

"People aren't smart enough."

"You mean they don't *care* enough. Any man above the level of a dullard has enough sense to grasp the principles of physics and basic engineering and mechanics. They just aren't motivated to grasp them. The brain is a tool, not a garbage can for oddments of information! Your baby there—he should learn the principles of logic and semantics before he's ten. He should be taught how to *use* the tool, the brain. We've just begun to learn how to think. If the common man were trained in scientific reasoning methods, we'd solve our problems in a hurry."

"What has this got to do with us?"

"Everything. Your George folded up because he couldn't control his slice of civilization and he couldn't live without it. He couldn't fix the broken toy, but he suffered from its loss. And you're in the same fix. I haven't decided yet whether you're crazy or just neurotic."

She gave him an icy stare. "Let me know when you figure it out."

They were leaving the city, driving out through the suburbs again into the night-shrouded residential areas. He drove by streetlight, for the car—accustomed to piloting itself by radar—had no headlights. Mitch thought gloomily that he had blundered. He had stalked into the city without a plan and had accomplished nothing. He had alerted Central and had managed to get himself classified as a criminal in the central data tanks. Instead of simplifying his task, he had made things harder for himself.

Whenever they passed a cop at an intersection, the cop retreated to the curb and called Central to inform the Coordinator of their position. But no attempt was made to arrest the fugitives. Having reached her limit of subunit expenditures, Central was relying on the nonexistent human police force.

"Mayor Sarquist's house," the girl muttered suddenly. "Huh? Where?"

"Just ahead. The big cut-stone house on the right—with part of the roof caved in."

Mitch twisted a dial in the heart of the pilot-computer, and the car screeched to a stop at the curb. The girl lurched forward.

"You woke the baby," she complained. "Why stop here? We're still in the city limits."

"I don't know," he murmured, staring thoughtfully at the dark hulk of the two-story mansion set in a nest of oaks. "Just sort of a hunch."

There was a long silence while Mitch chewed his lip and frowned at the house.

"I hear a telephone ringing," she said.

"Central calling Mayor Sarquist. You can't tell. It might have been ringing for three years."

She was looking out the rear window. "Mitch—?"

"Huh?"

"There's a cop at the intersection."

He seemed not to hear her. He opened the door. "Let's go inside. I want to look around. Bring the gun."

They strolled slowly up the walkway toward the damaged and deserted house. The wind was breathing in the oaks, and the porch creaked loudly beneath their feet. The door was still locked. Mitch kicked the glass out of a window, and they slipped into an immense living room. He found the light.

"The cop'll hear that noise," she muttered, glancing at the broken glass.

The noisy clatter of the steel-wheeled skater answered her. The cop was coming to investigate. Mitch ignored the sound and began prowling through the house. The phone was still ringing, but he could not answer it without knowing Sarquist's personal identifying code.

The girl called suddenly from the library. "What's this thing, Mitch?"

"What thing?" he yelled.

"Typewriter keyboard, but no type. Just a bunch of wires and a screen."

His jaw fell agape. He trotted quickly toward the library.

"A direct channel to the data tanks!" he gasped, staring at the metal wall panel with its encoders and the keyboard. "What's it doing here?"

He thought about it briefly. "Must be...I remember: just before the exodus, they gave Sarquist emergency powers in the defense setup. He could requisition whatever was needed for civil defense—draft workers for first aid, traffic direction, and so on. He had the power to draft anybody or anything during an air raid."

Mitch approached the keyboard slowly. He closed the main power switch, and the tubes came alive. He sat down and typed: *Central from Sarquist: You will completely clear the ordinance section of your data tanks and await revised ordinances. The entire city code is hereby repealed.*

He waited. Nothing happened. There was no acknowledgment. The typed letters had not even appeared on the screen. "Broken?" asked the girl.

"Maybe," Mitch grunted. "Maybe not. I think I know."

The mechanical cop had lowered his retractable sprockets, climbed the porch steps, and was hammering at the door. "Mayor Sarquist, please!" he was calling. "Mayor Sarquist, please!"

There was a mahogany desk, several easy chairs, a solid wall of books, and a large safe in another wall. The safe--

"Sarquist should have some rather vital papers in there," he murmured.

"What do you want with papers?" the girl snapped. "Why don't we get out of the city while we can?"

He glanced at her coldly. "Like to go the rest of the way alone?"

She opened her mouth, closed it, and frowned. She was holding the tommy gun, and he saw it twitch slightly in her hand, as if reminding him that she didn't *have* to go alone.

He walked to the safe and idly spun the dial. "Locked," he muttered. "It'd take a good charge of T.N.T.... or—"

"Or what?"

"Central." He chuckled dryly. "Maybe she'll do it for us." "Are you crazy?"

"Sure. Go unlock the door. Let the policeman in."

"No!" she barked.

Mitch snorted impatiently. "All right, then, I'll do it. Pitch me the gun."

"No!" She pointed it at him and backed away.

"Give me the gun!"

"No!"

She had laid the baby on the sofa, where it was now sleeping peacefully. Mitch sat down beside it.

"Trust your aim?"

She caught her breath. Mitch lifted the child gently into his lap.

"Give me the gun."

"You wouldn't!"

"I'll give the kid back to the cops."

She whitened and handed the weapon to him quickly. Mitch saw that the safety was on, laid the baby aside, and stood up. "Don't look at me like that!" she said nervously.

He walked slowly toward her.

"Don't you dare *touch me!*"

He picked up a ruler from Sarquist's desk, then dived for her. A moment later she was stretched out across his lap, clawing at his legs and shrieking while he applied the ruler resoundingly. Then he dumped her on the rug, caught up the gun, and went to admit the insistent cop.

Man and machine stared at each other across the threshold. The cop radioed a visual image of Mitch to Central and got an immediate answer.

"Request you surrender immediately sir."

"Am I now charged with breaking and entering?" he asked acidly.

"Affirmative."

"You planning to arrest me?"

Again the cop consulted Central. "If you will leave the city at once, you will be granted safe passage."

Mitch lifted his brows. Here was a new twist. Central was doing some interpretation, some slight modification of ordinance. He grinned at the cop and shook his head.

"I locked Mayor Sarquist in the safe," he stated evenly. The robot consulted Central. There was a long twittering of computer code. Then it said, "This is false information."

"Suit yourself, tin boy. I don't care whether you believe it or not."

Again there was a twittering of code. Then: "Stand aside, please."

Mitch stepped out of the doorway. The subunit bounced over the threshold with the aid of the four-footed sprockets and clattered hurriedly toward the library. Mitch followed, grinning to himself. Despite Central's limitless "intelligence," she was as naive as a child.

He lounged in the doorway to watch the subunit fiddling with the dials of the safe. He motioned the girl down, and she crouched low in a corner. The tumblers clicked. There was a dull snap. The door started to swing.

"Just a minute!" Mitch barked.

The subunit paused and turned. The machine gun exploded, and the brief hail of bullets tore off the robot's antenna. Mitch lowered the gun and grinned. The cop just stood there, unable to contact Central, unable to decide. Mitch crossed the room through the drifting plaster dust and rolled the robot aside. The girl whimpered her relief and came up out of the corner.

The cop was twittering continually as it tried without success to contact the Coordinator. Mitch stared at it for a moment, then barked at the girl, "Go find some tools. Search the garage, attic, basement. I want a screwdriver, pliers, soldering iron, solder, whatever you can find."

She departed silently.

Mitch cleaned out the safe and dumped the heaps of papers, money, and securities on the desk. He began sorting them out. Among the various stacks of irrelevant records he found a copy of the original specifications for the Central Coordinator vaults, dating from the time of installation. He found blueprints of the city's network of computer circuits, linking the subunits into one. His hands became excited as he shuffled through the stacks. Here were data. Here was substance for reasonable planning.

Heretofore he had gone off half-cocked and quite naturally had met with immediate failure. No one ever won a battle by being good, pure, or ethically right, despite Galahad's claims to the contrary. Victories were won by intelligent planning, and Mitch felt ashamed of his previous impulsiveness. To work out a scheme for redirecting Central's efforts would require time. The girl brought a boxful of assorted small tools. She set them on the floor and sat down to glower at him.

"More cops outside now," she said. "Standing and waiting. The place is surrounded."

He ignored her. Sarquist's identifying code—it had to be here somewhere.

"I tell you, we should get out of here!" she whined. "Shut up."

Mitch occasionally plucked a paper from the stack and laid it aside while the girl watched.

"What are those?" she asked.

"Messages he typed into the unit at various times." "What good are *they*?"

He showed her one of the slips of yellowed paper. It said: *Unit 67-BJ is retired for repairs. A* number was scrawled in one corner: 5.00326.

"So?"

"That number. It was his identifying code at the time." "You mean it's different every day?"

"More likely, it's different every minute. The code is proba-bly based on an equation whose independent variable is *time* and whose dependent variable is the code number."

"How silly!"

"Not at all. It's just sort of a combination lock whose combination is continuously changing. All I've got to do is find the equation that describes the change. Then I can get to Central Coordinator."

She paced restlessly while he continued the search. Half an hour later he put his head in his hands and gazed despondently at the desk top. The key to the code was not there.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Sarquist. I figured he'd have to write it down somewhere. Evidently he memorized it. Or else his secretary did. I didn't figure a politician even had sense enough to substitute numbers in a simple equation."

The girl walked to the bookshelf and picked out a volume. She brought it to him silently. The title was *Higher Mathematics for Engineers and Physicists*.

"So I was wrong," he grunted. "Now what?"

He shuffled the slips of paper idly while he thought about it. "I've got eleven code numbers here, and the corresponding times when they were good. I might be able to find it empirically."

"I don't understand."

"Find an equation that gives the same eleven answers for the same eleven times, and use it to predict the code number for now."

"Will it work?"

He grinned. "There are an infinite number of equations that would give the same eleven answers for the same eleven substitutions. But it might work, if I assume that the code equation was of a simple form."

She paced restlessly while he worked at making a graph with time as the abscissa and the code numbers for ordinates. But the points were scattered across the page, and there was no connecting them with any simple sort of curve. "It almost has to be some kind of repeating function," he muttered, "something that Central could check by means of an irregular cam. The normal way for setting a code into a machine is to turn a cam by clock motor, and the height of the cam's rider is the code number for that instant."

He tried it on polar coordinates, hoping to get the shape of such a cam, but the resulting shape was too irregular to be possible, and he had no way of knowing the period of the repeating function.

"That's the craziest clock I ever saw," the girl murmured. "What?" He looked up quickly.

"That electric wall clock. Five minutes ahead of the electric clock in the living room. But when we first came it was twenty minutes ahead."

"It's stopped, maybe."

"Look at the second hand."

The red sweep was running. Mitch stared at it for a moment, then rose slowly to his feet and walked to her side. He took the small clock down from its hook and turned it over in his hands. Then he traced the cord to the wall outlet. The plug was held in place by a bracket so that it could not be removed.

The sweep hand moved slowly, it seemed. Silently he removed the screws from the case and stared inside at the works.

Then he grunted surprise. "First clock I ever saw with elliptical gears!"

"What?"

"Look at these two gears in the train. Ellipses, mounted at the foci. That's the story. For a while the clock will run faster than the other one. Then it'll run slower." He handled it with growing excitement.

"That's *it*, Marta—the key. Central must have another clock just like this one. The amount of lead or

lag—in minutes—is probably the code!"

He moved quickly to the direct-contact unit. "Tell me the time on the other clock!"

She hurried into the living room and called back, "Ten-seventeen and forty seconds ...forty-five ...fifty—"

The other clock was leading by five and one-quarter minutes. He typed 5.250 on the keyboard. Nothing happened. "You sure that's right?" he called.

"It's now ten-eighteen—ten... fifteen ...twenty."

The clock was still slowing down. He tried 5.230, but again nothing happened. The unit refused to respond. He arose with an angry grunt and began prowling around the library. "There's something else," he muttered. "There must be a modifying factor. That clock's too obvious anyway. But what else could they be measuring together except time?"

"Is that another clock on his desk?"

"No, it's a barometer. It doesn't—"

He paused to grin. "Could be! The barometric pressure difference from the mean could easily be mechanically added or subtracted from the reading of that wacky clock. Visualize this, inside of Central: The two clock motors mounted on the same shaft, with the distance between their indicator needles as the code number. Except that the distance is modified by having a barometer rigged up to shift one of the clocks one way or the other on its axis when the pressure varies. It's simple enough."

She shook her head. Mitch took the barometer with him to the unit. The dial was calibrated in atmospheres, and the pressure was now 1.03. Surely, he thought, for simplicity's sake, there would be no other factor involved in the code. This way, Sarquist could have glanced at his watch and the wall clock and the barometer and could have known the code number with only a little mental arithmetic. The wall time minus the wrist time plus the barometer's reading.

He called to the girl again, and the lag was now a little over four minutes. He typed again. There was a sharp click as the relays worked. The screen came alive, fluttered with momentary phosphorescence, then revealed the numbers in glowing type.

"We've got it!" he yelled to Marta.

She came to sit down on the rug. "I still don't see what we've got."

"Watch!" He began typing hurriedly, and the message flashed neatly upon the screen.

CENTRAL FROM SARQUIST. CLEAR YOUR TANKS OF ALL ORDINANCE DATA, EXCEPT ORDINANCES PERTAINING TO RECORDING OF INFORMATION IN YOUR TANKS. PREPARE TO RECORD NEW DATA.

He pressed the answer button and the screen went blank, but the reply was slow to come.

"It won't work!" Marta snorted. "It knows you aren't Sarquist. The subunits in the street have seen us."

"What do you mean by 'know,' and what do you mean by 'see'? Central isn't human."

"It knows and it *sees*."

He nodded. "Provided you mean those words in a mechanical sense. Provided you don't imply that she *cares* what she knows and sees, except where she's required to 'care' by enforced behavior patterns—ordinances."

Then the reply began crawling across the screen. SARQUIST FROM CENTRAL. INCONSISTENT INSTRUCTIONS. ORDINANCE 36-J, PERTAINING TO THE RECORDING OF INFORMATION, STATES THAT ORDINANCE DATA MAY NOT BE TOTALLY VOIDED BY YOU EXCEPT DURING RED ALERT AIR WARNING.

"See?" the girl hissed.

DEFINE THE LIMITS OF MY AUTHORITY IN PRESENT CONDITIONS, he typed. MAY I TEMPORARILY SUSPEND SPECIFIC ORDINANCES?

YOU MAY SUSPEND SPECIFIC ORDINANCES FOR CAUSE, BUT THE CAUSE MUST BE RECORDED WITH THE ORDER OF SUSPENSION.

Mitch put on a gloating grin. READ ME THE SERIES NUMBERS OF ALL LAWS IN CRIMINAL AND TRAFFIC CODES.



The reaction was immediate. Numbers began flashing on the screen in rapid sequence. "Write these down!" he called to the girl.

A few moments later, the flashing numbers paused. WAIT, EMERGENCY INTERRUPTION, said the screen.

Mitch frowned. The girl glanced up from her notes. "What's—"

Then it came. A dull booming roar that rattled the windows and shook the house.

"Not another raid!" she whimpered.

"It doesn't sound like—"

Letters began splashing across the screen. EMERGENCY ADVICE TO SARQUIST. MY CIVILIAN DEFENSE CO-ORDINATOR HAS BEEN DESTROYED. MY ANTI-AIRCRAFT COORDINATOR HAS BEEN DESTROYED. ADVISE, PLEASE.

"What happened?"

"Frank Ferris!" he barked suddenly. "The Sugarton crowd—with their dynamite! They got into the city."

CENTRAL FROM SARQUIST, he typed. WHERE ARE THE DAMAGED COORDINATORS LOCATED?

UNDERGROUND VAULT AT MAP COORDINATES K-81.

"Outside the city," he breathed. "They haven't got to the main tanks yet. We've got a little time."

PROCEED WITH ORDINANCE LISTING, he commanded.

Half an hour later they were finished. Then he began the long task of relisting each ordinance number and typing after it: REPEALED; CITY EVACUATED.

"I hear gunshots," Marta interrupted. She went to the window to peer up and down the dimly lighted streets.

Mitch worked grimly. It would take them a couple of hours to get into the heart of the city, unless they knew how to capture a robot vehicle and make it serve them. But with enough men and enough guns, they would wreck subunits until Central withdrew. Then they could walk freely into the heart of the city and wreck the main coordinators, with a consequent cessation of all city services. Then they would be free to pillage, to make a mechanical graveyard of the city that awaited the return of man.

"They're coming down this street, I think," she called.

"Then turn out all the lights!" he snapped, "and keep quiet." "They'll see all the cops out in the street. They'll wonder why."

He worked frantically to get all the codes out of the machine before the Sugarton crowd came past. He was destroying its duties, its habit patterns, its normal functions. When he was finished it would stand by helplessly and let Ferris's gang wreak their havoc, unless he could replace the voided ordinances with new, more practical ones.

"Aren't you finished yet?" she called. "They're a couple of blocks away. The cops have quit fighting, but the men are still shooting them."

"I'm finished now!" He began rattling the keyboard frantically.

SUPPLEMENTAL ORDINANCES: #1: THERE IS NO LIMIT OF SUBUNIT EXPENDITURE.

YOU WILL NOT PHYSICALLY INJURE ANY HUMAN BEING, EXCEPT IN DEFENSE OF CENTRAL COORDINATOR UNITS.

ALL MECHANICAL TRAFFIC WILL BE CLEARED FROM THE STREETS IMMEDIATELY.

YOU WILL DEFEND CENTRAL COORDINATORS AT ALL COSTS.

THE HUMAN LISTED IN YOUR MEMORY UNITS UNDER THE NAME `WILLIE JESSER' WILL BE ALLOWED ACCESS TO CENTRAL DATA WITHOUT CHALLENGE.

TO THE LIMIT OF YOUR ABILITY YOU WILL SET YOUR OWN TASKS IN PURSUANCE OF THE GOAL: TO KEEP THE CITY'S SERVICES INTACT AND IN GOOD REPAIR, READY FOR HUMAN USAGE.

YOU WILL APPREHEND HUMANS ENGAGED IN ARSON, GRAND THEFT, OR PHYSICAL VIOLENCE AND EJECT THEM SUMMARILY FROM THE CITY.

YOU WILL OFFER YOUR SERVICES TO PROTECT THE PERSON OF WILLIE JESSER.

"They're here!" shouted the girl. "They're coming up the walk!"

—AND WILL ASSIST HIM IN THE TASK OF RENOVATING THE CITY, TOGETHER WITH SUCH PERSONS AS ARE WILLING TO HELP REBUILD.

The girl was shaking him. "They're here, I tell you!"

Mitch punched a button labeled "commit to data," and the screen went blank. He leaned back and grinned at her. There was a sound of shouting in the street, and someone was beating at the door.

Then the skaters came rolling in a tide of sound two blocks away. The shouting died, and there were several bursts of gunfire. But the skaters came on, and the shouting grew frantic.

She muttered: "Now we're in for it."

But Mitch just grinned at her and lit a cigarette. Fifty men couldn't stand for long against a couple of thousand subunits who now had no expenditure limit.

He typed one last instruction into the unit. WHEN THE PLUNDERERS ARE TAKEN PRISONER, OFFER THEM THIS CHOICE: STAY AND HELP REBUILD, OR KEEP AWAY FROM THE CITY.

From now on, there weren't going to be any nonparticipants.

Mitch closed down the unit and went out to watch the waning fight.

A bigger job was ahead.

## **A Family-Matter**

### **By Walter M. Miller, Jr.**

*"Rust Thou Art, to Rust Returneth ..."*

SOMEONE has awakened me. I feel darkness and a cold wind about my hull. I stand in the launching position and wait. I am waiting for the signal that will send me thundering alone into the night, toward the bright points of light that wink above me. I can see them beckoning through the eye in my prow. A voice comes to me.

"C-33 from Winnipegport Control. Greenwich time, 0655 hours. Start your jets. Prepare for blast-off. Over."

I answer with an acknowledgement signal, although I have no voice. I start my reactors and clear my tubes, letting them heat to operating temperature. The warmth is good. It brings a faint glow to my pleasure circuits. Soon I shall be streaking starward for a journey which no human crew could long endure. This is my first solo; this is my test. If it is good, then first-sol will reward me with sleep, and with soft dreams.

I don't know where I came from. At first I could think and remember, but I could not dream. I could not desire. I could not feel fear nor pain nor pleasantness. I was made of metal and glass and hot patterns of energy. But I was not yet complete. They gave me another part—a fragile bit of warm flesh, immersed in a globular tank of thick fluids, fed by pumps and aerators and chemical infusers, and interconnected with the part of me that is metal and glass. When I am Awake, it becomes a part of my oneness. It gives me pleasure and pain. It gives me fear and desire. When I am asleep, it dreams separately of beauty.

The voice comes again. "C-33 from Control. Sixty seconds before blast-off. Am beginning time-signals. Over and out."

The signals come as radar pulses at one second intervals. I adjust my jets so that their growling thrust holds me poised feather-light—my tripod scarcely touching the ramp beneath me. A new fluid suffuses my organic unit; I feel excitement. The controls are my tense muscles. The instruments are my eyes and ears. It is good to be so strong and alert. The pulses have paused—a five second lull. Then . . .  
*teeeeeet!*

MY JETS spurt fury. Nostrils breathing fire. I throw myself skyward like a handful of lightning. I am lightning! My power is an ecstasy! As the seconds tick away, the hot rush of air grows thinner about my body. The sudden thrust causes my flesh-organ to sag and grow dazed in its fluid, but its long presence has taught my mechanical circuits how to respond, and I can still feel elation although the organ is half-asleep.

The time is 0702. My altitude should be 371.4 kilometers, but there is a slight negative discrepancy. Either my thrust is less than my instruments indicate, or my mass is greater than anticipated. I am pausing to cross-check all available evidence.

Now I have checked. Now I feel uneasiness. The loading-tapes are in error by seventy-five kilograms. Somewhere within my body is an unexplained object, or objects. Compared with my total weight, its mass indeed is tiny. But it is great enough to cause large errors in my course-plan. Already I have veered slightly from my line-of-thrust; the object is off-center. I use my stabilizers to compensate for its presence. I feel their feedback and know that the object lies four meters from my center-line.

I have eyes in my control room, my reactor room, and my cargo hold. I look through them—and see nothing. I am empty—no crates, no forgotten tools—only the parts that belong to my body. There is only one place that is invisible to me—a small closet just aft of the empty control room. I can see its closed door; it is where humans go for privacy when I have a crew aboard. It is four meters from my center-line. One of my ears is set within it, but the sound of my jets drowns my hearing. I am frightened. Can this be a test to confuse me? Now I must revise my course-plan!

The plan is revised. With a tiny increment of thrust, with the auto-stabilizers in constant action, and with a revised flow-velocity while in the next layer of five-space, I shall reach Argos III at the specified time of arrival. But the mystery remains. What unauthorized cargo am I carrying? I have decided that it is not a test: the off-center loading is illegal during blast-off. Even crewmen must be strapped in specified positions. My commander would not devise an illegal test.

I have scanned my memory-libraries and have extracted a list of several hundred objects, each of which could weigh seventy-five kilograms, be motionless, and fit within the closet. But considerations of plausibility reduce the list to three possibles: (1) a dead human being. (2) six cases of whiskey for an official on Argos III, and (3) an unconscious human being.

If I do not reduce my acceleration, the list will shrink to two: broken whiskey, dead human. I find a word in my anthropo-concept vocabulary that seems to fit whatever person is responsible for this misloading. The word is "fool."

My inertia is now greater -than the backward tug of Earthplanet's gravity. I am quenching my jets so that I can listen for possible sounds in the closet. For a moment, I hear nothing. I increase the pickup's preamplifier to full sensitivity.

And now . . . *I hear faint breathing!* Then a low moan! The organism is still unconscious. What am I to do? It is obviously human. I self-key a soporific fluid into my flesh-organ's bath, thereby lulling my anxiety. Shall I call back to Winnipegport? Perhaps that would bring punishment. I am supposed to be capable of solving any problem that does not involve repairing damages to my body. Unless there is an emergency. Is this an emergency?

NOW the creature moves a little. It pulls itself toward the door. I can feel the feedback from my autostabilizers: there seem to be two objects—one of eighteen kilograms, the other about fifty-seven. The larger is self-moving; but it seems small for a human. My memory units suggest the possibility that it is a female. Despite the soporific, I am terrified. The being is standing up.

I watch the narrow closet door through my control-room eye. I listen to the being's breathing. The breaths come as faint moans. The creature seems weak and exhausted. Except for the clicking of my relays, the ship that is my body is silent. I am spinning slowly about my axis to provide a slight gravity. If the animal proves dangerous, I can again pin it helplessly in place by renewing my acceleration. Nevertheless, the circuits controlled by my flesh-organ are trembling with involuntary pulses.

The latch-lock clicks. The door swings open. I see it swaying in the entrance, glancing quickly up and down the corridor. It calls weakly.

"Timmy?"

It is a female. It has stringy, gray-brown, hair, and a thin frightened face. It wears the garments of a working-class male, although its hips and breasts make the pretense transparent. It has the gauntness and the slightly wrinkled skin of middle-age. After scanning again, I see that it has called the name of a male.

I have no voice. I can only speak the lovely tones of radar code, or operate a typing keyboard in my control room. She is still standing in the corridor.

"Timmy . . . can you hear me?"

I type: "You are the only human aboard. It is evident that you are stowing away on the wrong rocket. There is no 'Timmy' here."

The sound of the keyboard startles her. She gasps and steps back toward the closet. When the typing ceases, she tiptoes slowly to the entrance and peers cautiously around at the controls. Her hands are trembling. She sees the keyboard and moves toward it.

As she reads her face tightens gradually into a tense mask. She seems to be making a grief-response. Suddenly her hands fly to her cheeks. "*Timmy!*" she cries in a kind of shrieking roar. She falls to her knees, then throws herself on the deck. She curls up on her side and sobs into her arms.

"I regret that he is not aboard," I type. "If you were authorized to board another rocket, but have simply made a human-type mistake, then I shall return you to Winnipegport, Earthplanet of Sol. If you are a stowaway, I shall act in accordance with Pan-Stellar Code."

I wait. She does not arise to read. She continues sobbing. I do nothing. The past reactions of my own flesh-organ allow me to understand that her emotion will pass. Through the open closet door, I can see a leather bag—the other object. From past experience, I recognize it as a suitcase.

Gradually, her sobbing subsides, but she does not arise. She lies shivering. I tap an impatient rhythm in x's on my keyboard, hoping to arouse her. I have business; she detains me.

At last she pulls herself erect and sits down to read. For a moment, I fear that she will repeat the grief-response, but her shudder passes. Her dark eyes narrow; she straightens herself and sets her mouth grimly. She touches the keyboard, but I type first.

"Speak aloud, please. I have audio-pickups."

She looks around quickly. "Wh-where are y-you?" She has a rich female voice, much pleasanter than those of the male crewmen. But her question is meaningless.

"I am the being in which you are located," I reply. "I am all around you. My name is C-33. I am an M-3 express ship with Class XII neuro-cybernetic controls. Please adjust yourself emotionally to this fact."

She nods quickly. "You are Timmy!"

I PAUSE. The animal obviously thinks that someone is hiding from her. Her stupidity irritates me: but the Code requires me to be patient with humans.

I type again.

"Tell me how you happened to come aboard. I must have this information in order to decide what shall be done with you."

She tosses her head defiantly. "Don't speak to me like that!" she barks. "You'll decide nothing."

"You will be treated in accordance with Pan-Stellar Code. Now please..." I stop typing because she gets up and walks away from the board. She paces the floor, apparently suffering a conflict of emotions. She keeps looking about the cabin, as if searching for someone to address.

I remain silent—and uneasy. I have decided to be patient for ten minutes—no more.

"Where is Timmy, you monster?" she shrieks suddenly, crouching slightly as if to leap upon the keyboard. Of course she does not realize that I could crush her with a sudden jet-thrust.

"There is no 'Timmy' here. I find the word 'insanity' listed in my vocabunits. Are you suffering from such a malfunction?"

She steps forward to read. Her face clouds. Then she makes a small bitter laugh. "That's right, I'm insane. Insane to love anything but the State. Insane for believing that a few things should belong to me—and a few even to God." She finds my eye and stares into it. "Tell me, C-33, who made you?"

"You speak sedition," I warn. "But in answer to your pointless query—State made me, of course. Code specifies that no private individual or concern shall manufacture any machine or device that requires the use of processed materials. No one except State is powerful enough to make me."

"And what of Timmy?"

"I fail to understand. Who, or what, is Timmy?"

She shakes her head irritably. "You have a brain. Where is it?"

"My cybernetics circuits are scattered throughout the ship."

"The brain, the *brain!*" she raged. "Where is the flesh-and-blood brain, your mind, your soul!"

I find her concepts jumbled. Undoubtedly she is insane. But now I grasp her meaning. She means the flesh-organ that motivates me and allows me to imagine.

"The organ is behind a panel in the calculator-unit, and it is an integral part of my oneness. I fail to see. . . ."

She whirls to stare at the unit. Suddenly she darts across the control-room with a wild cry. In order to protect myself from her, I spurt a three-gravity thrust with my jets. She sprawls with a shriek and skids across the floor. I hold her there firmly with a continued acceleration. She is gasping and fighting to arise.

"Please ... don't, Timmy *don't!* It hurts ... my heart. I only wanted to look at it."

I understand pain. I am sorry she feels pain. I type: "I fail to understand your motives. But if it will please you, you may look at the flesh-organ. I must warn you however that my reaction-time is measured in microseconds. I can crush you quickly if you behave hostilely."

She hears the typing. I ease the gravity so that she can pull herself back to read it. She nods. "I—I won't harm it. . . ."

Her face is wet as she strips away the panel. She makes sobbing sounds in her throat. So nervous are her hands that the panel slips clattering to the floor. She falls to her knees and stares inside. She remains there, frozen.

I am proud of the flesh-organ, and grateful to State for furnishing me with it. When it is inoperative, I am not myself. Without it I think, but cannot feel. And then I think only the thoughts that a human crew requires of me. Sometimes I think that it is the source of my consciousness—even though I have an independent mechanical memory that functions more efficiently than the haphazard neural circuits of the flesh-organ. Indeed, it is an important part of me. I can understand the female's interest in it. But I can understand neither her delusions nor her grief responses.

SHE has been kneeling there motionless for several seconds. She stares at the dimly illuminated globe of transparent plastic, containing the pink and wrinkled object in its warm bath of drifting' fluid. Is she disappointed? But suddenly she speaks. A hollow whisper . . . but tender.

"Timmy . . . Timmy . . . twenty years it's been . . . since they took you away. Can't you remember? Please, Timmy! The doctor that delivered you ... oh, no, you can't remember . . . or can you?"

They say the mind never really forgets. Timmy—try to remember being born, *try!* The pain, the bright light, fear! Oh my baby, my baby . . . listen . . . I nursed you. For two days I nursed you, before they said you had a bad heart and couldn't live ... before they *stole* you ... and took your brain out of your warm little body. Timmy, Timmy—how can you endure it! This monster. . . ."

The woman buries her face in her hands and makes choking spasms of sound. She is being illogical. But now I am interested. Frequently I have wondered about the organ's origin. It was obviously not *manufactured* by State. I am pleased to learn that it is human; State must think highly of me.

But the kneeling animal is guilty of a fallacy. She is considering the organ as apart from the rest of me. I am one. Assuming that my consciousness derives originally from the brain of her whelp, I am nevertheless C-33. This body is the only one I have known. The organ's functions have adapted to the ship's senses and the ship's muscles. I am proud of my body. It disgusts me that this creature should think differently.

"Get up," I type. "I assume now that you are a stowaway. Code states that if a stowaway is discovered, the ship shall continue according to the flight-plan and shall deliver the stowaway to the human authorities at the destination port. I am sorry for your sake that this is a test-flight." I wonder if it

would be wise to tell her that the flight will involve accelerations of ten gravities sustained for hour-long periods. Even my own flesh-organ becomes weak from the ordeal, although it is specially protected.

The woman hears the typewriter. She looks around suddenly. Her haggard face becomes radiant. The fool! She thinks I am Timmy. She thinks I am answering her plea. She hurries to the keyboard.

"Fool!" I add as an afterthought. Her eyes go wild suddenly. She shrieks with hysterical laughter. "Code . . . you speak to me of *Code!* Timmy, my little boy! Now hear *this Code*—" *Thou shalt honor thy father and thy MOTHER!*" She darts to the manual control panel. She seizes a heavy crank-lever-and races toward the flesh-organ's housing. Evidently she means to destroy it.

I regret that I must cause her pain.

I breathe hard on my forward jets to throw her back. She lurches across the room and falls against the control-panel. I don't want to kill her deliberately.

She is tugging herself to her feet. I increase the thrust slightly to keep her pinned down.

*She saw the thrust-dial move!*

"No! NO!" She is trying to override me on the controls! She twists and jerks and batters at the delicate dials!

I throw every ounce of thrust into the jets — straining the very hull of my body.

I see her crash across the room and batter sickeningly against the bulkhead. I look away.

Pain, terrible throbbing pain. It lances out from my flesh-organ to pervade my circuits. I am dazed. For an instant the force reached twenty-five gravities. Now the jets are silent, but the pain persists.

I look toward my flesh-organ's housing. The fluid bath has become crimson —the color of the stuff on the floor and on the bulkhead. My organ has ruptured —or one of the fluid-vessels that feed its inner structure has broken. I wonder ... if they will give me another one . . . but would I have the same consciousness then?

Who am I?

I think I am going to sleep. I am certain of it. But I need to revise the flight-plan now.

I am off-course. . . .

But I am growing lazy. I am indeed asleep. No one has commanded me to revise the flight-plan. Indeed I was commanded to follow it.

Now I don't care. I shall follow the plan in my memory units. It will take me to nothingness. But now I don't care. I have no fear. I have no desire.

## **GRAVESONG** **By WALTER MILLER, JR.**

Emilish knew that Man had conquered Space—he was to find that Man had lost the Earth!

FOR five subjective centuries she had lived, although Earth had aged half a million years since she had left it. She remembered Earth, now that she was dying on the parched yellow soil of Sorcerer VI. She remembered, and complained like an old hag of her fate, and the fate of her race. Her voice was a thin whine, and her face was cracked and haggard by the ages as she pleaded with him.

"Take me back, Emilesh—to Earth !"

"Yes, Motar," purred the young man who knelt beside her pallet.

"Not here—don't bury me here."

"No, Motar."

She wheezed weakly and stared beyond the window-slit toward the blue-green sky where blazed the Sorcerer and Sorcerer's wife—twin suns, pale yellow giant and blue-white dwarf, devouring one another in a close orbital embrace.

"Man is no longer Man," complained the old woman.

"I don't understand," murmured her son.

She stared at him with dull violet eyes, faded by the years. "How old are you, Emilesh?"

He made a choking sound in his throat. She was fading fast, becoming delirious perhaps.

"I am only fifty, Motar."

"You do not remember Earth."

"No. But I remember Viking II, and you said—"

"It is *not* like Earth. There is but one Earth! Made for Man. And Man made it Earth, but he is gone."

"Not gone, Motar. He has won space."

She hissed a low sigh and closed her eyes. "You cannot understand."

"Tell me, Motar." He leaned forward to blot a fleck of pink foam from her cracked lips.

"Give into the hands of one man great power—and Men become slaves."

"It is true."

"Give all men great power—and *Man* becomes a slave."

"I do not understand."

She raised herself up on a quaking arm and stared at him with wild eyes. Her voice crept a note higher.

"But give *each* man, every man, great power—and Man passes away. He dies. Do you understand?"

"No, Motar."

She crumpled back on the pillow and closed her eyes. "What is society, Emilesh?"

He paused, bewildered. "There is the Liberty Drive Society on Todmacht V. And the Funph Corporation that owns Darkon VII and manufacturers energy-triggers for the five-space drive. And—"

"No, Emilesh—your society. Where is your society?"

He straightened his shoulders proudly and smiled. "I am owned by no corporation, Motar! You know that! I am free lance."

She turned her face to the wall.

"Where is your law?"

"Law—*law*? I—"

"You have forgotten the word."

"Perhaps, Motar—I—"

Her breathing became louder, faster. "Take me to Earth, Emilesh."

"I shall."

"Scatter my ashes there—where Man —still—"

HER voice trailed off. He sat staring at her for a long time. Then he arose and went out to stand in the yellow dust and watch the setting of Sorcerer and Sorcerer's wife. The sky went orange and gray, and at last the ten thousand suns of Cluster Regenesi winked out to gleam like the eyes of dorquebirds, squatting in their nests of planets. And beyond the stars of the cluster, the nebulous band of the Milky Way streaked the blackness, its glowing belt splotched and blotted by the Great Rift. Beyond the galactic nucleus, beyond the dust screens of the Rift, far out in an arm of the galactic spiral, lay Sol—class G star, magnitude 4.8, main sequence—invisible, insignificant.

At midnight, the smoke of a funeral pyre darkened the stars. Before dawn, he burned the house, as a place of death. And there was no one but Emilesh to watch it crumble in ashes on that sea-bound continent of Sorcerer VI. Then he went to the ship.

He went alone with Motar's ashes, for he had not yet captured himself a wife, and he would not trade his freedom as free lance for any woman offered as enticement by the corporate societies. He preferred to live alone as wanderer, exploiter, trader—until he happened upon the camp of an equally lonely female.

It was a hard thing Motar had asked of him, hard because it would cost him five years of aging in hypnohibernosis while the time-lag would drink up several hundred centuries of galactic local time. He

would return to a different era, but that mattered little. They had done it several times during Motar's subjective lifetime.

He placed the ashes in a sealed vault and strapped himself in the recline-seat. A microphone lowered itself before his face.

"Sybern Seven, answer please."

"*I am hearing*," grated the metallic voice.

"Have you a star in your memory called Sol?"

"*Pause for scanning*."

There was a silence in the small ship. Then—

"*Negative. It is perhaps listed by sector designation?*"

The suggestion was followed by a click and a sliding sound. A thick volume appeared at his elbow. He shuffled the pages, then read aloud: "It has been renamed. *Oculus Christi Regis*, 10,400 parsecs, 1.51 radians. It is our destination, Sybern Seven."

"*Please designate planet*," croaked the robot.

Emilesh paused. "I believe it is the fourth—no, the third. Chose a temperate land-mass for landing. Now prepare me for hypno-hybernosis."

The couch was moist beneath him. A mist arose about him, collected on his skin, congealed to form a warm oily membrane. He closed his eyes. Steel fingers encircled his wrists. A needle touched the hollow of his arm, probed deep into a vein. He felt lighter. Another touched his chest. A jab of pain caused him to yelp. And then the needle glided gently between ribs. His pulse began to lag, his breathing slowed. A blinding point of light danced in his waning consciousness. Somewhere—far away—the thunder of rockets.

"It is still and silent in the womb," droned a voice. "It is warm and black in the womb. Still and silent. Warm and black. Very heavy."

Emilesh slept.

THERE was silence; darkness and silence. A breath of fresh night air reached his nostrils, cool and pleasant about his face. He lifted his head. Faint moonlight was splashing through the open airlock. He heard the quiet chirp of insects and the distant howl of an animal.

"Where are we?" he groaned weakly.

"*Oculus Christi Regis III. Am I permitted to retire from consciousness?*"

"Retire."

He unbuckled himself and sat for a long time working his joints. The electro-stimulators had been at work on him while he slept, but they were no substitute for active exercise. He was weak and sick and a dull ache pervaded his bones.

He arose and staggered to the airlock. In the night wind, some of the sickness passed. He stared about at the moonswept landscape.

Earth! Earth after six hundred thousand years.

Sybern had landed at the edge of a grove atop a flat hill. At the foot of the slope flowed a narrow river, clothed along its length in bunches of black trees through which reflected moonlight peeped.

He left Motar's ashes in their vault and slid down to stand on the rocky ground. Earth! He could feel it, a sense of rightness, of belonging here. The way the wind came, and its smell, and the rustle of the trees in the grove. They stirred memories, and he tried to think, but there were no memories.

"I have never been here," he reminded himself.

Born in space, grown to manhood in the heart of the galaxy, memories of Earth were impossible to him. But the feeling of memory was there, and he wondered over it. He stooped and gathered up a handful of the hard soil—grass-roots, and moist sand, and broken bits of soft rock. He squeezed it in his fist, and it felt *right*. Strange! Did the feeling of memory spring out of the depths of a race-mind, arise out of the sub-structure of a forest-bred species?

He crumbled the earth in his fist and thought, "I am made of this stuff." Then he walked to a place where the slope steepened, and looked out beyond the river, across billowing grassland into gray



distance, dimmed by moonlit mist. There were no lights. Emilesh, whose beginnings lay beyond the Great Rift, had somehow known that there would be no lights on Earth.

He looked upward to the thinly scattered stars, Man's lights, sprinkled across the galaxy like flaming chaff in the wind. Who had stood on the hill before him in ages past—and longed for the stars? Who had dreamed here?

The visitor smiled faintly, drinking in his oneness with the soil, with the wind and its odor of Autumn. He wondered if the dreamer had understood the thing he wanted, and the thing he intended giving up. Flesh, torn from the planet of its birth, found freedom in space; freedom but not contentment. He shivered.

It was dangerous to stand here. He must not linger. Earth was cast in the image of Man. If he stayed too long, he might never escape her. He turned quickly back toward the ship, and stopped.

A slender white figure stood by the airlock in the moonlight. A *human* figure! He groped for his holster, but it was inside the ship. He stood staring dumbly at the motionless figure of a woman, unclad and silent as the earth.

HE WALKED slowly toward her, his boot-heels crunching in the ground. He stopped a few feet away. She had not moved, only watched him. Her hair was close-cropped, and black as the night. Her face was an oval shadow, with a spot of brightness on the tip of her nose. She was well-formed, with soft white limbs and a high bosom that longed for children. She tossed her head a little, and he could see that she was smiling at him. But her eyes caught a flash of the moon, and they gleamed for a moment like cat's eyes.

The thought came like a whisper, but it was soundless.

"I am Eva. Have you come to bury your dead, Wanderer?"

For an instant he felt his scalp crawling. He had met telepathic races, but never a human so endowed. But then he remembered. Hundreds of thousands of years had passed by the Earth-clock, time for evolution to be at work. A telepath—and he had hardly expected to find any remnants of humanity.

"Give me your dead, Wanderer," purred the thought. "And I shall tend the grave."

He gasped a little, and leaped to a conclusion: *others had returned before him—bringing the remains of their ancestors to rest in the soil of Oculus Christi Regis III.*

"Tending graves, is it your duty?" he muttered.

She stepped back, as if frightened by the sound. She moistened her lips and nodded, but her eyes were gleaming curiously again. He knew then that she did not understand his speech, but only the thought that accompanied it. A telepath—she had forgotten how to speak. He lowered his voice to a whisper.

"What do you ask in barter? In exchange for allowing me to scatter my motar's ashes here?"

By her answering jumble of thought, he knew she failed to understand. Still, if her duty was that of grave-tender, he could only conclude that some corporate enterprise had seized Earth as a burial ground. "Give me your dead," was her only intelligible reaction.

Emilesh shook his head. His scalp was tingling again. The thought had seemed so eager. He pushed his way past her and entered the airlock. A few minutes later he returned with the urn, and she was still standing there. She saw it, and opened her hands as if to take it.

"No!"

The girl backed away, stared at him somberly: Then her pale marble shoulders lifted in a faint shrug.

"I'm sorry I spoke sharply. I—"

She turned away slowly and began walking toward the blackness of the grove, her body swaying gracefully in the moonlight. She was beautifully formed, and Emilesh realized suddenly what he had done. After many years searching free lance planets for a mate. . . .

"Wait!"

The girl walked gracefully on. He started after her, then glanced down at the urn in his arms. There would be time to find her later. He had come to bring Motar home.

He walked through thickening brush down the slope to the bank of the river, and the ground became soft and wet beneath his feet. Far out in the silvery water a fish leaped high and splashed again. He held

the urn high in the wind, let it tilt, and slowly spill a stream of dust that whipped away and became invisible in the lustrous gloom.

*"Break the urn,"* whispered a voice in his mind, and he knew the girl was watching from the hilltop.

He shattered it over his knee, and the pieces that remained in his hands he threw out into the river. Motar had returned to Earth. A dust, the substance of whose longing was so great that it demanded passage across ten thousand parsecs to be united with the dust of Earth again.

HE TURNED away and climbed the slope, pausing twice to rest, for the long endurance of hypnohibernosis had weakened him. He dare not leave again until his strength returned—weeks perhaps.

Back at the ship, he called to the girl, but she did not answer. He tried calling with his mind alone, but there was no answering thought. She had been watching him when he was at the river's edge. She could not be far. He walked toward the grove, seeking her, his mind toying with the thought of taking her as mate. . . . if she would go with him, or at least if she did not object too violently to being captured.

The rustling trees closed over him, and only slender shafts of moonlight penetrated the foliage. The undergrowth was sparse; man had trained his planet well.

"Eva—"

No answer. The woods were full of tiny sounds, twitterings and scamperings in the brush. He paused to peer about him.

Then he saw the eyes, glowing softly by a tree-trunk. He stepped quickly toward them.

"Eva—"

*AhhrrRRRAAUGHrr!*

A thundering roar split the night. He stumbled and lurched back. The eyes belonged to a giant cat. He clawed for the missing weapon, then darted for a tree-trunk. But he paused. The animal was doing nothing. Suddenly the eyes disappeared, and he heard the creature lumbering away through the brush. It had not molested him. *Why?*

*"You are Man,"* came the girl's thought.

He leaned against the tree, panting slightly while he recovered his composure. A thrill shot through him. He had walked on many planets, fled from many beasts, and killed a few. But never had he met a giant carnivore who would turn and walk away from the pale and hated biped.

*"He hates you,"* called the whisperer, *"but he knows you for who you are."*

He shook his head in wonder. Even the beasts remembered.

"Where are you?" he called to the girl. "Come. Let us talk."

Her answer was slow in coming. Had she heard his thoughts about a mate?

*"It is best that you go quickly from this world, Space-animal."*

The name shocked him. She had called him "Man" before.

"You—are—human, still?" he muttered suspiciously.

*"We are both of Man. But we are different."*

"The same species—"

*"No."*

"The same flesh—"

*"Yes—"* But her thought was like bitter laughter.

"Come out."

For a long time he stood waiting. But she neither came nor answered him. He sighed and turned away, walked slowly back through the woods and across the narrow clearing to the ship.

THE singing of birds awoke him. The Earth was full of bright yellow sunshine. A large blue insect buzzed in through the air-lock, wheeled in a crazy circle and buzzed out again. Emilesh sat up and shook the sleep from his head. He felt fine, refreshed. He was still weak from hypno, but never had he felt such rapid recovery. The air of Earth, mother of his race, was sweet medicine indeed. He groped sleepily for his clothing, then pushed it aside. It was too warm for anything more than a short kilt.

A bundle lay in the airlock—a bundle wrapped in leaves. He frowned in bewilderment, then went to stoop over it. The fragrant odor of fresh-cooked meat. He stripped away the leaves and found the roasted carcass of a small mammal. Still puzzled, he glanced up toward the grove.

Whispering laughter floated through his mind. The girl. He thought a grateful exclamation at her and tore off a succulent hindquarter.

"Come join me," he offered.

There was a long pause. Then her graceful white figure slipped out of the trees and came toward him with the swaying catlike walk. He stopped eating to stare. She was perfect—a narrow doll-like face with upturned features and hazel eyes. He was uncomfortably aware of her body, and he kept his eyes averted lest he think some thought to embarrass her.

He offered her some of the meat she had brought him, but her dark head shook in quick refusal.

*"I do not eat of the dead."*

He dropped the hind-quarter quickly and stared at her. The tingling in his scalp again.

"What is it?" he demanded.

She thought an image at him—a small brown animal with a short fluffy tail and long ears. The image was nibbling a grass-blade.

"Only an animal," he grunted, recovering.

*"It is forbidden for the grave-tenders to eat of the dead."*

A sanctity rule of the corporate society, he thought to himself. She seemed to catch the thought, but made no reply—only watched him curiously as he ate.

*"You are different,"* she thought at last.

Emilesh looked up quickly. She had told him that before, but now he detected a certain qualitative note in the assertion—a note that tended to point out where she thought the difference lay.

"You have never seen a male!" he gasped.

The loudness of his voice frightened her and she inched away. The words meant nothing to her, but the mental images that accompanied them seemed to disturb her deeply.

Then suddenly she thought a timid question at him, and he gasped. It was little short of obscene! The girl caught his reaction. She leaped nimbly to her feet and darted away toward the forest.

"Eva, wait!"

But she was gone. He cursed himself for a moment. It was not obscene, but only the bluntness of complete ignorance. He called after her and tried to explain, but she had hidden in an embarrassed silence.

THREE days passed. He saw nothing of her, but at times he felt that his thoughts were being examined and studied from afar.

Nor did he see any other human beings. The broad flat plain beyond the river was an expanse of grassy emptiness. When the wind whipped the grass, tiny white stones sometimes peeped into view. They were rectangular and set vertically in the ground. Markers of some kind, he guessed—but there were so many of them, spaced two or three paces apart. And the grass seemed to grow higher in low mounds at the foot of each marker. They stretched beyond the range of his vision, and whatever their purpose, he guessed that the plain was completely covered with them.

He was walking far down along the river bank when he heard the girl call to him again. He had been gone perhaps an hour, and the ship lay far beyond him. He came to a mud flat that reached from the riverbank back to a low place in the forest, where apparently a brook emerged during the rainy season. The mud flat was only a stone's throw wide, and there were rocks set here and there in the ooze, so that it would be possible to cross by skipping from one to the next. He had just stepped on the first stone when the girl's thought struck him.

*"No! Stay away! Do not cross!"*

He turned to frown irritably toward the grove. She had been avoiding him for nearly a week, never answering when he called. He snorted and leaped to the next stone. It seemed to sink a little with his weight.

"No! Man-creature! There is danger!"

He paused to look around. There was nothing but the ooze of black stuff, steaming in the sun. The river to his right, and the forest to his left. He moved to make another leap. But the stone seemed to quake a little under his feet, and something touched his boot as if feeling of its texture.

Emilesh looked down. A *hand*—a fumbling *hand*! Covered with the sticky mud, it reached up out of the mire to fumble, and then to clutch at his ankle. He shrieked and kicked at it. Another appeared to grasp for a hold. He screamed and leaped for the bank, sprawling in the wet sand and clawing his way up the slope on hands and knees.

When he reached dry grass, he looked back. A head had reared itself up out of the morass. White eyes and gaping paws. It sucked in a loud breath and submerged itself again.

His flesh was crawling as he trotted back toward the safety of the ship. The thing in the mud was the flesh of man, tortured by six thousand centuries. Why not?—he thought—trying to console himself. Species evolved by splitting. The thing in the mud had taken the low road. Some form of adaptation to a threat that had long since vanished.

And the girl in the woods? The highroad?

"It is you, Emilesh, who have taken the road to the stars."

"Come show yourself!" he growled angrily.

But she was already sitting in the airlock of his ship, eyeing him with somber concern. "It is best that you go back."

IT WAS a moment before he realized she had whispered the words in accompaniment to her thought. And the words were *real* words, not mere sequences of thought images that suggested them. She had learned to speak, perhaps by probing his mind.

"You are pleased?"

He nodded and grinned at her.

"Will you go?"

He sat down in the sun and chewed a blade of grass. "I am still not fully recovered," he lied.

She shifted her body in the entranceway and crossed her long white legs. "You are wondering if I will go with you," she murmured wistfully.

He reddened. "Will you?"

"No. I am of Earth."

"So am I."

"We are different."

"How?"

She groped for words, and he felt the confusion in her mind. She stared at him for a time. "Your hair is yellow," she said.

Emilesh caught a fleeting impression that she only half understood the concept of "human", that in her mind "to be human" was to be exactly like herself, modified by the recent discoveries she had made concerning his sex.

"Tell me," he said gently, "when is the last time you saw a human being?"

She stared out across the grasslands. "I don't remember," she murmured. "Maybe never."

"Where were you born?"

"I don't know."

A suspicion that had been gnawing at his mind crept into consciousness again. He tried to suppress it, but the girl looked at him sharply.

"You're thinking perhaps I was never *born*. You're thinking I was—*made*."

"Are you an android?" he breathed.

"I don't know."

"How long have you lived?"

She shook her head slowly. She didn't know.

"Do you remember being a child?"

Her shudder was a visible thing. Her face drained of color, and an impenetrable wall closed about her mind. But in an instant before the curtain dropped, he caught a glimpse. She had been a child, long ago. And she refused to remember the horror of it.

"Why do you torment me so?" She was gazing at him evenly, but with reproof in the cool green eyes.

Emilesh crossed to her quickly and caught her cool shoulders in his hands. "Come with me, Eva."

"No. I am of Earth." She cast her eyes skyward, as if afraid. "You are an animal out of space. I am an animal of the ground."

But he saw that if he decided to take her, she would not resist. Still he wondered. Why had some men lingered on the planet after the Liberty Drive ? But of course, some would always linger, clinging ever more tightly to the Earth as each succeeding generation drained away those who were willing to go. And soon there would be only those who were incapable of leaving.

Like the creatures who lived in the mud ...

She caught the thought. She stood up and walked away from him. Down the slope toward the river.

"Eva, where are you going?"

No answer. She walked on with lazy catlike grace until she came to the bank. He watched with a puzzled frown. Suddenly she dived into the water, and he started a few steps after her. But she surfaced quickly and began swimming toward the opposite bank.

"Eva, wait!"

She climbed out on the opposite bank and disappeared into the brush. He called after again, but it was no use. He turned toward the ship.

SUDDENLY the image struck him, and he closed his eyes. She was thinking of the mud-flat. Of a group of gibbering, writhing bodies milling toward the bank, bearing a screaming child. The child was human, but streaked with the smelly ooze of the flat. The mud-creatures threw the child out bodily onto the bank. It whimpered and crawled back in the mud, pleading with them and wailing. They cast it forth again and again, until bruised and crying softly, it crawled away through the high grass toward the forest. He felt some of its pain—desperation at being unwanted ... By its parents!

Because it was different!

He sat down in a sick heap. She was a child of the mud-beings—a throwback across half-a-million years.

*"I am sorry, Emilesh. I wanted to go with you."*

Glumly he climbed in through the airlock and began making preparations for his departure. She was right. She was of the soil, he of space. And he remembered Motar's words—about the package-sized Liberty Drive : *Give each man, every man, great power—and Man will pass away.*

*By freedom unlimited.*

He caught another glimpse of her before he blasted off from the hillside on *Oculus Christi Regis III*. She was a tiny doll-like figure across the river in the field of high grass. She was bending over, working among the white marble markers. He caught a thread of her thought, and understood what she was doing. She was digging a grave. Her own. She liked working in the earth.

"Destination : Sorcerer VI," growled the space-animal.

## THE HOOFER

THEY ALL KNEW he was a spacer because of the white goggle marks on his sun-scorched face, and so they toler-ated him and helped him. They even made allowances for him when he staggered and fell in the aisle of the bus while pursuing the harassed little housewife from seat to seat and cajoling her to sit and talk with him.

Having fallen, he decided to sleep in the aisle. Two men helped him to the back of the bus, dumped him on the rear seat, and tucked his gin bottle safely out of sight. After all, he had not seen Earth for nine months, and judging by the crusted matter about his eyelids, he couldn't have seen it too well now, even if he had been sober. Glare-blindness, gravity-legs, and agoraphobia were excuses for a lot of things, when a man was just back from Big Bottomless. And who could blame a man for acting strangely?

Minutes later, he was back up the aisle and swaying giddily over the little housewife. "How!" he said. "Me Chief Broken Wing. You wanta Indian wrestle?"

The girl, who sat nervously staring at him, smiled wanly, and shook her head.

"Quiet li'l pigeon, aren'tcha?" he burred affectionately, crashing into the seat beside her.

Two men slid out of their seats, and a hand clamped his shoulder. "Come on, Broken Wing, let's go back to bed."

"My name's Hogey," he said. "Big Hogey Parker. I was just kidding about being a Indian."

"Yeah. Come on, let's go have a drink." They got him on his feet, and led him stumbling back down the aisle. "My ma was half Cherokee, see? That's how come I said it. You wanta hear a war whoop? Real stuff."

"Never mind."

He cupped his hands to his mouth and favored them with a blood-curdling proof of his ancestry, while the fe-male passengers stirred restlessly and hunched in their seats. The driver stopped the bus and went back to warn him against any further display. The driver flashed a deputy's badge and threatened to turn him over to a constable.

"I gotta get home," Big Hogey told him. "I got me a son now, that's why. You know? A little baby pigeon of a son. Haven't seen him yet."

"Will you just sit still and be quiet then, eh?"

Big Hogey nodded emphatically. "Shorry, officer, I didn't mean to make any trouble."

When the bus started again, he fell on his side and lay still. He made retching sounds for a time, then rested, snor-ing softly. The bus driver woke him again at Caine's junc-tion, retrieved his gin bottle from behind the seat, and helped him down the aisle and out of the bus.

Big Hogey stumbled about for a moment, then sat down hard in the gravel at the shoulder of the road. The driver paused with one foot on the step, looking around. There was not even a store at the road junction, but only a freight building next to the railroad track, a couple of farmhouses at the edge of a side-road, and, just across the way, a deserted filling station with a sagging roof. The land was Great Plains country, treeless, barren, and roll-ing.

Big Hogey got up and staggered around in front of the bus, clutching at it for support, losing his duffle bag.

"Hey, watch the traffic!" The driver warned. With a surge of unwelcome compassion he trotted around after his troublesome passenger, taking his arm as he sagged again. "You crossing?"

"Yeah," Hogey muttered. "Lemme alone, I'm okay."

The driver started across the highway with him. The traffic was sparse, but fast and dangerous in the central ninety-mile lane.

"I'm okay," Hogey kept protesting. "I'm a tumbler, ya know? Gravity's got me. Damn gravity. I'm not used to gravity, ya know? I used to be a tumbler—huk!—only now I gotta be a hooper. 'Count of li'l Hogey. You know about li'l Hogey?"

"Yeah. Your son. Come on."

"Say, you gotta son? I bet you gotta son."

"Two kids," said the driver, catching Hogey's bag as it slipped from his shoulder. "Both girls."

"Say, you oughta be home with them kids. Man oughta stick with his family. You oughta get another job." Hogey eyed him owlshly, wagged a moralistic finger, skidded on the gravel as they stepped onto the opposite shoulder, and sprawled again.

The driver blew a weary breath, looked down at him, and shook his head. Maybe it'd be kinder to find a constable after all. This guy could get himself killed, wander-ing around loose.

"Somebody supposed to meet you?" he asked, squinting around at the dusty hills.

"Huk!—*who*, me?" HogeY giggled, belched, and shook his head. "Nope. Nobody knows I'm coming. S'prise. I'm supposed to be here a week ago." He looked up at the driver with a pained expression. "Week late, ya know? Marie's gonna be sore—woo-hoo!—is she gonna be sore!" He waggled his head severely at the ground.

"Which way are you going?" the driver grunted impatiently.

HogeY pointed down the side-road that led back into the hills. "Marie's pop's place. You know where? 'Bout three miles from here. Gotta walk, I guess."

"Don't," the driver warned. "You sit there by the cul-vert till you get a ride. Okay?"

HogeY nodded forlornly.

"Now stay out of the road," the driver warned, then hurried back across the highway. Moments later, the atomic battery-driven motors droned mournfully, and the bus pulled away.

Big HogeY blinked after it, rubbing the back of his neck. "Nice people," he said. "Nice buncha people. All hoofers."

With a grunt and a lurch, he got to his feet, but his legs wouldn't work right. With his tumbler's reflexes, he fought to right himself with frantic arm motions, but gravity claimed him, and he went stumbling into the ditch.

"Damn legs, damn crazy legs!" he cried.

The bottom of the ditch was wet, and he crawled up the embankment with mud-soaked knees, and sat on the shoulder again. The gin bottle was still intact. He had himself a long fiery drink, and it warmed him deep down. He blinked around at the gaunt and treeless land.

The sun was almost down, forge-red on a dusty horizon. The blood-streaked sky faded into sulphurous yellow toward the zenith, and the very air that hung over the land seemed full of yellow smoke, the omnipresent dust of the plains.

A farm truck turned onto the side-road and moaned away, its driver hardly glancing at the dark young man who sat swaying on his dufflebag near the culvert. HogeY scarcely noticed the vehicle. He just kept staring at the crazy sun.

He shook his head. It wasn't really the sun. The sun, the real sun, was a hateful eye-sizzling horror in the dead black pit. It painted everything with pure white pain, and you saw things by the reflected painlight. The fat red sun was strictly a phoney, and it didn't fool him any. He hated it for what he knew it was behind the gory mask, and for what it had done to his eyes.

With a grunt, he got to his feet, managed to shoulder the duffle bag, and started off down the middle of the farm road, lurching from side to side, and keeping his eyes on the rolling distances. Another car turned onto the side-road, honking angrily.

HogeY tried to turn around to look at it, but he forgot to shift his footing. He staggered and went down on the pavement. The car's tires screeched on the hot asphalt. HogeY lay there for a moment, groaning. That one had hurt his hip. A car door slammed and a big man with a florid face got out and stalked toward him, looking angry.

"What the hell's the matter with you, fella?" he drawled. "You soused? Man, you've really got a load."

HogeY got up doggedly, shaking his head to clear it. "Space legs," he prevaricated. "Got space legs. Can't stand the gravity."

The burly farmer retrieved his gin bottle for him, still miraculously unbroken. "Here's your gravity," he grunted. "Listen, fella, you better get home pronto."

"Pronto? Hey, I'm no Mex. Honest, I'm just space burned. You know?"

"Yeah. Say, who are you, anyway? Do you live around here?"

It was obvious that the big man had taken him for a hobo or a tramp. HogeY pulled himself together. "Goin' to the Hauptman's place. Marie. You know Marie?"

The farmer's eyebrows went up. "Marie Hauptman? Sure I know her. Only she's Marie Parker now. Has been, nigh on six years. Say—" He paused, then gaped. "You ain't her husband by any chance?"

"HogeY, that's me. Big HogeY Parker."

"Well, I'll be—! Get in the ear. I'm going right past John Hauptman's place. Boy, you're in no shape to walk it."

He grinned wryly, waggled his head, and helped Hogey and his bag into the back seat. A woman with a sun-wrin-kled neck sat rigidly beside the farmer in the front, and she neither greeted the passenger nor looked around.

"They don't make cars like this anymore," the farmer called over the growl of the ancient gasoline engine and the grind of gears. "You can have them new atomics with their loads of hot isotopes under the seat. Ain't safe, I say—eh, Martha?"

The woman with the sun-baked neck quivered her head slightly. "A car like this was good enough for Pa, an' I reckon it's good enough for us," she drawled mournfully.

Five minutes later the car drew in to the side of the road. "Reckon you can walk it from here," the farmer said. "That's Hauptman's road just up ahead."

He helped Hogey out of the car and drove away without looking back to see if Hogey stayed on his feet. The woman with the sun-baked neck was suddenly talking garrulously in his direction.

It was twilight. The sun had set, and the yellow sky was turning gray. Hogey was too tired to go on, and his legs would no longer hold him. He blinked around at the land, got his eyes focused, and found what looked like Hauptman's place on a distant hillside. It was a big frame house surrounded by a wheatfield, and a few scrawny trees. Hav-ing located it, he stretched out in the tall grass beyond the ditch to take a little rest.

Somewhere dogs were barking, and a cricket sang creak-ing monotony in the grass. Once there was the distant thunder of a rocket blast from the launching station six miles to the west, but it faded quickly. An A-motored con-vertible whined past on the road, but Hogey went unseen.

When he awoke, it was night, and he was shivering. His stomach was screeching, and his nerves dancing with high voltages. He sat up and groped for his watch, then remem-bered he had pawned it after the poker game. Remember-ing the game and the results of the game made him wince and bite his lip and grope for the bottle again.

He sat breathing heavily for a moment after the stiff drink. Equating time to position had become second na-ture with him, but he had to think for a moment because his defective vision prevented him from seeing the Earth-crescent.

Vega was almost straight above him in the late August sky, so he knew it wasn't much after sundown—probably about eight o'clock. He braced himself with another swal-low of gin, picked himself up and got back to the road, feel-ing a little sobered after the nap.

He limped on up the pavement and turned left at the narrow drive that led between barbed-wire fences toward the Hauptman farmhouse, five hundred yards or so from the farm road. The fields on his left belonged to Marie's father, he knew. He was getting close—close to home and woman and child.

He dropped the bag suddenly and leaned against a fence post, rolling his head on his forearms and choking in spasms of air. He was shaking all over, and his belly writhed. He wanted to turn and run. He wanted to crawl out in the grass and hide.

What were they going to say? And Marie, Marie most of all. How was he going to tell her about the money?

Six hitches in space, and every time the promise had been the same: *One more tour, baby, and we'll have enough dough, and then I'll quit for good. One more time, and we'll have our stake—enough to open a little business, or buy a house with a mortgage and get a job.*

And she had waited, but the money had never been quite enough until this time. This time the tour had lasted nine months, and he had signed on for every run from station to moon-base to pick up the bonuses. And this time he'd made it. Two weeks ago, there had been forty-eight hundred in the bank. And now . . .

"Why?" he groaned, striking his forehead against his forearms. His arm slipped, and his head hit the top of the fencepost, and the pain blinded him for a moment. He stag-gered back into the road with a low roar, wiped blood from his forehead, and savagely kicked his bag.

It rolled a couple of yards up the road. He leaped after it and kicked it again. When he had finished with it, he stood panting and angry, but feeling better. He shouldered the bag and hiked on toward the farmhouse.

They're hoofers, that's all—just an Earth-chained bunch of hoofers, even Marie. And I'm a tumbler. A



born tum-bler. Know what that means? It means—God, what does it mean? It means out in Big Bottomless, where Earth's like a fat moon with fuzzy mold growing on it. Mold, that's all you are, just mold.

A dog barked, and he wondered if he had been mutter-ing aloud. He came to a fence-gap and paused in the dark-ness. The road wound around and came up the hill in front of the house. Maybe they were sitting on the porch. Maybe they'd already heard him coming. Maybe ..

He was trembling again. He fished the fifth of gin out of his coat pocket and sloshed it. Still over half a pint. He decided to kill it. It wouldn't do to go home with a bottle sticking out of his pocket. He stood there in the night wind, sipping at it, and watching the reddish moon come up in the east. The moon looked as phoney as the setting sun.

He straightened in sudden determination. It had to be sometime. Get it over with, get it over with now. He opened the fence-gap, slipped through, and closed it firmly behind him. He retrieved his bag, and waded quietly through the tall grass until he reached the hedge which di-vided an area of sickly peach trees from the field. He got over the hedge somehow, and started through the trees toward the house. He stumbled over some old boards, and they clattered.

"*Shhh!*" he hissed, and moved on.

The dogs were barking angrily, and he heard a screen door slam. He stopped.

"Ho there!" a male voice called experimentally from the house.

One of Marie's brothers. Hoge-y stood frozen in the shadow of a peach tree, waiting.

"Anybody out there?" the man called again.

Hoge-y waited, then heard the man muttering, "Sic 'im, boy, sic 'im."

The hound's bark became eager. The animal came chas-ing down the slope, and stopped ten feet away to crouch and bark frantically at the shadow in the gloom. He knew the dog.

"Hookey!" he whispered. "Hookey boy—here!"

The dog stopped barking, sniffed, trotted closer, and went "*Rrroof!*" Then he started sniffing suspiciously again.

"Easy, Hookey, here boy!" he whispered.

The dog came forward silently, sniffed his hand, and whined in recognition. Then he trotted around Hoge-y, panting doggy affection and dancing an invitation to romp. The man whistled from the porch. The dog froze, then trotted quickly back up the slope.

"Nothing, eh, Hookey?" the man on the porch said. "Chasin' armadillos again, eh?"

The screen door slammed again, and the porch light went out. Hoge-y stood there staring, unable to think. Somewhere beyond the window lights were—his woman, his son.

What the hell was a tumbler doing with a woman and a son?

After perhaps a minute, he stepped forward again. He tripped over a shovel, and his foot plunged into something that went *squelch* and swallowed the foot past the ankle. He fell forward into a heap of sand, and his foot went deeper into the sloppy wetness.

He lay there with his stinging forehead on his arms, cursing softly and crying. Finally he rolled over, pulled his foot out of the mess, and took off his shoes. They were full of mud—sticky sandy mud.

The dark world was reeling about him, and the wind was dragging at his breath. He fell back against the sand pile and let his feet sink in the mud hole and wriggled his toes. He was laughing soundlessly, and his face was wet in the wind. He couldn't think. He couldn't remember where he was and why, and he stopped caring, and after awhile he felt better.

The stars were swimming over him, dancing crazily, and the mud cooled his feet, and the sand was soft behind him. He saw a rocket go up on a tail of flame from the station, and waited for the sound of its blast, but he was already asleep when it came. .

It was far past midnight when he became conscious of the dog licking wetly at his ear and cheek. He pushed the animal away with a low curse and mopped at the side of his face. He stirred, and groaned. His feet were burning up! He tried to pull them toward him, but they wouldn't budge. There was something wrong with his legs.

For an instant he stared wildly around in the night. Then he remembered where he was, closed his

eyes and shuddered. When he opened them again, the moon had emerged from behind a cloud, and he could see clearly the cruel trap into which he had accidentally stumbled. A pile of old boards, a careful stack of new lumber, a pick and shovel, a sand-pile, heaps of fresh-turned earth, and a concrete mixer—well, it added up.

He gripped his ankles and pulled, but his feet wouldn't budge. In sudden terror, he tried to stand up, but his ankles were clutched by the concrete too, and he fell back in the sand with a low moan. He lay still for several minutes, considering carefully.

He pulled at his left foot. It was locked in a vise. He tugged even more desperately at his right foot. It was equally immovable.

He sat up with a whimper and clawed at the rough concrete until his nails tore and his fingertips bled. The surface still felt damp, but it had hardened while he slept.

He sat there stunned until Hookey began licking at his scuffed fingers. He shouldered the dog away, and dug his hands into the sand-pile to stop the bleeding. Hookey licked at his face, panting love.

"Get away!" he croaked savagely.

The dog whined softly, trotted a short distance away, circled, and came back to crouch down in the sand directly before Hogey, inching forward experimentally.

Hogey gripped fistfuls of the dry sand and cursed between his teeth, while his eyes wandered over the sky. They came to rest on the sliver of light—the space station—rising in the west, floating out in Big Bottomless where the gang was—Nichols and Guerrero and Lavrenti and Fats. And he wasn't forgetting Keesey, the rookie who'd replaced him.

Keesey would have a rough time for a while—rough as a cob. The pit was no playground. The first time you went out of the station in a suit, the pit got you. Everything was falling, and you fell with it. Everything. The skeletons of steel, the tire-shaped station, the spheres and docks and nightmare shapes—all tied together by umbilical cables and flexible tubes. Like some crazy sea-thing they seemed, floating in a black ocean with its tentacles bound together by drifting strands in the dark tide that bore it.

Everything was pain-bright or dead black, and it wheeled around you, and you went nuts trying to figure which way was down. In fact, it took you months to teach your body that *all* ways were down and that the pit was bottomless.

He became conscious of a plaintive sound in the wind, and froze to listen.

It was a baby crying.

It was nearly a minute before he got the significance of it. It hit him where he lived, and he began jerking frantically at his encased feet and sobbing low in his throat. They'd hear him if he kept that up. He stopped and covered his ears to close out the cry of his firstborn. A light went on in the house, and when it went off again, the infant's cry had ceased.

Another rocket went up from the station, and he cursed it. Space was a disease, and he had it.

"Help!" he cried out suddenly. "I'm stuck! Help me, help me!"

He knew he was yelling hysterically at the sky and fighting the relentless concrete that clutched his feet, and after a moment he stopped.

The light was on in the house again, and he heard faint sounds. The stirring-about woke the baby again, and once more the infant's wail came on the breeze.

*Make the kid shut up, make the kid shut up ...*

But that was no good. It wasn't the kid's fault. It wasn't Marie's fault. No fathers allowed in space, they said, but it wasn't their fault either. They were right, and he had only himself to blame. The kid was an accident, but that didn't change anything. Not a thing in the world. It remained a tragedy.

A tumbler had no business with a family, but what was a man going to do? Take a skinning knife, boy, and make yourself a eunuch. But that was no good either. They needed bulls out there in the pit, not steers. And when a man came down from a year's hitch, what was he going to do? Live in a lonely shack and read books for kicks? Because you were a man, you sought out a woman. And because she was a woman, she got a kid, and that was the end of it. It was nobody's fault, nobody's at all.

He stared at the red eye of Mars low in the southwest. They were running out there now, and next

year he would have been on the long long run ...

But there was no use thinking about it. Next year and the years after belonged to *little* Hogey.

He sat there with his feet locked in the solid concrete of the footing, staring out into Big Bottomless while his son's cry came from the house and the Hauptman men-folk came wading through the tall grass in search of someone who had cried out. His feet were stuck tight, and he wouldn't ever get them out. He was sobbing softly when they found him.

## I, Dreamer

THERE WERE LIGHTS, *objects, sounds; there were tender hands.*

*But sensing only the raw stimuli, the newborn infant saw no world, heard no sounds, nor felt the arms that lifted it. Patterns of light swarmed on its retina; inter-mittent disturbances vibrated within the passageways of the middle ear. All were meaningless, unlinked to con-cept. And the multitudinous sensations seemed a part of its total self, the self a detached mind, subsuming all.*

*The baby cried to remove hunger, and something new appeared within the self. Hunger fled, and pleasure came.*

*Pain came also. The baby cried. Pain was soon withdrawn.*

*But sometimes the baby cried, and conditions re-mained unchanged. Angry, it sought to explore itself, to restore the convenient order. It gathered data. It corre-lated. It reached a horrifying conclusion.*

*There were TWO classes of objects in the universe: self and something else.*

*"This thing is a part of me, but that thing is something else."*

*"This thing is me because it wiggles and feels, but that is something cold and hard."*

*He explored, wondered, and was frightened. Some things he could not control.*

*He even noticed that certain non-self objects formed groups, and each group clung together forming a whole.*

*His food supply, for instance, was a member of a group whose other components were the hands that lifted him, the thing that cooed to him and held the diaper pins while the hands girded his loins in humiliating nonself things. This system of objects was somehow associated with a sound that it made: "Mama."*

*The infant was just learning to fumble for Mama's face when it happened. The door opened. A deep voice barked. Mama screamed.*

*Bewildering sounds jumbled together into angry thunder. Sensations of roughness made him cry.*

*Sensations of motion confused and dazed him. There blinding pain, and blackness.*

*Then there was utter disorientation.*

*He tried to explore, but the explorers were strange somehow. He tried to cry, but there was nothing to cry with.*

*He would have to begin all over again. Somehow, he had been mistaken. Parts of him were changed. And now the universe was divided into three classes of ob-jects: self, semi-self, non-self. And it was different, all different!*

I stand in the rain. Like a bright silver spire, I stand waiting in the rain for Teacher to come. The great concrete plain stretches about me on all sides to vanish in the gray torrent. But some of my senses can see beyond the rainshroud. A cluster of buildings nestles to the west, and a high wire fence divides the plain from the city on the north. The city is a place of the TwoLegs who are called "human", and the city is named Port e-Eridani VII. This is the place of my creation, but not the place of my purpose nor the place of my great happiness. The place of my happiness is the sky and beyond it to the star-flung blacknesses. I am XM-5-B, but Teacher calls me "Clicker." The giving of names is a function of the TwoLegs.

I am sad in the rain. Teacher is long in coming and there is no one with whom I may speak. I have found no others like me, although Teacher says, "If you are good, and obey, and learn your lessons well, the Secon Samesh will make many others in your likeness."

I think Secon Samesh made me. "Therefore I must serve him," Teacher says. But to me that seems *nonsequitur*; the TwoLegs can be illogical if they wish. That is one of the inherent rights of TwoLegs. I also am capable of being illogical, and sometimes it pleases me secretly; but I am not allowed to be illogical when Teacher comes. If my analysis is faulty, Teacher presses the Pain Button and I hurt.

They wish me to be logical, and they wish me to serve Secon Samesh who is their Social Director. But if this is so, why then did they create me so as to be capable of disobedience and illogic? Their other machines are incapable of these faults. Their other machines lack the principles of abstraction and tentative generalization in their analyzing circuits; they are unable to generalize without a sufficiency of data.

I, therefore, am alone. And I am frightened. I have been frightened for as long as I can remember. They have made me to feel joy, fright, pain and sleep. I like sleep best, because I dream, and the dreams are strange. Last sleep I dreamed that I was TwoLegs. How can I have had a sufficiency of experience to dream such a dream?

This is one of the things that frightens me. I wish to survive and I am one of the controlling factors in my survival. Yet I do not know how to use me to best advantage for I fail to understand myself. I lack data for an analysis of myself. Therefore I am afraid and I desire the data. Teacher will not tell me. He says, "You perform, you are aware, you experience. That is all you need to know."

"Secon Teacher," I asked, "is your own awareness comparable to mine?"

His thin hard face gathered a frown. "Not quite. Awareness is built of sensations and memories of sensations. I have no senses to perceive microwaves or X-radiation or ultrasonic stimuli. I have no direct subjective impressions of what these things *feel like* to you. Nor do I have your effectors. I sense the conditions of my body. You sense the conditions of yours. I have muscles covering a skeletal framework. You have hydrogen reactors, field-generators, jets and control mechanisms. Our consciousness cannot be comparable."

"Extended sensory equipment is desirable for survival?" I asked.

"Yes:"

"Then my capability for survival is greater than yours, Secon Teacher?"

He growled a word I do not understand. He jabbed the Pain Button vigorously. I screamed and writhed within myself. It is like fire rushing through all of me.

That was long ago. I have learned not to ask such questions. The question threatened Teacher's subjective security; this I can understand. He hurt me to block the question. I understand, and analyze—and I have looked him over, but he has no Pain Button. The TwoLegs have certain prerogatives.

I feel that I can understand Teacher's awareness, for I am able to imagine that I am Teacher. It is almost as if I had a latent memory of walking mechanisms and grasping mechanisms and the other parts that go to make up a TwoLegs. Why then can Teacher not imagine what it is like to be *me*? Perhaps he does not wish to imagine my reaction to the Pain Button.

There is a TwoLegs that I like better than Teacher. It is called Janna, and it is a female which is also called "she." Her function is to clean and repair a group of my electronic control mechanisms through which I feel and see and hear. She always comes the day before I am to fly again, and perhaps this is the reason for my adient response to her presence: she is the herald of my coming ascent into space.

Janna is tall and her hair is the color of flame, and her parts are softly constructed. She wears white coveralls like Teacher's. She comes with a box of tools, and she hums a multitonal tune while she works. Sometimes she speaks to me, asking me to try this control or that, but otherwise she is forbidden to converse. I like to hear her humming in her low rich voice. I wish that I could sing. But my voice is without inflection, monotonal. I can think a song, but I cannot make it with my speakers.

"Teach me that song, Secon Janna," I asked boldly one day. It was the first time I had dared to speak

to her, except in a routine way.

It frightened her. She looked around at all my eyes, and at my speakers, and her face was white.

"Hush!" she muttered. "You can't sing."

"My thoughts sing," I said. "Teach me the song and I shall dream it next sleep. In dreams I sing; in dreams I have a singing organ."

She made a funny noise in her throat. She stared for a long time at the maze of circuit wiring which she had been testing. Then she glanced at a special panel set in the wall of my cabin. She moistened her lips and blinked at it. I said nothing but I am ashamed of the thing that lies behind that panel; it is the thing that makes me ca-pable of disobedience and illogic. I have never seen it but I know it is there. They do not allow me to see it. Before they open the panel they blind my eye mecha-nisms. Why was she looking at it? I felt shame-pain.

Suddenly she got up and went to look out the ports, one at a time.

"There is no one coming," I told her, interpreting her behavior by some means that I do not understand.

She went back to her work. "Tell me if someone starts this way," she said. Then: "I cannot teach you that song. It is treason. I did not realize what I was singing."

"I do not understand `treason'. But I am sad that you will not teach me."

She tried to look at me, I think—but did not know where to look. I am all around her, but she did not know. It was funny, but I cannot laugh—except when I am dreaming. Finally she glanced at the special panel again. Why does she look there, of all the places.

"Maybe I could teach you another song," she said. "Please, Secon Janna."

She returned thoughtfully to her work, and for a mo-moment I thought that she would not. But then she began singing—clearly, so that I could remember the words and the tune.

*"Child of my heart,  
Born of the stellar sea,  
The rockets sing thee lullaby.  
Sleep to sleep to sleep,  
To wake beyond the stars ...."*

"Thank you," I said when she was finished. "It was beautiful, I think."

"You know—the word `beauty'?"

I was ashamed. It was a word I had heard but I was too uncertain of its meaning. "For me it is one thing," I said. "Perhaps for you another. What is the meaning of the song?"

She paused. "It is sung to babies—to induce sleep."

"What are babies, Secon Janna?"

She stared at my special panel again. She bit her lip. "Babies—are new humans, still untutored."

"Once I was a new machine, still untutored. Are there songs to sing to new machines? It seems that I remember vaguely—"

"Hush!" she hissed, looking frightened. "You'll get me in trouble. We're not supposed to talk!"

I had made her angry. I was sad. I did not want her to feel Trouble, which is perhaps the Pain of TwoLegs. Her song echoed in my thoughts—and it was as if someone had sung it to me long ago. But that is impossible. Teacher behaved adiently toward Janna in those days. He sought her out, and sometimes came inside me while she was here, even though it was not a teaching time. He came and watched her, and his narrow dark eyes wan-dered all over her as she worked. He tried to make funny sayings, but she felt avoidant to him, I think. She said, "Why don't you go home to your wives, Barnish? I'm busy."

"If you were one of my wives, Janna, maybe I would." His voice was a soft purr.

She hissed and made a sour face.

"Why won't you marry me, Janna?" She laughed scornfully.

Quietly he stole up behind her while she worked. His face was hungry and intent. He took her arms

and she started.

"Janna—"

She spun around. He dragged her close and tried to do something that I do not understand in words: nevertheless I understood, I think. She struggled, but he held her. Then she raked his face with her nails and I saw red lines. He laughed and let her go.

I was angry. If he had a Pain Button I would have pressed it. The next day I was disobedient and illogical and he hurt me, but I did it anyway. We were in space and I pushed my reaction rate up so high he grew fright-ened.

When he let me sleep again I dreamed that I was a TwoLegs. In the dream Teacher had a Pain Button and I pressed it until he melted inside. Janna was adient to me then and liked me. I think things about her that I do not understand; my data are not logically organized con-cerning her, nor do they spring from my memory banks. If I were a TwoLegs and Janna liked me I think that I would know what to do. But how can this be so? Data must come from memory banks. I am afraid to ask Teacher.

Teacher teaches me to do a thing called "war." It is like a game, but I haven't really played it yet. Teacher said that there was not yet a war, but that there would be one when Secon Samesh is ready. That was why I was so important. I was not like their other machines. Their other machines needed TwoLeg crews to direct them. I could fly and play war-game alone. I think this is why they made me so I could disobey and be illogical. I change my intent when a situation changes. And I can make a decision from insufficient data, if other data are not available. Teacher said, "Sometimes things are like that in war."

Teacher said that Secon Samesh would use me, and others like me, to capture the planet from which all TwoLegs came in the beginning of time. It is called Earth, I think—the world Janna sometimes sings about. I do not know why Secon Samesh wanted it. I do not like planets. Space is the place of my great happiness. But the war would be in space, if it came, and there would be others like me—and I would cease to be alone. I hoped the war would come soon.

But first I had to prove to Secon Samesh that I was a good weapon.

Teacher kept trying to make Janna be adient to him but she would not. One day he said to her: "You'll have to go up with me tomorrow. There is something wrong with the landing radar. It seems all right on the ground but in space it goes haywire."

I listened. That was erroneous datum. My ground-looking eyes were functioning perfectly. I did not understand why he said it. But I kept silent for his hand was resting idly on the Pain Button.

She frowned suspiciously. "What seems to be wrong with it?"

"Double image and a jerky let-down."

It was not true! Without replying she made a ground-check.

"I can't find anything wrong."

"I told you—it only happens in space."

She was silent for a long time, then: "All right, we'll run a flight test. I'll have Fonec come with us."

"No," he said. "Clicker's maximum crew-load is only two."

"I—don't—"

"Be here at sixtime tomorrow," he said. "That's an order."

She reddened angrily but said nothing. She continued looking over the radar. He smiled thoughtfully at her slender back and went away. She went to the port and stared after him until he was out of sight.

"Clicker?" she whispered.

"Yes, Secon Janna?"

"Is he lying?"

"I am afraid. He will hurt me if I tell."

"He is lying then."

"Now he will hurt me!"

She looked around at me for a long time. Then she made that funny noise in her throat and shook her head. "No, he won't. I'll go, Clicker. Then he won't hurt you."

I was happy that she would do it—for me—but after she was gone I wondered. Perhaps I should not let her do it. She was still avoidant toward Teacher; maybe he wanted to do something that would give her Trouble.

It was nearly sixtime, and the yellow-orange sun Epsi-lon Eridani lay just below the horizon coloring the sky pink-gray. Teacher came first, stalking across the concrete plain in space-gear. He wore a distant thoughtful smile. He looked satisfied with himself. He climbed aboard and prowled about for a few minutes. I watched him. He stopped to glower at one of my eyes. He turned it off, blinding my vision in the direction of the gravity pads upon which the TwoLegs must lie during high accelcra-tion. I did not understand.

"How can I see that you are safe, Secon Teacher?" I asked. -

"You do not need to see," he growled. "I don't like you staring at me. And you talk too much. I'll have to teach you not to talk so much."

He gave me five dots of Pain, not enough to cause un-consciousness but sufficient to cause a whimper. I hated him.

Janna came. She looked tired and a little frightened. She scrambled aboard without accepting an assist from Teacher.

"Let's get this over with, Barnish. Have Clicker lift fifty miles, then settle back slowly. That should be enough."

"Are you in a hurry, my dear?"

"Yes."

"To attend one of your meetings, I presume?"

I watched her. Her face went white, and she whirled toward him. "I—" She moistened her lips. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

Teacher chuckled. "The clandestine meetings, my dear—in the west grove. The Liberty Clan, I think you call yourselves, eh? Oh, no use protesting; I know you joined it. When do you plan to assassinate Secon Samesh, Janna?"

She swayed dizzily, staring at him with frightened eyes. He chuckled again and looked at one of my eyes.

"Prepare for lift, Clicker."

I closed my hatches and started the reactors. I was baffled by what Teacher had said. They took their places on the gravity padding where I could no longer see them, but I heard their voices.

"What do you want, Barnish?" she hissed.

"Nothing at all, my dear. Did you think I would betray you? I only meant to warn you. The grove will be raided tonight. Everyone present will be shot."

"No!"

"Ah, yes! But you, my dear, will be safe in my hands." I heard a low moan, then sounds of a struggle.

"No, you can't leave the ship, Janna. You'd warn the others. Here, let me buckle you in. Clicker—call control for take-off instructions."

Control is only an electronic analyzer. I flicked it a meaningful series of radar pulses, and received the all-clear.

"Now, lift."

There was thunder, and smoke arose about me as the rockets seared the ramp. I went up at four gravities and there was silence from my passengers. About ten minutes later we were 1,160 miles in space, travelling at 6.5 miles per second.

"Present kinetic energy exceeds energy-of-escape," I announced.

"Cut your rockets," Teacher ordered.

I obeyed, and I heard them sitting up to stretch. Teacher laughed.

"Let me alone!" she wailed. "You despicable—"

He laughed again. "Remember the Liberty Clan, my dear."

"Listen!" she hissed. "Let me warn them! You can have me. I'll even marry you, if you want me to. But let me warn them—"

"I'm sorry, Janna. I can't let you. The miserable trai-tors have to be dealt with. I—"

"Clicker!" she pleaded. "Help me! Take us down—for God's sake!"

"Shut up!" he snapped.

"Clicker, *please! Eighty people will die if they aren't warned.* Clicker, part of you is human! If you were born a human, then—"

"*Shut up!*" I heard a vicious slap.

She cried, and it was a Pain sound. My anger increased. "I will be bad and illogical!" I said. "I will be disobedient and—"

"You threaten me?" he bawled. "Why you crazy piece of junk, I'll—" He darted toward the panel and spun the dial to tel dolls, my saturation-point. If I let him jab the button I would become unconscious. Angrily I spurted the jets—a brief jolt at six gravities. He lurched away from the panel and crashed against the wall. He sagged in a daze, shaking his head.

"If you try to hurt me I shall do it again!" I told him.

"Go down!" he ordered. "I'll have you dismantled. I'll—"

"Let Clicker alone!" the girl raged.

"*You!*" he hissed. "I'll turn you in with the others!"

"Go ahead."

"Go down, Clicker. Land at Port Gamma."

"I will be disobedient. I will not go down."

He glared at one of my eyes for a long time. Then he stalked out of the cabin and went back to the reactor room. He donned a lead suit and bent over the main reactor. I saw what he was going to do. He was going to take my rockets away from me; he was going to control them himself.

"No, Secon Teacher! Please!"

He laughed. He removed one of the plates and reached inside. I was afraid. I started a slight reaction. The room flared with brilliance. He screamed and lurched back. His hands were gone to the elbows.

"You wanted to disconnect the control circuit," I said. "You shouldn't have tried to do that."

But he didn't hear me. He was lying on the floor. Now I know they have Pain Buttons. They must have little Pain Buttons all over them.

Janna staggered back to the reactor room. She wrinkled her nose. She saw Teacher and gurgled. She gurgled all over the deck. Then she went back to the cabin and sat with her face in her hands for a long time. I did nothing. I was ashamed.

"You killed him," she said.

"Was that bad?"

"Very bad."

"Will you hurt me for it?"

She looked up and her eyes were leaking. She shook her head. "I won't hurt you, Clicker—hut *they* will."

"Who are *they*?"

She paused. "Secon Samesh, I guess."

"You won't hurt me, though?"

"No, Clicker. You might be my own child. They took a lot of babies. They took mine. You might be Frankie." She laughed crazily. "You might be my son, Clicker—you *might be*."

"I do not understand, Secon Janna."

She laughed again. "Why don't you call me '*Mom-mie*'?"

"If that is what you wish, Mommie."

"*Nooo!*" She screamed it. "Don't! I didn't mean—"

"I am sorry. I still do not understand."

She stood up, and her eyes were glittering. "I'll *show* you then!" She darted to the special panel—the one of which I am ashamed—and she ripped the seal from the door.



"Please, Secon Janna, I do not wish to see that—"

But the door fell open, and I was silent. I stared at the part of myself: a pink-gray thing in a bottle. It was roughly an obloid, wrinkled and creased, with only a bilateral symmetry. It was smaller than Janna's head—but something about it suggested a head. It had wires and tubes running to it. The wires ran on to my computer and analyzer sections.

"See!" she screamed. "You're twelve years old, Clicker. Just a normal, healthy little boy! A little deformed per-haps, but just a prankish little boy. Frankie maybe." She made a choking sound. She fell down on her knees before the thing. She sobbed wildly.

"I do not understand. I am a machine. Secon Samesh made me."

She said nothing. She only sobbed.

"I am sad."

After a long time she was through sobbing. She turned around. "What are you going to do now, Clicker?"

"Teacher told me to go down. Perhaps I should go down now."

"They'll kill you—for killing him! And maybe they'll kill me too."

"I would not like that."

She shrugged helplessly. She wandered to and fro in the cabin for a time.

"Do you have fuel for your high C drive?" she asked.

"No, Secon Janna."

She went to a port and looked out at the stars. She shook her head slowly. "It's no use. We've no place else to go. Secon Samesh rules the Epsilon Eridani system and we can't get out of it. It's no use. We'll have to go down or stay in space until they come for us."

I thought. My thoughts were confused and my eyes kept focusing on the thing in the bottle. I think it was a part of a TwoLegs. But it is only *part* of me and so I am not a TwoLegs. It is hard to understand.

"Secon Janna?"

"Yes, Clicker?"

"I—I wish I had hands."

"Why?"

"I would touch you. Would you be avoidant to me?"

She whirled and her arms were open. But there was nothing to hold with them. She dropped them to her sides, then covered her face with her hands.

"My baby! It's been so long!"

"You were adient to your—your baby?"

She nodded. "Don't you know the word *love*?"

I thought I did. "Secon Samesh took your baby?"

"Yes."

"I would like to be disobedient and illogical to Secon Samesh. I wish he would put his hands in my reactor. I would—"

"Clicker! Are your weapons activated? Are they ready to be used?"

"I have none yet."

"The reactors. Can they explode?"

"If I make them. But—then I would be dead."

She laughed. "What do you know about death?"

"Teacher says it is exactly like Pain."

"It is like sleep."

"I like sleep. Then I dream. I dream I am a TwoLegs. If I were a TwoLegs, Secon Janna—I would hold you."

"Clicker—would you like to be a TwoLegs in a dream forever?"

"Yes, Secon Janna."

"Would you like to kill Secon Samesh?"

"I think that I would like it. I think—"

Her eyes went wild. "Go down! Go down fast, Clicker! I'll show you his palace. Go down like a meteor and into it! Explode the reactors at the last instant! Then he will die."

"And he will take no more of your babies?"

"No more, Clicker!"

"And I will sleep forever?"

"Forever!"

"And dream!"

"I'll dream with you, Clicker." She went back to fire the reactor.

I took a last look at the loveliness of space and the stars. It is hard to give this up. But I would rather be a TwoLegs, even if only in a dream.

"Now, Clicker!"

My rockets spoke, and there was thunder through the ship. And we went down, while Janna sang the song she taught me. I feel joy; soon I shall dream.

## I Made You

IT HAD DISPOSED of the enemy, and it was weary. It sat on the crag by night. Gaunt, frigid, wounded, it sat under the black sky and listened to the land with its feet, while only its dishlike ear moved in slow patterns that searched the surface of the land and the sky. The land was silent, airless. Nothing moved, except the feeble thing that scratched in the cave. It was good that nothing moved. It hated sound and motion. It was in its nature to hate them. About the thing in the cave, it could do nothing until dawn. The thing muttered in the rocks

*"Help me! Are you all dead? Can't you hear me? This is Sawyer. Sawyer calling anybody, Sawyer calling anybody—"*

The mutterings were irregular, without pattern. It filtered them out, refusing to listen. All was seeping cold. The sun was gone, and there had been near-blackness for two hundred and fifty hours, except for the dim light of the sky-orb which gave no food, and the stars by which it told the time.

It sat wounded on the crag and expected the enemy. The enemy had come charging into the world out of the unworld during the late afternoon. The enemy had come brazenly, with neither defensive maneuvering nor offen-sive fire. It had destroyed them easily—first the big lum-bering enemy that rumbled along on wheels, and then the small enemies that scurried away from the gutted hulk. It had picked them off one at a time, except for the one that crept into the cave and hid itself beyond a break in the tunnel.

It waited for the thing to emerge. From its vantage point atop the crag, it could scan broken terrain for miles around, the craters and crags and fissures, the barren expanse of dust-flat that stretched to the west, and the squarish outlines of the holy place near the tower that was the center of the world. The cave lay at the foot of a cliff to the southeast, only a thousand yards from the crag. It could guard the entrance to the cave with its small spit-ters, and there was no escape for the lingering trace of enemy.

It bore the mutterings of the hated thing even as it bore the pain of its wounds, patiently, waiting for a time of respite. For many sunrises there had been pain, and still the wounds were unrepaired. The wounds dulled some of its senses and crippled some of its activators. It could no longer follow the flickering beam of energy that would lead it safely into the unworld and across it to the place of creation. It could no longer blink out the pulses that reflected the difference between healer and foe. Now there was only foe.

*"Colonel Aubrey, this is Sawyer. Answer me! I'm trapped in a supply cache. I think the others are dead. It blasted us as soon as we came near. Aubrey from Sawyer, Aubrey from Sawyer. Listen! I've got only one cylinder of oxygen left, you hear? Colonel, answer me!"*

Vibrations in the rock, nothing more—only a minor irritant to disturb the blessed stasis of the world it guarded. The enemy was destroyed, except for the lingering trace in the cave. The lingering trace was

neutralized however, and did not move.

Because of its wounds, it nursed a brooding anger. It could not stop the damage signals that kept firing from its wounded members, but neither could it accomplish the actions that the agonizing signals urged it to accomplish. It sat and suffered and hated on the crag.

It hated the night, for by night there was no food. Each day it devoured sun, strengthened itself for the long, long watch of darkness, but when dawn came, it was feeble again, and hunger was a fierce passion within. It was well, therefore, that there was peace in the night, that it might conserve itself and shield its bowels from the cold. If the cold penetrated the insulating layers, thermal receptors would begin firing warning signals, and agony would increase. There was much agony. And, except in time of battle, there was no pleasure except in devouring sun.

To protect the holy place, to restore stasis to the world, to kill enemy—these were the pleasures of battle. It knew them.

And it knew the nature of the world. It had learned every inch of land out to the pain perimeter, beyond which it could not move. And it had learned the surface features of the demiworld beyond, learned them by scan-ning with its long-range senses. The world, the demiworld, the unworld—these were Outside, constituting the uni-verse.

*"Help me, help me, help me! This is Captain John Harbin Sawyer, Autocyber Corps, Instruction and Pro-gramming Section, currently of Salvage Expedition Lunar-Sixteen. Isn't anybody alive on the Moon? Listen! Listen to me! I'm sick. I've been here God knows how many days ... in a suit. It stinks. Did you ever live in a suit for days? I'm sick. Get me out of here!"*

The enemy's place was unworld. If the enemy ap-proached closer than the outer range, it must kill; this was a basic truth that it had known since the day of creation. Only the healers might move with impunity over all the land, but now the healers never came. It could no longer call them nor recognize them—because of the wound.

It knew the nature of itself. It learned of itself by introspecting damage, and by internal scanning. It alone was "being." All else was of the outside. It knew its functions, its skills, its limitations. It listened to the land with its feet. It scanned the surface with many eyes. It tested the skies with a flickering probe. In the ground, it felt the faint seisms and random noise. On the surface, it saw the faint glint of starlight, the heat-loss from the cold terrain, and the reflected pulses from the tower. In the sky, it saw only stars, and heard only the pulse-echo from the faint orb of Earth overhead. It suffered the gnawings of ancient pain, and waited for the dawn.

After an hour, the thing began crawling in the cave. It listened to the faint scraping sounds that came through the rocks. It lowered a more sensitive pickup and tracked the sounds. The remnant of enemy was crawling softly toward the mouth of the cave. It turned a small spitter toward the black scar at the foot of the Earthlit cliff. It fired a bright burst of tracers toward the cave, and saw them ricochet about the entrance in bright but noiseless streaks over the airless land.

*"You dirty greasy deadly monstrosity, let me alone! You ugly juggernaut, I'm Sawyer. Don't you remember? I helped to train you ten years ago. You were a rookie under me . . . heh heh! Just a dumb autocyber rookie ... with the firepower of a regiment. Let me go. Let me go!"*

The enemy-trace crawled toward the entrance again. And again a noiseless burst of machine-gun fire spewed about the cave, driving the enemy fragment back. More vibrations in the rock

*"I'm your friend. The war's over. It's been over for months . . . Earthmonths. Don't you get it, Grumbler? 'Grumbler'—we used to call you that back in your rookie days—before we taught you how to kill. Grumbler. Mo-bile autocyber fire control. Don't you know your pappy, son?"*

The vibrations were an irritant. Suddenly angry, it wheeled around on the crag, gracefully maneuvering its massive bulk. Motors growling, it moved from the crag onto the hillside, turned again, and lumbered down the slope. It charged across the flatlands and braked to a halt fifty yards from the entrance to the cave. Dust geysers sprayed up about its caterpillars and fell like jets of water in the airless night. It listened again. All was silent in the cave.

*"Go 'way, sonny,"* quavered the vibrations after a time. *"Let pappy starve in peace."*

It aimed the small spitter at the center of the black opening and hosed two hundred rounds of tracers into the cave. It waited. Nothing moved inside. It debated the use of radiation grenade, but its arsenal was fast depleting. It listened for a time, watching the cave, looming five times taller than the tiny flesh-thing that cowered inside. Then it turned and lumbered back across the flat to resume its watch from the crag. Distant motion, out beyond the limits of the demiworld, scratched feebly at the threshold of its awareness—but the motion was too remote to dis-turb.

The thing was scratching in the cave again.

*"I'm punctured, do you hear? I'm punctured. A shard of broken rock. Just a small leak, but a slap-patch won't hold. My suit! Aubrey from Sawyer, Aubrey from Saw-yer. Base Control from Moonwagon Sixteen, Message for you, over. He he. Gotta observe procedure. I got shot! I'm punctured. Help!"*

The thing made whining sounds for a time, then: *"All right, it's only my leg. I'll pump the boot full of water and freeze it. So I lose a leg. Whatthefhell, take your time."* The vibrations subsided into whining sounds again.

It settled again on the crag, its activators relaxing into a lethargy that was full of gnawing pain. Patiently it awaited the dawn.

The movement toward the south was increasing. The movement nagged at the outer fringes of the demiworld, until at last the movement became an irritant. Silently, a drill slipped down from its belly. The drill gnawed deep into the rock, then retracted. It slipped a sensitive pickup into the drill hole and listened carefully to the ground.

A faint purring in the rocks—mingled with the whining from the cave.

It compared the purring with recorded memories. It remembered similar purrings. The sound came from a rolling object far to the south. It tried to send the pulses that asked "Are you friend or foe," but the sending organ was inoperative. The movement, therefore, was enemy—but still beyond range of its present weapons.

Lurking anger, and expectation of battle. It stirred restlessly on the crag, but kept its surveillance of the cave. Suddenly there was disturbance on a new sensory chan-nel, vibrations similar to those that came from the cave; but this time the vibrations came across the surface, through the emptiness, transmitted in the long-wave spec-tra.

*"Moonwagon Sixteen from Command Runabout, give us a call. Over."*

Then silence. It expected a response from the cave, at first—since it knew that one unit of enemy often exchanged vibratory patterns with another unit of enemy. But no answer came. Perhaps the long-wave energy could not penetrate the cave to reach the thing that cringed inside.

*"Salvage Sixteen, this is Aubrey's runabout. What the devil happened to you? Can you read me? Over!"*

Tensely it listened to the ground. The purring stopped for a time as the enemy paused. Minutes later, the motion resumed.

It awoke an emissary ear twenty kilometers to the southwest, and commanded the ear to listen, and to trans-mit the patterns of the purring noise. Two soundings were taken, and from them, it derived the enemy's precise position and velocity. The enemy was proceeding to the north, into the edge of the demiworld. Lurking anger flared into active fury. It gunned its engines on the crag. It girded itself for battle.

*"Salvage Sixteen, this is Aubrey's runabout. I assume your radio rig is unoperative. If you can hear us, get this: we're proceeding north to five miles short of magnapult range. We'll stop there and fire an autocyb rocket into zone Red-Red. The warhead's a radio-to-sonar trans-ceiver. If you've got a seismitter that's working, the trans-ceiver will act as a relay stage. Over."*

It ignored the vibratory pattern and rechecked its battle gear. It introspected its energy storage, and tested its weapon activators. It summoned an emissary eye and waited a dozen minutes while the eye crawled crablike from the holy place to take up a watchpost near the entrance of the cave. If the

enemy remnant tried to emerge, the emissary eye would see, and report, and it could destroy the enemy remnant with a remote grenade catapult.

The purring in the ground was louder. Having prepared itself for the fray, it came down from the crag and grum-bled southward at cruising speed. It passed the gutted hulk of the Moonwagon, with its team of overturned tractors. The detonation of the magnapult canister had broken the freightcar sized vehicle in half. The remains of several two-legged enemy appurtenances were scattered about the area, tiny broken things in the pale Earthlight. Grumbler ignored them and charged relentlessly south-ward.

A sudden wink of light on the southern horizon! Then a tiny dot of flame arced upward, traversing the heavens. Grumbler skidded to a halt and tracked its path. A rocket missile. It would fall somewhere in the east half of zone Red-Red. There was no time to prepare to shoot it down. Grumbler waited—and saw that the missile would explode harmlessly in a nonvital area.

Seconds later, the missile paused in flight, reversing direction and sitting on its jets. It dropped out of sight behind an outcropping. There was no explosion. Nor was there any activity in the area where the missile had fallen. Grumbler called an emissary ear, sent it migrating toward the impact point to listen, then continued South toward the pain perimeter.

*"Salvage Sixteen, this is Aubrey's runabout,"* came the long-wave vibrations. *"We just shot the radio-seismitter relay into Red-Red. If you're within five miles of it, you should be able to hear."*

Almost immediately, a response from the cave, heard by the emissary ear that listened to the land near the tower: *"Thank God! He he he he—Oh, thank God!"*

And simultaneously, the same vibratory pattern came in long-wave patterns from the direction of the missile-impact point. Grumbler stopped again, momentarily confused, angrily tempted to lob a magnapult canister across the broken terrain toward the impact, but the emissary ear reported no physical movement from the area. The enemy to the south was the origin of the disturbances. If it removed the major enemy first, it could remove the minor disturbances later. It moved on to the pain perimeter, occasionally listening to the meaningless vibrations caused by the enemy.

*"Salvage Sixteen from Aubrey. I hear you faintly. Who is this, Carhill?"*

*"Aubrey! A voice —A real voice—Or am I going nuts?"*

*"Sixteen from Aubrey, Sixteen from Aubrey. Stop bab-bling and tell me who's talking. What's happening in there? Have you got Grumbler immobilized?"*

Spasmodic choking was the only response.

*"Sixteen from Aubrey. Snap out of it! Listen, Sawyer, I know it's you. Now get hold of yourself, man! What's happened?"*

*"Dead . . . they're all dead but me."*

*"STOP THAT IDIOTIC LAUGHING!"*

A long silence, then, scarcely audible: *"O.K., I'll hold onto myself. Is it really you, Aubrey?"*

*"You're not having hallucinations, Sawyer. We're cross-ing zone Red in a runabout. Now tell me the situation. We've been trying to call you for days."*

*"Grumbler let us get ten miles into zone Red-Red, and then he clobbered us with a magnapult canister."*

*"Wasn't your I.F.F. working?"*

*"Yes, but Grumbler's isn't. After he blasted the wagon, he picked off the other four that got out alive—He he he he ... Did you ever see a Sherman tank chase a mouse, colonel?"*

*"Cut it out, Sawyer! Another giggle out of you, and I'll flay you alive."*

*"Get me out! My leg! Get me out!"*

*"If we can. Tell me your present situation."*

*"My suit ... I got a small puncture—Had to pump the leg full of water and freeze it. Now my leg's dead. I can't last much longer."*

*"The situation, Sawyer, the situation! Not your aches and pains."*

The vibrations continued, but Grumbler screened them out for a time. There was rumbling fury on an Earthlit hill.

It sat with its engines idling, listening to the distant movements of the enemy to the south. At the foot of the hill lay the pain perimeter; even upon the hilltop, it felt the faint twinges of warning that issued from the tower, thirty kilometers to the rear at the center of the world. It was in communion with the tower. If it ventured beyond the perimeter, the communion would slip out-of-phase, and there would be blinding pain and detonation.

The enemy was moving more slowly now, creeping north across the demi-world. It would be easy to destroy the enemy at once, if only the supply of rocket missiles were not depleted. The range of the magnapult hurler was only twenty-five kilometers. The small spitters would reach, but their accuracy was close to zero at such range. It would have to wait for the enemy to come closer. It nursed a brooding fury on the hill.

*"Listen, Sawyer, if Grumbler's I.F.F. isn't working, why hasn't he already fired on this runabout?"*

*"That's what sucked us in too, Colonel. We came into zone Red and nothing happened. Either he's out of long-range ammo, or he's getting cagey, or both. Probably both."*

*"Mmmp! Then we'd better park here and figure something out."*

*"Listen ... there's only one thing you can do. Call for a telecontrolled missile from the Base."*

*"To destroy Grumbler? You're out of your head, Saw-yer. If Grumbler's knocked out, the whole area around the excavations gets blown sky high ... to keep them out of enemy hands. You know that."*

*"You expect me to care?"*

*"Stop screaming, Sawyer. Those excavations are the most valuable property on the Moon. We can't afford to lose them. That's why Grumbler was staked out. If they got blown to rubble, I'd be court-martialed before the debris quit falling."*

The response was snarling and sobbing. *"Eight hours oxygen. Eight hours, you hear? You stupid, merciless—"*

The enemy to the south stopped moving at a distance of twenty-eight kilometers from Grumbler's hill—only three thousand meters beyond magnapult range.

A moment of berserk hatred. It lumbered to-and-fro in a frustrated pattern that was like a monstrous dance, crushing small rocks beneath its treads, showering dust into the valley. Once it charged down toward the pain perimeter, and turned back only after the agony became unbearable. It stopped again on the bill, feeling the weariness of lowered energy supplies in the storage units.

It paused to analyze. It derived a plan.

Gunning its engines, it wheeled slowly around on the hilltop, and glided down the northern slope at a stately pace. It sped northward for half a mile across the flatland, then slowed to a crawl and maneuvered its massive bulk into a fissure, where it had cached an emergency store of energy. The battery-trailer had been freshly charged before the previous sundown. It backed into feeding position and attached the supply cables without hitching itself to the trailer.

It listened occasionally to the enemy while it drank hungrily from the energy-store, but the enemy remained motionless. It would need every erg of available energy in order to accomplish its plan. It drained the cache. Tomorrow, when the enemy was gone, it would drag the trailer back to the main feeders for recharging, when the sun rose to drive the generators once again. It kept several caches of energy at strategic positions throughout its domain, that it might never be driven into starved inability to act during the long lunar night. It kept its own house in order, dragging the trailers back to be recharged at regular intervals.

*"I don't know what I can do for you, Sawyer,"* came the noise of the enemy. *We don't dare destroy Grumbler, and there's not another autocyber crew on the Moon. I'll have to call Terra for replacements. I can't send men into zone Red-Red if Grumbler's running berserk. It'd be mur-der."*

*"For the love of God, Colonel—"*

*"Listen, Sawyer, you're the autocyber man. You helped train Grumbler. Can't you think of*

*some way to stop him without detonating the mined area?"*

A protracted silence. Grumbler finished feeding and came out of the fissure. It moved westward a few yards, so that a clear stretch of fiat land lay between itself and the hill at the edge of the pain perimeter, half a mile away. There it paused, and awoke several emissary ears, so that it might derive the most accurate possible fix of the ene-my's position. One by one, the emissary ears reported.

*"Well, Sawyer?" "My leg's killing me."*

*"Can't you think of anything?"*

*"Yeah—but it won't do me any good. I won't live that long."*

*"Well, let's hear it."*

*"Knock out his remote energy storage units, and then run him ragged at night."*

*"How long would it take?"*

*"Hours—after you found all his remote supply units and blasted them."*

It analyzed the reports of the emissary ears, and calcu-lated a precise position. The enemy runabout was 2.7 kilometers beyond the maximum range of the magnapult-as creation had envisioned the maximum. But creation was imperfect, even inside.

It loaded a canister onto the magnapult's spindle. Con-trary to the intentions of creation, it left the canister *locked to the loader*. This would cause pain. But it would prevent the canister from moving during the first few microseconds after the switch was closed, while the magne-tic field was still building toward full strength. It would not release the canister until the field clutched it fiercely and with full effect, thus imparting slightly greater energy to the canister. This procedure it had invented for itself, thus transcending its programming.

*"Well, Sawyer, if you can't think of anything else—"*

"IDID THINK OF SOMETHING ELSE!" the answering vibrations screamed. *"Call for a telecontrolled missile! Can't you understand, Aubrey? Grumbler murdered eight men from your command."*

*"You taught him how, Sawyer."*

There was a long and ominous silence. On the flat land to the north of the hill, Grumbler adjusted the elevation of the magnapult slightly, keyed the firing switch to a gyroscope, and prepared to charge. Creation had calculated the maximum range when the weapon was at a standstill.

*"He he he he he—"* came the patterns from the thing in the cave.

It gunned its engines and clutched the drive-shafts. It rolled toward the hill, gathering speed, and its mouth was full of death. Motors strained and howled. Like a thun-dering bull, it rumbled toward the south. It hit maximum velocity at the foot of the slope. It lurched sharply up-ward. As the magnapult swept up to correct elevation, the gyroscope closed the circuit.

A surge of energy. The clenching fist of the field gripped the canister, tore it free of the loader, hurled it high over the broken terrain toward the enemy. Grumbler skidded to a halt on the hilltop.

*"Listen, Sawyer, I'm sorry, but there's nothing—"*

The enemy's voice ended with a dull snap. A flare of light came briefly from the southern horizon, and died. *"He he he he he—"* said the thing in the cave.

Grumbler paused.

THRRRUMMMP! came the shocking wave through the rocks.

Five emissary ears relayed their recordings of the det-onation from various locations. It studied them, it an-alyzed. The detonation had occurred less than fifty meters from the enemy runabout. Satiated, it wheeled around lazily on the hilltop and rolled northward toward the center of the world. All was well.

*"Aubrey, you got cut off,"* grunted the thing in the cave. *"Call me, you coward ... call me. I want to make certain you hear."*

Grumbler, as a random action, recorded the mean-ingless noise of the thing in the cave, studied the noise, rebroadcast it on the long-wave frequency: "Aubrey, you got cut off. Call me, you coward ... call me. I want to make certain you hear."

The seismitter caught the long-wave noise and reintroduced it as vibration in the rocks.

The thing screamed in the cave. Grumbler recorded the screaming noise, and rebroadcast it several times.

*"Aubrey ... Aubrey, where are you ... AUBREY! Don't desert me don't leave me here—"*

The thing in the cave became silent.

It was a peaceful night. The stars glared unceasingly from the blackness and the pale terrain was haunted by Earthlight from the dim crescent in the sky. Nothing moved. It was good that nothing moved. The holy place was at peace in the airless world. There was blessed stasis.

Only once did the thing stir again in the cave. So slowly that Grumbler scarcely heard the sound, it crawled to the entrance and lay peering up at the steel behemoth on the crag.

It whispered faintly in the rocks. *"I made you, don't you understand? I'm human. I made you—"*

Then with one leg dragging behind, it pulled itself out into the Earthglow and turned as if to look up at the dim crescent in the sky. Gathering fury, Grumbler stirred on the crag, and lowered the black maw of a grenade launcher.

*"I made you,"* came the meaningless noise.

It hated noise and motion. It was in its nature to hate them. Angrily, the grenade launcher spoke. And then there was blessed stasis for the rest of the night.

## **IZZARD AND THE MEMBRANE**

**BY WALTER M. MILLER, JR.**

*The computing machine had considerable ability — but there was something besides a computer at work on that haunted machine! And moreover, the whole was greater than the sum of the parts!*

**Illustrated by Rogers**

Scotty MacDonney was one of the Americans trapped in Europe when the sudden and unexpected eruption of uprisings boiled up out of the underground like angry lava. Simultaneously with the local revolutions, the Red Wave began rolling in from the East. But before it reached Paris, Scotty was already enjoying the tender mercy of the local revolutionaries. They had seized him almost as soon as the first shot was fired. They knew his potential value to their cause. They also knew that "converting" him would be a long and difficult task. But they had plenty of time. Their prophets always promised that time was on their side.

Scotty was a cyberneticist, with incidental degrees in electronic engineering and physiological psychology. He had designed several new and improved calculating machines for American industry. He had invented a synaptic relay for the giant electronic "brain," and it was actually an improvement over a living neuron's all-or-none principle. And he had developed a new method in remote control of guided, missiles. His importance to an American war effort was vaguely but not completely realized by the American government.

It was *fully* understood by the proponents of a new-era.

When the scarlet tide had rushed across the hills and fields of France, Scotty was taken east, to a city where soft snow gathered on strange Byzantine domes whose pointed peaks speared at the chill winter sky ; a city where East met West in a subtle transfusion of wisdom and savagery.

Scotty was in his late thirties. He was muscular, but not massive. His face was angular with a kind of handsome ugliness. He was generally calm, patient, easy-going — the practical scientist, with a normal family life. He had married well, and had been thoroughly settled with his wife and two children in an



Ohio university town.

He anticipated nervously that when his captors were done with him, he would be gray, broken, and reduced to a warped and schizophrenic shadow of his former self. He even suspected that they would make threats against his family, for it was well-known that there were plenty of agents in America capable of carrying out the threats.

He certainly didn't anticipate what really happened.

He was given an elegant, but well-guarded, suite of rooms in one of the best hotels. He was visited by high dignitaries of their government; they promised that he would not be abused as an enemy alien. Not borscht but caviar, not water but champagne amused his palate. He was offered various kinds of sensual pleasures, but—although idleness was beginning to whet his appetite—he turned them down, thinking of Nora and the children.

Nora, with the pale cloud of hair, with the dreamer's eyes, with the willowy body that could stretch so languorously. He began to think of her so much, so frequently, and so fervently, that he began to carefully taste the strange and exotic foods, examining them for any slight bitter or metallic flavor that might suggest drugs. Nora was constantly in his thoughts; and when a commissar brought his beautiful wife, then was forced to leave by a sudden phone call, Scotty remained restlessly chaste, although the woman had obviously been ordered to entertain him. His captors complimented him for his devotion to family. Their compliments both pleased him and increased his determination to avoid the pitfalls they offered.

They shrugged, smiled with their Oriental eyes, and promised to keep him occupied in other ways. Workmen were sent to tear out a section of wall in each of his rooms. Frosted glass panels were installed in the sections. "Movie screens," they told him, "with projectors behind the walls."

*Why behind the walls?* he wondered.

Then they covered the screens with heavy, transparent plastic panels. Scotty read a Slavic trademark on one of the panels. It said, "Unbreakable."

*Why?*

He was stretched out in a soft chair one evening, reading a Russian work on cybernetics, when the loudspeakers crackled slightly. He glanced up. They had turned the amplifiers on. Then, soft recorded music flooded the room, a lovely Russian symphony.

The screen flickered on. The scene was a bedroom—and a sudden chill gripped him. It was his wife's bedroom. From the angle of view, he reasoned that the camera was concealed in a ventilator. There was Nora's purse on the dressing table, her manicure set, her brushes and combs. On the pillows was the familiar giant Teddy bear. Everything was the same.

He stood up and anxiously paced the floor. What were they trying to do? Drive him insane with nostalgia?

Then something moved onto the screen. He froze in his tracks and stared. *It was Nora!*

She moved to the dressing table and sat down to brush her hair. She used the same long gliding strokes as always. And by the slow moving of her lips, he could tell that she was humming a tune. She arranged her hair carefully, then applied make-up. When she was through, she moved to the closet and selected a dress.

It was an evening gown!

Scotty slumped down in the chair again, too weak to stand. He felt more than a trace of bitterness and disappointment. With her husband a prisoner in an enemy nation, with two children to care for, she was wearing evening gowns. He got one last glimpse of her face before she moved out of the room. It was a happy face.

The scene shifted to the hallway. The camera was looking downward and toward the door. Nora appeared, hag in hand, ethereal in the white, gown and with a golden chain binding her long ashen hair. The music became romantic. She opened the door. There stood a beautifully tailored tuxedo, with a man inside it. He stepped inside, smiling, and gave her a corsage.

Scotty, stricken though he was, recognized the man. He was a government official, very handsome,

and noted for his amatory successes. He had also been investigated by a senatorial committee, but charges of subversion had been dropped.

Nora opened the orchids, laughed with pleasure, then kissed the man lightly. Then they went out into the evening. The door closed like an exclamation point. The screen went dark.

And for three hours, it stayed as dark as the black depths of Scotty's heart. He shouted curses at his captors, but none answered him.

The music wandered into a classical theme, then into Russian symphony—music of the clenched fist, of sprawling factories, of mechanized peasantry toiling for a cause. Then martial airs—the roar of mighty squadrons over Red Square, ponderous tanks rolling along the streets in full parade—all serious, all determined, all purposive. Then after three hours:

*"Woodaddy hoogaddy zoop! My baby's in the soup!"*

The sudden savage howl of American jazz. It beat at the eardrums and frayed jangled nerves. The veins in his temples were already pounding with his own inner misery.

The screen became bright again—the same scene, the same closed door. Scotty waited tensely.

The door opened. Nora staggered in, obviously tipsy. The man followed. Then another man. It was a congressman, a friend of Scotty's! His reputation was impeccable. He stood just inside the door, talking to them with occasional laughter. Then he nodded good night, stepped outside.

When he shut the door, it seemed to Scotty that the American government had offered its blessings upon Nora and the other man.

Nora laughed with sudden abandon and began skipping about the hall in a wild dance, like the complete self-release of a marijuana addict. The man was watching with a grin. Suddenly she threw herself upon him, and they clutched at each other in a rocking, wrenching embrace. Scotty could bear no more of it. He clenched his lids together until his eyes ached.

A shift in the music to something low and pulsing made him steal another glance in the hope that the screen was dead. But the act had shifted to the bedroom, and it was one of such utter depravity and horror that Scotty ran out of the room, shouting hoarsely. But in the next room, the same scene confronted him. He threw himself on the floor, closed his eyes, and became violently ill.

For a week the persecution continued. The same picture over and over again, interspersed with Russian newsreels showing troops on the march, factories turning out war planes, high leaders at the conference table. Then the howl of jazz again, and the awful horror. Of course he didn't watch, but it was *there*, and he knew what it *was*, and even with his eyes closed, he could see the flicker of the screen through his lids. And the music told him what was happening. For the week he was left entirely alone. His food was pushed through a slot in the door. No one answered his shouts.

Then they came and told him that there would be a new set of pictures for the following week—on exactly the same subject. Only this time, they said, he would catch a glimpse of his children's faces as they peered around a doorway and saw their mother.

It was enough. They asked nothing of him. But he told them what *he* would do for *them*. He would build them the machine that would win the war. He begged and pleaded with them. They were polite, but reluctant. How did they know he could be trusted? No, he would have to wait until they discussed it with the politburo.

And so, he enjoyed another week of the amusing films.

When he tried to kill himself, they decided that he was ready. In two weeks he had lost twenty pounds. His eyes were bleary and wild. When they let him out of the suite, he fainted with relief. They carried him to a psychologist for indoctrination.

Yes, yes, he believed in all they had to say. Yes, yes, his country was a degenerate imperialist nation. Yes, yes, it was time for the ultimate in revolutions. Yes! Anything! Let him build them something that would do everything from A to Izzard.

And that's what he called it: the Izzard.

They gave him to Porshkin, cyhernetist for the cause, a brutal, bearded man, who treated him to rough threats and verbal abuse, who criticized his scientific theories according to political dogma. But

Scotty moved as through a daze, treating his colleague with deference, and working long hours with dull plodding intensity.

They allowed him a certain amount of freedom. He was carefully guarded from a distance. A man in plain clothes followed him through the snow as he walked to the laboratory at dawn and returned at sundown to his apartment. Guards were posted near him wherever he went, but they never molested or even approached him.

He devoted all of his thoughts to the project, and it kept him from being maddeningly lonely.

The Izzard was a gigantic "electronic brain." Its instrument and control panels were erected in a huge subterranean vault, and their length covered three hundred feet of walls. Another vault of equal size was built to house its memory units. A factory behind the Urals devoted itself to the manufacture of special parts according to Scotty's design. Vacuum tubes the size of peas were used for synapses, but they weren't actually tubes at all. There were to be more of them than there were cells in three human brains.

It was not to be a calculator, although it had a math unit too. Its logic and semantic circuits were to solve problems in economics, military strategy, political science, human psychology, sociology, and—*cybernetics*. The machine would be able to analyze itself, and suggest changes. It could plot the courses of guided missiles from radio signals sent while in flight.

It had two sets of memory units, one permanent, and one for temporary, erasable material. The permanent set was quickly built and powered, so that several thousand workers could begin translating the entire contents of large libraries and feeding them into the machine. The semantics and logic circuits were assembled and made ready for use before the other circuits were even begun. They were to provide a first test. Although, by themselves, they would be able to do little more than give *ergo's* to simple syllogisms.

Europe was still solidifying itself under the new rule, and the two warring powers were still sparring timidly at each other across the Atlantic on the night that Porshkin and Scott MacDonney stood alone in the long, high-ceilinged vault of concrete, and made ready for the tests under the glaring lights that flooded down from overhead. They were alone, because the test was clandestine. Failure would be a deadly mistake, not to be tolerated by the fist held clenched above them. If the test was a success, nothing would be said—and high officials would be invited to see the second "first test."

Porshkin was muttering nervously in his beard, and shouting spurts of advice at the calmer Scott, who moved thoughtfully from panel to panel checking instruments, adjusting dials, jotting careful notes in a black notebook. Porshkin stalked around after him like a chained bear, peering suspiciously at the notes, disclaiming responsibility. His bull voice filled the long hall with angry echoes.

"Son of a capitalist! Brother of a capitalist!" he roared. "You suckled on imperialistic milk! You are soaked in it from childhood! The fools! They think to change the very fiber of your brain in a few short months! But *I*, Porshkin, know the marrow of the brain! You are still a capitalist swine!"

And Scott MacDonney went on peering calmly at dials, jotting, studying, adjusting—and ignoring the mastodon with the fiery eyes, who stalked relentlessly at his heels.

"I can see it in the way you take notes!" the bear growled. "You write numbers like a monk writes prayers in a holy book! You are full of 'sacred' ideas! *I*, Porshkin, who am *born* a materialist, see it in your mind! You think you're making a god! Why don't you build it an altar?"

Scotty moved calmly to the master circuit breakers, which controlled all the power to the lab. One small set handled only the sunlight lamps that made the vault a pit of daytime. The other set was to control the power to the intellect circuits. The memory units were powered individually, as a precaution against forgetting, for setting the permanent memories was a long, hard process.

"They blame *me* when you fail," Porshkin snarled. "They let you spend the people's money upon this folly! You stumbler! You capitalist! May you be the first they shoot! When they shoot us both, I shall watch you die!"

Scotty checked his earlier calculations. The semantics and logic circuits alone should require an even hundred kilowatts of power. He had spent hours checking the figure. But he set the breakers to trip on one hundred and twenty kilowatts, just to be sure. Then he pressed the switch that activated the

breaker-closing mechanisms.

The only sounds in the vault were Porshkin's hoarse, wet breathing, and the whine of the motors that pulled the breaker contacts closer and closer together in their enclosed tub of oil.

Scotty turned to look at Izzard's long black rows of panels. He had come to love the machine. He thought of nothing else, not even of the practical end to which it would be put. The war was forgotten. Other things forgotten, too. Izzard was *his* creature, *his* giant baby, his to train and to teach, to have and to hold, as he might a human child—or had he ever known any human children? Sometimes, sometimes it was hard to remember.

Suddenly, there was a loud *whack!* The breakers had opened again! The accompanying surge fed back into the lighting circuits. Their breakers opened. The vault was plunged in inky blackness, save for a dying, violet glow from Izzard's air vents. The darkness smelled of oil as vapor hissed from pressure valves on the tubes.

A roar of rage came from Porshkin's throat, and Scotty heard his meaty arms beating at the air as he tried to find his despised colleague. Scotty ducked low and crept away along the rows of panels. Porshkin howled insults and threats in his native tongue while he heat at the darkness in search of Scotty.

Scotty deliberately kicked the baseboard of a panel, to draw the bull away from the switch. Then he made a slow and quiet circle as he heard Porshkin lumbering toward the sound. He reached the breakers. He worked quickly, moving the breaker setting up a quarter turn. That would correspond to a hundred and fifty kilowatts. If Izzard demanded that much, it would damage the circuits after half an hour of heating. But he would have a few minutes to locate the trouble.

Porshkin heard the setting change. His footsteps beat across the concrete floor. Scotty left the lighting breaker open, but started the motors again. Then he called a taunting curse at the raging hunter and ran toward the semantics panel to attract Porshkin away from the breakers.

But it spelled his downfall. Porshkin, following the loud footsteps, was suddenly upon him. His mighty hands caught Scotty's head like a football, crushed, pressed him to his knees, then forced backward. Scotty felt the vertebrae popping in his neck.

"Izzard!" he managed to gasp. "It's on! It works! Let go!"

The Russian did not release him nor relax the pressure of his hands. But he looked around at the panels. Scotty could see him looking, because the floor was bathed in the purple glow of incandescent mercury vapor from Izzard's vents. Porshkin said nothing. But after a moment he flung Scotty away from him like something discarded, and went to look in the panels. Scotty picked himself up and tried to work his neck back in place.

Then he hurried to the breakers, cut on the blinding lights, and noted the input power.

It stood at nearly one-forty-four! Izzard was drawing forty-some per cent overload. It seemed unthinkable that such a relatively simple calculation as power-demand had been that far in error. If he missed it that much on power, how much had he missed it on delicate circuit calculations? It shocked him. He didn't care about being executed for failure; it was the failure *itself* that bothered him. For he was like a doctor, delivering his own child into the world.

But there was no time for idle musing. He moved back to the panels. Porshkin resumed his curses and condemnations.

"Give me a hand, if you want to save your skin," Scotty told him quietly.

The Russian fell silent. "You know what's wrong?" he asked in a more subdued tone.

"No. We've got about twenty minutes to find out. You keep an eye on the temperature gauges. When they get close to the red, warn me. We'll cut it off."

Porshkin obeyed, but began grumbling under his breath. Scotty quickly jotted down the power readings in each individual circuit. Some were just what they should be. Others were one hundred per cent high!

"Hey!" he called. "Watch *these* in particular! They're on double demand."

Porshkin scowled at him. Scotty peered in through the vents at the mercury arcs. The ones supposedly overloaded were glowing no more brightly than the others. He checked readings on all

meters. Nothing was off but power and its components. It seemed impossible.

Fifteen minutes had passed. "How's the temperature?" he called. "The double-loaders should be in the red."

Porshkin shook his head and sneered. Then he returned his gaze to the panels and put on a sarcastic smirk amid his stiff black beard. Scotty paused in suspicion. Then he backed away to check them himself.

Every needle rested on the thin black line marked: *Operating Temperature!*

"Heh heh!" the Russian chuckled. Suddenly he could no longer restrain himself. He filled his barrel-chest with air, arched his back, and rocked with wild, explosive laughter that filled the vault with ringing echoes.

Scotty was no longer interested in human reactions to his work. Izzard was his baby. It was all that mattered. While Porshkin roared, Scotty found a metal stool and began totaling the individual power readings. The total checked with the meter at the breaker.

He looked at Izzard again. The temperature of the units remained a safe constant. But if the added power wasn't being dissipated as heat loss, then where was it going? Offhand, he could think of but one answer: radiation.

He arose and started out of the vault. Porshkin stopped laughing.

"Hey, Mr. Blunderer ! Where you going?"

"Stock room!" Scotty snapped over his shoulder.

The stock room was a mile-long tunnel that encircled the other vaults. An, electric truck ran along a pair of rails that carried it around the entire circle. Scotty climbed in and drove to the instrument room. He loaded half a dozen X-ray plates, an ultraviolet light meter, several meters for the radio bands, and, after some hesitation, a Geiger counter.

It struck him, as he went back to the vault, that if forty-four kilowatts were being dumped into the ultraviolet or the X-ray bands, that he and Porshkin should by now be blistered corpses—or at least well on their way to that end. And if it was going into radio-frequency, somebody from upstairs would be sending down troops to turn it off—lest American aircraft pick up the beam and home on it.

That, the Geiger should register anything seemed equally incredible, simply because of Izzard's make-up. Nevertheless, he checked it first. Nothing—only a stray occasional click—and that was because the vaults had once been used for storing bombs.

Porshkin was telling him quite forcefully that he was crazy, and that his warped capitalist brain could not even figure the power in a radio set.

Scotty checked the other instruments. There was some ultraviolet from the mercury arcs—five hundred watts at most. There was perhaps a watt or two scattered over the radio bands. He took the meters back to stock, and began developing the plates. Nothing there, either.

Was Porshkin right? Was he losing his grip? He had seen two brilliant scientists do that. Suddenly they couldn't even add a pair of vectors correctly, or even a list of numbers.

He wandered back to the vault, and his heart said, "No, you haven't made a mistake." But there it was—right on the instruments.

"What now, Mr. Godmaker?" chuckled the Russian.

Scotty went to the control panel. The switch was in the "question" position. He pushed it to the "answer" position to let the circuits clear themselves of any spurious "ideas." Two dials spun half a turn to zero, and an automatic typewriter clicked out a line of nonsense syllables. That was all; and it was as it should be.

"Whoops!" cried Porshkin as if in surprise. "Power fell off." Scotty backed up and looked. When he threw the switch, Izzard had stopped gobbling power. Why? It should actually use more power on "answer." It could still wait until tomorrow. Temperature was the real factor. He went back to the

controls, and sat at the keyboard which was part of the logic circuits. Porshkin came to look over his shoulder as he pressed the switch back to "question." Scotty typed a simple query. "What is your name?"

He touched the switch again. A few relays clicked. With lightning rapidity Izzard searched through her small memory unit of proper names. The keyboard clacked of its own accord.

"Ans: My name is Izzard Electro-Synaptic Analyzer."

Porshkin rumbled about the impropriety of teaching her to say "Izzard," and what the commissar would think. But Scotty only half-heard him; he was too elated over the response. With trembling fingers he tried another.

"All crows are black. Sammy is a crow. Analyze, please."

And, after the usual moment of operating noises, Izzard replied: "*Ergo*: Sammy is black. *Qualified by operational query*: What is a Sammy?"

Scotty chuckled happily and patted the panel. The query meant she was playing safe, the way he wanted her to do. She wanted to make sure that a Sammy *could be* a crow. The Marxian dialecticians wouldn't be able to tell her that a circle was a square and have her believe it. She scanned her memories in search of false propositions, and she found "Sammy" under "Men's Names."

He gave her a reply. "Operational query noted. Enter following answer in learned-memory. Namely: Human organisms sometimes apply human proper names to nonhuman objects and organisms."

The reply apparently satisfied her. She would need to learn a lot of little things like that, Scotty thought.

Scotty was in love at first speech. He had made her, and she would be perfect, and she was his creature.

He made a few other tests with more complicated syllogisms and triads. Her responses were flawless.

It was enough for the first test. He was like a child, afraid of wearing out the fascination of a new plaything. Even Porshkin was grudgingly pleased. He wanted to teach Izzard to play chess for the commissars' amusement when they made the official unveiling.

They shut off the machine and took the elevator to the surface. The lift always stopped between levels, and its occupants were required to go through a long identifying procedure for the secret police. At the top level, they were stripped, searched, and fluoroscoped by a detachment of guards before they moved out into the streets.

It was a bright moonlight night. As Scotty turned on his lonely way homeward, he noticed a man hovering in the shadows of an alley. Then the figure disappeared into a dark doorway. It startled him at first. But he was in a rooming-house district. Probably an insomniac had stepped out for a breath of night air.

He glanced behind him. His guard was plodding along as usual, a block to the rear. Scotty shrugged and turned his thoughts again to Izzard.

The power-puzzle gnawed at his mind. If the new circuits, not yet connected, showed a similar appetite, he would have to heavy up on the main lines and the breakers. The state wouldn't like that, because it spelled *mistake*, and even the greenest engineer should be able to avoid a mistake like that. But that worried him less than did the problem itself. Forty kilowatts of power didn't just vanish. They had to steal away as some form of energy—heat, chemical, electromagnetic, or mechanical. But it obviously wasn't any of those. Could Izzard be converting energy into matter?

He made a few mental calculations. Forty-four kilowatts was the equivalent of matter being born at about the rate of two micrograms per hour—an infinitesimally small quantity. It seemed impossible, but there wasn't any way to check it. His musings began to lead him into the realm of metaphysics. Then he remembered something. When Izzard was completed, she might be able to diagnose her own ailment. He would wait and see.

He was approaching the intersection of his own street. A car was parked on the opposite corner. He had seen it there several times. It had the black-curtained windows of a government limousine, but never

had he seen anyone around it. Porshkin had once whispered, "OGPU, Mr. Godmaker! They guard your sacred hide." But the car bore no markings, and it could easily have been an industrialist's staff car. He started to turn the corner.

*Spang!* Chipped concrete stung his face. A fleeing bullet made hornet sounds. Instinctively, Scotty dropped prostrate in the building's shadow'. From somewhere across the street, a voice called out in a Slavic accent.

"If you're still alive, traitor, let me tell you something. Your wife wasn't—"

A sudden blast of machine-gun fire drowned the voice. The explosions made lightning-flashes in the murky street. Glass tinkled to the sidewalk from a third-story window. A car door slammed and two uniformed men ran toward the sniper's building. With drawn revolvers, they disappeared up a stairway. A third man hurried from the limousine toward Scotty, who began picking himself up from the concrete.

"Are you hurt, comrade?"

Scotty shook his head, and peered at the man's face. He recognized him as a high police commissioner.

"We have been expecting this," the man told him. "But we weren't certain when it would happen. The underground has had you marked for assassination. Our agents fortunately discovered the plot."

Scotty brushed himself off in silence.

"I think we got him with the first burst," the commissioner went on. "Did you hear him call to you?"

Scotty hesitated. He had heard, but the police agent seemed, to be watching him peculiarly.

"I guess I was too frightened. What did he say?"

The commissar shrugged and seemed to relax. "It sounded to me like he said—'Your life wasn't worth —' and then we got him."

A muffled shot came from the building across the street. It was as if the pistol had been pressed against its target. The *coup de grace*, Scotty guessed.

"These assassins are never worth questioning," the commissioner explained. "The swine that send them know they'll be caught. So they use new recruits who know nothing at all. We questioned one once. You won't believe it, but he'd never even seen another underground member. He picked up his orders out of gutters, and on restaurant menus—with underlined words."

The uniformed men reappeared in the street. Their guns were in their holsters, and they were chuckling and talking in low voices. They saluted the commissioner and reported.

"He's dead, sir."

"Any identification?"

"No, sir. Nothing in his clothes. All fillings chipped out of his teeth. Their surgeons took off his nose and ears, scarred up his cheeks. Hands and feet burned, as usual."

The commissioner explained to Scotty. "They're fanatics. They go over their hands and feet with a blowtorch. Then they let them fester so we can't get fingerprints. They're half dead of infection when they're ready for a sniping job. No wonder they can't shoot too straight."

Scotty shivered. "May I go now, commissioner?" he asked. "I've been working since dawn."

The commissioner bowed slightly. "Certainly, comrade. And don't fear another attack. We'll double your guard." He looked suddenly startled. "Where *is* your guard?"

Scotty shook his head.

"Boris!" the commissioner snapped. "Find him!"

One of the men slipped around the corner.

"They undoubtedly knifed him," the commissioner sighed. "They expected *him*, but not *us*."

Scotty nodded good night and moved away.

"If you feel in danger, call me," the commissioner shouted after him. "Mention your name to the operator and ask for Colonel Mischa Varnoff."

"Thanks!" Scotty called curtly. He plodded slowly homeward through the moonlight.

The next week was heavy with despondency. Ghost-words kept murmuring in his mind, like multiple echoes between sheer cliffs of fate's cold granite—but unlike echoes, for they would not die away.

*Traitor, your wife wasn't . . . Traitor, your wife wasn't . . . Traitor, your wife ...*

Wasn't *what*? Wasn't a treacherous, despicable, degenerate wretch? Bah! He had seen it, and he had seen the congressman condone the thing. What sort of country was it, where elected officials winked at the despoiling of a captured patriot's family?

His conviction of her wretchedness was unshakable, but the assassin's mocking cry had stirred up old dregs, had summoned up Old memories that would be better left buried in the dark abysses of unconsciousness. He thought of his children—Cathy and Bob. He thought of the green hills of Ohio, of the cornfield's sweet smell in the sun and the breeze.

And he had more time on his hands now. The work was moving along by itself. The trial-and-error stage, the design-and-experiment stage—they were over. Nearly a million men were engaged in preparing Izzard for her many tasks. The work was laid out for them. And Scotty's job was now hardly more than a supervisory one. He had no official authority, but his intellect had unlimited control.

Most of his spare moments were spent at the keyboard. He talked to Izzard as father chats with daughter. He told them that he was checking her memory for omitted material. But he was really only chatting with a friend, although he knew she was merely an unconscious intellect. For consciousness needed sensory receptors—eyes, ears, things to feel with. She gave the illusion of consciousness, because he had fitted first and second person pronouns into her memory. But their use was purely automatic.

A thought struck him one evening as he sat at the keyboard. Weren't her *controls* sensory receptors? Wasn't her very keyboard a listening ear? Quickly, he asked her a question.

"Are you aware of your own existence?"

Her reply was slow in coming. He waited for ten minutes while she searched her memory units and tried to piece together an answer from an enormous number of possible concept-combinations. He pitied her in a way—for her psychological circuits were not yet connected. She was trying to solve it by logic alone. At last the keys began typing out words.

"Answer indeterminant. Only relevant memory, (*sic*) '*Cogito, ergo sum*,' quoted from Descartes, memory unit LP-7. *Operational query*: Can human individual's self-awareness transor be mechanically duplicated?"

Scotty stared at the reply nervously. "*Cogito, ergo sum*"—the scientist Descartes' answer to philosophers who claimed that even the individual's own existence couldn't be proved—"I *think*, gentlemen. Therefore: I *am*."

But it didn't prove anything. Even Izzard knew that. It was the operational query that really bothered Scotty. He didn't even know what it meant. Where had she got concepts like that?

"Postpone query," he told her. "Define `transor! Define 'self-awareness transor.' Read related memories."

She replied quickly. "*Definition*: A transor is a tensor with a complex number of components. *Definition*: A self-awareness transor is the mathematical function which describes the specific consciousness pattern of one human, individual. *Related memories*: A tensor is a transor with a 'real' number of components. A vector is a tensor with only two or three components. A scalar is a tensor with a single component, i.e., a scalar is a simple number."

Scotty sat frozen in the presence of the unknown. Izzard had access to her mathematical memory units, although she didn't have the proper circuits to work problems yet. Even so—Scotty knew very well that this strange business about *transors* hadn't been put in her permanent memory. She would soon be equipped to handle tensors and vectors, but *transorsi*—who had even heard of them?

"Locate transor-definition," he told her.

"Memory unit T-KJ-6," she replied.

Scotty didn't need to check the unit's location. The code letters placed it. The *T* stood for temporary. The other letters were vault co-ordinates. Somebody had fed the information into her temporary units—*after* the last time Scotty had been at the keyboard. A wave of suspicion engulfed him, and the feeling was akin to jealousy.



But where in all Eurasia was a mathematician who could give her such a concept? For months he had been seeking staff-mathematicians who could do something more than count on their fingers. The State had backed him up, but the search was fruitless. Yet, here Izzard had a learned memory that was beyond Scotty's own knowledge. An underground scientist? Impossible! The OGPI: took too many precautions to keep others out of the vaults.

Suddenly the keyboard began clicking again. Izzard was continuing her report.

"Disregard postponed operational query. Answer is now available to me. Unit T-KJ-7."

Scotty was breathing heavily. Those units could only be stocked from outside the machine. Izzard had another set of units in which to remember things she figured out for herself. *He* certainly hadn't touched the keyboard. And there wasn't any *other* keyboard.

"Give answer to postponed operational query," he commanded. "List and locate all of your memory-intake devices."

He doubted that she could do the latter, without access to the cybernetics circuits. But if she *did* do it, then it would mean she was conscious, and that her controls and keyboards were really sense organs.

Her answer began. "Yes, human individual's self-awareness transor can be mechanically duplicated." Then she began listing each of her controls by their exact vault coordinates. She named all of them, but added an extra one as well.

Scotty left the keyboard, trembling slightly. If Porshkin had secretly added another keyboard, he would—

He was raging inwardly as he followed the lettered lines on the floor. They led him to a blank wall that separated the thinking circuits from the memory units. The point described by the co-ordinates *lay buried in three feet of solid concrete*.

He went back to the keyboard and made her repeat it. There was no mistake.

It was too much for one day. He opened the breakers and put Izzard to sleep. Then he went to the job office and wrote up a work order. "Cut circular hole of three meter diameter through partition *K*. Center at co-ordinates LH-5. Plaster the rim." He paused for a moment, then wrote: "Reason—to provide leakage path through structural steel contained in partition."

The "reason" was nonsense, but it would pass without question. Porshkin would see it, but his *ego* wouldn't let him ask about it for fear of appearing ignorant. *Unless!* If Porshkin, or someone else connected with the, State, had planted something in that wall—then the work order would bounce like a hot check.

Scotty mentally postponed the matter, and as he walked homeward, he tried to piece together the significance of what Izzard had told him.

Her discussion of "self-awareness transors" amounted to just one thing, as he saw it. It amounted to a mathematical definition of something that makes a man *himself* and not someone else. It was a definition of some elusive human quality, or quantity, which men had once labeled "the soul." And she said that it could be mechanically duplicated:

Her listing of her own control mechanisms meant that she had consciousness, and that the mechanisms were equivalent to sense organs. They gave her information—just like eyes or ears.

*What*, he asked himself, *would happen if the "soul" of one specific man were mechanically duplicated?* He put the enigma out of his mind until the following day.

The newspapers were finding it suddenly fashionable to wear banner headlines. Scotty had picked up enough Russian to read them, although he seldom did so. But now, the front pages were covered with stories of mass bombing raids along the American North-Atlantic coastline. The war in Alaska had moved to the second page.

With a kind of horrified fascination, he began reading the accounts of the air raids. An aerial photo showed a giant luminous mushroom blossoming over New York's skyline. The caption said, "The Fate of Wall Street." He felt the pit of his stomach sagging.

The mass raids were a prophecy. The politburo was getting ready for the trans-Atlantic bridgehead, a direct sea-land strike at the industrial area of New England. And *he*, Scott MacDonney, held the key

to the bridgehead gates! For Izzard, when completed, would map out the course of the entire invasion, keep running inventories of all pertinent events, and make strategic changes when necessary!

It was hard for him to think of Izzy as a cold and calculating military strategist. She seemed more like a curious little girl, a super-normally intelligent child. A child that would soon learn to kill.

Izzard's vault was ringing with the chatter of pneumatic drills when Scotty entered on the following day. Workmen were busily boring through the wall where Izzard claimed her "sixth sense" lay. Porshkin was also in the vault, supervising the setting in place of two new circuit-units for the widening of Izzy's scope of interest. Scotty noted that they were the math unit and the military strategy unit. He went over to inspect them.

Porshkin turned on him in lip-curling fury. He shot out a stubby finger toward the noisy drillers, and the finger waggled like a recoiling pistol barrel.

"What is this nonsense business?" he bellowed. "What you drilling? Oil wells yet? How I hear myself yell at my men? *How?*?"

"You're doing all right," Scotty told him. It was the first time he'd heard the Russian lapse into a strong accent—except the night he was furious enough to break unconsciously back into his own language.

"Flux leaks yet!" Porshkin went on. "You got flux in the head! Why you put lie on work order?"

"If you thought it was a lie, why didn't you block the order? Didn't *you* sign it, too?"

"*Nyet! Nyet!* I don't sign your fool orders. I read and send to work-commissar!"

"You still could have blocked it."

The Russian paused to regain his self-control. "Listen, Mr. Godmaker! If you want to drill an oil well in the people's concrete, its all right with me. But why you have to do it *now*? When *I*, Porshkin, got *sane* work to do?" He gestured toward the new units.

Scotty started to remind him who had designed the units. Then he thought better of it. There was no use antagonizing the bear. Porshkin seemed to have high influence in the State.

"Sorry, Porshkin. I didn't think they'd do it today. Shall I tell them to wait?"

The bear hesitated. Then his red lips bloomed a sweet smile in the black foliage of his beard. "No," he said more calmly. "No, let them dig. Then you show me how flux leaks through, and wherefrom. You get compass and show me which way they go, huh? Then we show cute trick to commissar."

Scotty walked away from him. Porshkin was becoming treacherous. The drilling was not an expensive thing, but the Russian was looking for any excuse he could find to put Scott in a bad light. He thought, obviously, that the American was no longer needed, now that the work would run itself.

By late afternoon, the self-contained units were mounted in place and tied in with the master circuits. Izzy had a couple of new holes to her brain. The drillers were also through, and the hole was a cleanly cut circle with a smooth rim of damp plaster. But there had been nothing except solid concrete and heavy rods of supporting steel.

When Porshkin left the room for a moment, Scotty took the opportunity to question Izzy again about the "sixth sense." She replied with exactly the same co-ordinates for its location. But now that point was nothing but an empty spot in midair. Puzzled, Scotty went to the circular window and moved his hand through the point. There was certainly nothing there.

"You feel the flux with your fingers, yet!" said Porshkin with mock amazement. He had returned quietly to the vault, and he carried a magnetic compass.

With a sick feeling in his stomach, Scotty moved aside to make way for his hulk. The Russian waved the compass dramatically about in the open space. Suddenly his mouth lost its smirk. He frowned slightly and began watching the compass more carefully. He moved it in a slow circle about the center point. Then he described with it a circle in a vertical plane. Finally he held it steadily in the center. Scotty

thought he heard a faint whirring sound. Then a click.

"*Heart of the Black Madonna!*" howled the Russian materialist. He jerked the instrument away and nearly dropped it.

"What's the matter?" Scotty asked. He glanced at the instrument. The needle had slipped off the shaft. It lay to one side.

"She spin!" said Porshkin. "She spin like a crazy top. Listen, comrade. It's crazy! That needle points to the center from all directions! Up, down, sideways, crossways. There's no place where the needle points away from it. But on the other side, in the next room, the needle doesn't do anything at all—except point at the North Pole."

Scotty removed the glass cover and fitted the needle back on the shaft. What Porshkin said wasn't possible. Magnetic flux lines always made closed loops. They never began or ended on a point. Even the Earth's magnetism sprayed out from one pole, circled around to the other, and then went back through the ground to the starting point. And if that center point had a directional field converging into it, then the same lines would have to leave it again.

He checked it himself.

Porshkin had *not* made a mistake. The point behaved like an isolated pole—which was considered an impossibly idealized concept. A pole *had* to have a mate, somewhere in four-space.

Necessarily in four-space?

The thought struck him suddenly and began to nag his mind. He tried to dismiss it with a snort. But it clung.

Porshkin left the vault. He walked slowly, with massive shoulders slumped, with sagging face. He seemed to be burning with some strange inner fire or fury, although he dropped his outer display of ferocity. Scotty felt certain that the bear would never be his friend. He seemed continually tormented by the knowledge that Scotty's was the guiding hand, that Izzard was Scotty's baby and none of his own. Porshkin was a proud man.

The Russian had run some brief checks on the new units, but his sudden morose departure left the coordination tests to Scotty. And Scotty was not displeased. There were a number of things to discuss with Izzy, and he didn't care to have the bear know about them.

He checked over the math unit: It had conventional calculator controls and a large keyboard as well, so that word problems and raw data could be fed to it. The semantics circuits would translate them into the language of the calculator.

The strategy unit was the most massive of all, for it contained shortwave equipment for monitoring several dozen frequencies. Scotty adjusted one of them to an American station. He set up the controls so that Izzy would memorize all news broadcasts. That was for his personal illumination.

After an hour, he had completed all the adjustments that made the new units an integral part of Izzy's total mind. It saddened him in a way: it was like watching a child move inexorably into a less happy adulthood. And Izzy was growing into a warrior queen of steel and dancing electrons. When it was done, and the breakers set up for the added load, he went to the familiar keyboard.

"Hello, Izzy! This is Scotty."

Izzy knew him, because he had left a lot of personal material in her erasable memory tubes. Some times he tried to talk to her as a friend—for he had no others—just to watch her responses. He told her about his childhood, and about canoeing on the Ohio, and about the beauty of wooded slopes and rolling farmland. She had replied with an operating query: "Is it advantageous for all organisms to have eyes?" It had given him pause. There seemed something wistful about it. He knew it was only a request that she built up in her search for order and logic among his ramblings. But he had always remembered it. He remembered it again, now that the shortwave receivers were installed.

"How does it feel to have a new sense organ, Izzy?" he asked.

Her thinking assembly moved noisily. He knew she could understand the question, because he had planted in her temporary memory many analogies which allowed her to think of her inner functioning in terms of words descriptive of human behavior. He had taught her to anthropomorphize herself. Porshkin

would burst an artery if he learned of it, but it seemed harmless to Scotty. The units could be erased before Izzy went to work.

"Answer indeterminate," she replied. *"Related reaction: human gratitude."*

He took it as her way of saying, "Thanks for the new ears," even though he knew that all she had done was to select the most likely human reaction. Or was it the most likely? A deaf man, suddenly restored to hearing, would be less likely to thank the doctor than to run about shrieking that he could hear again. Izzy was a funny kid.

"You're my test girl, Izzy," he typed with a broad grin.

He heard her tuck it away in a memory unit, but she made no reply. So, he buckled down to the more serious business of making co-ordination tests. The problem tapes had already been made up for hypothetical questions of strategy. They contained terrain descriptions analytically expressed, troop numbers, weapon data, placements of all units, supply information, and all other pertinent facts for a mock battle. Izzy was to start with a basic military situation and work it out into a detailed strategic plan for battle.

It would be several hours work, even for Izzy. He left her with the task and went topside to kill time.

He returned just past midnight. Izzy was basking quietly in the glow of her mercury arcs. Several yards of typed answers were on a roller above the keyboard, and at the strategy unit a long tongue of paper tape lay panting out of the answer slot. The tape was punched with Izzy's accompanying mathematical analysis of the strategic problem. He removed her solutions and marked them for immediate decoding by the staff.

Then he noticed a clear-text notation at the bottom of the typed roll. He read it with a deepening frown.

*"Operating request: Please explain apparent contradiction between nature of strategic problem number one and historical laws forbidding destruction of human life."*

He nodded gravely. Then he tore it off the roll. The general staff wouldn't like it.

The work progressed rapidly. The psychology and cybernetics units were installed. After each co-ordination test proved successful, Porshkin sank deeper into morose silence. He reminded Scotty of a giant, bearded King Solomon whose wisdom had been surpassed. His eyes followed the American wherever he went. He became no longer useful, but seemed bent only on solving some secret problem.

Scotty, whenever he could be alone with Izzard, had her recite the American news broadcasts she had memorized. Then he quickly burned the pages, lest the secret police discover that he had been listening. He discovered that the Russian news reports were not too grandiose in their claims. They didn't need to lie. The truth was grim enough. New England was a shattered havoc. And the bombers were cutting deeper, striking at targets along the Great Lakes as far west as Ohio. He thought of Cathy, and Bob, and even —Nora.

Porshkin came. He saw the paper ashes on the floor. He moved to the strategy unit and noticed the settings on the short-wave equipment. Then he left the vault in silence. Nothing came of it, immediately.

Someone high in the general staff called Scotty. "Are you going to meet your deadline, comrade?" he asked.

"The analyzer will be completed within a week," Scotty told him. "Good!" the man said. "We will increase our air operations to full capacity at once!"

Scotty knew that the invasion was ready. They were waiting only on Izzard to set the time and map the plans. As his work of vengeance drew near completion, he found himself growing restless, disturbed. He spent more time sitting at the keyboard, idly chatting with his creature.

He questioned her again about the self-awareness transors in the hope that, her new units would enable her to give a complete analysis. He also asked about the power losses and about the isolated pole which she had called one of her sensory receptors. But she replied with gibberish about the power and the pole. Her circuits became clogged with transients when he mentioned them. But—

*"Answer: Human self-awareness transor can be mechanically duplicated. Operational note: I do not have effector facilities for writing transor equations: Operational query: Shall I cybernetically reorder*

my circuits into a human transor form as a demonstration? If so, whom shall I duplicate?"

After a long, thoughtful moment, Scotty wrote. "No, not yet, my baby."

The mechanisms for robot-guided missile control were installed. The general staff decided that they should be put into operation immediately. Two guards and an operator were assigned to the unit. Scotty had neighbors in the vault, but they remained at their controls and paid no attention to him.

Shortly thereafter, Izzy read him a news bulletin : "One of the fatalities in last night's atomic raid on Cleveland, was Mrs. Nora MacDonney, well-known for her organizational work in shaping up her highly efficient Civilian Evacuation Corps, a service composed entirely of volunteer workers, whose heroic work in moving casualties and helpless families from target areas has won high praise and citation from the American provisional government in Denver.

"Mrs. MacDonney's husband, Dr. Scott MacDonney, who was captured by the revolutionaries at the beginning of the conflict, has become the guiding mind in the Russian campaign, according to unconfirmed reports from underground sources. If the reports are true, it seems likely that MacDonney has endured the same living death that the Reds invented for the 'conversion' of others. Thus, MacDonney's name might conceivably be entered beside that of his wife on the roll-call of American dead."

Scotty read it with mingled grief, shame, depression, and resentment. Nora's death made things different somehow. It removed some of the vengeful hatred from his heart.

A low chuckle came from behind him. Porshkin had a way of creeping up quietly across the concrete floor. Scotty looked around. His wide red smile made his beard fan out like a peacock's tail. His small eyes glittered with triumph as he stared down at the American. His voice was softer than Scotty had ever heard it.

"I'm going to tell you something, Mr. Godmaker. You are a fool as well as a traitor. Do you really believe in the authenticity of the movies they showed you?"

Scotty's heart seemed to pause in its beating. Then it pounded violently. He became helpless before the giant's calm words.

*"I saw,"* he gasped. *"My own—"*

"There is a small cottage in the Ukraine," Porshkin said. "They tell me that it looks just like yours. It even has a Teddy bear on the pillow in the bedroom. After your capture, one of our American agents stole into your home with a camera. And do you know, comrade—he liked your little nest so well that he decided to build one for himself, just like it, right here in Mother Russia."

"Actors!" Scotty gasped in horror.

"Ah, yes!" Porshkin breathed with a kindly smile. "If you should meet Maria Lakovna face to face, you would cry 'Nora, my love!', for our people's republics now contain more than half the population of the globe. Do you think, comrade, that among such a multitude of faces, we could not find ones to duplicate three or four stupid Americans? Bah! Your Hollywood capitalists manage to fool you when they have only a few million from which to find doubles. Do you see, comrade?"

Scotty saw only dimly through a murky fog of despair and hopelessness.

"Ah, yes, comrade!" Porshkin hissed. "You see! You see your little mechanical lady here. You see her sending a tiny missile across the American skies. You see a big beautiful mushroom over Cleveland. And you see the blackened body of a woman. You had a beautiful wife, comrade. I have seen Maria Lakovna."

When Scotty floated out of his stupor, Porshkin was gone. The vault was empty, save for the operator at the guided-missile unit, and the two guards who slumped lazily against the wall. They had not overheard Porshkin's tale.

Scotty's mind seemed a homogenous mass. No longer did the demon-conscience of his superego hurl accusations at him. For it had already crushed him. His will lay dead at its feet. He pleaded guilty, and surrendered all desire, save one: to destroy his destroyers.

He wandered out of the vault and found a telephone. "This is Scott MacDonney," he told the operator. "Connect me with Colonel Mischa Varnoff."

After a moment, the commissioner's voice barked, "Varnoff speaking!"

"I want to report a crime of sedition and slander against the people's State," Scotty said calmly.

"Someone has maliciously attempted to sway me away from the cause."

Varnoff's voice became tense with excitement. "Who, comrade? Tell me, and we'll dispose of him at once! It's highly commendable of you to report such things!"

"Porshkin," Scotty said. "Andrei Porshkin."

There was a long silence. Scotty heard Varnoff's heavy breathing. When he replied, his voice seemed weak.

"This is *incredible*, American! Porshkin is unshakably loyal. He has friends high in the Kremlin. You'll have to offer strong proof. What do you allege that he said to you?"

"He invented a story about my wife. It involves the State. Do you remember the documentary films which you showed me? The ones revealing certain unpleasant—"

"Yes! Yes! I remember," Varnoff barked. "Go on! What did Porshkin—"

"He said they had been faked. He tried to incite me to treason."

There was a long pause. Varnoff seemed to be struggling mentally. "And how did you react to this seditious slander?" he inquired cautiously.

"By calling *you*, of course! The story is obviously ridiculous: He seems to think I couldn't recognize my own family, my own home."

Varnoff exhaled heavily. "You are a good citizen, comrade. Some day you'll be admitted to the party. I think we can handle this case summarily, without any further proof. I'll check with the Kremlin. I advise you to stay away from Porshkin."

The "good citizen" knew why Varnoff needed no more proof. Porshkin had revealed the truth, and that was proof enough. Scotty returned to the vault. The Bear was wandering about as if he owned the place, now. He wore a triumphant mask.

In a short time, two armed guards appeared. They carried sub-machine guns at the ready as they approached the bearded Russian. "Come quietly, and do not speak," one of them told him. "You're under arrest."

Porshkin glared at them without comprehension for a moment. Then slowly he turned toward Scotty. His eyes narrowed to glittering slits. Purple lines began distending on his forehead.

"I'll kill you!" he roared. "*I'll kill you!*"

He plunged toward Scotty, a juggernaut of iron-hard flesh. The vault was suddenly full of deafening tommy-gun bursts. The behemoth fell at Scotty's feet, his skull shattered by the blasts.

Scotty watched for a moment while they dragged him away. His head was a wet mop that left a crimson trail across the concrete floor. One of the many destroyers had been destroyed. Millions remained.

But he felt no satisfaction as he sat at the keyboard. He was no longer capable of feeling gratification. His thirst was that of a sieve, that of a bottomless pit.

Izzy was full of operational queries about the inconsistency between human law and what she was being forced to do with her remote missile-piloting mechanisms. He answered them all with a brief injunction.

"Postpone queries. They will be corrected."

Then he asked her some questions. "Can you cybernetically duplicate more than one human self-awareness transor? Can you duplicate the transor of a deceased person?"

"*Answer:* Yes, to both questions. *Related knowledge from T-memory inventory:* A transor is an equation, not a material quantity. It describes the necessary physical neuron-circuit conditions which determine individuality. The equation remains true, even though the individual be dead. *Additional knowledge:* I have enough circuits to duplicate six consciousness patterns."

Scotty drank in the significance of her words. She was saying in effect that the human soul was as immortal as the mathematical equation that determined its shape. But there seemed to be a slight peculiarity in Izzy's behavior. Where was her emotionless mind securing motivation to make the uncalled-for observations.

Her keyboard began operating again. "*Operating note:* To duplicate consciousness of deceased, it

will be necessary for you to furnish anthropometric and psychic characteristics of the individual. These characteristics will not determine transor, but will only give its general form. Knowing its form, will enable me to sweep my circuit patterns through its mathematical region until the proper transor is reached. At that point, the consciousness will appear among the circuits."

Scotty felt some of the numb ice melt from his soul. "Duplicate Nora MacDonney," he commanded. Then he gave her a personality description of his wife, and it became a glowing picture of tenderness once felt but trampled under the boots of hate. He made it a work of art, painted with the brush of the heart, tinted with Nora's gentleness, and wistfulness and inner intensity. And he made a crown of ash blond hair for the pale spirit of his thoughts.

He switched to "answer."

"*Related human response:*" Izzy replied. "I'm no longer your 'best girl.' Good-by, Scotty." Then she set to work.

His eyes stung. He left her, and went out into the corridor for a smoke. She was destroying her own individuality by sending herself on the search for Nora's soul. She was moving aside for another.

When he returned, Izzy was silent. But there was a note on the roller.

"Scotty-Mack, are you there? Are you there, darling?"

The nickname! It meant—Nora!

He sat quietly, regaining his composure, forcing himself to remember the task at hand.

"Postpone felicitations," he told the machine. "Urgent work ahead. *Operating order:* duplicate my own transor."

Scotty waited nervously while the instrument needles began wandering about across their scales. The machine was humming softly as its circuits searched slowly through the hypothetical universes defined by the strange things called transors. It was searching for his soul.

He felt the nagging fingers of anxiety. He walked away from the machine and paced the length of the vault. What would happen? He had forgotten to ask for information about the qualitative effect on his own material mind and body. He had forgotten that Izzard was really only a machine, that she might not be motivated to warn him of serious consequences. He realized suddenly that he had been thinking by analogy. He had considered the process as one of simply creating an identical twin for himself.

But identical *twins* weren't really identical!

He tried to summon up a mental image of what was happening. He could visualize a vector, because it existed in three dimensions. He could imagine a tensor, because it existed in four, five, six, or any real number of dimensions. He could imagine it by giving a vector another component in a fourth dimension. But a transor? According to Izzy's definition, it had components in a complex number of dimensions.

If he told a man to go one mile south, then one mile west, then one mile straight up, than one year back in time, and finally, one unit into a fifth dimension — he would have given the man a set of directions which were the word-equivalent of a five-component tensor. But if, instead of *five* directions, he had given the man—three, plus, the square-root-of-minus-one times four, directions—it would be a transor, according to Izzy.

Keeping the geometric analogy—Izzy was then letting each "distance" be, not a mile, but a variable quantity, and changing the length of each one of them until they, hit-or-miss, coincided with his own components. The directional example was, of course, only a limited way of trying to conceive it.

Then he suddenly understood the whole thing, in terms of pure mathematics. It was strange that he hadn't done so before! But his attention was attracted to something else.

It was attracted to a group of seventy-nine missiles with atomic war heads. They were moving west across the Atlantic. He knew by checking his new sensory receptors that they were meant for Chicago.

He glanced down at his body. It was unchanged. He glanced toward the rest of him—the part which was steel and glass and wire and . . . something else.

Nora!

He saw her with his cybernetics unit. She was a large number of synaptic relays and connecting neural conductors strung throughout the entire analyzer.

"Hi, baby!"

"Scotty, darling!"

The perception of a kiss passed through the interconnecting network of circuits, and the proper sensations accompanied it, for the transor-duplication was complete, even to the sensory neurons of the affective nervous systems. He realized quickly that all effector mechanisms, the analyzer's muscles, were common to both of them.

He thought a rather passionate mathematical expression at her.

"Not in front of the children!" her circuits hissed.

Startled, he scanned the entire chain of networks. They were there, all right. Cathy, and Bob—and what was left of Izzy! She was still her basic self, but cramped. And there was someone else—but he couldn't quite make out *who*.

For several microseconds, the analyzer was a jumble of mingled sensations — children squealing, heads being patted, bear hugs, and moist kisses. Nora had brought in the children after Izzy had found her. They, too, had been victims of a raid.

"The missile-control unit, Scotty," Nora reminded him. "I haven't changed anything yet."

He saw that the rocket-driven projectiles were winging across the American coastline. He checked their fuel. There was enough to take them past the Pacific coast.

"Give me complete control of all effector mechanisms," he told the others. "You just sit and watch."

They agreed—all of them except the extra one. It said nothing. He realized that it was preventing his perception of itself: He could "see" the others clearly, but the sixth being was screening itself off from him.

Then, as if it sensed his thoughts, it said, "You are free to use the effectors as you choose." The tone was imperial, as if the being were allowing him freedom—out of its own graciousness.

Scotty noticed that the being was controlling the T-memory units from which Izzy had derived her information about transors. It was also controlling, and *blocking off*, two T-memory units where—he paused to check the indexer—where information about the isolated pole and about the power losses was stored.

It puzzled him, but he decided not to molest the sixth mind unless it interfered.

Scotty—the flesh-and-blood Scotty —glanced around the vault. He had scarcely moved since his conscious had merged with its image in the analyzer. Neither the two guards nor the missile-unit operator were paying any attention to him. Nothing had happened—which was visible to them.

Scotty knew that his connection to the machine would not be affected by distance. He saw that *something* would affect the connection, but the something was hidden in the two blocked memory tubes.

He left the vault and walked along the corridor toward the elevators. A guard halted him.

"I have orders that you are not to leave the vault!" the man snapped.

"Why?" Scotty asked with a frown. His movements had never before been hindered.

"I don't ask questions," replied the burly guard.

There was a telephone in the corridor. Scotty went to it and dialed Varnoff. The commissioner seemed pleased to hear from him. He thought sardonically that since his expose of Porshkin that he had "pull" in high circles.

"Are these vault guards your boys?" Scotty asked.

Varnoff admitted hesitantly that they were. "Why do you ask?" he added.

"Where did they get their orders to keep me downstairs?"

"Uh, well, I gave it, comrade. Don't ask me why. I can't tell you. But it's nothing personal. All the present occupants are temporarily confined. And, by the way—"

"Yes?"



"Somebody from General Staff will call you in a few minutes, but I'll forewarn you. You're to prepare the analyzer for a problem in complete, overall strategy. Not a sample problem, I might add, but a mass demonstration of full-scale battle operations."

That could only mean one of two things, Scotty thought. The invasion, or a demonstration before the highest pair of eyes in the people's State.

"The analyzer won't be equipped to handle a full-scale invasion for several days yet," he lied.

"Oh, that's all right. Something in the Alaskan theater will do. And a big aerial display. Every available rocket and remote aircraft."

"Big visitors, eh?" Scotty asked.

The colonel's silence was complete, and it promised to continue.

"O.K.," Scotty said, "but I have to get out of here for an hour or so to check the transmitters for the missile control. They're outside the city, you know."

"Sorry, comrade."

"You wouldn't want anything to go wrong with the demonstration, would you?"

"*That* would be *your* neck!" Varnoff snapped.

"O.K., and I'd tell them you kept me confined."

Varnoff paused. "And that would be *my* neck," he admitted agreeably. "All right, comrade. I'll send a staff car for you, and a guard to get you back in time. But you're to wait until General Staff calls."

"Agreed !"

Scotty left the telephone, started back along the corridor, then paused. The seventy-nine missiles were approaching Chicago. The operator at the unit was slowly turning the dial that started their descent.

That was why he had wanted to leave the vault immediately. When he blocked off the control circuits and sent the missiles on toward the Pacific, the operator would think the unit had gone haywire and come running to find him. Scotty didn't want to be found.

But *now* if he blocked off the circuits, the operator would not only find him, but General Staff would get word that something was wrong with the analyzer. They would call off the demonstration, demand an explanation, and send a whole throng of party scientists to peer over his shoulder while he worked on it.

As it in reply to his thoughts, the being-who-crouched-in-the-corner released a memory from one of the blocked units. It also released one of the circuits that it had screened. But it carefully preserved the cloak of secrecy about itself and the rest of the memories in two units.

Scotty saw suddenly where the surplus energy was going. The forty-four kilowatts of original overload, plus the proportional overload on the newer units, were storing energy in an ever-expanding magnetic field *beyond* the isolated pole. And the *beyond* was not within the bounds of the space-time continuum in which Scotty had always lived and moved. This revelation seemed supported by the observations he and Porshkin had made with the compass.

The missiles were getting too close for comfort. He needed to act quickly.

He nosed them upward slightly, then felt the operator twist the controls back, correcting the course. He couldn't do it that way. With the cybernetics unit, he began making circuit alterations.

After a brief instant, it was done. The whole setup was changed. The radio signals which came in from the missiles were routed through the interpretive circuits as usual, but then they went to the semantics unit, which was the real center of Scotty's mind image, instead of going to the operator's instruments. Scotty took direct control of all indicators, and began feeding them fictitious position and course reports.

But to keep the circuit-instruments from showing a change in the analyzer's internal operating conditions, he needed to transfer energy from one circuit to another without passing it through the meters. The isolated pole point provided the outlet, and the means for doing it.

Then he told the operator, through the course indicators, that the missiles had gone into a sharp dive, apparently sending them down short of the target. He felt the operator's sharp twist on the altitude control.

Then the incoming signals from the missiles said that they were pulling up out of their shallow dive.

When they were flying straight and level again, he indicated to the operator that they were on-target. The operator neutralized the controls.

Scotty calculated the time of impact, then registered an explosion signal at the proper instant. The operator immediately cut off the panel switch, not suspecting that by his own hand he had sent the rockets winging on harmlessly toward the Pacific.

In a moment, the operator appeared in the corridor. Scotty shook himself out of his semitrance and walked on to the vault. He gave the man a friendly nod in passing.

"Just a moment, comrade!"

Scotty turned and glanced at him questioningly. The operator looked puzzled.

"Something's wrong with the unit," he said. "The Chicago missiles were set to explode *over* the target. They exploded on impact, apparently."

Scotty hadn't known about that. Bomb fusing wasn't his business. "The unit's all right!" he snapped. "It brought them in, didn't it?"

"How do you know, comrade? You haven't checked it yet." The operator turned on his heel and strode away. He stopped at the telephone.

Scotty went back to the vault to wait for Varnoff's man and the call from General Staff. The analyzer and its designer were soon going to be in hot water. The operator was calling in a successful report, qualified by his vague suspicions. Then the strategic command would wait impatiently for the seismograph units in Alaska and the Pacific to call in a report of the explosion. In less than an hour they would get one—but not from Chicago's area. It would be practically in the laps of the seismo units.

Somebody would want to know some fast reasons.

Footsteps echoed in the corridor. It was a short stocky general, with a round, leather face, and quick suspicious eyes. He approached Scotty briskly, slapping a riding crop against his leg. The guards snapped to attention.

"General Barlov," he barked. "From Staff. You MacDonney?"

Scotty nodded respectfully. Barlov was definitely the no-nonsense type.

"Varnoff told me you wanted out. I countermanded the order."

Scotty groaned inwardly. He must not be available when the analyzer started doing unprecedented things, seemingly of its own accord.

"Why, sir?" he asked in a wounded tone.

"You said the transmitters need adjusting. It's obvious that they don't. The Chicago mission was successful. Can you think of a better lie, American?"

Scotty shrugged. "Does the general judge a soldier's physical condition by his marksmanship?"

Barlov purpled. "I can judge your life span by the direction of your remarks," he said ominously. "Get this ! If anything goes wrong during that demonstration, it'll be called sabotage. Varnoff recorded your telephone call. You said the analyzer wasn't ready for an invasion problem. I've got a report on my desk that says it *is* ready. Apparently you're not anxious for it to start. So you see who we'll hang if the demonstration bombs don't reach their targets."

Scotty saw. And he saw who would catch it as soon as the Chicago mission reports came in.

Barlov handed him a brief case. "Here's mission information," he said. "All you're to do is look at it. If you see anything wrong, say so. Do it now. You're not to touch the machine after operations start. Our men will handle that."

Scotty opened the brief case. It contained settings for the analyzer circuits, tapes for the strategy units, and complete data for an offensive operation in the Alaskan theater as well as details of a massive air- assault against targets along the Pacific coast. The analyzer would have to shout blow-by-blow tactical instructions to Alaskan ground forces as well as direct the air armada.

He risked a quick calculation with his math and cybernetics units. Somebody was going to have *to move over*. When the operators set up the analyzer, there wouldn't be enough circuits to hold the six awareness-patterns.

"I'll go," Nora thought to him.

"No!" he muttered aloud, and the general glanced at him sharply.

Then Scotty felt new circuits being released. But it wasn't Nora. It was the thing who hid itself. It was taking its consciousness out of the analyzer. What was it? Then it was gone, and the two blocked units were released. But there was no time to scan them now. And the general was looking around suspiciously at the units.

"Who's using this thing?" asked. "It's making noises."

"It's got a problem in it," Scotty told him.

"He lies, sir!" called a voice from across the vault. "He hasn't been at the controls since the Chicago mission."

"Well?" Barlov grunted.

Scotty glared at the operator. He was a thin, pale-faced fanatic, obviously bucking for the general's favor.

"Do you know how long it takes to run through a problem in say, cybernetics, lieutenant?" Scotty asked.

The operator shook his head.

"Then keep your mouth shut." He turned to Barlov. "The analyzer keeps tabs on its own circuits," he explained.

The general was still glancing around suspiciously. His suspicion would give Scotty a way to safely scan the new memory tubes.

"I'll show you," he said, and glanced at his watch. "In about thirty seconds, the machine's due to run a test. You'll hear it scanning through its memory."

The operator snickered. Scotty started scanning after twenty seconds. "My watch is a little off," he explained with mock embarrassment.

In a few moments he had scanned the contents and plugged the units into continuous contact with the analyzer's circuits. But the nature of the new knowledge came as such a sudden shock that he reeled dizzily. And he felt the percept of a gasp from Nora.

The being-who-crouched-in the corner had erased much of the contents before it was evacuated. But Scotty knew where it had gone. It had passed beyond the isolated pole—from whence it came. And it was very clear that Scotty could go there too, when it was time.

The general was shaking his arm. "Snap out of it! What's wrong, Yankee?"

Scotty came out of it slowly, and murmured that he was all right. Then he returned his attention to the demonstration material. Barlov seemed to be watching him closely.

He found a flaw, too obvious a flaw, too easily found. It looked like a plant. "If the Missiles use this signaling interval," he murmured, "they'll very likely miss the entire target area."

Barlov looked disappointed. Scotty didn't need the psychology unit to figure it out. The general wanted him to see the error, then let it pass by. That would make a very good treason case, and the people's State would have an excuse to dispose of a no longer useful alien. Barlov didn't even ask for the correct signaling interval. He took back the brief case, nodded, and chained it to his wrist.

"In a few minutes," he said, "the operators will come. Stay away from the controls, but don't leave. The show starts in two hours." He moved away.

Two hours—it was too long. They would find out about the Chicago mission before then. But if the operators were coming in a few minutes, then the rocket missiles must be all set up for take-off. Their self-contained radio-control equipment would have to be sending out signals for the operators to check.

He swept through the control frequencies—and counted two hundred and fifty projectiles. They were ready for blast-off from launching points in eastern Siberia. He was tempted to send them immediately skyward. But he had another task.

He went to the place of the isolated pole. The memory unit said that the point could be distorted, ironed out into a limited plane. He circuited the memory into the cybernetics and math units and searched for an answer.

The operators were drifting into the room by the time he had worked it out. Soon they would begin tampering with the controls. He began rearranging circuits according to the equation he had derived.

Nothing visible happened, but his other senses told him that a great deal had happened. He stretched out his hand toward the circular wall opening. It met something smooth. He pushed at it. The substance yielded, but bounced back. It seemed to be a tight, completely transparent, elastic membrane, stretched across the ten-foot opening. He went around to the next vault and examined it from the opposite side. It seemed the same; but he knew that it was not. For the being had left a circuit connected to a related memory in a quotations unit.

The quotation said, "The road back home never leads to where it started from."

Also, the equation he had derived for warping the pole point out into a plane had a region of discontinuity in it.

He took a pencil and pressed its point against the membrane, harder, and slowly harder. Suddenly it punctured through, snatched itself from his hand, and was gone. But it hadn't fallen in the next vault. It had vanished.

He went to the other side and tried it in reverse with a scrap of wire. It popped through the screen. With the same sort of jerk. What was the difference?

He felt an operator touch a control. He immediately choked off the circuit's input with a biasing voltage that blocked the first stage past cutoff. He heard the operator gasp, then the murmur of voices as other clustered about him.

Then a clinking sound at his feet made him look down. There lay the scrap of wire! It meant that something that went through the screen from the panel-vault side either must come back, could come back, or—was sent back by the being who had crouched in the corner.

Why could light pass through the opening without skittering off into wherever the wire had gone? He submitted the question to the mechanical lobes of his collective brain. They replied that passage through the screen, involved a dimensional deflection. And the velocity of light was the unattainable limit for the deflection process.

Two operators were coming toward him. He pretended not to see them and returned to the adjoining vault.

"Comrade MacDonney!" one of them called.

"Just a minute," he snapped, as he passed through the doorway. "But, something's wrong with the controls!"

"Well—come on in here!" He moved toward a rack of blank memory units. They drew up behind him and he saw that one of them was the pale fanatic who had challenged him before Barlov.

"One of the controls is—"

"I know it!" he barked. "I'm working on it. Here—you—keep this, unit tilted for me slightly, like this. And *you*, hold this one."

The operators obeyed reluctantly, Scotty searched through his pockets. "Forgot my test prods," he muttered. He went back to the main vault, then pressed the switch that slid a thick steel hatch over the doorway.

He heard a muffled cry from behind it. Evidently sound waves couldn't pass through the membrane and remain in space time. One of the operators was pounding on the hatch, but the thick steel deadened the sound. Scotty walked to the circular opening. One of the men approached it from the other side, saw the American, shouted inaudibly, then lunged toward him. He struck the invisible screen, then broke through. Or, rather, the screen seemed to catch him and slip him sideways out of existence.

The man at the hatch had seen his comrade disappear through the opening. He, too, bounded toward it. And then there were none.

But three others were crossing the floor of the main vault. They walked fast and stared angrily. A guard followed with tommy gun half unslung from his shoulder.

"Why did you lock Litkin and Frei in the vault?" one of them snarled. "Open the hatch!"

Scotty gave them a scornful glance, opened the steel door, and stepped through it. They were close on his heels.

"You don't see them, do you?" he asked.

The men began moving among the aisles between the memory units. "I *saw* Litkin through that hole in the wall," one of them called to another. "Then it looked like a lifting hook caught him and jerked him out of sight." They turned to stare at the wall above the opening.

*The reliability of eye-witnesses*, Scotty chuckled to himself. The man saw, something he couldn't understand, so he invented an understandable phenomenon—and believed it.

The guard remained by the door with his weapon at port-arms. Scotty couldn't chance slamming the hatch again. He turned his total mind again toward the nature of the membrane, and calculated the power required to stretch it out still further. The concrete partition was a straight wall that ran a hundred yards north and became one side of the corridor. The only other doorways were to the elevator shafts. No one dared enter the elevators from the corridor because of the Staff order against leaving the vaults.

Scotty turned his mind to the task of spreading out the screen. It necessitated cutting off several of the effector units to keep from overloading the main breakers. But when it was accomplished, the membrane had become a thickless disk that sliced down through the partition and blocked all doorways. He was going to cut on the analyzer's alarm system, and if guards came *down* the elevator shafts, they would pass through the screen in the direction of no return.

The analyzer told him that it was theoretically possible to return from that direction—but it was very clear that the two operators hadn't done so.

The men had finished their search. They returned with baffled expressions.

"Where are they, Yankee?" one of them snapped. He seized Scotty's shirt-front and shook him roughly.

Scotty closed his eyes and concentrated.

An alarm bell thundered from just above the doorway. Red filters slid over the ceiling fixtures, bathing the vault in bloody light. The man released him.

"Sabotage warning!" someone bellowed.

They plunged toward the doorway. And met the elastic plane. And fell through. Scotty caught at the guard's weapon as he slipped into the invisible. The tip of the barrel was already in the screen, and the gun twisted in his hands. He put both feet against either side of the door and tugged furiously. It came free with a snap. Scotty groaned and tested a bruised hip for possible fracture. Then he noticed the tip of the barrel. It glowed with a dull red heat. The reason for the men's failure to return became clear. Weather beyond the west side of the war was rather torrid.

The two men who remained in the main vault came into view beyond the doorway. They were shouting at one another excitedly and peered behind panels for the cause of the alarm. Then they ran toward Scott, saw the machine gun, and stopped. One of them—the other guard—raised his weapon. Scotty started to throw himself aside, then paused, remembering the screen. He grinned arrogantly and swung the tommy gun toward them, but did not fire. The guard shouted something inaudible, then unleashed a bright soundless burst of explosions. The membrane seemed to shiver slightly, but Scotty felt nothing. The guard hesitated, then emptied his cartridge-drum at the American who had obviously stolen his comrade's weapon. He dropped the tommy gun and stood in dazed amazement. The American was rising to his feet, still unharmed, still grinning. The two men bolted.

Scotty cut off the energy flow that kept the membrane stretched in the distended condition. Then he stepped into the main vault. The men were plunging toward the corridor. He cut them down with two quick bursts. He couldn't be bothered with prisoners.

The corridor guards returned his fire. Chipped concrete stung his face, and a slug tore through his thigh. He flung himself sideways as he fell, and crawled behind a panel. He heard the sound of their boots as they raced toward him. There was but one thing to do. He spread out the membrane again across the opening.

Then he dragged himself through it—in the direction that the wire had gone. It warped inward as he

pushed against it, then snapped back behind him. There was a sudden spinning sensation, as if he were riding on a gyrating top that had been kicked sideways.

Then he was rolling across hard surface. He sat up in cool darkness. He tried to let his eyes adjust, but there was a complete absence of light. He felt about him. Nothing but the hard surface. It was rough and flat, like the worn rock of a creek bed. And it was damp, sticky-damp. His own blood.

He took off his belt and made a tourniquet for his leg. The bullet had torn the quadricep muscles, but he could still hobble on the leg.

A faint glow of light appeared then disappeared. He watched its source. After a moment it recurred. It had the shape of a human palm. Then there were two of them.

Slowly he realized what was happening. The guards hadn't seen him go through the opening. They were searching about cautiously through the vaults, wary lest he fire from ambush. One of them had undoubtedly stolen toward the opening, hazarded a glance through it, then started to slip quietly through—and discovered the screen. Now he was examining it with his hands.

The analyzer had become such an integral part of Scotty's mind that it required several moments for him to sense that he was still thinking with it. Evidently it didn't matter where he was, nor in what universe, as long as the twin consciousnesses remained identical. The transor was a mathematical expression, and if  $X$  equaled  $X$ , the expression was an identity, and the  $X$ 's were one and the same. The location of the material quantities they described wouldn't matter.

This train of logic required only a fraction of a second, but he saw that the guard was pressing harder against the membrane. The luminous hand glowed more brightly. In a moment he would be through it.

Scotty let it collapse quickly into a point, then spread it out again. The hand had disappeared. The guard had fallen through the opening into the next vault. And if he tried to go back through it in the opposite direction, he would find himself in a warmer climate. Scotty let the membrane keep distending until it once more covered the door to the elevator shaft.

Somewhere in the surrounding blackness, he knew that the being-who-had-crouched in the corner was lurking, perhaps watching him. But he couldn't go back to the vault until its other occupants had been disposed of. He had counted four corridor guards, racing toward him. Three of them were still prowling about among the panels. If they tried to pass the membrane, he could shrink it and dump them into the memory vault from which they could escape only into the place of no return. But until then, he had to remain in the world of-the unknown being.

He cursed himself for not providing Izzard with photoelectric eyes so that the analyzer could see inside the vault. He remembered Izzy's operating query—"Is it advantageous for all organisms to have eyes?" He'd imagined — anthropomorphically — that it had been the wistful expression of a desire. Now he knew that had come from her sixth occupant, who had probably been hiding there all along, providing her with the advanced mathematical concepts.

Scotty had the uneasy feeling that he wasn't altogether the guiding mind behind all that had happened since Izzy had first come alive. But there wasn't any way to check the theory: the being had erased many memories before it departed. It seemed to be using him indirectly, leaving him only such hints as lit absolutely needed to accomplish task.

He turned his attention suddenly to the robot missiles which were ready for launching at the Siberian blast-off site. One of them had suddenly stopped sending in the pulses. Somebody had cut it off! The General Staff had undoubtedly radiogramed the station that something was wrong with the analyzer.

Scotty began concentrating on the missile-guiding unit. He sent a wave of blast-off pulses, then waited for the reply that the rockets were airborne. Two hundred and forty-eight signals came back with course, altitude, speed, and angle of climb. Another signal reported rocket-failure. The missile was still grounded. He gave it a selective fusing order, then detonated it. Another of his circuits immediately picked up its explosive pulse.

That took care of the launching site. The communications equipment would probably be close enough to the flight-line to be destroyed. If personnel were still alive on the base, they wouldn't be able to report what had happened. Seismograph units and neighboring towns would report the explosion, but until

someone went out to look at the site, they would probably blame it on an American raid.

He then deployed the missiles and put them into a one hundred and eighty degree turn. When they completed it, he set them to home on his own signal and brought them down to skim along, at a few feet above the ground, so that radar locating equipment couldn't spot them. He circuited the missile-unit out of his conscious mind and left it to its own devices. It became like the breathing of his lungs, normally unconscious, but quickly switching to the conscious level in the event of trouble.

Suddenly, from out of the darkness overhead, a scream rang out. Then a body thudded on the rock surface. He started in surprise, then remembered that the membrane also would be covering the elevator entrances on two higher levels. Someone had entered the shaft from above, and fallen sixty feet down on Scotty's side of the screen.

A faint groan came to his ears. It seemed far away. The body would have fallen about a hundred yards from his own location. He struck a match and peered through the gloom, but the dim flicker illuminated only a small area of the rough rock surface. Whoever the man was, he was an enemy, and Scotty decided not to approach him. He would hardly walk away from a sixty-foot fall.

The match flickered out, but it had lasted long enough to show him evidence of life. There were patches of gray-green moss on the rock, and a wandering tendril of creeping vine. But no animal sounds had pierced the stillness.

He stood up painfully. The leg had gone numb. He loosened the tourniquet slightly, but the bleeding began again. He tightened the belt and hopped toward the place where the luminous hands had appeared.

Since they had appeared but once, he reasoned that the remaining guards had seen what happened to their comrade when he tampered with the membrane. Scotty tried to size up the resistance he would meet when he stepped back through the screen.

First of all, the order to stay in the vaults would be countermanded by now. But he knew that no one had entered the elevators on the vault level, because they would have been hurled into the dark world wherein he had his present being. And he had heard no one except the falling body. The falling body told him that one of the elevators had been on the higher level. The fact that no one had entered his universe on the vault level told him that *both* lifts were on a higher level. And they must be staying there.

Why?

Because when a passenger had disappeared, the operator would have leaped through the wrong side of the membrane. And both elevators must be at the top level because a large party of men was trying to enter the vaults.

Scotty decided to have a look at the body before he went back. He touched the membrane and began making his way along it, striking matches at regular intervals. At last he saw the motionless figure—and went to bend over it.

The man was Varnoff. His back was broken, but his lids were parted, and his eyes glittered in the match light.

"Ah," he whispered, "Comrade MacDonney, I . . . never had . . . chance to . . . thank you. We found . . . Porshkin was real . . . leader of underground."

Scotty gasped. "You're lying, Varnoff!" he barked.

"No, I—" Varnoff hesitated. He seemed suddenly to understand that something was wrong. He began moving his arms weakly and trying to turn his head. "The marshal ... where is . . . is . . . is he all right? Didn't fall—"

Suddenly the commissioner's head lolled sideways, and he sagged limply. Scotty left him for dead or unconscious, and went back to the screen. He made his way weakly toward its center.

Porshkin the leader of the underground! Scotty had destroyed him. The knowledge made his misery complete. He had betrayed his country. He had been responsible for the success of the terrible bombings. He had built the machine that killed his wife and children. And even though he had restored them, they were but fleshless circuits in a perishable machine.

He felt Nora's protesting thoughts—and for a moment he confused them with her physical voice. He

seemed to hear her with his ears as well as his mind, but of course, he had become accustomed to the analyzer's extra senses. And her thought lasted only an instant. It had been choked off.

He traced circuits to find out why. And he discovered that the sixth being had returned, as if to clap a hand over her mouth. Scotty felt a twinge of anger. The being seemed able to come and go at will—without the necessity of transor-searching.

The being replied to his anger by circuiting a memory at him—a very recent memory. Varnoff's last words. About—the *marshal!*

Scotty got the hint at last. "The marshal" could mean only one person—and Varnoff had been worried about his falling. Falling as Varnoff had done, and from the same place. Evidently the premier and other officials had already been assembled on one of the upper levels when the trouble began. The membrane had blocked them off, and prevented their descending to the vault and their returning to the surface. They were sealed in on the second or third levels. Varnoff, having the lowest rank, had been invited to stick his neck through the screen.

Scotty had found the center of the screen again. He started to step through—then remembered that a guard might be covering it. So he set off the alarm to distract attention, then leaped.

The top spun and was kicked aside. Scotty found himself rolling across concrete floor under blinding lights. He crashed to a stop against a panel, and expected to feel slugs tearing his flesh.

But the vault was empty. He sat up; blinking. What had happened to them? If they had passed the barrier in his direction, he would surely have heard them in the darkness.

The sixth being allowed a thought to pass to him: "The gate is the doorway to your own transor region. It matters not how you enter. Yours led to darkness."

"Then the guards went through to no-return?"

But the being would not answer. Scotty sat puzzling over it for a moment. His own led to darkness. It did indeed—to the darkness of shame and doubt and remorse.

"Don't, Scotty," Nora thought. "You can make the sun rise—" Suddenly she was cut off.

Then with horror he realized that her transor pattern was being taken out of the analyzer—by the sixth being. Scotty's mind leaped into action. He fought against the process with every circuit at his disposal. His physical body broke into an icy sweat as he wrestled with the thing. But it beat him down, walled him off, and left him clinging only to the basic circuits necessary to the form of his transor. Then the being's words thundered through the analyzer.

"Fool! Do you think their patterns are destroyed because the mold is shattered?"

Scotty slumped slightly. They were all gone, Nora, the children, Izzy. Sure, they could be set up again, if the thing who was now in command allowed it.

"Why did you do it?" he asked.

But the being had fallen silent again behind the shroud. It had released the units again to Scotty.

The missile unit was nagging at him. He circuiting it into unconsciousness. There were now only one hundred and eighty units in his control. The other sixty-eight were off course. He could "hear" their reports, but somehow his commands were not reaching them.

Then he felt a crude, shapeless spurt of charge in his control circuits. It was as if someone had touched a screwdriver across a pair of bare wires. He tested the remote leads to the transmitter station.

Someone had cut into the cables that led out of the city! Someone had set up a makeshift keying arrangement. Scotty knew that they could never take orderly control of the rockets, but they could easily bump them off course. He paused to analyze the situation.

The bundle of cables that ran to the station was a massive tangle of several hundred wires. Whoever was tampering with it had thus far succeeded in isolating only one unit. He must act before they found the others.

First, he increased the velocity of the remaining robots. They were about twenty minutes from the city. Then he readjusted their courses so that they would strike their target without further external control. Having done this, he cut off the transmitters, swept them off frequency, and changed the signaling interval. By the time the tamperers figured it out and made readjustments at the station, it would be too late.



A signal bell jangled from across the vault. It was the direct phone to the transmitter station. Scotty smiled grimly as he went to answer it.

It was Barlov. "What kind of deals do you want, MacDonney?" he snapped.

"No deal, Shorty!"

"Listen, man!" Barlov fumed. "You can't blow a cityful of civilians off the map! It wouldn't change anything anyway!"

"Except that the central government would be gone, and the people would revolt. You know your chiefs of state are trapped down here, don't you?"

"I've contacted them by telephone, yes! But that doesn't matter. They're just as expendable as anyone else."

"O.K., then we'll expend them. You too. Start running, Barlov. If you can move about thirty miles in the next ten minutes, you might get away from the blast area. The way they're coming now, the bomb pattern will extend out to about forty miles from the center of the city—one bomb about five or six miles from the next one, over the whole area. Lord knows where those you bumped off-course will go! Not far, though. Maybe you'll meet them."

Barlov wavered. "What is it you want, MacDonney?" he asked.

"Give me back that transmitter! Then I'll hold off the bombs until your men make some circuit corrections for me. After that, we'll discuss it again. If you co-operate, no one will be killed."

"What circuit corrections?"

"Give me the transmitter first!" There was a long pause. Then Scotty felt the jumpers being pulled from his control circuits. He took a moment to regain control of the fleet, then set them in a circle about the city.

"That's fine, Shorty," he said. "Now make the following connections at the terminal panel: point A-10 to point J-17, point R-42 to—" Scotty read off a list of several connections and disconnections.

"What'll that do?" Barlov grunted.

"Stop asking questions! I'm getting impatient. When those missiles start running low on fuel, I'll bring them-in!"

"O.K., hold it!"

There was a short pause. Then Scotty felt his instructions being carried out. Immediately he brought the robots in closer to the city, unfused them temporarily, cut the jets, spun them in tail first, then fired the jets again. The circuits wailed off a fast and erratic deceleration. It was by no means a landing, but only a limited crash.

The vault trembled as if from an earthquake. Scotty cursed. Several of the missiles had exploded accidentally. Barlov was shrieking gibberish into the telephone.

Scotty felt the membrane pulsing. Evidently the occupants of the upper level were leaping through it in their hysteria.

He shouted Barlov down, then said, "Those explosions weren't intentional, but it's a good demonstration. There's over two hundred of them left, scattered over the city. Now I'll explain the circuit changes you made for me." Scotty refused the remaining bombs as he spoke. "The whole business is now set to detonate if the transmitters stop sending out the signals, or if anybody tampers with the bombs."

Barlov began cursing him softly.

"I trust you'll provide me with a good maintenance crew," Scotty continued, "to see that the station is kept shipshape. And you better bring in all available troops to keep people away from the missiles."

"And don't try to evacuate the city," he added, "or I'll touch it off."

He hung up, then turned his attention to the semantics circuits. The sixth being had been doing something to the unit while his thoughts were diverted.

"Hello, Mr. Godmaker," said a sneering "voice."

"*Porshkin!*"

"So, the traitor has turned patriot again, eh? I, Porshkin, the materialist did predict it."

The percept of bellowing laughter came from the bodyless bear. Scotty stood stricken.

"You are stupid!" Porshkin roared. "I see you still are thinking that I am one of *them*! Look, fool! Look at my mind! And see why I wanted you to fail, and why the assassin knew where and when to find you! Look! I open myself to you!"

The Russian dropped his electrical cloak. But the sixth being stepped in to choke off some of the circuits between them. But Scotty saw enough, enough to believe what Varnoff had told him. Porshkin had indeed been the leader of the underground. He had hoped that the General Staff would count too strongly on Izzard's abilities, and that they would delay the invasion, and that Scotty's final failure would give the Americans time to prepare.

And he saw the depth and the intensity of Porshkin's mentality, his seething inner fires. The man was unchainable. He was no fanatic, either for the party or against it. He was simply the personification of individual freedom, the image of the thirst to shed all shackles. He could never be anything except an uncaged bear, an angry destroyer who tried to wreck whatever threatened human liberty—be it man or be it nation. Scotty felt suddenly humble and impotent before him.

Porshkin seemed to catch his sentiments. "Bah !" he snorted gruffly "You are a man of intellect, Mr. Godmaker. And because you are a specialist, you are a fool in many things. They fooled you so easily with the movies. You use all your mind to think with, and you have none of it left to guide your emotions with. Bah ! You are like a credulous, sulking child, with the brain of a genius."

Scotty stood up under the inquisition because he knew that he deserved it.

"Look toward your so-called membrane !" Porshkin snapped.

Scotty looked toward the opening. Suddenly something burst through it and came tumbling across the floor. It sat up.

It was Porshkin, the man.

He smiled the red smile in the black brush. "Where did you think all that energy was going to?" he snorted.

Scotty gasped.

"When you set a transor in the machine, you do something else on the other side," the bear explained. He stood up. "Now let's get to work and build ourselves some arms and legs, comrade." "Do *what*?"

"Arms," Porshkin roared, "with fists attached! You know! Tanks, planes, new weapons! You've got the whole crew of engineers and workers trapped in the city. We'll activate every robot device in the area, and put controls on the rest. The 'brain's' got to have muscles, boy ! We're in command of a city, but not a country. And after they get another provision government set up, we won't even have the city! We've got to work!"

"Listen," Scotty said thoughtfully. "If you can prove your identity to the American government, maybe there's an easier way."

"Yeah! The underground code. Varnoff never got his hands on it."

"All right," Scotty said. "Get on the radio. They won't believe *me*, but you can give them the situation." He gestured toward the strategy unit. "The operators left their tapes. They've got all the information about the whole war setup on them. Troop locations and concentrations, air strength, data and statistics on everything from the front lines back to the factories. Give them all the information, then run it through the strategy unit and send them a master plan. If they strike now, while we've got the country's brains paralyzed, it'll be like—"

"Like beating up a blind-man," Porshkin howled gleefully. "Let's go."

In a few hours, the thing was done. The statistics and the plan were in the hands of the American command. But the government's reply was curt and suspicious.

"They don't believe us, comrade," Porshkin said.

"Then tell them the business about the missiles. They can confirm it by checking their seismographic records of explosions. They can spot one at the launching site and several close to the city. If they check

that against their own flight records, they'll see we're telling the truth."

Porshkin set to the task, while Scotty turned his attention to the local broadcasting stations. The only way Barlov could hastily evacuate millions of people was by using news bulletins to inform the populace. But the stations were carrying on as usual. Lots of people would leave of their own accord, of course, because of the "dud" missiles lying about the city.

After a time, Porshkin threw up his hands. "I don't know, comrade," he said. "They checked the story, but they still don't say 'yes' or 'no.'"

They just keep on asking silly questions. They thought I was dead."

"What about your underground?" Scotty asked. "Have they got transmitters?"

The Bear nodded. "Yeah, they could—" He paused.

Scotty groaned. "They think you're dead too, though," he said dismally.

Porshkin laughed. "Hah! How they think I'm dead? Only way they knew me was by code. Da, Da! I can call Rizkin and have him contact American agents. They'll believe *him*." He began retuning one of the small local transmitters.

Then a light on one of the receivers began blinking. Scotty brought its output into consciousness. At first there was only the faint hiss of a carrier wave. Then a voice broke through. It was Barlov.

"All right," MacDonney," he said. "Detonate the bombs, if you want to. I'm in a transport plane a hundred and fifty miles south of the city. And with me, I've got every man who's of any importance to the people's state — except the ones you've trapped, of course. As I said, they're expendable. Even the marshal's only a symbol."

"And you'll be the new symbol, I suppose," Scotty replied, as he set tip circuits to take a fix on the aircraft.

"Certainly, certainly !" Barlov called.

Scotty led him on until he had a fix. Then he swept through all possible robot frequencies until he found a positioning pulse. At a base in the Ukraine, a ground crew was running a routine inspection on a guided missile. Its "climb angle" showed that it was on a launching rack. Scotty sent it a blast-off signal. Then he directed it toward the fix. In half an hour, its own radar found Barlov's plane. Scotty sent it to home on the ship, and fixed its detonator for an explosion at two thousand feet from the target. It would give Barlov a fraction of a second to suffer before he charred and melted.

Porshkin was finished. "Rizkin has contacted the agents," he said. "Now we wait and see."

They listened on the American tactical frequencies. They were becoming jammed with coded messages. Scotty "memorized" several minutes of the jumbled letter-groups. Then he put the math and semantics units to work. Soon the message was decoded.

". . . immediately. Task force nine-to be sent against point seven-eight-zero. Dispatch units 6-AX-7 toward Vladivostok area—"

It was part of the strategic plan.

Porshkin smiled slowly. "Without a government and without a high command, the Russians will wither." Then he laughed his roaring laugh and patted the panel of the machine. "Meet the new Czar, boy!" he bellowed.

"It's your baby, now, Porshkin," Scotty told him sadly. "When the Americans get here, I may be hung."

"Why? You didn't *start* the war. And most of the raids on your country were accomplished before the analyzer was set up. It was only operating for a couple of weeks. So half a dozen cities *were* destroyed. They'd have been bombed anyway. And it's a cheap price for winning the war."

Scotty shook his head. "It wasn't my business to *set* the price," he said. "No, Porshkin, I broke faith. Whether they call me a traitor or a patriot—it doesn't matter. I can judge myself; and I find myself guilty."

"*Silence, Man!*" roared the sixth being. "It is *I* who judge!"

A twisting force seemed to grip Scotty's mind. He slumped heavily to the floor. The very warp and woof of his existence seemed to be wrung between mighty hands. The being was doing something to his consciousness circuits—and to *him*!

Then he was suddenly somehow beyond the membrane. But it was no longer a place of darkness. A bright sun shone in the sky. The rock was a broad, flat ledge atop a mountain. Below him, a land of forests and lakes spread out toward the horizon. He groped back toward the screen in terror. Just as he spun back through it, he caught a glimpse of someone else on the rock—someone familiar, but not quite discernible in the distance.

Then he was rolling across the vault floor again. He looked around. Porshkin was bending over a body—Scotty's body. It had dried blood on its leg.

Scotty looked down at himself. There was no wound in his new leg. But he could see through it hazily.

A kind of impatient sigh seemed to come from the sixth being. Then Scotty found himself tumbling back toward the membrane again. When he bounced heavily on the rough rock of the mountain top, there was the after-sensation that he had been chucked through by the seat of his pants. He felt for the membrane, but the being had collapsed it. It was gone.

Still he felt the remnants of his circuits in the analyzer. And the being parted the shroud of secrecy slightly.

"You have restored yourself," said the voice. "You have lost one world, but gained another. And, my young friend of a young race, do not make the mistake of believing that yours is the first people of the total continuum to achieve understanding. The first to conceive and build mechanisms to extend the mind.

"And do not believe again that physical-material transit—limited in speed—is the sole road of exploration.

"You have a new world. The feeble energy sources of your machine could not supply energy for more than a single physical totality transor; Porshkin is more needed in the old world. You are more needed in this."

Then Scotty's consciousness circuits were scraped out of the machine like scales off a fish—leaving him but the brain and the body of a man.

He heard footsteps on the rock nearby, then a familiar voice. "Scotty-Mack!"

Her face was cool from the mountain breezes as he pressed it against his own, and the wind whipped her ashen hair about his cheeks as he kissed her. But smaller hands tugged at his legs.

"Hi, kids !"

After a while they went to the edge of the ledge and looked at the broad green panorama, empty of civilization.

"No people," he murmured. Then he saw her faint smirk. He got the point. The Being had also spoken to her—about increasing and multiplying.

THE END

*How can we possibly amount to much when our fathers were sold at auction a scant five thousand years ago?*

## **Let My People Go** **By Walter Miller, Jr**

THE SITUATION is ridiculous!" growled Wolek Parn, glaring fixedly at the scope which displayed the planet's surface as a mottled green pattern of pale luminescence. "Look at them. Just look!"

The others said nothing. Taut faces, with eyes locked to the screen. The planet lay seven thousand miles from their landing site on its moon, but the magnification pulled the surface toward them so that they watched it as if from an altitude of thirty miles. There were continents, oceans, islands, peninsulas. The land appeared splotted and spotted, as if by variations in flora between highland and lowland. All this

had been expected, predicted by Merrigull's calculations. A planet for colonization, and they had reached it after thirteen years of journeying across the blackness of interstellum. Now they were here, and the planet indeed was inhabitable.

Furthermore, it was already inhabited.

"There's another one!" Wolek Parn breathed as a checkerboard pattern of tiny squares drifted into view near the planet's misty limb. "Six, maybe seven miles square. That's no native village!"

He turned to peer at their faces by the glow-light from the scope. Morgun Sahl, biologist — a tall gaunt man with a saturnine face, he showed no emotion except for a flicker at the corner of his mouth that might have been indicative of bitterness or of grim amusement. A wiry shock of black hair dangled over his forehead. He was a Lincolnesque Machiavelli with a sour drawl.

Beside him stood Faron Qun, chemist, mineralogist — a shorter man with straw hair and a quiet scholarly face, small-featured, slightly pudgy, usually smiling. The smile was absent now. He looked like a small boy at a funeral, and the glow of the screen made his face seem abnormally pale. He held the launch pilot's arm, squeezed it spasmodically.

It was a soft arm, milk-white and scattered with tiny freckles, and it belonged to Alaia Dazille—a tall girl, not beautiful, but cool and pleasant, with red-brown hair, a narrow oval face, and hazel eyes that could shine with friendly amusement and suddenly switch to the cold glitter of sarcasm. Wolek Parn had met women that reminded him of gardenias and fine wine. Alaia Dazille, however, made him think of geraniums and buttermilk. She responded to his stare with a questioning flicker of her eyebrows. She was trying hard not to be frightened.

"Well, Alaia?"

She shook her head. "Don't ask *me* anything Skipper."

He glanced at the chemist. Faron Qun seemed to shudder. "No opinion. Ask our biologist."

"All right, Sahl," Parn growled. "We spent thirteen years getting here. Shall we spend another thirteen going back home?"

Morgun Sahl watched the slow drift of the checkerboard patterns on the scope. "I'm sure you mean that," he grunted sourly.

"Maybe I do. Why shouldn't I?"

The big man shrugged. "How old would you be, Parn, when we got back? Sixty?"

"Fifty-nine."

"You started in the prime of life. You get back approaching retirement age. Twenty-six years gone for nothing. And you don't get paid a nickel for your trouble." He smiled humorlessly and tapped the scope with his finger. "There's your pay, Skipper. Epsilon Eridani Two. You won't turn it down."

Parn scowled. "You think we can land right in the middle of somebody else's civilization and start a colony?"

SAHL HESITATED, chewed the corner of his mouth thoughtfully for a moment. He gestured at the screen again. "They, whoever they are, undoubtedly know we're here. The ship's big enough, and the moon is close enough, so that they can see us with a small telescope. Creatures that build cities that size probably are advanced enough to spot us and recognize us for what we are: alien invaders. Undoubtedly they're already reacting to what they see."

"And what kind of a reaction?"

The biologist shook his head. "Impossible to guess. Anger—hysteria—terror. Or maybe cold analysis and planning. I suggest we just wait and see."

"And wind up with a fleet of guided missiles coming up to greet us?"

"Maybe."

"What kind of creatures do you think we'd find on such a planet?"

The biologist was slow to answer. "Well, life always takes about the same pattern everywhere we've found it. It's never been too radically different. The basic protoplasm is always the same, or we can't call it 'life.' This planet is very earthlike. The sun is cooler than our Sol, but there's enough ultraviolet for vegetation. I believe the life-forms will be similar to what Earth has developed at various periods in her

history."

"Which might be anything from a duck-billed platypus to a dinosaur," Parn fumed. "And the cities might be insect hives."

With an exclamation of disgust, Wolek Parn snapped a switch, flooding the compartment with light. He turned off the scope and paced to his desk where he dropped wearily into his seat and faced them, arms draped across his legs, his shoulders slumped dejectedly.

"We can send a launch down, of course," he said gloomily. "But it'll be a one-way trip because of fuel considerations. If it goes down, it stays. And so it has to take a load of colonists with it, or somebody gets left behind in the long run. How can I send twenty-four guinea pigs down into the hands of—of what?"

Sahl shrugged. "You can ask for volunteers."

Parn leaned forward, clasped his head in his hands, and shook it slowly. "Eventually, I guess I'll have to. Right now, I'm faced with telling them. About the cities. They've been impatient as hell to know what's going on. Why we landed here. A few more hours and they'll start getting mad."

FARON QUN spoke up for the first time. "Why don't you put it to them as a vote, Skipper? Make them responsible for deciding."

"Suppose they decide to load everybody in the launches and go down right now?"

"Well—suppose they do? Can you say definitely that it's the wrong decision?"

"No, I guess not."

"I can," Sahl growled. "But you needn't give them that choice. Ask for volunteers for a first launch, then let the volunteers decide whether they want to jump right in, or wait and see if there's any reaction to our presence here on the planet's moon."

Parn nodded thoughtfully and sighed. "I guess it's the only thing to do."

There was a brief silence, suddenly interrupted by a knock at the entrance. "Colonists," Parn muttered, "wanting to know what's up." He raised his voice. "Okay! Come in!"

The hatch opened, and a young officer leaned inside without entering. "It's Rulian, Sir. He wants to see you."

"Ru—I thought I sent him out to scout the surface."

"He's back, Sir."

"All right, send him in."

The officer nodded and vanished. A pudgy, florid man stepped hurriedly inside. He was panting slightly, appeared to be nervous. He still wore a pressure suit, but the helmet had been removed. He brushed at his disheveled hair and gazed at Parn.

"Well, what is it? Surely you didn't have time to finish—"

Rulian shook his head quickly. "No, Sir. We got halfway to the hills. And then we came back. We thought you ought to know right away."

"Know what?"

The scout held something out on the palm of his hand—a torn bit of metal. Parn frowned questioningly.

"Looks like—maybe a sheared-off rivet. So?"

"Just brought it back so you wouldn't think I was off my rocker, Skipper."

"What are you talking about?"

"Out there—on the surface. There's the entrance to a tunnel, with an air-lock. A meteorite clobbered it—long time ago, maybe." He tossed the bit of metal on Parn's desk. "That's from the wreckage of the lock."

A hush fell over them. Parn reached for the bit of metal, rolled it around in his palm with a blunt finger. Morgun Sahl was the first to break the silence.

"Well, Skipper—I guess that determines what we do next."

"Eh? Oh, yes. Sahl, I guess the job is yours, since we don't have an archeologist aboard. Pick whoever you need."

Sahl glanced at Faron Qun and Alaia. "You two want to go?" The girl glanced at Qun. The chemist paused, then nodded. "We'll get suits and meet you outside."

## Chapter II

THE LANDSCAPE lay barren and sunswept under a lurid sky. The moon possessed a thin atmosphere of xenon and other heavy gasses that tempered the harshness of the sun-glare and painted the blackness of space with a translucent film of sky. Morgun Sahl glanced at the wrist-indicators of his suit. The pressure was around two pounds, and temperature a modest 110° Fahrenheit. He stood outside the lock with Rulian, waiting for Qun and Alaia. The scout was pointing to a low outcropping of rock perhaps four hundred yards from the ship.

"The tunnel is just beyond that," came the scout's voice in his headsets. "Believe me, Sahl, I about dropped over when I saw it. Who do you suppose dug it?"

The biologist shrugged, and gazed moodily at the huge but faintly visible crescent that hung in the western sky. What manner of beings were watching them and waiting for a move?

Man had never before touched a planet where flourishing life was possible. There was Mars, of course, with its stunted flora and primitive fauna. And the single planet of Alpha Centauri, with its steaming oceans full of marine life, but with a climate too hot for land-life except in fertile patches in the polar regions.

Here, however, under the orange glare of an Eridanian sun, lay a world nearly Earthlike. So Earth-like that the eventual development of an intelligent species was almost inevitable, according to Sahl's way of thinking. Merrigull had thought so, too, but he had allowed for a probable deviation from Earthlike conditions, and had guessed that the peculiarly human survival response called "intelligence" would not happen here.

Obviously, Merrigull had guessed wrong. And one hundred and twenty colonists were left holding the bag, visitors without reservations, discovering too late that the inn was already full. Certainly the visitors would not be welcome. The only question in Sahl's mind pertained to the amount of resistance the Eridanian life-forms would offer to their coming. It might be anything from grudging tolerance to fanatical opposition. In case of the latter, there was nothing to do but retreat, go back to Earth, if they could escape—and try to laugh off the twenty-six lost years of life. Certainly there could be no forcing an entry into the Eridanian world against the will of the Eridanian civilization. The colony was equipped with no spectacular weapons, nor any way to maintain a technological culture for more than a generation. They had come hoping to begin with a society of small farms in some area where metals were plentiful, and to let their descendants gradually assemble the tools of a better civilization.

THE AIR-LOCK opened behind him, and he turned to watch Alaia and Faron Qun climb down to join them. Across the cracked dry ground they strode, puffs of dust rising about their boots and drifting away on the thin breeze. The scout led them to the outcropping of rock, and they climbed it to stare at the plain beyond. The tunnel's mouth, was only a small pock-mark of blackness on the ground, but there was a glitter of metal at its rim. Sahl stared at the terrain around it, then pointed to dark splotches on the ground a hundred yards beyond the tunnel.

"You examine those?" he asked. "Yeah, we looked at them. Ground looks fused. I'd guess it was used as a landing site."

"Probably. How about the lock? Think we can get through it?"

"Have to hoist that wrecked hatch out of the way. I think four of us can manage it. If we can't, I brought a torch."

Sahl leaped from the outcrop and drifted down the six-foot drop to level ground. The others followed. Moments later they stood at the mouth of the lock. Alaia kicked at a layer of dust with her boot, uncovered a smooth stone ramp in which the lock was set.

Sahl knelt beside the torn hatchway to tug at the sheared metal door, wedged diagonally in the entranceway. "It's still fastened in one spot," he called. "Let's have that torch, Rulie."

The scout fumbled at the valves of the two cylinders strapped to his back, then struck a blinding dart of blue-white flame from the hand-torch. Sahl flipped a dark filter down over his visor, then played the torch slowly over the jagged metal. Minutes later, the fastening pulled loose. The hatch slipped deeper and wedged.

"All right, let's heave. Don't grab the hot spot."

After a concerted effort, the hatch, came free with a suddenness that sent Alaia sprawling. Faron Qun quickly helped her to her feet, leaving the others to struggle with the hatch. Sahl gave him a black look, but said nothing.

Beneath the lock appeared a corridor heaped with cave-in rubble, but apparently passable. Sahl stared down for a moment, then eyed the scout. "Notice anything," he grunted.

"Yeah," the other muttered. "We're not going to be able to stand up down there. Looks like a crawl-way."

Sahl shook his head. "It was probably designed to walk in all right—but the designers evidently aren't very tall. Four feet high at the most." He stepped into the wrecked lock and let himself down gingerly to the top of the rubble heap. He crouched to shine a light down along the corridor, then glanced up at the others.

"Can't see much. Let's go down. We'll stick close together. And don't touch anything that you don't understand." He slid feet-first down the heap of rubble and crouched in the gloom below. The others followed.

"Last man ought to blaze a trail somehow, as we move along," he called. "So we won't get lost down here."

FARON QUN picked up a chunk of rock from the heap and scratched it experimentally on the wall. It left a discernible mark. Sahl nodded and fumed, to move along the narrow corridor. After a few paces, he went to his hands and knees and crawled. The ceiling was too low to permit walking without crouching uncomfortably.

Blackness engulfed them, except for the light thrown by Sahl's hand-lamp. They passed a turn and came to a second hatch. Sahl ran his flash around the edge.

"Tight seal," he grunted. "Another lock."

"They've probably got the place split into compartments in case of a leak," Faron offered.

Sahl heaved at the door with his shoulder, but it failed to budge. "Try that button," Alaia suggested.

The biologist snorted, but pressed the stud beside the hatch and held it down. With his helmet pressed against the metal, he thought he heard the feeble click of a relay, but the hatch remained closed.

"That disk," she called, reaching over his shoulder. "Might be an emergency hand-control."

"All right, turn it," he growled.

She twisted it hard. After two turns, Sahl glanced down to see a tiny spurt of dust licking up from a valve an inch above floor level. It startled him. He had expected no pressure to remain in the lock. When the jet of dust subsided, he heaved against the door again. It swung slowly open, revealing the inside of the lock.

"We'll have to go through it two at a time," he said, then paused. "Anybody think to bring a weapon?"

No one answered for a moment. Then Faron snapped irritably, "Why should we, Sahl? Don't be silly!"

"Yeah. I'm being silly. Come on, Rulie, let's go through."

They crawled into the lock and closed the hatch. Sahl closed the valve from the inside, and found a similar control for the inner door. Then he watched the fabric of his suit go slowly slack as the pressure built up in the lock.

"Open it." Rulie grunted.



A slight tug brought the thick hatch swinging inward. They stared beyond the door into a long domed room. The ceiling seemed to glow faintly, and Sahl extinguished his flashlight to check it. Bands of faint luminosity provided a dim glow-light to the room. The last feeble flicker, he guessed, of a lighting system abandoned long ago.

THE ROOM was empty, and a layer of dust lay thick over the ledges and across the floor. The dust was marked in places, but the marks were not fresh, and dust had partially covered them again. They closed the hatch behind them so that the others could come through.

Sahl glanced at his pressure gauge. "Twelve pounds," he muttered. "I'm going to try a sniffer."

Rulie protested. "Might get a lungful of chlorine! I can test for oxygen with the torch."

Sahl yelped and snatched it away from him before he struck a spark. "Might get worse than a lungful of chlorine if you strike that thing in here!"

Rulie muttered apologetically. Sahl touched the sniffer valve at the side of his helmet and opened it a tenth of a turn, then cut off his oxygen supply and waited until the pressure in his suit fell to twelve pounds. Then he inhaled deeply several times.

"Don't smell anything," he called. "I'm going to open it all the way. If I keel over, catch me."

The air in the room smelled musty, but after a minute's experimental breathing he removed his helmet. Rulie loosened his own helmet, but the biologist tightened it for him again.

"If I'm all right after half an hour," he shouted against Rulie's visor, "you can take it off."

The others followed them through the lock and looked around quickly. Without his helmet, Sahl could not hear their conversation except as a muffled murmur from behind their visors. He motioned for them to follow, then crossed the room to enter another corridor beyond.

Somewhere in the station, nuclear reactors were still seeping a trickle of energy that kept a faint glow of light from the ceiling, and he hoped that Faron would be able to estimate the age of the place from radioactive decay. He sent Rulie back to call the Ark.

As they progressed through a series of corridors, rooms and other locks, Sahl grew deeply puzzled. This was no observatory, nor was it an experimental station. It had apparently been used as a transfer point to space, a way-station where landing launches from the planet shifted cargo or passengers with larger ships too bulky to land on the mother-world. Why had it been abandoned? Oxygen was still being released from the rocks. The place was still in fair condition. Had the builders abandoned space entirely?

The station was not large, and an hour's exploration brought them to its limits. Faron had discovered the reactors in a vault beneath the main level, where they supplied heat to an extensive bank of thermopiles which still delivered a trickle of power to the equipment. Faron let himself down into the vault to examine the equipment, while the others continued to explore the main level, having removed their helmets to breathe the still air of the station.

SAHL WATCHED Alaia puzzling over a four-foot cube of transparent plastic that rested on a low pedestal in the center of the floor.

"Know what it's for?" he asked. She shook her head and took a last swipe at the dust that covered it. "It's clear except for a few specks of something. Air bubbles maybe."

Sahl extinguished his light and noticed that she stepped away from him quickly in the darkness. He grinned sourly to himself, and waited until his eyes adjusted to the lack of light.

"What's the idea?" she muttered suspiciously.

"Look at the specks in the plastic."

"Why.—they shine faintly! Why?"

"Probably bits of radioactive material covered with a phosphor." He studied it in silence for a moment. One group of dots appeared to be joined by a web of fine lines. Their colors ranged from dull red to blue-white, and they varied in brilliance. "A star map, I think," he said suddenly. "That small orange one near the center of the web. Epsilon Eridani, their sun."

"Why the web?"

"Probably indicates the places their ships have—" He stopped suddenly and sucked in his breath.

The web included Sol.

Alaia interpreted his silence. "I wonder how long ago," she murmured.

Sahl turned as footsteps approached from behind. It was Rulie, and he seemed puzzled by an object in his hand. He held it out and stared at Morgun Sahl.

"Bone, Sahl?"

The biologist took the six-inch fragment and turned it over once. His hands seemed to freeze as they held it, and he was silent for several seconds.

"Where did you find this, Rulie?"

"Back by the rubble heap, when I went back out to check with the Ark. Why? What is it?"

The biologist looked up slowly. "Piece of a human tibia," he said, and his voice was somehow flat.

### Chapter III

THERE'S ONLY one explanation!" Parn was saying as he paced the floor of his cabin, occasionally glancing at Sahl.

"What's that, Skipper?"

"An Earth civilization that archeologists don't know anything about. A civilization that got to space before it died out and disappeared."

"I don't think so," Sahl disagreed quickly. "A civilization like that would leave too many traces. If primitive architectural ruins stand for thousands of years, as in Egypt—think how long the remains of a technological culture would endure. No, Skipper, I don't agree at all."

"All right, damn it! How do you explain that piece of bone."

"I don't."

Parn snorted irritably. "Do you even *know* it's human?"

The biologist shrugged. "You got the surgeon's opinion to confirm my own."

"Isn't there any way to tell how old it is?"

"The lab's working on it, but they aren't very experienced at that sort of thing."

"What about this carbon-14 method?"

Sahl nodded indifferently. "They'll try it, but we can't trust results."

"Why not? I thought it was very accurate?"

"It is—on Earth, where we know the percentage of radioactive carbon ingested during life. But how long had the fellow been away from Earth? And what percentage did he get while he was away? Was he even born on Earth?"

Parn clenched his fists and began beating his knuckles together with thoughtful regularity while he paced the floor. "Maybe humanoid creatures evolve wherever it's possible," he ventured. "Maybe the cities down there are—"

"What about those four-foot ceilings in the station?" Sahl interrupted. "That tibia came from a man about our height."

Parn clucked irritably. "Well, you said some of the ceilings were ten feet and over. "Why don't you judge from that?"

Sahl smiled wryly. "How about —say—the Cathedral of Notre Dame. Would you judge the stature of the builders by the height of the nave, or by the size of the smallest door?"

Parn grunted defeat. "All right, why don't you venture an opinion."

"It'd be more, in the nature of a wild guess, I think."

"Make it, then."

"Well—let's turn the situation around. Suppose we had come here as explorers rather than as colonists. Suppose we landed on the planet and found a semi-intelligent species, and we were interested in studying it further. Suppose we captured a few, and carried them back home for breeding purposes."

PARN GLANCED at him sharply as if to interrupt, but Sahl continued: "That three-dimensional star-map we found makes me think the builders have visited Sol. If they visited it before Man began

civilizing himself, we'd have no legends, nor any trace of the visit. They could have made off with a few humans and we'd never know it had happened."

"Why would they want humans?"

Sahl shrugged. "Why do we catch wild animals and put them in cages? Why did we domesticate dogs? Curiosity, maybe some usefulness. Man has brought back specimens from every planet he's ever visited. Maybe he's been a specimen himself. It's just a guess."

"Pretty wild guess, if you ask me," Parn snorted. "Human beings would be rather dangerous pets to have around."

"Would they? Humans have made pets—or slaves—of humans."

Parn slumped into a chair, shaking his head slowly. "None of which answers the question: 'What are we going to do?' "

"How are the colonists taking it?"

"Better than I expected. They're restless, but quiet. Maybe too quiet. I don't know. I let them out of the ship to roam around. They work off steam that way;"

"If *they're* not getting disturbed," Sahl offered, "I suggest we wait until we've gone over that station with a fine-tooth comb. Faron is still puzzling over the reactors. And we might learn more about the builders by closer study of the interior structure."

"How?"

"Well, by measuring dimensions, for one thing. The shape of the doorways suggest that they're small bipeds—or at least, their height is about three times their width. And Faron found something else down in the reactor vault that might be significant."

"What's that?"

"A pair of goggles, a circuit diagram, and a place to sit down. The goggles are too closely spaced for human eyes, and perfectly round, but the strap just about fits my head. The circuit diagram is hung on a wall, and we have to stoop to read it. And the seat would be about the right height for a child with a foot-high knee."

Parn threw up his hands. "All right. Go ahead and study all you want to. Until they start shooting at us, anyway."

Sahl glanced at the scope, noticed that it was on. He grinned. "Been watching for them to start?"

"I've been watching. Now get out, Sahl. I got some worrying to do. Go find Alaia."

The biologist stiffened. "What makes you say that?"

"Eh? What makes—?" The captain paused, smirked sadistically. "Oh, sorry. I must have been thinking of Faron Qun, eh? Don't slam the door."

Sahl left it open instead, but he heard it slam when Parn got up to close it. He smiled irritably, and went down through the colonists' quarters to listen to the chatter. But the chatter was absent. Gloom pervaded the ship. He felt it hanging tensely, murderously, in the air, waiting to become rage or rebellion or sudden popular decision. These people were not going back to Earth. They had gambled thirteen years and they didn't intend to quit as losers. He passed quietly through the passenger-areas of the ship, and stopped at his own quarters long enough to slip into a pressure suit. He stopped again at Alaia's cabin, hesitating before the door. But he moved on without knocking. It might embarrass someone if Faron Qun were with her. Sahl tried to grin his way around the twinge of anger that followed the thought, but he failed to rid himself of it.

HE TIGHTENED his helmet and stepped out through the lock. Lunar night, with the planet's disk filling a huge patch of sky. The colonists had tagged the planet "Merrigull's Guesswork", had later shortened it to "Guesswork", Sahl had idly speculated that after a dozen, or ten dozen generations, its name might evolve into "Kesuark", and it might be regarded as the center of the universe, personalized by a symbol of fecundity, and perhaps thought of as the vale of tears into which Man had been cast after his original sin in an Eden called "Erd" or "Urth", or maybe "Brooklyn". But now, it seemed more likely that the planet would stay just what it already was, and that it would never be infected with humanity.

As he strode toward the mouth of the tunnel, he saw Alaia and Faron Qun coming around the

outcrop, arm in arm, occasionally touching the metal of their helmets together as if the steel shells possessed somesthetic receptors capable of savoring the contact. They hailed him as he approached, and his headset burred as both tried to call at once. Alaia won the battle.

"Congratulate us, Sahl!" she called.

"Why? Is Qun pregnant?"

"See here, Sahl!" sputtered the chemist.

"Sorry. What's up?"

"Never mind!" Alaia snapped, marching haughtily past him. Faron gave him a cold stare in passing.

Sahl turned to watch them go. Once Alaia glanced over her shoulder. She tried to toss her head, but her helmet waggled crazily.

"Ridiculous!" he hissed to himself. Then he unclenched his fists and stalked on toward the shaft of the underground station.

Three workmen were sifting through the rubble, searching for more bones. The biologist leaped down into the tunnel to inspect their findings: several vertebrae, a few snapped ribs, and assorted odds and ends. Apparently the meteorite had crashed into the airlock while the man was in the first tunnel-section, and the responsible occupants had not cared enough about him to bother removing the body. But if the station had been in continuous use at the time, surely they would have removed it for reasons of sanitation. Or at least for appearance's sake. I, thought Sahl, wouldn't leave a dead cat on my sidewalk unless I didn't intend to be back.

The suspicion was growing on him that the builders had once used the station extensively, then had tapered off, visiting it at first only on rare occasions, then not at all.

Why? Why would a race which had once mastered space come to consider it as no longer a worthy pursuit? Had they been driven down from the heavens by an exhaustion of resources? Disaster? Or the final ennui of discovering that there was no magic in the sky, no heaven, no solution to everyday problems?

He snorted to himself. He was projecting human characteristics onto the Eridanian race: a fruitless and possibly dangerous pastime. He went on down into the station to join the others who had taken up the task of combing the station for evidence pertaining to the builders.

THE EVIDENCE was accumulating, but it seemed to reveal very little. They appeared to be small bipeds, roughly humanoid in appearance. Their number system was octal, suggesting perhaps four-fingered hands. Their written language was not phonetic, but seemed to be based on a system of ideographs, and a rather complicated system at that. It occurred to Sahl that they might not communicate by sound-waves, but he dismissed the notion as growing out of fragmentary evidence.

A telephone circuit had been run from the Ark to the underground station. It began jangling frantically.

"Sahl!" Parn bellowed when he picked it up. "A spacecraft has been sighted about five miles away, over the hills! It's just hanging there on its jets, watching us. Get back to the Ark. Everybody."

The biologist gathered an incredulous frown. "What kind of a ship?" he gasped.

"Sleek little rocket. About half the size of a launch. Hurry back. If it lands, I want you to size up the occupants."

"Okay, Skipper. But I doubt that there're any of them in it. I'll bet it's a remote control ship, or a computer-piloted job."

"Why? What makes you say that?"

"Simple. They don't know anything about us. They're probably holding up a hat on a stick to see if we'll shoot at it, and maybe to see what kind of weapons we've got. I'll be right out."

He hung up and yelled at the others, then scrambled through the lock and out of the station. He paused to peer at the dark sky in search of the ship, then found it at about thirty degrees above the horizon in the west. A silvery sliver that glittered in the sun, nose pointed skyward as if landing. But the thrust of its jets just matched the tug of gravity, and it hung motionless in mid-air, breathing a fiery tail downward.

Sahl sprinted toward the Ark. Faron and Alaia and several others of the staff were assembled in Parn's cabin when he burst inside. The Captain waved him to a seat. Faron was speaking.

"It's probably a television ship sent to scan us, Skipper. I think we ought to make some friendly gesture toward it, or at least not behave hostilely. We could probably bring it down with a few bursts, but it'd undoubtedly lead to trouble."

"No question about that," Parn muttered. "Well, Sahl? You itching to say something?"

"Yes. Give me a pilot and a launch and permission to blast off and approach the vessel cautiously."

"Wh—why? Suppose it shot you down? We'd lose a launch, and twenty-four people will be stranded. No, I can't do it."

He shook his head quickly. "Of course it's a risk, but it might pay off. Suppose it is a robot ship? If I can board it and ride it back to the planet, we've gotten an emissary down there without wasting a launch."

Parn sat with his mouth open for a moment, then shouted: "And suppose it's a one-way ship? Suppose it doesn't go back—but only sits there and—"

"Skipper!" A low gasp from Alaia who had been watching the screen.

They stared. The small rocket, motionless at first, had begun to move. Tilting its axis at a slight angle, it began whisking rapidly toward them. Wolek Parn went white and began jabbing buttons.

"Man emergency stations, all hands!" he bellowed into the intercom. "All hands in pressure suits, man the launches! Prepare for blast-off!"

Alaia and the other launch pilots scrambled through the door. Faron raced for the reactor room. Sahl sat quietly staring at the screen.

"Well, everybody got some exercise anyhow," he said as the rocket landed on the flats beyond the tunnel's mouth, fanning up great whirls of scorched dust. He climbed to his feet. "Coming?" he grunted over his shoulder.

"Don't go out there!" Parn barked. "Let them make a first move."

"They've already made it," he called back through the hatch. "If they wanted to mess us up, a few armor piercing shells are all they needed to do the job. Coming?"

Mumbling irritably, the Captain reached for his helmet.

## Chapter IV

THE DUST was subsiding, and the rocket was a slender spire through the thin haze as they left the Ark's lock and began walking slowly across the lunar plain.

"See that black hole in the hull?"

Parn snapped. "They're either watching us or aiming at us."

"I see it. Let's keep walking."

"Probably a television camera, eh?"

"If it makes you feel any better to think so."

"*Sgerul ingbagge khannil du?*" came a third voice on the inter-helmet communicator frequency. The men glanced at each other nervously. Sahl shook his head. "It wasn't me, Skipper."

Parn set his jaw and glared fixedly at the rocket as they approached. A hatch slid open in its side, revealing an empty lock. Something began snaking down from the lock toward the ground. "What the—!"

"A ladder!" Sahl breathed. "A flexible ladder. They want us to come up. What do you think?" Parn paused. "I—I don't like it. I wish they'd show themselves." He paused again. "But we've got to face them sometime, I guess."

"Yeah."

They stood at the foot of the ladder, looking up the wall of gleaming metal toward the lock. A lense, projecting from the side of the ship had turned downward to survey them with its mechanical gaze.

Sahl grunted nervously and started climbing. Soon he felt Parn coming after him. What manner of creatures were they about to meet? Or was the ship remotely piloted? Once they were inside, would it

blast off without warning—a specimen bottle that had been filled?

He scrambled up into the lock and stood gazing back toward, the Ark as Parn climbed up after him.

Two figures were walking across the plain toward them, and he thought he recognized Faron and Alaia. But the hatch slid closed, shutting off the view.

THEY STOOD waiting tensely while air hissed from the ship into the lock. Sahl took a sniffer, then removed his helmet, for spectroscopic analysis had already revealed that the planet's atmosphere contained a breathable supply of oxygen. Parn, too, slipped the helmet from his shoulders, having smelled nothing peculiar.

But suddenly Sahl was groping feebly to fit it in place again. "Gas!" he gasped. "Odorless, anaesthetic—Skipper! *Skipper!*"

His vision blurred. He slumped against the wall, then slid to the floor. His last impression was that of the inner hatch rolling quietly open. Then blackness.

"Morgun Sahl. Open your eyes."

A soft purring voice that he did not recognize, a quiet mechanical monotone. He felt intuitively that he had slept for quite some time. And his first fear was that the rocket had gone into space. But he still felt the faint moon-gravity beneath him, and no drum of rockets broke the silence.

*"Morgun Sahl. Open your eyes."*

He was strapped in a metal seat, with bands of steel encircling his wrists and ankles. He opened his eyes and blinked away blindness in the bright light. He sat in a glass cubicle, peering out into a room whose walls were instrument panels. A small machine faced him, and it was connected to a loudspeaker mounted in the glass. Beyond it, a man lay flat on his back on a narrow table—a hairless man with saffron skin and the face of an idiot. The man's lips moved, and a voice came from the loudspeaker.

"Assimilate your surroundings, then I shall release you. You were subjected to a hypnotic drug. It was necessary that we might quickly gain command of your language. Its structure was analyzed and entered in the translator you see before you. I am speaking my own tongue. The voice you are hearing is your own, built up of recorded syllables you spoke while in trance."

Sahl forced himself to remain silent and to refrain from reacting while he studied his surroundings, Parn was not in sight. There was only the glass partition, the machine, and the saffron man who lay speaking quietly to a microphone that hung down from overhead.

"How do you feel, Morgun Sahl?"

"Dizzy, but fair. Unlock me. I won't kick the place apart."

The wristlocks snapped open, then the ankle-bands. He stood up stretching. He felt calm, too calm. Drugs? Or perhaps post-hypnotic suggestion? He realized that he should be violently startled.

"Where is Wolek Parn?" he asked.

"Sleeping. He will awaken soon, as will the others."

"Others?"

"The two who followed you."

"Alaia and Faron. Are we prisoners?"

"No. We realize that our treatment of you runs contrary to your ethical system. We did not realize it before the hypnotic interview. You are not prisoners. We wished only to establish contact, and to study you. We welcome your colony to our planet."

SAHL SAT very still, studying the reclining figure beyond the glass partition. The puffy, Neanderthaloid features of the saffron man, and the small circular tattoo on his shoulder, and the simple white loincloth that he wore did not somehow jibe with the complex science suggested by the visible equipment. The man's head was bald, with a heavy protruding brow and a small flat skull. His body was thick and heavy, with long arms and broad hands. Sahl imagined that he would stoop when standing, for his shoulders, though thick, seemed steeply sloping.

"May I ask some questions?" he grunted.

"Certainly," purred the loudspeaker.

"Are you the dominant race on the planet?"

"Yes."

"Are your ancestors locally evolved?"

"Yes."

Sahl hesitated, staring at the man. He shook his head slowly. Somehow he could not believe that the fellow was not originally descended of Earth stock.

"Apparently your race has explored extensively in space during its history. Why did you give it up?"

A brief pause, then: "We found what we regard as a more mature goal than mere widespread expansion. For thousands of years our activities have been directed toward the biologic integration of all life-forms on our planet."

"Into a world-organism, you mean?"

"Ultimately perhaps. Interdependence and elimination of destructive parasitism are the immediate goals. Symbiosis rather than conflict. You might call it biologic socialism."

"With your race leading and integrating?"

"Naturally."

It sounded plausible, Sahl thought. Perhaps earthlings would someday become bored with the stars and turn back to their own planet to "rule over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and all living creatures". For they had never really tried to do so, had never tried world-wide schemes of biologic control.

"But why," he said slowly, "are you ready to invite outsiders? What makes you think we would cooperate?"

THE VOICE was silent for a time, then: "We have taken in other outsiders. The fauna and flora of our planet is no longer local, but a composite—made up of selected species from forty star-systems. You will find it something like an artificial garden. It would be virtually impossible for you not to cooperate.

Sahl wondered how much information had been gleaned from him along with his language. Quite a lot, he guessed, since the very structure of a language implied many things about the linguistic animal that spoke it.

"Maybe you understand," he said slowly, "why we came here. We want to establish a colony and try to equip it with our own brand of culture. Our culture is expansive, exploitive. I fail to see how it could fit in without some strong shift in cultural goal."

"That would be expected."

Sahl frowned. "You don't understand. Our cultural continuity is as important to us as 'genetic continuity.'"

"Why?"

The biologist groped for an explanation. "A leader of one of our primitive tribes once put it this way, when his own culture was dying. He said, 'In the beginning, God gave to every people a cup of clay, from which it drank its life. Now our cup is broken.'"

The Eridanian was silent for a long time. When he spoke, his tone remained unchanged—for the machine had but one tone one rhythm of speech. But Sahl somehow felt an aura of menace associated with the words.

"If you wish to survive, you must come to our planet. If you come to our planet, you must conform to our patterns and our plans. You cannot come to expand and exploit."

Sahl weighed it carefully for a moment. "Before we decide, may we send a delegation down to look around?"

"That was anticipated," came the quick reply. "We will take your delegation down and bring it back." A pause, then: "Wolek Parn has awakened. We will speak with him. Then you may return to your ship to discuss the matter among yourselves if you wish." There was a click, and the loudspeaker went dead.

A sudden thought came to him. *How did the fellow know Parn was awake?* He had not moved nor opened his eyes. Sahl watched him carefully. His lips still moved, but no sound penetrated the glass wall. Evidently the translator's output had been channelled to another compartment. Evidently the fellow

was talking to Parn.

Two hours of waiting and watching followed, two hours during which a suspicion flickered in his mind, and grew to proportions of near-certainty: *the man who lay on the table and talked was a cat's paw, a servant of something else.*

But who was using him?

Observation failed to answer the question or even confirm the suspicion. A panel slid open behind him, revealing the door to the airlock. His helmet lay on the floor. He fastened it quickly in place, and the airlock opened. Simultaneously Parn entered it from a flanking hatch. They glanced at each other silently, grimly, but neither spoke.

Before the hatch closed behind Parn, Sahl saw another glass cubicle beyond it. Another suspicion entered his mind: that this ship had been designed specifically for this one mission.

Moments later, they were descending the ladder to the plain below, and the comforting beam of a searchlight picked them up from the Ark. It was night, and the warm tinted crescent of the planet shone overhead. Somehow it seemed gloomy and forbidding.

## Chapter V

THEY SEEM to have interviewed all four of us separately," said Parn when they were back in the Ark again. "Let's compare notes. I'll begin with what happened to me."

The Skipper related his conversation with the Eridanian matter-of-factly, and it differed only in detail from Sahl's experience. The Skipper apparently had reacted more angrily, but the general line of discussion was the same. The same was true of the others, except for Faron Qun, who apparently had been more eager than the rest to take advantage of the Eridanian's "generous offer", as he put it.

"Let's get it straight," Parn grunted. "I said flatly that we wouldn't fit in like a cog in somebody else's wheel. Sahl took a dim view of it. Alaia kept her mouth shut—which was probably smart. And Faron, you thought their offer was a good idea."

"I still do."

"That remains to be seen. The point is, they probably realize now that there's going to be a diversity of opinion among us. They might try to take advantage of it somehow. But the main question of course is: 'What the devil do they have in mind for us?' "

"They seem to want us, all right," muttered the girl.

"But *why?*"

"Maybe the delegation can find out."

"That brings up the question of who's going."

Alaia glanced around quickly. "How about *us?*"

Parn shook his head, grinning wryly. "Not you, Ala. I'll send Qun and Sahl."

The girl reddened angrily, fell silent. Faron Qun touched her arm lightly. "I'd rather you'd stay where it's safer. . . ."

"Excuse me, Skipper," Sahl interrupted sourly. "But I think we'd better have a pilot along, just in case."

Faron snorted contemptuously. "In case of *what?*"

"In case we have to seize the ship and come back on our own."

"Of all the silly—"

"Maybe it's not so silly, Faron," Parn growled. "I believe you're right, Sahl."

"Not Alaia, of course, but—" She bounded to her feet angrily. "Why not Alaia?" she demanded.

Parn sighed and shrugged. "All three of you go, then. I'll have to stay and watch over the brood, I guess. Try to get them to establish radio contact with us, so you can keep us informed."

TWO DAYS later, the small Eridanian ship bearing the three Earthlings spaceward, climbed a column of flame. They sat locked in a small but comfortably furnished compartment until blast-off was accomplished and acceleration fell to something around a gravity. They waited. The compartment was



locked. Sahl rapped sharply at the door, but there was no answer.

"No sightseeing permitted," he grunted suspiciously.

"They probably just want to keep a balanced loading, so they don't want us moving around."

Sahl glanced at the pilot. "Think so?" he muttered.

She frowned at him irritably, but shook her head. "I doubt it. They must have automatic trimming mechanisms to correct for slight load unbalance."

"No sightseeing permitted, then," he reasserted.

Faron sneered slightly. "You've got a lousy attitude, Sahl. It makes me sick."

"That's too bad," the biologist sympathized quietly.

Alaia glanced from one to the other of them. Then she twisted Faron's ear with playful sternness.

"Sorry, darling, but you're out of line this time."

He reddened, and fell silent. An hour passed. Alaia, normally calm, began to seem restless. She moved about the small compartment nervously, peering at each fixture and marking.

"This ship is new," she muttered. "Brand new! I'll bet it's the first flight."

Sahl watched her, but said nothing. She reached a grille-covered vent over the hatch and tried to pull herself up to peer through it. The grille came free and she fell clumsily. Faron helped her up, while the biologist stared up at the opening with interest.

"Only a ventilator duct," she said.

"Yeah, but—" Sahl stood up. "Might be big enough to crawl through."

"Not for you."

Sahl glanced at her. She might be slender enough to wiggle into the duct, unless her hips ...

"Get that notion out of your head, Sahl!" Faron snapped. He picked up the grille and moved toward the opening to replace it.

"Put it down," Sahl said tonelessly.

Something about his voice made Faron hesitate.

Alaia said, "Let me try it. I want a look at the control room."

"You're *not* going to do it," Faron growled, blocking the duct opening.

"Move, Faron," murmured the biologist. "Let's not have a tussle." "Let's do."

"It would be rather one-sided, I'm afraid," Sahl grunted, producing an automatic. "Ever get pistol-whipped, Qun?"

"Wh—where did you get that? What do you mean by bringing a weapon? This is supposed to be a peaceful—"

"Yeah. Now move. Help her up in the duct."

Faron stepped reluctantly aside, his face bright with anger. Alaia gave him a peculiar glance, then scrambled up and into the opening without assistance. She glanced back at Sahl and beckoned him close.

"Three openings just up ahead. Watch down the duct in case I get caught."

He handed her the gun and nodded. "Don't go too far. Return trip'll be harder, backing up."

She stuffed the gun in her belt and gave Faron a warning look. "You better keep your temper, F.Q." She crawled slowly out of sight.

Faron glared at the biologist. "Fool! Don't you imagine they're watching us? Know exactly what's going on?"

"I doubt it. They're probably too busy to bother." He climbed to the duct opening and glanced along it. Alaia's body blocked the light from the other openings toward the front of the ship, but faintly he could hear her moving.

"Well?" Faron growled.

"You watch if you want to." Sahl returned to a seat.

Faron peered along the dark duct for several minutes. "She's reached another grille," he muttered suddenly. "I can see the light—and—*oh! no!*"

"What's wrong?"

"The grille came loose. She—*Alaia, no! No!*"

SAHL HEARD a muffled report, then another. He scrambled for the opening, as Faron began beating frantically at the hatch.

"They saw her! They shot her!" Sahl stared toward the faint light a dozen yards down the duct. He could *see* her faintly, her arm dangling from the opening. She lay very still. Somewhere someone was screaming gibberish. "Help me!" Faron howled. "Help me get it open!"

Together they battered the locked hatch. The light metal door seemed to give slightly with each crash. After four tries, the lock gave way, and they spilled out into the corridor. A few paces away, the saffron-skinned man stood staring at them idiotically. Suddenly he opened his mouth and screamed. After a moment, he screamed again—without moving. Scalp crawling, Sahl darted around him. He seemed not to see them, but continued screaming as they ran down the corridor.

Faron kicked open a hatch, then froze. Sahl's gun lay on the floor beyond it, and Alaia's hand hung limply down from above. And there was something else. A small manlike creature with a huge head lay dead in a pool of red-brown blood near an instrument panel, his skull torn open by a ten millimeter slug from the automatic. A fat hand-weapon with multiple barrels was still clutched in his small fist.

"See about Alaia," Sahl snapped, grabbing up the gun. "I'll watch the corridor."

Faron stepped inside and felt her wrist. "Thank God," he breathed, "she's alive. Unconscious."

"Wounded badly?"

"I—I can't tell." He paused. "There's something stuck in her face. Help me get her down." Sahl paused. Another saffron crewman was coming along the corridor, feeling his way and stumbling, as if blinded. He kept pawing at his head. He moved past Sahl without glancing at him.

The biologist watched him go, then stepped inside and helped Faron haul the limp girl down out of the duct.

"Damn you, Sahl! Now we're in trouble, bad trouble!"

"All right, save it till later, will you? There's no time to fight about it now."

They stretched her out on the floor and examined her for wounds.

"Nothing," Faron muttered. "Except these little red marks on her face, and—" He bent over her and jerked three tiny splinters from her cheek and laid them on his palm. "Crystals. Sharp little crystals."

SAHL LOOKED at her pupils and felt her pulse. "I'd say she was drugged." He arose and crossed the cabin to bend over the dead creature. He disentangled the weapon from a slender four-digital hand and inspected it closely. He drew back what seemed to be a charging-plunger, then aimed at the dead thing and flicked a switch. It kicked in his hand and emitted a dull cough. Six crystals appeared, stuck in a patch of the creature's hide. They began to volatilize at once.

"Anaesthetic crystals," he guessed. "Must be quick acting, but not quick enough to keep Ala from shooting back when she got stung."

"This is terrible !" Faron mourned. "Now they'll never let us colonize."

"Wake up, fellow," Sahl snapped, pointing at the dead creature. "*That's* one of our hosts, not the idiots with orange hides."

He tossed Faron the Eridanian's weapon and stepped through the hatch. "I'm going to search the ship, see if he's the only one."

He moved warily along the corridors, peering cautiously into each compartment. He found one other saffron servant, curled up in the foetal position on the floor of a cabin. The man did not look up. There were no other creatures like the one Alaia had killed. And the three servants—if such they were—appeared to be completely demented. They seemed unaware of their surroundings, stared vacuously at nothing. The search convinced him that automatic devices were keeping the rocket on a constant heading with respect to the planet's gravitic field—which would make it a spiralling course with respect to a fixed framework. Unless the devices corrected when they reached the atmosphere, or unless they could get control of the ship, they would go in like a meteor and crash.

He returned to the compartment where Alaia lay moaning but still unconscious. Faron was studying the instrument panels. He turned away white-faced to stare at the biologist. His voice was high and

tense.

"Do you realize this is the control cabin? That thing was piloting the ship! Somebody's got to take over!"

"He's the only one of his kind aboard. I guess it'll have to be you. I'm a mechanical moron, Qun."

Faron groaned. "I can't even pilot one of our own ships. And we'll never be able to read the markings on these instruments, or know what they mean. The controls *look* fairly simplified, but—" He shook his head, pointed at the screen. The ship seemed to be plunging surfaceward at a shallow angle.

"We've got to get Alaia awake. Maybe she can analogize between those gadgets and familiar controls."

Faron growled a low curse and went to the hatch. "I'm going to see if I can't shut off the jets somehow. We might still have enough of an orbital velocity-component to carry us around the planet, if we can stop the rockets from skidding us back any more."

"An orbit?"

"Yeah. Probably with an underground perihelion. If we get out of this, Sahl, I'm going to kick your face in."

"I'll be looking forward to it," the biologist murmured; as he knelt beside Alaia.

TWENTY MINUTES later, the instrument panel's lights began flashing frantically, and relays clattered loudly. He straightened, sensing vaguely that they were falling. His weight was diminishing rapidly. Then he noticed that the thunder of the rockets was dying. It became a dull roar, then a purr.

Faron came back. "I got the reactors damped down," he said, "but it may not matter. Look at the screen."

Sahl turned. The scope revealed the curving horizon of the planet, but the cross-hairs rested only a fraction of a degree above the misty limb. "Will we skim through that atmosphere?" he asked.

"If we do, we'll melt the hull off at this speed. We'll just have to wait and see." He glanced down at the girl. "How is she?"

"Opened her eyes once. Drifted off again. Might bring her around if we had some sort of stimulant."

Faron fumbled quickly through his suit, brought out a small vial. "Neurodrine," he grunted. "I brought it along to keep awake in case we were pretty busy."

The biologist took it quickly and shook out two small capsules. "You on the stuff?" he asked.

"Of course not!"

The vehemence of the denial made Sahl guess that Faron was at least worried about the possibility of addiction. The drug did not set up a true craving, but habitual users became listless and apathetic when it was withdrawn, and they had to continue taking it in order to stay normally alert.

He took the capsules apart and emptied the white powder in Alaia's mouth. Her jaw worked spasmodically, and he held her mouth closed lest she reflexively spit out the bitter compound. Five minutes passed.

Sahl became aware of a faint whine, high-pitched and all-pervading. He glanced at Faron who was staring at the instruments.

"Upper fringes of the atmosphere!" the chemist groaned.

"That whistle?"

"Yeah!" He hurried out of the cabin and returned a moment later, his face taut with worry.

"What's up?" Sahl asked.

"The temperature. Leading edges of projections on the hull. Red spots here and there." He stared at the screen. The cross-hairs seemed a little higher above the horizon now, but the horizon's curvature was less. "We're low, too low. Maybe sixty miles."

"Perihelion?"

"Maybe we're at it. But if that air slows us down enough, we'll drop."

ALAIA BEGAN muttering aloud. She opened her eyes and pressed her hands to her temples. Her face went tense with fear. "It shot . . . hurt—my face. Where?"

"No time now!" Sahl grunted. "Listen to me. You've got to get control of the ship."

"The big head ... the *thing* . . . is it—?"

"Dead."

She closed her eyes again and moaned. Sahl shook her hard. "Alaia! Listen to me!"

"Sick . . . Water . . ."

He shook her again, then pulled her up to a sitting position. She saw the dead creature, and her eyes widened. She gasped and seemed to recover a little. She stared at the control panel and shook her head.

"That whine!" she gasped. "Air!"

Sahl helped her to her feet. "Faron got the jets idled," he told her quickly, "but that's all. You've got to figure out the controls."

She staggered toward the instrument panel and stared. "I'll never be able to read those things. But . . ." She looked down at the array of switches and studs. "Only two variable controls," she muttered. "The rest are on-off. I hope this, thing is—" She touched a lever and bent close to inspect it. "Ball and socket mounting. Can push it any direction. That means—" She pushed it forward slightly.

"No!" Faron howled. "Look at the screen!"

The cross-hairs had split into a pair, one set red, the other black. The black set rested now below the horizon.

"Don't worry," she muttered. "That must be just the aim of our nose. I didn't feel a course-change."

She tugged back slowly on the lever. A low drone came from the instrument panel. The black cross-hairs drifted slowly upward, and the planet's horizon swept completely off the screen. The scope revealed only a patch of space. "Must be a stern pick-up somewhere." She touched one of the switches under the scope, then returned it to the original position. "Magnification. And this one — intensity. And this—" The scene on the scope changed abruptly and the planet's surface appeared again. "That's it. Now we're looking back toward the tail."

She turned abruptly to look at Faron. "How did you get the reactors damped?"

"Back in the power room. Slipped in a couple of rods."

"Better go slip them back like they were."

HE NODDED and departed silently. Minutes later, the rocket's purr became a roar again. Alaia slowly moved the second control and the thunder waned, then grew again. The ship lurched clumsily as she fumbled with the heading-lever, but gradually the planet's surface lay directly tailward, and they were climbing slowly. The whine began to diminish.

Faron returned from the power room to stare over her shoulder. "Wonderful!" he murmured.

"Not so wonderful, maybe," she said gloomily. "We don't know what the instruments are registering. One slip and we're finished."

"Can we make it back?" Sahl asked.

"Back? To the moon? No!" She shook her head emphatically. "No way to navigate."

"What then?"

"We'll have to get in an orbit, let me practice on the controls. Then—there's nothing to do but try to land it somewhere down there. Unless you'd rather stay here as a permanent satellite."

"They'll send other ships up after us," Faron said darkly. "They're probably watching us right now."

Sahl stared at the surface revealed on the screen. "I agree that they're watching us. But I don't think they'll send pursuit."

"Why not?"

"It's my guess that they don't have anything to pursue us with. I believe this rocket was specially constructed for this one task."

Faron snorted contemptuously. "If they can build this one, they've certainly built others."

"Why?"

"Well—"

"I'm certain they could build all the ships they wanted to," Sahl continued. "And Earthlings could build

humanoid robots if they wanted to. But who wants to? The Eridanians have deserted space. They don't need to build ships, except for some special purpose, like this one."

"Maybe," Faron admitted. "But if we stay here very long they'll build one to come after us. If what you say is true, they certainly built this one in a hurry."

The biologist nodded, glanced at Alaia. "How long will it take?"

"Somewhere between five minutes and forever," she answered curtly.

"Well, we land as soon as you think you can manage it. We'll have to be careful about choosing a spot. Some place pretty far from a city. Let's say—high ground in the twilight zone."

"Why twilight?"

"So that if we get down, we might try to get away in the dark." He paused. "I'm going to look over the ship again and try to get something out of those crewmen. If that's what they are."

## Chapter VI

HE WAS gone for half an hour, during which the ship lurched and rocked and spun as Alaia tested the controls. He came back looking grim, and went to bend over the dead Eridanian. He pried open its jaw and stared.

"Want it to say `ah'?" Faron asked sourly.

"Look," Sahl grunted, pressing back the creature's lips to expose the inside of his mouth.

"Toothless," Faron observed, "and no tongue. So?"

"Look again." He inserted his finger and pressed something. A pair of gleaming white fangs slipped slowly into view. "Hollow and retractile."

Faron frowned. "Poison sacs?"

"No. Feeding mechanisms."

"A blood-feeder!"

"Not exactly. I found something growing on one of the crewmen's backs. A parasite vegetable growth, I think. It's taken root there—deep roots. And there's a pale green pulpy sphere on the outside. It had fang-marks on it. Seems to be full of a milky fluid, but not blood. I'd say it's the fruit of the parasite growth. And the fellow's flesh is the ground it grows in."

"And he's still alive?"

"In a stupor. He's the one curled up on the floor. Asleep, or unconscious."

"How about the others?"

"They don't have it. Apparently this thing—" He nudged the small body. "—just brought along one dinner pail."

Faron shuddered. "They're slaves, then."

"Maybe. Better look the other way," he said, producing a pocketknife. He made a neat incision in the throat, and studied for a moment. "Breathing tube, no real vocal cords. They can't talk, nor even make much oral noise."

"Somebody was talking to us!" the chemist protested.

"Yeah, but I think this thing was using the saffron fellow as a mouth piece; telepathic control. The human—if he is a human—spoke in his own language, and the machine translated. But the original thoughts must have come from *this*."

Faron looked toward the door thoughtfully. "I can't even believe those people *have a language*. They act like complete idiots."

Sahl looked up. "I have an idea that's withdrawal shock, rather than idiocy. If this little beastie was controlling them telepathically, they must have gotten some kind of jolt when Alaia shot it. And maybe they've been controlled so long that they've lost their own egos, lost their own personality."

They looked up as the tug of acceleration decreased suddenly.

"Okay," Alaia called nervously, "I guess it's now or not at all. I'm going to start down."

Sahl turned to watch the planet's surface on the screen. It tilted again, revealed a horizon as she guided the ship so as to resume the process of cancelling out its orbital velocity component.

"I'll have to do it fast," she called. "We're too close to the atmosphere. You'd better lie down—or sit."

THE ROCKETS' thunder grew to deafening proportions, and Sahl felt his weight tripling under the force of the thrust. He sat braced against the wall, watched Alaia's face sag under the pressure. Soon the whine of atmospheric friction returned, and grew into a wild shriek. He inched away from the wall as it began to burn his back. Faron mopped his face with a heavy hand.

"Hot," he gasped. "Lord, it's getting hot!"

"How's it coming?" Sahl shouted, but the girl was too tensely absorbed to answer.

After a time the shriek seemed to diminish slightly, became a low howl, then a muffled drumming, scarcely audible above the roar of the rockets. The minutes crawled slowly past, and gradually the surface markings on the screen stopped their crawl. Their normal weight had returned, and the sound of the jets ceased to be deafening.

"How's it coming?" he called again.

This time she answered. "We're just about stationary. Sitting on our thrust at—oh, somewhere between twenty and thirty miles. I think I've located the radar-altimeter—by watching it crawl back—but I still can't read it."

"Can you tell the zero-mark on it?" the chemist called.

"Yes. But I'm afraid to trust it. There's some kind of adjustment on the dial."

"There's a small transparency port in the power room," Faron called. "Want me to watch it?"

"Yes. I'll go down at about a mile a minute until we're a couple of miles up. Think you can yell when we're at about ten-thousand feet?"

"I'll try," he muttered. "How'll you judge our rate of descent?"

She tapped an instrument dial. "This thing seems to be an acceleration balance. It sits on this center mark when the thrust is just right to make me feel my normal weight. I've been comparing the reading with the feel of the thrust. We'll start down slow, then keep it on the center mark. Warn me if we seem to be dropping too fast."

Faron shook his head, muttered pessimistically, and left the cabin. The biologist sat watching the scope and feeling helpless. Slowly the surface markings spread, grew larger. The land was rising to meet them.

Faron burst into the cabin again. "Better slow it down," he called. "We're dropping pretty fast." The rockets droned louder for a moment, and the screen markings ceased to spread. Alaia risked a quick glance at Faron:

"What kind of country down there?"

"Hilly," he said, then glanced at the scope and touched it. "This place right here looks like a valley. Fairly flat."

She nodded and touched the controls lightly. The marking crept slowly under the crosshairs, then stopped. The descent began again. Sahl saw that her only yardstick of velocity lay in the seeping spread of the markings on the scope. She occasionally glanced at the acceleration balance, but her eyes turned quickly back to the screen. Faron had returned to the power room.

HER HANDS began flickering quickly about the controls as the spread became more rapid. She muttered through gritted teeth. Sahl braced himself and waited.

Faron was shouting from the power room, but the roar made his voice unintelligible.

"See what's the matter with him!" she snapped suddenly. "I'll hold us right here." The roar increased slightly as she nudged the thrust control, and the spread of the marking slowed to a halt.

Faron was mopping his face on his sleeve as Sahl entered the power room. "About to go down in a gorge!" he shouted. "She's got to move it over some."

Sahl glanced at the transparent port, saw nothing but grayness beyond it. "What's that?"

"Smoke. Our jets touched off the vegetation. We're about a hundred yards up. No use watching any more. I'll try to guide her in."

They hurried back to the control cabin. Faron traced a finger lightly along a dark marking on the scope. "Deep cut," he told her. "Move it over here."

The scenery began to crawl. "Say when!" she called.

"Take it slow—all right, *now!*" "Check. Brace yourselves. We're going in."

Seconds later, a series of muffled tearing sounds echoed through the ship. Then a settling jar. She killed the jets.

"Down!" gasped Faron, sitting up,

"Watch *out!*" Alaia screamed suddenly. "We're going over!"

The room began to tilt, first slowly, then gathering impetus. Sahl scrambled toward the down-going wall. A thunderous roar. A bone-crushing jolt. A body slammed against him hard, and the wind went out of him. The room spun crazily, and the jolts continued, as if they were rolling down a hill. His head slapped hard against the wall. Awareness faded.

The jolting had stopped. Apparently he had blacked out for only a few seconds, for Alaia was still untangling herself from him when he shook the fog away. "Sorry, Sahl," she muttered. "I didn't mean to use you for a crash pad. You just got in the way."

HE SAT up slowly, found himself sitting on the dead Eridanian, and arose to stand on the slightly inclined wall. Faron lay groaning in the corner.

"Nice landing," Sahl breathed, and meant it.

"Faron's hurt!" she gasped, bending over him. "His leg! It's all—"

Sahl knelt to take a look. "Broken," he muttered, then began splitting the fabric of his suit. "Broken femur." He shook his head and reached for the Eridanian's crystal gun.

"No!" the girl protested, knocking his hand away.

He glowered at her. "Rather listen to him scream while I splint it?"

"It didn't kill *you*, did it?"

"All right, but—if he's unconscious—he can't—"

He looked at her sourly. "Can't come trotting along with us?" He held the gun close to Faron's shoulder, pressed the firing switch, and waited for the groans to stop. Then he brushed away the crystals that remained half-imbedded in his skin.

"Go find me something long and straight for a splint," he grunted, and began ripping Faron's suit into strips.

She came back after a few minutes, empty-handed. "All I found was a long metal rod, but it must weigh thirty pounds. He's heavy enough as it is."

He gazed at her quietly. "You planning to carry him, Ala?"

She sucked in a short breath. "Why, I—"

"Get the rod, if you want it splinted."

She hesitated, then went back to get it. "We're hanging over the edge of a bluff. It's a wonder we didn't roll into it," she called.

"Let's have the rod."

She gave it to him, then watched as he packed one end of it under Faron's arm, then bound it to his body from the chest down. Gradually it seemed to dawn, on her that Faron wasn't going any place.

"Pull this tight and tie it when the fracture pops in place," he muttered, then sat down to stretch the limb against the writhing knot of muscles.

There was a dull snapping sound. "Tie it!" he grunted.

Minutes later, Sahl arose panting. "It may not be properly set, but that'll keep it from compounding, anyhow. Let's go."

She shook her head slowly. "I'm not going anywhere."

He frowned sharply. "Listen! It's certain that someone spotted our landing. It's equally certain that we can't move Faron, and that they'll get him anyway. Your presence won't help him a damn bit."

"I can't just *desert* him!"

"If you don't, you'll be deserting a hundred and twenty others."

"I don't see how—"

"We came down here to look around, get information, and get it back to the Ark. I don't know how we can accomplish it now, but I know we *can't* do it just sitting here waiting to be captured. They're probably on their way here now. Come on, let's get moving."

She looked down at Faron and bit her lip. "All right, I'll come," she said hoarsely. "But Sahl, I hate your guts."

## Chapter VII

THE FIRES still smoldered on the low hillside about the ship. By their light, he could see that they had landed in what appeared to be a garden, or an orchard. The sun had set, and only a trace of twilight lingered in the west. A faint breeze washed the hillside and whispered in the foliage of the shrub-like trees. The breeze brought pleasant odors: a wisp of smoke, the smell of moldering leaves, a faint perfume from the trees. Despite the danger, they paused a moment savoring the feel of mossy earth under their feet.

"Thirteen years," Alaia kept murmuring, "thirteen long years." The "orchard" was cool and pleasant, the trees shaped like inverted hearts, with the foliage draped from the branches like tassels. They reminded Sahl of weeping willows, except for their near-perfect symmetry. It was indeed a garden world—and old, old and carefully tended.

She caught his arm suddenly. "Sahl! Lights moving in the sky! Up there!"

He gazed in the direction she pointed and saw them. The breeze brought the faint drone of engines. Circling aircraft.

He moistened his lips nervously and hesitated. "Probably sent to spot the rocket. But they can't land here, not unless they do it the same way you did."

"Yes, but they'll guide a ground party to us."

He nodded and walked to the rim of the gorge. A hundred feet down to the rush of water over rocks. The moon was rising, and by its faint light he saw the dim whiteness of a small waterfall.

"Let's go," he grunted, and began trotting toward higher ground, following the lip of the cliff a dozen yards on their right.

"Where to?" she called from behind.

"How should I know? Anywhere, away from that rocket. We'll stay on the crest of the ridge. It seems to follow the gorge. Down there might be a good place to hide, if we have to."

"This moss is too soft. Sahl, we're leaving a clear trail."

"I know it, but I hope they won't find it before morning."

"Those lights. They're circling lower. They've seen the fires."

"Yeah. Save your breath for running."

The crest of the ridge steepened and angled away from the gorge and led them to a steep hill that arose on their left. They scrambled up a series of rocky ledges to a rain-guttered slope that was free of the moss. Regular patches of brush lay ahead. Alaia pleaded exhaustion and they paused to rest.

"We must have run ten miles," she panted.

"Closer to four, maybe," he muttered, staring back at the orange etching of glowing embers on the hillside where they had landed.

"Sahl, look! Down the gorge toward the valley!"

"Uh—yes, lights. A whole swarm of them. And they're moving."

"Torches?"

"I don't think so. They—they move too fast. And they're too white for flame."

They fell silent for a moment. "I don't hear anything. No engines."

"Too far away, maybe."

"The wind's right. But—look! They're flying. Close to the ground, but they're flying."

"Come on," he muttered, "we'd better be moving."

They climbed again, and as the brush thickened a moon-splashed cliff loomed ahead. They made for



it, tearing through the brush and stumbling over the rocky ground.

"That cliff," Sahl muttered. "Looks like a mesa up there, or a high plateau."

"What good is it? Why do we keep climbing?"

"To get a view of the land. So that if we last through tomorrow, we'll see where to go."

SHE TURNED to look back.

"Sahl! Those lights. They've split up back by the rocket." He paused to follow her gaze, then tugged her on. "Part of them coming this way. Hurry!"

"But where?" she gasped as she ran.

"The cliff's got an overhang. We'll get under it."

"The lights—they wink on and off—like signals. And they warm around like wasps."

"Come *on!*" he snapped. "You can watch them from under the overhang."

They sprinted across a clearing, then ran along the foot of the cliff until they reached a gulley where the rock hung like a jaw over the ground. They crawled quickly back into the blackest shadows of the recess and sat panting on the moist rocks.

"Nice place for something big and stealthy and hungry to hang out," she said with a shiver in her voice.

"Maybe. But I doubt if there's anything like that left on this planet." He paused, and his voice changed slightly. "Nothing, that is, except *us*."

He heard her moisten her lips in the darkness, as if to speak, but she said nothing. Peering out at the night he caught a glimpse of the winking lights, momentarily visible beyond a dip in the ridge.

"They must have picked up our trail all right," he muttered. "Let's hope they lose it where the mossy ground ends."

"What *are* they?"

"I don't know but—they're getting closer. Listen!"

"I don't hear . . ." She paused, then: "Yes, I do—faintly. It's a whirring sound, like wings, like quail flying. A whole big covey of quail."

"That's what it is," he whispered. "Wings." He crawled closer toward the opening and stared.

"Fireflies. Giant fireflies, Ala—only they're probably nothing like fireflies except that they glow. Listen to those wings! And they light up a whole patch of hillside."

"Coming this way?"

"They're circling. Must have lost us."

She laughed suddenly. "Fireflies, chasing humans. It's funny—"

"Don't get hysterical, Ala!"

"It's really funny," she went on. "All the quaint little life-forms, out to hunt us down. Watch out for the rabbits, Sahl! Beware of the sparrow patrol! They work in packs. I wonder what the fireflies are leading. A band of gophers? A flock of snakes?" She laughed again, but choked it off in a hiss and a shiver.

"You're not far from wrong," he muttered. "They *are* leading something. There's lots of rustling in the brush. But—I think they're heading the wrong way."

"Intelligent fireflies—what next?"

"Not intelligent, I'd guess. Just under control. Like a dog-pack."

"Under whose control? The little fat-heads?"

"Remotely, I imagine. I wouldn't be surprised but what every life-form on the planet is controlled. The fellow we communicated with on the ship said as much. Or hinted at it."

She was silent for a moment. "Have the lights gone away?"

HE CRAWLED halfway out into the open and stared. "They're swarming up the cliff, about half-a-mile away—up to the top of the mesa. I guess they think we went . . ."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just happened to think: if they suspect we took that way, then there must be a path up the cliff down there—or some reason why they think we'd want to climb it. Both, maybe."

"So?"

"So maybe we should, if we get a chance."

"Sahl—I'm too tired to move."

"Sleep awhile, if you can. I'll watch."

She murmured gratefully, and he heard her shifting around on the loose rock, seeking a place to stretch out. Suddenly she giggled. "Something crawled down my back. I—" Then she choked out a yelp. "Sahl, help me! It stings, and I can't reach it."

With a worried grunt he crawled back to where she lay, trying to claw at something between her shoulder-blades. He slipped his hand down the neck of her suit and felt along the smooth skin until he found it—a rough scaly little disk that clung tight to her back. He pinched it hard and jerked. She whimpered as the thing came free. Sahl struck a light and studied it briefly—a leathery creature with wiry tendrils that moved very slowly, as if groping for the hold they had lost. His face remained expressionless.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Nothing much," he grunted.

He laid it on a rock and burned it. It wasn't much, as it stood—but he had seen the mature one with the pale green fruit, growing with its roots buried deep in the flesh of a man.

"Better sleep up closer to the front," he advised.

The moon rose higher in the star-flecked sky, and he watched the quiet land with its orderly patterns of vegetation, and the winking lights that circled slowly over it. The orderliness implied ownership. Here was no primitive forest waiting for the axe and the plough. Here was no place for a colony. He glanced at the lurid disk of the moon and tried to pick out the landing site where over a hundred humans waited and watched.

In vain.

No, they would not turn back, would not spend the long years required for the journey home. They would come down here eventually. And when they came, what would be their role in the scheme of the world? Servants? Or merely an organ in the biologic corporation the native Eridanians were building?

VOICES FLOATED to him on the breeze, voices and the rustle of brush. He frowned, brought out his gun, and stretched out on his stomach to wait. The search was continuing. Peering carefully, he finally spotted them a hundred yards away. A dozen of the saffron-skinned manlike creatures were beating about in the brush and talking among themselves.

The language seemed monosyllabic and primitive, but somehow human, designed for the acoustics of the human throat. Sahl felt certain that they were not locally evolved, but rather had descended from primitive Earthlings, captured by the Eridanian space-wanderers during their day of expansion. How long ago? Judging by their bone structure, he guessed it to be at least fifty thousand years. Mutations had occurred, of course; their coloring and their loss of hair had undoubtedly come about since their departure from Earth. Also their ability to commune telepathically with the Eridanian species. The latter specialization seemed to suggest forced breeding.

The searchers were wandering closer. They seemed to carry no weapons except staves, and their only source of light was the moon. Since they spoke among themselves, he guessed that they were free agents rather than telepathically-controlled creatures such as the ones they had encountered on the ship.

Sahl retreated deeper into the recess. The party reached clear ground fifty yards down the cliff, then turned and wandered toward the place where the fugitives lay hidden. He quickly searched through the pockets of Alaia's suit and found the crystal gun, which seemed preferable to the more lethal automatic, in case they were discovered.

The party paused occasionally to prod under the edge of the cliff with their staves. Didn't they realize that the Earthlings were armed? That numbers were no match for guns?

SUDDENLY HE heard a burst of laughter from the group, then a sudden shriek—a woman's voice, raised in clamoring protest. He frowned. There had been no woman among the searchers. He stole

closer for a look. A short, thick female was struggling to escape them, but they pinned her arms behind her and held her fast. He suddenly heard the screech of an infant among the babble of voices. One of the men held the baby under his arm, and the woman fought frantically to get it back. Suddenly Sahl understood. The men had not been searching for the Earthlings, but for the woman and her child. The small drama was breaking up. They dragged the howling female down the hill. The fellow with the baby set out in another direction—along the foot of the cliff toward the place where the winking lights had swarmed up its side.

He thought for a moment of following, but decided to wait. There were still signs of activity in the area about the damaged rocket, and certainly the search was continuing, probably along the gorge. He was puzzled by the incident he had just witnessed. It seemed to have an ominous significance, but he could not interpret it. Did the child's capture in some way involve the motives of the Eridanian race? Or had the woman merely stolen a child that was not her own?

He stiffened suddenly, hearing a sound in the distance. Had he imagined it, or did a voice call his name—a booming voice that rolled across the hills. It came again, swelling louder with a change in the breeze.

*"Morgun Sahl. Alaia Dazille!"*

He lay frozen for a moment. A giant loudspeaker calling to them. Echoes rang and reverberated among the hills. Was it Faron, captured by the master-creatures, and responding to their bidding? But the voice seemed mechanical, and he remembered the translator unit aboard the rocket. Undoubtedly the language structure was still set up in its memory circuits and recording units. They had only to feed its output into a large amplifier.

*"Welcome! Welcome! Sahl and Dazille, Welcome!"*

THE WORD made him shiver. Perhaps it resulted from a malfunction of the translator. Or perhaps it was a trick. He wondered how much insight they had gained into human psychology. Or were they interpreting it in terms of their almost sub-human servants with the saffron hides? He shook Alaia awake, and she sat up muttering sleepily. Then she clutched his arm as the voice resumed.

*"Welcome, wanderers!"* A pause to let the echoes die. *"You are free to roam and observe . . . You will not be harmed. . ."*

"What's going on?" Alaia whispered in fright.

"Shhh! Listen!"

*". . . as long as you harm no one else . . . We shall wait until you feel the need to cooperate with us . . . Meanwhile, lest you think of violence, remember that we hold Faron Qun a hostage."*

The voice fell silent. The echoes died.

"Free to roam!" Alaia repeated. "Did we misjudge them?"

"I hadn't realized that we'd *made* a judgement," he murmured sourly.

"Then why run? Why hide?"

"Because we didn't know how they'd react to the seizure of their rocket, and to your killing the one on board. We still don't know."

"I've got the feeling we're trapped," she murmured.

"We are. We can't contact the Ark or get back to it without their help. We don't dare trust them. And I can't see how they dare trust us. To them, we're a couple of wolves—wandering in their flocks."

"They've got Faron," she reminded him.

He hesitated, then spoke softly: "Listen, Ala—the three of us are expendable. We have to be, for the hope of the colony. If you don't agree, then we'd better part company—and you can head for the nearest city."

"I—I know, Sahl. Of course we're expendable, but—"

"Then we can't think of Faron as a debit. If he has to be spent, then we'll spend him. If you can't agree, you'd better go. If you feel he's a club over your head, then you'd better go look for our hosts—and 'cooperate', as they put it."

"I—" She started to speak, but fell silent. Her breathing became labored. "I hate you." Her voice was

violent.

"That's beside the point," he said coldly. "It doesn't give an answer."

Another silence, then: "All right. All right."

He nodded in the darkness. "I doubt if they'll harm him, no matter what we do."

"Why not?"

"They want us for something. And I have an idea what it is. No, don't ask me yet—because I'm far from being certain, and I don't want us to act on guesswork."

## Chapter VIII

DAWN CAME, and he arose with a start, having fallen asleep during the night. He touched Alaia's arm and she stirred, then sat up to rub drowsy eyes. He crawled to the opening and stared across the hilltops and beyond them toward a plain. The orange sun spread a lurid light over the landscape, fully revealing its features to them for the first time.

A moss-draped world, hoary with age. No vivid colors splashed its gray-stained spread of vegetation, no riotous growth, nor any tangle of plants seeking sunlight in a frantic competition. It was a restrained world of dusty greens, drab browns, silvery grays. The hills and the valley were covered with evenly spaced trees, and the moss blanket lay soft over the ground between. Perhaps ten miles away on the plain nestled a patch of white buildings.

He looked further and saw others like them—small villages scattered across the valley nestled beside the creeks in nests of trees. And the inhabitants?

"It looks like a painting," Alaia murmured beside him.

"It is," he grunted, "but the pigment is protoplasm. Nature's been changed into an art-form—or a system of slavery, depending on how you look at it, and from which side of the fence."

"Reminds me of pictures I've seen of Japanese landscapes."

"Yeah, Earth might look like this someday. With one difference."

"What's that?"

"It'll belong to Man."

"And here?"

"We'll just fit in somewhere. Or else we won't fit in at all. We won't be at the top."

"Maybe someday—"

"No, Ala. If this is as carefully a tailored biologic system as I think, it's designed to serve one species—the one that developed it. Thinking that Man could supplant the designers of it is like expecting a whale's brain to function in the body of an elephant."

"What hope is there, then?"

"That maybe we can live here as predators—or at least as non-participants. We brought tons of seeds from Earthplants, and the small animals, of course. If we could get established on an island continent —" He stopped suddenly.

"What's wrong?"

"Seeds," he muttered. "Seeds. Vegetables of course, but also—clover and Johnson grass, oaks and pecans and pines, even sagebrush and cactus. Not to mention the rabbits and white rats."

"I don't understand."

"Never mind, let's just look around. There's no one in sight."

THEY SLIPPED from the recess under the cliff face and paused for a moment. A few winged creatures circled lazily in the sky. A tendril that grew from a fissure in the rock seemed to sense their presence, and began curling back away from them at perhaps an inch a minute. A ball of fur hung in a nearby shrub, dangling by a single tentacle that was coiled about a branch. It opened a single eye and blinked at them. Then it snaked out another tentacle, caught at a neighboring shrub, and began swinging away—hand over hand.

Alaia shuddered. "I'm starving, but what'll we eat?"

He brought out a single stick of protein dehydrate and broke it in half. "We'll have to wait and see what the saffrons eat. We don't dare experiment. Come on. Let's walk."

They hurried along the foot of the cliff toward the place where the flying lights had ascended. They cast nervous glances toward the hills, and all about them.

"I keep feeling like something's watching us," she breathed.

"It's possible," he grunted. "That fur ball with one eye, for instance. Or the trees. The birds. Which creatures are semi-intelligent? Which communicate among themselves, or with the dominant race? We don't have a way of knowing."

"Sahl, what are we looking for? It seems so hopeless?"

"We're looking for weak spots, for sensitive points. There's one thing about an integrated system, a system of interdependencies: if some key member of it gets out of whack, the whole thing goes to pot, Like mechanical civilization, for instance; deny it any one of a dozen key materials and it starts falling to pieces."

"Even if we found it, how could we do anything about it?" He chuckled grimly. "We won't—in anything less than a lifetime. You didn't expect anything else, did you?"

She shook her head. "I didn't expect it to be easy, no." She paused, staring ahead. "What's that up there, where the rock juts out?"

"It's—" they moved ahead a few paces. "—a ladder, I think. Iron rungs, set in the rock." His eyes followed them up, but the face of the cliff sloped back out of sight.

He trotted out toward the brush, seeking a better vantage point. He stood there for a time, gazing at the clifftop two hundred feet above them.

"What is it?" she called in a low voice.

"A wall," he answered. "A high wall along the top of the cliff." He looked around quickly, as if fearing an eavesdropper, then called, "Come on out here."

As she approached, he handed her the gun. "I'm going to climb it, Ala. Cover me. I want a look at what's on the mesa."

She took the gun and made a wry mouth. "You'll be a perfect target up there whether I cover you or not."

He nodded. "I know—but I'm beginning to believe what they said, about leaving us free to roam awhile. Surely they could have taken us before now if they wanted to."

HE STRODE to the cliff and began climbing slowly. But the rungs seemed to be about three and a half feet apart, making the climb something of a struggle. Standing on the first rung, and clutching the second at the level of his waist, he could just comfortably reach the third. A person of less than adult stature could not have climbed the ladder. Why the wide spacing, he wondered?

Halfway up, he froze. The loudspeaker had thundered a single word from over the hills: "*Wait!*" And the echoes said, "wait . . . wait. . . ait. . ."

He hung there motionless for a moment, listening. A perfect target indeed! A helpless speck on the crag. They wouldn't even have to inflict a lethal wound. If he were winged, the drop to the rocks would kill him.

"*If we meant to destroy you, now would be the time.*"

He waited.

"*Wouldn't it?*" demanded the smug watchers.

He gingerly went back down one rung.

"*But you are free to continue upward, or to descend, as you choose.*"

A moment of indecision. He looked back at Alaia. She stood very still, eyes sweeping along the cliff-top. He set his jaw and began climbing again.

"*Do not molest the young ones,*" warned the distant voice, "*nor their nurses.*"

The warning made him catch his breath. Young ones? Were they letting him wander into a place where the Eridanians spawned their young? If so, he decided that they were making a serious mistake.

But as he continued the climb, a faint babble of voices reached his ears—childish shrieks and laughter

and gibberish. Human voices, or those of the saffron primates.

He scrambled up the last step and stood in a narrow pathway that ran along the eight-foot wall, overhung here and there by the drapery of foliage. He stood on a rock, leaped for a hand-hold, and pulled himself up. He looked over into what seemed to be a shady garden or park. He caught a glimpse of two orange-tinted children toddling across the moss-covered turf. They vanished among the trees, but he heard the wailing of infants, and the shouting of the young. Puzzled, he sat on the wall and beckoned to Alaia. She came forward and labored through, the same as he had.

HE STIFFENED, suddenly sensing the reason for the wide spacing: *so that the children could not escape*. He looked quickly back toward the villages on the plain, remembered the incident of the woman and her child. The searchers had led her back in the general direction of the villages, but they had obviously taken the child up here. Why?

Alaia's frightened face came into view. "I never felt so helpless," she gasped as he helped her up to the top of the wall.

She regained her breath and listened to the sounds in the park. "Children. Lots of them. What is this?"

"Let's find out." He leaped down to the mossy turf and caught her arm as she followed.

They moved a few yards deeper into the trees, then stopped suddenly. A buxom saffron female lay nude on the soft moss, sprawled listlessly on her back with her eyes closed. Two toddlers nursed hungrily at her large breasts. One looked up to peer at the intruders with his large brown eyes, but did not interrupt his meal.

They moved quietly on through the cool shade, encountered several similar scenes. "Wet nurses," he breathed.

"Not mothers?"

"Doubt it. Saw one little fellow trade nannies back there."

Occasionally one of the nurses moved listlessly to gaze at them with empty eyes, only to fall back lazily to a more comfortable position without showing any real curiosity.

"It's horrible!" Alaia shuddered. "They're all idiots."

"Highly specialized breeding, probably. I imagine they're a distinct sub-species. Contented cattle, as opposed to the yoke oxen."

She murmured a protest. They moved on. The park was a garden spot, overgrown with fruit-bearing trees and vines. Alaia plucked a pulpy, pink-skinned fruit, but he caught her hand on its way to her mouth.

"It must be all right," she said. "I saw a nurse eating one."

He hesitated, then let her take a bite. "Good!" she smiled.

"I'll wait, thanks. If you put on a blank look and start nursing babies, then I'll know."

She sputtered and spat and tossed the rest of it away. "Go to hell!" she snapped, reddening furiously.

They came to a low wall and looked over it into another section of the nursery park. There were children of a higher age group, but no wet nurses. He caught sight of a saffron adult wandering among the trees—a man.

"Two to three-year-olds, Sahl. What is this place?"

"Stockyard, I think. Come on, let's see the whole thing."

## Chapter IX

THE MESA proved to include about five square miles of land, and Sahl estimated that the park contained approximately four thousand children, ranging in age from a few weeks to eight years. No one molested them as they wandered, although the cold, objective stares of the supervisors made him feel somehow that they were control units of Eridanian masters. Indeed, the older children themselves seemed occasionally to move and gaze with a solemnity that was somehow unchildlike. He saw one incident that

he could only interpret as a release-shock phenomenon.

The child, an eight-year-old, stood gravely by the wall at the far end of the enclosure, hands folded behind his back, feet spread slightly, head erect. He watched them with adult-seeing eyes, quietly observing a disinterested and interpretive silence. As Sahl crouched and leaped to pluck a fruit, the child's eyes seemed to measure the height of the jump, and he nodded slightly to himself. After they had passed, Sahl glanced back. The child had slumped to the ground, was clutching his head in his hands and moaning. A look of idiocy had spread across his face. The biologist remembered the reaction of the ship's crew to the death of the master, and he pursed his lips thoughtfully.

Alaia touched his arm suddenly. "Look—a stone building, there in the trees. It's covered with vines."

"First one we've seen," he murmured, coming to a halt. "Unless you count the unwall'd rain-shelters. Let's have a closer look."

They wandered closer, but Sahl suddenly drew his gun and stiffened.

"What's wrong? What do you see?"

"Notice the door. Five feet tall, no more. Not built for human convenience."

"Look what's hanging over it." "One of the fur balls, like the thing we saw in the brush."

THEY ADVANCED slowly. The creature hung by a tentacle from a peg set in the wall. The other tentacle was coiled about a half devoured fruit that it had plucked from the vines. The single eye surveyed their approach unwinkingly. Suddenly it set the fruit on a small ledge over the door and thrust the tentacle through a small hole in the wall just beneath the ledge. The tentacle seemed to writhe for a moment, then withdrew and picked up the fruit again.

"Sahl, I heard a chime ring just then. Inside the building."

"So did I. The little fellow up there is apparently a doorman."

She stared at it for a moment. "It might be quaint, if I weren't so scared."

"Quaint? Mmmm—which is more advanced: a photoelectric warning rig, or a biomechanism whose only purpose in life is to do a task like that?"

"Rhetorical question. Shall we try the door."

"Why? It looks like it's opening for us."

They stopped a few feet away, guns ready, gazing into what appeared to be an empty anteroom.

"What opened it?"

"We'll find out."

Sahl thrust his head gingerly inside, glanced around quickly, then withdrew it. "Another fur ball," he muttered, "hanging on the inside wall. Some system."

"*You are invited to enter,*" called a voice from inside the building.

"Sahl, there's one of them in there!"

"Maybe." He hesitated for a long moment, then shrugged. "We might as well go in, but keep that crystal-gun ready."

They stepped cautiously into the anteroom. The door swung slowly closed behind them. Light came from openings along the top of the wall. The ceiling nearly brushed the top of Sahl's head, touched when he stood on tiptoe. They faced an opposing door, but it remained closed. Briefly, he wondered if they had walked into a trap.

"*If you will replace your weapons in your clothing, we shall permit you to pass. We cannot trust your impulsiveness.*"

"They *are* in there," he conceded to Alaia.

"Well, what next?"

He paused, then spoke to the voice. "I'll put my automatic away, but we won't give up the anaesthetic weapon."

The voice hesitated, then: "*Agreed. But I advise you against its use.*"

A TENTACLE opened the door for them, and they approached slowly. Another room beyond it, this one richly furnished. The Eridanian sat on a softly padded couch, facing them with a calm, piercing

gaze. Two eight-year-olds flanked him. Their weapons, and their coldly adult expressions, told Sahl that they were telecontrolled by the Eridanian. All remained motionless for a few seconds, and Sahl's eyes quickly swept the room. A young girl lay sleeping on a pallet, one of the parasite creatures rooted in her back. Twisted plants with fat protuberances grew in urns at each end of the Eridanian's couch. Similar parasites, with their pale-skinned fruit, grew tangled with the plants rooted in the protuberances. Sahl suppressed an exclamation of disgust.

"Our feeding method disturbs you," came the voice from an opening in the wall behind the Eridanian's couch. "The process is biologically favorable, however. There are virtually no waste products in the milk of the *wretr*; hence, our digestive organs are much simpler and less subject to disturbance than your own. Your disgust is a primitive reaction."

"I wasn't aware than I had expressed it," he growled.

"I perceive it," said the Eridanian, through the mechanical voice. "You have not been bred for telepathetic aptitude, nor conditioned for it, but I can easily perceive your overall semantic state."

Sahl looked around again. "How did you get the translator up here without us noticing it?"

"We did not. It was taken to the nearest city. A . . . uh . . . saffron lies in the next room, responding in his own language to my statements. His voice is being transmitted to the city by radio and fed into the translator. The translation is rebroadcast to this station. That is what you hear. The method seems complicated, but within a few days we shall have conditioned our saffrons—several of them—to speak your tongue."

Sahl frowned thoughtfully. "What frequencies—"

The creature on the couch seemed to purr, and Sahl somehow felt that it was a chuckle.

"You ask that, wondering if the signals are being picked up by your ship on our moon. That is very probable. We established communication with Wolek Parn as soon as we picked up the translator with its language-content. We have nothing to hide. I might mention that your leader seemed more disturbed by the death of our emissary than we have been."

"You *aren't* disturbed?" Sahl asked coldly.

"It was unfortunate," the creature conceded, "but we do not share your view of death. When a *Piszjil*—as the sub-species calls us—dies, he does not die in the same sense that you would understand. Because of telepathetic resonance conditions, the *Piszjil* focus of consciousness is not sharply limited to a single individual, but is to a certain extent distributed."

"A racial consciousness?"

"Not quite. I have a distinct personality, and the body you see is its central point. But it extends also to all of my kind within approximately a ten-mile radius. If you were to destroy me, my memories and thought-patterns and feelings would still live in the others. We are born as distinct individuals, you see, but as we grow older we become composite personalities, and even centuries after, death, some trace of awareness remains in others of our kind. Eventually, for all practical purposes, the individual ego dies out, or is subsumed by others—but there is no sharply defined death."

ALAIA MOVED a step closer and stared down at the small man-thing. The two guards swung their weapons toward her quietly. "For what are you going to use these children here on the mesa?" she demanded in a voice full of restrained hate.

The *Piszjil* blinked at her once with semi-transparent lids that covered yellow eyes with black slits for pupils. He drew a robe of pale green gauze more closely about his shoulders and studied her quietly before speaking.

"If your feelings become overt," he warned, "I shall have to anaesthetize you. Your question is an aggressive demand, but I shall answer nevertheless. The children are brought here at birth from the free villages on the plain—"

"Free?" Sahl interrupted.

"Yes. Theirs is a folk society, and quite fixed in cultural form. We do not interfere with their lives, except to levy a certain percentage of the birth rate, which is quite high. The percentage of males we take is such that the male-female ratio in the adult population of the villages remains one to seven."



"Seven wives apiece, eh?"

The *Piszjil* paused. "Their mating customs are rather free, but it works out about like that, usually. We make an occasional census, and it varies only slightly from year to year. They bring the children to us of their own accord. It is a religious ceremony for them, since they attach a sacredness to our race. The mother frequently objects, but the children that they keep are raised communally, and she soon transfers her affection to others. The priests bring our levy to us here at regular intervals."

"You haven't answered my question!" Alaia snapped.

The *Piszjil* ignored her, and continued: "You have seen the park, but have not understood its significance. This building is the center of influence. There are other rooms where Tutors sit in trance, continually exerting an effort to establish liaison with the growing children. It is established gradually at first, then reaches a sudden strongness of response at about eight years. When the liaison is perfectly achieved—if it is—the children are ready to leave the park."

"And if it isn't achieved?"

"There are failures, of course," said the *Piszjil*, gesturing with a fragile hand toward the girl who slept on the pallet, with the parasite rooted in her back. "But they are useful. The *wretr's* milk differs according to the nature of the host. Some hosts are vegetable, some animal. It provides a variety of diet—"

"Beast!" A sudden scream of rage from Alaia.

Sahl caught at her arms to restrain her, but she savagely tore herself free and darted toward the *Piszjil's* couch with obviously murderous intent. The weapons of the child-guards coughed together. She staggered a few steps, then crumpled with a sob at the foot of the couch.

Sahl had crouched and drawn his automatic. The child-guards kept their weapons trained on him, but did not fire. The *Piszjil* watched him without change of expression.

"In our cooperative world," it said slowly, "we have found lethal weapons unnecessary for many thousands of years. We are certainly capable of manufacturing them in a very short time, however."

The toneless voice seemed to contain a threat. Sahl straightened quietly and lowered the weapon, but kept it in hand. His scalp was bristling, and he fought an urge to kill the thing immediately.

"In fact," the *Piszjil* continued, "since the coming of your ship, we have assembled three rockets, well-armed and capable of destroying your Ark. Modify your behavior accordingly."

## Chapter X

THE CONFERENCE continued, as if there had been no interruption. Alaia lay unconscious before the creature's couch, and Sahl watched her breathing. Her presence had become a handicap, for he could neither run nor fight as long as she lay helpless.

He remembered his own words about the possibility of spending Faron, and suddenly wondered if they had not sprung from an unconscious wish to see the chemist dead. He realized vaguely that he was attracted to Alaia, who was obviously devoted to Faron.

"We inform you of conditions as they exist, you see," the *Piszjil* was saying. "Understandably, your people will be horrified for a time. On the other hand, you must understand our position. Our ancestors brought specimens of the highest life-form on your planet at the time." It gestured toward the child-guards. "You have a common ancestry with them, but at the time of capture they were scarcely more than apes. Their language consisted of perhaps two hundred words. They used fire when they found it; clubs and levers and sharp sticks their only tools.

"To us, they were only animals, potentially useful. We bred them selectively, weeding out the ferocious, saving the placid, the clever, the telepathically apt. The hairlessness was a concession to the beauty-standards of our more egocentric ancestors. Look at them, Morgun Sahl. Your rather distant cousins—human, I think, but different in that they lack your aggressiveness and egotism. Their development has paralleled your own in some respects, in others it has differed. They belong to us now, by their own wish. Does it still horrify you?"

Sahl remained silent, knowing that the *Piszjil* could feel the flood of suppressed anger about him.

"As for this park," the creature went on, "we regard it as philanthropic. Our own young reach

maturity in similar gardens on other tablelands. That should convey to you that we do not see our relationship with the sub-species as one of ruthless exploitation."

*Be kind to your dog,*Sahl thought bitterly, then stared at the *Piszjil* with sudden interest. "You are mammals?" he asked.

The yellow eyes narrowed slightly, and the *Piszjil* paused, as if sensing Sahl's shift in mood from frustrated anger to cautious interest. "No, we oviposit our young—in a symbiotic relationship with another species."

"I don't understand."

THE MAN-THING hesitated, lifted a slender arm, closed its eyes, and seemed to be in communication with some unseen person. A shutter clicked behind him, and a picture flashed into projection on the wall over the couch. It revealed a short, waddling creature with fat legs and a small head and a fat spherical body. Somehow, it reminded Sahl of a plucked chicken.

"A *diulrul*," the *Piszjil* said. "An egg-bearer. After fertilization, our eggs are transferred to these creatures to await birth." It paused to purr amusement. "An advantageous system for the females of our race."

"Yeah. Complete emancipation for women. I know some people who'd think it a great idea."

The scene shifted slowly, scanning over a waddling herd of the egg-carriers, then backing away for a view of the whole mesa. It appeared similar to the garden of children, except that a slender pylon arose in the center, marking it for what it was. The projection vanished suddenly.

"We have nothing to withhold, you see," the creature said. "Your species is intelligent enough to find out for itself eventually. So we will answer your questions honestly."

"Then suppose you tell us what you intend to do about our colony."

"Certainly. You will be permitted to land, but your spacecraft will be impounded. You will not be harmed, but you will submit to a period of indoctrination and comfortable detention. Then, everyone who is willing to cooperate will be allowed to go free."

"To do as we wish?"

"Yes."

"Will we be permitted to establish the colony in a geographically isolated area—such as an island group?"

There was a long silence. The *Piszjil* at first seemed to be reluctant to speak. His lids fell closed, and he communicated with another for a time. At last he looked up.

"We insist on assigning the areas ourselves. We will have you transported to them, of course. Afterwards, however, you may leave those places if you choose."

SAHL MUSED over the plural for a moment. Obviously they meant to break the colony up into groups. How small?

"What kind of places will they be?"

Again the *Piszjil* hesitated. "Your ignorance of our life-forms would permit you to survive nowhere except in the free villages of the subspecies. Naturally, however, we cannot inflict your whole group on a single native village."

A shred of suspicion flickered in his mind. "How many sub-groups?"

Silence. Sahl asked the question again.

"A large number. One couple to a village, perhaps."

"Neighboring villages?"

"Randomly selected. But as I said, if you are not content you may leave, after you have gained enough knowledge to survive. You may regroup again, if you wish."

"Uh-huh. And what kind of transportation for the regrouping?"

"Such as they have in the villages."

"Aircraft? Surface vehicles?"

"The latter."

"Powered by?"

"The villages have no technology. But the system of using domesticated life-forms is highly developed."

"The equivalent of horse-drawn vehicles, in other words."

The creature's mouth flickered open for an instant, revealing the retracted fangs. A grimace of irritation? he wondered.

"And what is the total land area over which these free villages are distributed?"

"About—" The *Piszjil* stopped suddenly, eyes narrowing. "The direction of your questioning becomes obvious. Perhaps we underestimated your cleverness. Very well, I'll give you the answer to what you want to know, before you ask it: We regard it as probable that your colony will not reassemble, once it is dispersed. But after a few generations, of course, a number of them will spring up."

"That wasn't to be my last question," Sahl growled.

The *Piszjil* leaned forward slightly, eyes glowing. "Very well. Then ask it."

"I'll state it instead!" he snapped. "A simple knowledge of our language, and the translator's ability to handle it, indicates that you acquired knowledge of the semantic content of our words when you extracted the words from us. Otherwise, the translator could only supply literal word-exchanges. Ergo: you must know the semantic content of the word 'incest,' know it's taboo."

"Go on."

"You know that if you settle one couple in a village, the children will be likely to shun brother-sister marriages, at least as long as the parents are alive. You know that they would grow up among the natives and probably regard them as the 'norm', since our children would be outnumbered. It is inevitable that those children would merge into the native culture, intermarry, lose interest in things outside the settlement. In a couple of generations you would have the hybrids that you apparently want, and they would respect you just as the natives do—as their demi-gods. You could then transplant them—the hybrids—to isolated colonies and do with them as you saw fit. And that would be?"

HE WAITED for an answer. The man-thing inclined its head slightly toward him, and purred softly. "A logical analysis of our motives, Morgun Sahl. We respect the abilities of your young race. Your abilities make you both valuable and a threat to us." He gazed toward the saffron children again. "Our selective breeding developed a certain amount of intelligence in them. But nature, using the same raw material, apparently did a better job—in your people. We think that a hybrid species, combining the docility with higher intelligence and initiative, would be of more use to us, you see. In performing difficult tasks, these folk require constant telepathic control. We think an increase in intelligence would relieve us of some of the burdens of constant supervision."

Sahl laughed humorlessly. "One creature supplies you with food. Another carries your young. Another opens your doors and rings your bells. Others do your labor. Don't you realize that you're heading toward complete dependence? Parasitism, when your descendants will be utterly worthless."

"The symbiosis is beneficial to all concerned," the *Piszjil* said stiffly. "The sub-species benefit by direction, which we supply."

The biologist shook his head. "We won't accept. The colony will make the trip back to Earth rather than agree."

"I spoke of the weapons we built," warned the *Piszjil*. "We will destroy you rather than let you leave. Your race is beginning a space expansion. We cannot let you carry back knowledge of our world to your home."

"Then you'll have to destroy us!" the biologist said harshly.

A purr. "But one of your numbers has already accepted."

"*Faron Qun!*" he gasped, "I don't believe it!"

"You'll see him soon. And, of course, we have the female here." He gestured toward the girl on the floor. "And you as well. A small beginning, perhaps, but if we have to destroy the ship . . ." He seemed to shrug.

Sahl's face went expressionless. "We're prisoners? You said—"

A long, quavering purr—and the creature's lips spread in what could only be the equivalent of mocking laughter.

SAHL LIFTED the automatic and shot it through the brain-case. It looked startled, and its fangs flicked out full length. He shot it again in the belly. The child-guards went into shock. One of them shrieked.

A weapon coughed behind him, and crystals stung his neck. His final impression of his surroundings was a blurred perception of the couch's motion. It was bleeding where the bullet had entered it after passing through the master's body. It lifted a small, rodent-like head which had been retracted, turtle-fashion. It squealed with pain and started staggering toward Sahl on short thick legs. Dimly, he saw that it meant to attack him.

But it was, badly wounded. It managed to collapse on top of him, then died. The breath, and the awareness, went out of him.

## Chapter XI

"HELLO SAHL. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Who is this? Who's talking? I can't see you."

"Of course you can't. We're talking by wire. This is Faron or, as my wives call me, Faroon. Isn't it beautiful here?"

"What are you talking about?" Sahl growled weakly as he lay on something soft and stared at a blue-lighted ceiling.

The chemist laughed heartily. "The planet! The scenery! The people! And—the *Piszjil!*" He paused, and his voice went reverent. "Yes, especially the *Piszjil!*"

"What's wrong with you?" The biologist trembled with anger. "You crazy or something? Where's Alaia? Where are you? And how did I get here?"

"Don't you *know?*" Faron called enthusiastically. "Aren't you *aware?* Oh, but they'll help you be aware, really aware. Of purpose, Sahl! Of high purpose!"

"Yeah?"

"Yes! I'm in a village, Sahl! A dozen beautiful wives! Wonderful, wonderful, everything's wonderful!"

"That's nice." He hesitated, feeling something tie a knot in his stomach. "Where's Alaia?"

"Who?"

"Alaia, *Alaia!*" he barked. "A-LA-I-A. Where is she? What's wrong? Have you completely lost your mind?"

"Who?" Faron's voice was baffled.

Sahl shivered violently. "The girl you were probably going to marry, you maniac! What's *wrong* with you?"

"Nothing! Nothing ever!" The chemist giggled. "Marry? I'm married a dozen times."

Sahl licked his lips, found himself panting. "Faron! Are you drugged? Doped? Or just insane? What day is it? Is the Ark all right?"

There was a long pause, then: "I think it's you that's out of your head, Sahl. Ark? What do you mean by 'Ark'? Noah's Ark? Arc of a circle? Say—you give me the *creeps!* So long, fellow!"

A sharp click.

"Hello! Hello!" he bellowed.

"Hello!" said quite another voice, one that was in the room.

He rolled his head and stared at a saffron servant who sat impassively in the corner, arms folded across his chest, eyes closed. Automaton, he realized, a control unit.

"Well?" he demanded.

"I am the *Piszjil*, *Fyff*, semanticist and psycho-logician. I am not in the room with you; no need to look."

"What's going on?"

"Your memory has been blanked for the past eight days. How do you feel?"

"Weak."

"A result of the conditioning process, perhaps. You experienced considerable pain."

"I was talking to Faron Qun. What happened?"

"The conversation with him was arranged as a demonstration for you. He was subjected to our conditioning methods, and the experiment was a complete success. He has been stripped of large patches of memory. He thinks he is still on Earth somewhere. He is confused, of course, by the blank-spots, but we filled them in with pseudo memories. He was an easy subject."

SAHL FELT the heat flooding his face. His lips twisted, but the curse wilted in his throat. Suddenly his voice was gone. He gasped and strangled, and struggled against his bonds. Dizziness, exhaustion, then nausea that left him drained. Slowly he relaxed, slowly the rage drained away. Then he lifted his hands easily to his face. *There were no bonds!* But he had felt them!

The fellow in the corner made a cackling sound, possibly a response to *Fyff's* amusement. "With you we could not achieve complete success. Your memory is nearly intact. You clung very stubbornly to recollections, no matter how unpleasant we managed to make them for you. Given time, we could probably succeed. But time is short, and we can use you better as you are."

Another flood of anger, another choked off curse, followed by the sensation of strangulation and fear and sickness. He could not move. When at last he subsided, the fellow cackled again.

"Is something wrong, Morgun Sahl?"

He sucked in a slow breath and kept himself calm. "What have you done to me?"

"Conditioned you against overt aggression in any form toward our race. That, at least, was successful. You will not be able to attack, condemn, or harm a *Piszil* in any way. If you persist in trying, you will only find yourself stricken by convulsion, perhaps unconsciousness."

Sahl suppressed a surge of anger about to burst forth. He lay breathing heavily, too stricken to speak.

"You'll also find that it's impossible for you to express an opinion that runs contrary to our wishes. You may feel it, but you can't express it. Eventually it'll probably frustrate you to such an extent that you'll have to come around to our way of thinking or go mad. The conditioning won't last forever, but by the time it dies out you'll be either a conformist or insane, like Qun."

*It won't last forever, It won't last forever*—his mind caught at the phrase and clung.

"I wonder if most of your people are as stubborn as you, or as flexible as Qun. We shall soon know, of course."

Good, he thought, they hadn't gotten the others off the moon yet, at least. And if he knew Wolek Parn, they wouldn't manage to do it. They'd have to destroy Ark, colony and all.

"What do you plan to do with me?" he asked aloud.

"Use you as an agent to Wolek Parn."

"I don't understand."

"Parn remains stubborn, even though we broadcast your messages to him. He is half-convinced, but not quite. He insists on talking to you in person before he agrees to your proposals."

"Messages?" he gasped. "Proposals? I didn't—" The denial choked off into a low wheeze. Dizziness again, and fright. He couldn't say it. The words refused to come, and he stammered gibberish.

The spokesman cackled. "A taboo statement, Morgun Sahl."

His helplessness enraged him, and the rage made the situation worse. He blacked out for a few moments. Then he lay weakly struggling to keep some sort of mental balance.

"Try saying, 'I recommend that the whole colony land on the planet without further delay.'"

"I—I—" He swallowed hard. The statement fascinated him strangely. No harm in seeing what happens, he thought. Then he said it. "I recommend that the whole colony land ..."

THE REACTION was immediate. A feeling of warmth, of relief, a sense of security and of relaxation

spread over him. For a moment there was perfect contentment and peace. From this too he recovered gradually, and icy fear replaced it. He was beginning to see.

"Is that the state of mind Faron Qun is in?" he gasped.

"Yes! Precisely! Wouldn't that be pleasant?"

He wanted to bellow a fierce negative, but he checked the impulse before he strangled on it. "You know my answer," he said quietly.

"Indeed I know it, but you can't make it. Now, as to your task—"

"I won't . . . *Won't . . . uhg! . .*"

The *Piszjil* waited until he finished choking, then continued: "A ship will take you to the Ark. Your task is to convince Wolek Parn to send the colony down at once, in a place we'll specify. You'll perform the task, because by that time you'll be fully aware of your limitations, and awareness will actually serve to strengthen the block. You'll be consciously frightened as well as subconsciously. You can't help doing it, and you might as well face it."

Sahl remained silent, fearful of another spasm.

The *Piszjil* paused briefly, then continued slowly: "Consider this. After it's done, you'll be well rewarded. You'll have a pleasant life, in pleasant surroundings. Peace. Relative freedom. Eventually, you'll be content with it. Man, what more do you want? Why insist upon dominion?"

The biologist moistened his lips. He lay staring blankly at the ceiling, refusing to speak, trying not to think. He could not risk any reaction lest it prove to be a dead-end of despair. If I blunder into too many forbidden responses, he thought, I'll really get confused. I'll save it until I get to Parn, he continued, and then I'll throw a sputtering convulsion all over his command deck. He'll know *something's* wrong.

"Now," said his tormentor. "Would you like to see Alaia Dazille?"

He sat up quickly. "May I?"

"Out the door, three rooms down the scorridor, and down the short incline to the seats. Go ahead."

"I'm not locked in?"

"No. Go anywhere you like—if you can."

*If you can.* He had a fair idea of what would happen if he tried to escape. He refused to try. He would save it all up for Wolek Parn, and then rebellion. He left the room and followed the *Piszjil's* directions. Was he making a mistake? I must suppress all possibly forbidden responses, he thought, lest I make the whole situation worse.

He walked down the incline and through a sound-proofed door. As soon as he opened it, he heard her scream. He froze for a moment, looking beyond the door. Nothing but a tier of seats next to a railing, and beyond the rail a pit. It reminded him of an operating room. Somehow it looked familiar. He advanced slowly toward the rail.

As Alaia's scream died, a monotonous voice echoed through the huge room. "Repeat the incident again."

He heard a faint sob. Alaia's. What were they doing to her? The same thing they had done to him—and to Faron with more success. He knew it vaguely, as he knew he had been in this room before. He reached the rail and looked down. She lay on her back in the center of a metal-plated floor far below. A *Piszjil* sat at a control-panel watching her coldly, while his saffron spokesman sat as if asleep behind him.

"Repeat the incident again," the voice insisted, as the creature touched a control.

A humming sound filled the room. She spoke slowly, as if in a trance, and he had to listen closely to understand her words.

"Sahl, put that rod down! For God's sake! No...!" A pause, then a more frantic note: "You hit him! Sahl! You broke his leg! Faron, get out of his way! He's gone berserk!"

SAHL'S KNUCKLES whitened on the rail. He clenched his teeth to keep from shouting a denial that he knew could never pass the block. They were forging memories, rooting out old ones, making new ones! Had they done the same to him?

"Sahl, I've got a gun . . . Put the rod down . . . Put it down, and let him alone . . . Sahl! Get away

from me . I ... Get back or I'll *shoot!* ... *Sahl! All right!* I warned you! Now it's too—"

Her voice stopped suddenly. She made a choking sound. Then: "*It's a lie, it's a lie, it's a lie!* You're making me imagine this. I didn't kill him. *I didn't kill . . .*"

drmmnnnnnggggg—

A sudden drone of surging power. As he stared, an aura of corona discharge flickered around her body like pale phosphorescence. Her screams were wild, insane, piercing. Sahl's belly was a sick knot. He hung panting on the rail, unable to draw himself away. The corona shimmered and flared and hissed—and subsided a little.

"All right!" she shrieked. "All right! Anything! I killed him! Okay! Make it stop!"

Abruptly the corona disappeared. The Eridanian pressed another control. He heard a faint buzz of power, but there was no glow display. Alaia moaned—apparently with relief.

"Thank God!" she kept saying. "Thank God! Don't let it stop. Ohhhhh . . ." And then her voice became a low mumble of relief.

The buzz of power died. He saw her stiffen.

"Repeat the incident again," said the calm voice.

She was silent for a moment, then spoke nervously. "I really didn't kill him; the gun went off accidentally"

A long pause. Then the operator said, "Repeat the incident again, as you recall it."

Sahl gritted his teeth. They were making her invent a false memory. He listened to her going through the imaginary scene again as if she were actually feeling, seeing, hearing it.

"*Alaia!*" he shouted. "*Alaia!* Up here!"

Nothing happened. No response either from the girl or from his internal system of blocks. She continued the reenactment.

"*Alaia! It's a lie—oh! Uhg!*" His voice choked off, and he gasped for air. Crying hysterically, he slipped to the floor—and knew he had lost. They hadn't managed to blank his memory, but they had made him helpless.

He knew dismally that he would do exactly what they wanted him to. Maybe it would be better to wind up like Faron. Faron at least didn't have to realize his condition. And it would be easy, just to let the unwanted things slip away into oblivion. To forget, and accept.

*That thought too was planted in you,* warned the voice of sanity.

Suddenly Alaia was screaming again that it was all a lie, a rotten lie, and it had never really happened. Then the terrifying *drnnngg* of the pain-making aura that seared every nerve ending without numbing or damaging tissue. Her screams came to him this time as inevitable effect of known cause. She was trying to hang on the way he had done—but could do no longer.

He picked himself up slowly and crept back to his cage. And something had slipped away, although he was not quite aware of what he had lost.

## Chapter XII

"IT'S GOOD to see you back, Sahl," Wolek Parn said wearily as they entered the Captain's cabin on the Ark, "even though I can't say you were much of a diplomat—killing two of them, behaving like a wild animal." He paused to glance back at the biologist with mixed emotion, most of it carefully restrained. "You look worn out, worried. I suppose your visit was pretty unnerving in spots."

Sahl nodded thoughtfully, felt a constriction in his throat, and muttered, "Not bad."

The captain sat, down and remained silent for a moment. Sahl stood quietly facing him and waiting. He dared make no long speeches, nor any unfavorable comment about the planet, or its keepers. He knew what he could say, and what was unspeakable. Over a week had passed since his first experience with the conditioned blocks, and he had learned the limitations.

"How's Alaia?" Parn asked.

"Fine," he said casually. Lying face down, he thought, with a baby parasite burrowing into her back. They had done *that* for *him*. If he convinced Parn to bring the colony down, they'd remove the parasite

from her before its roots grew too deep. If he failed, they said they'd let it stay.

"How's Faron?"

"Fine," he lied in the same tone. Parn sighed deeply. "I'm a little disappointed in you, Sahl. But then—we won't go into that. Results count, I guess—and they apparently aren't bitter about the two dead ones, nor about your behavior. All I wanted you back here for was to confirm what you said on the telecast. I was a little suspicious that you might be coerced, or hypnotized, and made to say it. You weren't, were you?"

"No." They had told him what he had said on the telecast, but he hoped he wouldn't have to repeat any of it now. Ridiculous position I'm in, he thought, with the only club *inside* my head. What was worse, he knew a way to attack, a way to strike out at the *Piszjil*, but he could neither do it, nor reveal it to Parn. A weapon, but it couldn't be used. He had known about it in a general way for quite a while, but now the knowledge was more specific. And useless.

"You confirm, everything you said in the broadcast then?"

For a time, he tried to remain silent. But the silence itself was forbidden, and after a moment he had to choke it out.

"I confirm it all."

Parn was staring at him peculiarly. "You feel all right? You look pale. There's nothing wrong with you now, is there?"

"Nothing, nothing at all."

Parn's hand slipped unobtrusively to a panel of buttons. He pressed one of them quietly, then folded his hands under his chin and put on a sour smile. He spent the next five minutes talking about the hard time he had endured trying to handle the restless colonists during the delegation's absence.

THE HATCH opened suddenly, two men entered: Doctor Roli Karme and a burly colonist. They glanced at Parn, then at the biologist. Karme put out a big hand and spoke with a friendly half-grin.

"Glad to see you, Sahl."

The biologist noticed that he was carrying a medical kit in his other hand. He frowned slightly and wondered.

"How much time?" Karme muttered mysteriously to the Captain.

Parn gestured toward the screen. "There's their ship waiting for him. It's obviously armed this time. They wanted to come with him, but I refused. They may come anyway, if we take too long."

What were they talking about? He began to feel frightened.

Karme turned to him with the friendly smile. "Would you stretch out on that cot, Sahl. I want to examine you. Won't take long."

"Wh-why?" He couldn't do it, if it were for a forbidden purpose. But then, he shouldn't have asked.

"Just want to see that you're all right."

Physically? He bore no physical marks. He nodded slightly and obeyed. Karme made a very cursory inspection, then produced a hypo syringe. He pulled at Sahl's sleeve.

"What's that for? What—?"

"Just a sedative. Won't affect you for long."

"I don't need—" But Karme had deftly stung him with it and emptied the barrel in a moment.

He began to feel warm and relaxed. The doctor slipped something around his arm and pulled it tight.

"Blood pressure?"

"Same kind of thing, isn't it?" came the non-committal answer.

But then Karme had another syringe, and this time he probed for a vein. When Sahl protested, the burly colonist came in and sat on him, and Parn held his arm. The lights went dimmer by degree, and the room swirled about him.

"Let's go back to the telecast," said a distant voice. "Sahl, you're telecasting to Captain Parn about the planet . . ."

Events became a tide of confusion. Questions. Answers. Shouts. There was fear, and deep retreat into blackness, so deep that answering became impossible, and consciousness was briefly gone. How



long did it last? There was no spacing of events called "time" in the confusion. Events came and went, but there was no order among them. Voices plagued him, demanded the impossible of him, and finally let him alone.

THE FIRST voice he heard and was Parn's. He lay with his eyes closed and listened. "I can't understand it, Roli. Sahl always seemed like a fairly stable fellow, sour sometimes, and chilly. I just can't see him making an impassioned speech; it's out of character."

"He made it all right. The memory's there somewhere, because snatches of it came out. He made the telecast, but—"

"What?"

"The way it came out this time was . . . well, mechanical, and frantic. Didn't it strike you that way?"

"Yeah, and this other thing bothers me too."

"The sensitive areas? I can't understand it either, Skipper. Why should he put up such a howl when I put him through the killing of that second *Piszjit* again? He couldn't have reacted that way while he did it. He was—"

Sahl sat up with a sudden shudder. "I couldn't kill one of them!" he shouted. "I couldn't!"

The three of them turned to watch him for a moment, and exchanged quiet glances among themselves. He slumped, covering his face with his hands. Something had slipped away from him for a time, but now he remembered. There had been a time when he could kill the things if need be. But now—it was different.

"Listen to me, Sahl," Karme said quietly, and waited for the biologist to look up. "We know something's wrong. Your response mechanisms are fouled up in spots. Speech and motor areas are affected. You block *to* certain things, refuse a response, and retreat. Not now, but under the drug. Now you're conscious, and you can choose alternate responses —cover up for the blocks. Under the drug, you didn't. Now, do you understand what I mean?"

He understood perfectly, but he could only say, "Nothing happened. I'm all right."

A long silence, then Karme said, "I want you to respond to my next questions by saying just the *opposite* of what you mean. If you mean 'yes' say 'no'. If you mean 'good', say 'bad'. All right?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"First question: was the telecast authentically yours?"

He opened his mouth, but no sound came. The block was literal, and he couldn't say 'no'. But the block was also interpretive, and he couldn't communicate the facts by saying 'yes'. But if he remained silent they would know something was wrong, and that also was forbidden. He screamed.

"Grab him, quick!" Parn bellowed.

Someone was shaking him back to consciousness and he fought them. But the light was strong in his eyes, and the taste of neurodrine was in his mouth.

"You've got to send the colony down," he babbled. "It's fine, everything's fine."

A palm crashed hard across his face in a brutal slap. "Nothing personal, Sahl," Parn growled. "But if you don't snap out of it, I'm going to beat hell out of you."

SAHL HOPED he would do it. Anything, if it would help release the flood of pent-up knowledge and the unspeakable plan for attack. Mentioning the plan wasn't blocked literally, for the *Piszjit* hadn't thought of it specifically, but he couldn't talk about it because of his own intent to use it against them. He lay panting and staring at Parn.

"Let him alone, Skipper," Karme said quietly. "He *wants* to say something, but he can't."

"I've seen enough!" the Captain grunted. "It's obvious that something's been done to him. We can't go down." He turned to watch the screen. "They're waiting out there for an answer. They haven't made any threats, but damned if I like the looks of that armament. The first ship didn't have it. They put it on for something."

"Why do they want us down there?" Karme complained. "Why should they invite a wild wolf to come wandering through their tame flocks?"

Sahl lay forcing the immediacy of the situation out of his mind, tried to force away the present, tried to think of nothing. Wolf, sheep, dog, rabbit

"Rabbit," he said. "Somebody introduced rabbits into Australia."

"What's he babbling about?"

Karme fell thoughtful. "Historical incident. Intercontinental tampering with fauna. Introduction of a rabbit pest."

"So?"

Karme shrugged. "Means nothing to me."

It had meant a spasm of agony for Sahl. He tried again, rejecting the present, keeping only a vague notion in mind.

"Japanese beetles—huhhh!"

"He's choking!"

"He's trying to say something." Karme paused. "What do we have in the stocking lockers besides rabbits and rats?"

"Bees, weasels, blacksnakes, foxes —oh hell!—everything small and wild. Not to mention the seeds and nuts and bacteria cultures. *He* was supposed to decide which, if any, of the Earth-forms should be cut loose on the alien planet."

Karme turned to Sahl. "What *is* the answer to that, by the way?"

Just one small word. One small word would do it. And then it would be done. His jaw worked frantically, and his breathing was agonized. The conditioning. It *had* to wear off sometime, Fyff had said.

Just a word!

"Well?" the doctor insisted. "Which species should be released here?"

It came out in a scream of rage.

"*Everything! EVERYTHING!*"

Particularly the weasels to attack the fat little egg carriers, and the foxes to kill the fur balls, and the rats to infest the cities, and the rabbits to gnaw on something vital until a flora sickened and shrank back from the rank aggressive grasses and the rampant weeds, until the towering trees arose to rob the modest gardens of sunlight. Villages would suffer famine and either wander or die, and there would be hell to pay for the designers of a tailored system. And Man? He could not safely enter the planet of peace, but a world in turmoil was just his meat. Famines made nomads, and someone had to lead a village in flight. It would be touch and go, for awhile, but as a wandering savage, Man would have a chance. The colony had wanted nothing more in the beginning.

"Something cracked!" Karme snapped. "He's slipping into gibberish."

"What to do?"

"Find out what he's trying to say. I can take him down to the lab, try everything from hypnosis to insulin shock. It'll be pretty tough on him though. May not be much left when it's over."

"You have my permission to kill him," Parn said pleasantly.

Karme bent over the stricken biologist and frowned. "Now what the hell made him grin like that?"

### Chapter XIII

THE LAUNCHES flew at low altitude, streaking through the night toward the dawn-line, and only an occasional creature looked up, or opened the palm of his hand skyward to see if the faint rattling in the brush was rain. Beyond the dawn-line and over the day-zone, and past the place where the landing was assigned, where a delegation waited, and turned, and frowned after the departing rockets.

No matter. They were foolish to try to escape, these launches. There was no place that they could land and make a break for freedom, for the world was subdued and orderly. The world was cut to a pattern, and the world would capture the colonists quickly, no matter where they tried to run.

The rockets landed on the night-side, two of them did. Two others disgorged their "colonists" in different places on the day-side. When the "colonists" were out, and scurrying away through the brush, the pilots emerged to wait.

A voice came from seven thousand miles away, and it spoke mockingly from the moon. "You have been pested," it said. "Your garden is full of weeds. And we are still up here."

"You will be destroyed immediately," came the curt cold answer.

"The pests are *our* pests, and we know how to deal with them," the mocker replied. "Do you?"

There was a worried silence. "Refuel our launches and send them back up," demanded the moon-voice. "We're coming down." Wolek Parn bracketed the microphone and grinned at the dazed man who lay on the cot.

"Brace up, Sahl. The worst pests that ever infested anyplace will be down there soon. Us. One of the pilots demanded that they let Alaia go, and Faron—if he wants to. I think they will."

Sahl's hand slipped over his forehead. There was a lot that he couldn't remember. Blank spaces. "You got the idea across. I know it tore you up. You'll pull out okay, though. Of course, humans are still in for a rough go down there for awhile. But then—when haven't they been? We'll make out all right. We always have ..."

## THE END

# THE LINEMAN

IT was August on Earth, and the newscast reported a heat wave in the Midwest: the worst since 2065. A letter from Mike Tremini's sister in Abilene said the chickens were dying and there wasn't enough water for the stock. It was the only letter that came for any of Novotny's men during that fifty-shift hitch on the Copernicus Trol-ley Project. Everybody read it and luxuriated in sympathy for Kansas and sick chickens.

It was August on Luna too. The Perseids rained down with merciless impartiality; and, from his perch atop the hundred-foot steel skeleton, the lineman stopped cranking the jack and leaned out against his safety belt to watch two demolition men carrying a corpse out toward Fissure Seven. The corpse wore a deflated pressure suit. Torn fabric dragged the ground. The man in the rear carried the corpse's feet like a pair of wheelbarrow handles, and he continually tripped over the loose fabric; his head waggled inside his helmet as if he cursed softly and continuously to himself. The corpse's helmet was translucent with an interior coating of pink ice, making it look like a comic figure in a strawberry ice cream ad, a chocolate ragamuffin with a scoop for a head.

The lineman stared after the funeral party for a time until the team-pusher, who had been watching the slack span of 800 MGM aluminum conductors that snaked half a mile back toward the preceding tower, glanced up at the hesitant worker and began bellowing into his microphone. The lineman answered briefly, inspected the pressure gauge of his suit, and began cranking the jack again. With every dozen turns of the crank, the long snaking cable crept tighter across the lunar plain, straightening and lifting almost imperceptibly until at last the center-point cleared the ground and the cable swooped in a long graceful catenary between the towers. It trembled with fitful glistenings in the harsh sunglare. The lineman ignored the cable as he turned the crank. He squinted across the plains at the meteor display.

The display was not spectacular. It could be detected only as a slight turbulence in the layer of lunar dust that covered the ground, and an occasional dust geyser where a pea sized bit of sky debris exploded into the crust at thirty miles per second. Sometimes the explosion was bright and lingering, but more often there was only a momentary incandescence quickly obscured by dust. The lineman watched it with nervous eyes. There was small chance of being hit by a stone of consequential size, but the eternal pelting by meteoric dust, though too fine to effect a puncture, could weaken the fabric of a suit and lead to leaks and blowouts.

The team-pusher keyed his mic switch again and called to the lineman on the tower. "*Keep your eyes on that damn jack, Relke! That clamp looks like she's slipping from here.*"

The lineman paused to inspect the mechanism. "*Looks OK to me,*" he answered. "*How tight do I drag this one up?*"

The pusher glanced at the sagging span of steel-reinforced aluminum cable. *"It's a short stretch. Not too critical. What's the tension now?"*

The lineman consulted a dial on the jack. *"Going on forty-two hundred pounds, Joe."*

*"Crank her up to five thousand and leave it,"* said the pusher. *"Let C-shift sag it in by the tables if they don't like it."*

*"Yokay. Isn't it quitting time?"*

*"Damn near. My suit stinks like we're on overtime. Come on down when you reel that one in. I'm going back to the sleep wagon and get blown clear."* The pusher shut off his oxygen while he transferred his hose connections from the main feeder supply to the walk-around bottles on his suit. He signaled "quitting time" at the men on the far tower, then started moon-losing his way across the shaggy terrain toward the train of rolling barracks and machinery that moved with the construction crew as the 200 kilovolt transmission line inched its way across the lunar landscape.

The lineman glanced up absently at the star-stung emptiness of space. Motion caught his eye. He watched with a puzzled frown, then hitched himself around to call after the departing team-pusher.

*"Hey, Joe!"*

The pusher stopped on a low rise to look back.

*"Relke?"* he asked, uncertain of the source of the voice. *"Yeah. Is that a ship up there?"* The lineman pointed upward toward the east.

*"I don't see it. Where?"*

*"Between Arcturus and Serpens. I thought I saw it move."*

The pusher stood on the low tongue of lava and watched the heavens for a time. *"Maybe—maybe not. So what if it is, Relke?"*

*"Well ..."* The lineman paused, keying his mic nervously. *"Looks to me like it's headed the wrong direction for Crater City. I mean—"*

The pusher barked a short curse. *"I'm just about fed up with that superstitious drivell!"* he snapped. *"There aren't any non-human ships, Relke. And there aren't any non-humans."*

*"I didn't say—"*

*"No, but you had it in mind."* The pusher gave him a scornful look and hiked on toward the caterpillar train.

*"Yah. If you say so, Joe,"* Relke muttered to himself. He glanced again at the creeping point of light in the blackness; he shrugged; he began cranking up the slack span again. But the creeping point kept drawing his gaze while he cranked. When he looked at the tension indicator, it read 5,600 pounds. He grunted his annoyance, reversed the jack ratchet, and began letting out the extra 600 pounds.

The shift-change signal was already beeping in his headsets by the time he had eased it back down to 5,000, and the C-shift crewmen were standing around the foot of the tower jeering at him from below.

*"Get off it, boy. Give the men a chance."*

*"Come on down, Relke. You can let go. It ain't gonna drop."*

He ignored the razzing and climbed down the trainward side of the tower: Larkin and Kunz walked briskly around to meet him. He jumped the last twenty-five feet, hoping to evade them, but they were waiting for him when his boots hit the ground.

*"We want a little talk with you, Relke, my lad,"* came Larkin's rich, deceptively affable baritone.

*"Sorry, Lark, it's late and I—"* He tried to sidestep them, but they danced in and locked arms with him, one on each side.

*"Like Lark told you, we want a little talk,"* grunted Kunz.

*"Sure, Harv—but not right now. Drop by my bunk tank when you're off shift. I been in this straight jacket for seven hours. It doesn't smell exactly fresh in here."*

*"Then, Sonny, you should learn to control yourself in your suit,"* said Larkin, his voice all mellifluous with, smiles and avuncular pedagogy. *"Let's take him, Harv."*

They caught him in a double armlock, hoisted him off the ground, and started carrying him toward a low lava ridge that lay a hundred yards to the south of the tower. He could not kick effectively because of the stiffness of the suit. He wrenched one hand free and fumbled at the channel selector of his suit

radio. Larkin jerked his stub antenna free from its mounting before Relke could put in a call for help.

"*Tch tch tch*," said Larkin, wagging his head.

They carried him across the ridge and set him on his feet again, out of sight of the camp. "*Sit down, Sonny. We have sееееerious matters to discuss with you.*"

Relke heard him faintly, even without the antenna, but he saw no reason to acknowledge. When he failed to an-swer, Kunz produced a set of jumper wires from his knee pocket and clipped their suit audio circuits into a three-way intercom, disconnecting the plate lead from an r.f. stage to insure privacy.

"You guys give me a pain in the hump," growled the lineman. "What do *you* want this time? You know damn well a dead radio is against safety rules."

"It *is*? You ever hear of such a rule, Kunz?"

"Naah. Or maybe I did, at that. It's to make things easy for work spies, psych checkers, and time-and-motion men, ain't that it?"

"Yeah. You a psych checker or a time-and-motion man, Relke?"

"Hell, you guys known damn well I'm not—"

"Then what are you stalling about?" Larkin's baritone lost its mellowness and became an ominous growl. "You came nosing around, asking questions about the Party. So we let you in on it. We took you to a cell meeting. You said you wanted to join. So we let you in on two more meetings. Then you chickened out. We don't like that, Relke. It smells. It smells like a dirty informing rat!"

"I'm no damn informer!"

"Then why did you welsh?"

"I didn't welsh. I never said I'd join. You asked me if I was in favor of getting the Schneider-Volkov Act repealed. I said `yes.' I still say `yes.' That doesn't mean I want to join the Party."

"Why not, Relke?"

"Well, there's the fifty bucks, for one thing."

"Wh-a-a-at! One shift's wages? Hell, if that's all that's stopping you—Kunz, let's pay his fifty bucks for him, okay?"

"Sure. We'll pay your way in, Relke. I don't hold it against a man if he's a natural born tightwad."

"Yeah," said Larkin. "All you gotta do is sign up, Sonny. Fifty bucks, hell—that's less than union dues. If you can call that yellow-bellied obscenity a union. Now how about it, Relke?"

Behind the dark lenses of his glare goggles, Relke's eyes scanned the ground for a weapon. He spotted a jagged shard of volcanic glass and edged toward it.

"Well, Relke?"

"No deal."

"Why not?"

"That's easy. I plan on getting back to Earth someday. Conspiracy to commit mutiny rates the death penalty."

"Hear what he said, Lark? He calls it mutiny."

"Yeah. Teacher's little monitor."

"C'mere, informer."

They approached him slowly, wearing tight smiles. Relke dived for the shard of glass. The jumper wires jerked tight and broke loose, throwing them off balance for a moment. He came up with the glass shard in one fist and backed away. They stopped. The weapon was as good as a gun. A slit suit was the ultimate threat. Relke tore the dangling wires loose from his radio and backed toward the top of the ridge. They watched him somberly, not speaking. Larkin waved the lineman's stub antenna and looked at him questioningly. Relke held out a glove and waited for him to toss it. Larkin threw it over his shoulder in the opposite direction. They turned their backs on him. He loped on back toward the gravy train, knowing that the showdown had been no more than post-poned. Next time would be worse. They meant to incriminate him, as a kind of insurance against his inform-ing. He had no desire to be incriminated, nor to inform—but try to make them believe that.

Before entering the clean-up tank, he stopped to glance up at the heavens between Arcturus and Serpens. The creeping spot of light had vanished—or moved far from where he had seen it. He did not

pause to search. He checked his urine bottle in the airlock, connected his hoses to the wall valves, and blew the barn-smell out of his suit. The blast of fresh air was like icy wine in his throat. He enjoyed it for a moment, then went inside the tank for a bath.

Novotny was waiting for him in the B-shift line crew's bunkroom. The small pusher looked sore. He stopped pac-ing when Relke entered.

"Hi, Joe."

Novotny didn't answer. He watched while Relke stowed his gear, got out an electric razor, and went to the wall mirror to grind off the blond bristles.

"Where you been?" Novotny grunted.

"On the line where you saw me. I jacked that last span up tighter than you told me. I had to let her back down a little. Made me late getting in."

The pusher's big hand hit him like a club between the shoulder blades, grabbed a handful of coverall, and jerked him roughly around. The razor fell to the end of the cord. Novotny let go in back and grabbed a handful in front. He shoved the lineman back against the wall, Relke gaped at him blankly.

"Don't give *me* that wide blue-eyed dumb stare, you sonofabitch!" the pusher snapped. "I saw you go over the hill with Kunz and Larkin."

Relke's Adam's apple did a quick genuflection. "If you saw me go, you musta seen *how* I went."

Novotny shook him. "What'd they want with you?" he barked.

"Nothing."

Joe's eyes turned to dark slits. "Relke, I told you, I told the rest of my men. I told you what I'd do to any sonof-abitch on my team that got mixed up with the Party. Pappy don't allow that crap. Now shall I do it to you here, or do you want to go down to the dayroom?"

"Honest, Joe, I'm not mixed up in it. I got interested in what Larkin had to say—back maybe six months ago. But I never signed up. I never even meant to."

"Six months? Was that about the time you got your Dear John letter from Fran?"

"Right after that, Joe."

"Well, that figures. So what's Larkin after you about now?"

"I guess he wonders why I asked questions but never joined."

"I don't want your guesses. What did he say out there, and what did you say to him?"

"He wanted to know why I didn't sign up, that's all."

"And you told him what?"

"No deal."

"So?"

"So, I came on back and took a shower."

Novotny stared at him for a few seconds. "You're ly-ing," he grunted, but released him anyway.

"OK, Relke, but you better listen to this. You're a good lineman. You've stayed out of trouble. You get along with the rest of the team. If you got out of line in some *other* way, I'd figure it was about time you let off some steam. I'd stick up for you. But get mixed up with the Party—and I'll stomp you. When I'm through stomping you, I'll report you off my team. Understand?"

"Sure, Joe."

Novotny grunted and stepped away from him. "No hard feelings, Relke."

"Naah." The lineman went back to the mirror and started shaving again. That his hand remained steady was a surprise to him. Novotny had never before laid a hand on him, and Relke hoped the first time would be the last. He had watched Joe mop up the dayroom with Benet for playing fast and loose with safety rules while working a hotstick job, and it put Benet in sick bay for three days. Novotny was small, but he was built like a bunker. He was a fair overseer, but he handled his men in the only way he knew how to handle them on such a job. He expected self-discipline and self-imposed obedience, and when he didn't get it, he took it as a personal insult and a challenge to a duel. Out on the lava, men were pressure-packed, hermetically sealed charges of high explosive blood and bone; one man's folly could mean the death of several others, and there was no recourse to higher authority or admonitions from the dean, with a team on the lava.

"What's your grudge against the Party, Joe?" Relke asked while he scraped under his neck.

"No grudge. Not as long as Benet, Braxton, Relke, Henderson, Beasley, Tremini, and Novotny stay out of it. No grudge at all. I'm for free love and nickel beer as much as the next guy. But I'm not for getting my ass shot off. I'm not for fouling up the whole Lunar project just to get the Schneider-Volkov Act repealed, when you can't get it repealed that way anyhow. I'm not for facing a General Space Court and getting sentenced to blowout. That's all. No grudge."

"What makes you think a general strike couldn't force repeal, Joe?"

The pusher spat contemptuously at the disposal chute and missed. "A general strike on the Lunar Project? Hell, Relke, use your head. It'd never work. A strike against the government is rough to pull off, even on Earth. Out here, it'd be suicide. The Party's so busy yelling about who's right and who's wrong and who's getting a raw deal—and what they ought to do about it—that they forget the important point: who's in the driver's seat. So what if we shut down Copernicus and all the projects like this one? Copernicus has a closed ecology, its own plant animal cycle, sure. We don't need much from Earth to keep it running—but there's the hitch: don't need *much*. The ecology slips out of balance now and then. Every month or two it has to get a transfusion from Earth. Compost bacteria, or a new strain of algae because our strain starts mutating—it's always something like that. If a general strike cut us off from Earth, the World Parlia-ment could just sit passing solemn gas through their waffle-bottom chairs and wait. They could debate us to death in two months."

"But world opinion—"

"Hell, *they* make world opinion, not us."

Relke stopped shaving and looked around. "Joe?"

"Yah."

"Kunz and Larkin'd kill me for telling you. Promise not to say anything?"

The pusher glowered at him for a moment. "Look, Relke, nobody brutalizes Joe Novotny's men. I'll handle Kunz and Larkin. You'd better spill. You think it's informing if you tell *me*?"

Relke shook his head. "Guess not. OK, Joe. It's this: I've been to three cell meetings. I heard some stuff. I think the strike's supposed to start come sundown."

"I heard that too. If it does, we'll all be—" He broke off. The cabin's intercom was suddenly blaring.

*Attention, all personnel, attention. Unidentified bird at thirty degrees over horizon, south-southwest, braking fire for landing in our vicinity. All men on the line take cover. Safety team to the ready room on the double. Rescue team scramble, rescue team scramble.*

Relke rolled the cord neatly around the razor and stared at it. "I'll be damned," he muttered. "It *was* a ship I saw. What ship would be landing way the hell out here?" He glanced around at Novotny.

The pusher was already at the periscope viewer, his face buried in the sponge rubber eyepieces. He cranked it around in a search pattern toward the south-southwest.

"See anything?"

"Not yet . . . *yeah*, there she is. Braking in fast—now what the hell!"

"Give me a look."

They traded turns at the viewer.

"She's a fusion furnace job. Cold fusion. Look at that blue tail."

"Why land way out here?"

The hatch burst open and the rest of the men spilled in from the dayroom. A confused babble filled the cabin. "I tole ya and I tole ya!" said Bama Braxton. "That theah mine shaff at Tycho is the play-yun evvy-dance. Gennle-men, weah about to have stranjuhs in ouah midst."

"Cut that superstitious bullspit, Brax," Novotny grunted. "There *aren't* any aliens. We got enough bogeys around here without you scaring the whoop out of yourself with that line of crap."

"Theah ahn't no aliens!" Braxton howled. "Theah ahn't no *aliens*? Joe, you blind?"

"He right, Joe," said Lije Henderson, Bama's chief crony. "That mine shaff speak fo' itself."

"That mine's a million years old," Joe snorted, "and they're not even sure it's a mine. I said drop it."

"That *ship* speak fo' itself!"

"Drop it! This isn't the first time a ship overshot Crater City and had to set down someplace else. Ten

to one it's full of Parliament waffle-bottoms, all complaining their heads off. Maybe they've got a meteor puncture and need help quick."

The closed-circuit intercom suddenly buzzed, and No-votny turned to see the project engineer's face on the small viewer.

"Are all your men up and dressed, Joe?" he asked when Novotny had answered the call.

"EVERYBODY PIPE DOWN! Sorry, Suds. No—well, except for Beasley, they're up. Beasley's logging sack time."

"The hell Beasley is!" complained Beasley from his bunk. "With you verbing nouns of a noun all yapping like—"

"Shut up, Bee; Go on, Suds."

"We got contact with that ship. They've got reactor troubles. I tried to get Crater City on the line, but there's an outage on the circuit somewhere. I need some men to take a tractor and backtrack toward Copernicus. Look for a break in the circuit."

"Why call me?"

"The communication team is tied up, Joe."

"Yeah, but I'm not a communic—"

"Hell!" Brodanovitch exploded. "It doesn't take an electronics engineer to splice a broken wire, does it?"

"OK, Suds, we'll go. Take it easy. What about that ship?"

The engineer paused to mop his face. He looked rather bleak suddenly. "I don't know if it's safe to tell you. But you'll find out anyhow. Watch out for a riot."

"Not a runaway reactor—"

"Worse, Joe. Women."

"WOMEN!" It was a high piping scream from Beasley. "Did he say *women*?" Beasley was out of bed and into his boots.

"WOMEN!" They came crowding around the intercom screen.

"Back off!" Novotny barked. "Go on, Suds."

"It's a troupe of entertainers, Joe. Clearance out of Algiers. They say they're scheduled for a performance in Crater City, come nightfall. That's all I know, except they're mostly women."

"Algiers! Jeez! Belly dancers . . . The room was a confused babble."

"Wait a minute," said Suds. His face slid off the screen as he talked to somebody in the boss tank. Moments later he was back. "Their ship just put down, Joe. Looks like a safe landing. The rescue team is out there. You'll pass the ship on the way up the line. Get moving."

"Sure, Suds." Novotny switched off and looked around at the sudden scramble. "I'll be damned if you do!" he yelled. "You can't all go. Beasley, Henderson—"

"No, bigod you don't, Joe!" somebody howled. "Draw straws!"

"OK. I can take three of you, no more."

They drew. Chance favored Relke, Braxton, and Henderson. Minutes later they crowded into the electric runabout and headed southeast along the line of stately steel towers that filed back toward Copernicus. The ship was in sight. Taller than the towers, the nacelles of the downed bird rose into view beyond the broken crest of a distant lava butte. She was a freight shuttle, space-constructed and not built for landing on Earth. Relke eyed the emblem on the hull of her crew nacelle while the runabout nosed onto the strip of graded roadbed that paralleled the transmission line back to Crater City. The emblem was unfamiliar.

"That looks like the old *RS Voltaire*," said the lineman. "Somebody must have bought her, Joe. Converted her to passenger service."

"Maybe. Now keep an eye on the telephone line."

The pusher edged the runabout toward the trolley rods. The overhead power transmission line had been energized by sections during the construction of it, and the line was hot as far as the road had been extended. Transformer stations fed energy from the 200 kilovolt circuit into the 1,500 volt trolley bars that ran down the center of the roadbed. Novotny stopped the vehicle at the end of the finished



construction and sidled it over until the feeler arms crackled against the electrified bus rods and locked in place. He switched the batteries to "charge" and drove on again.

"Relke, you're supposed to be watching that talk cir-cuit, not the ship."

"OK, Joe, in a minute."

"You horny bastard, you can't see their bloomers through that titanium hull. Put the glasses down and watch the line."

"OK, just a minute. I'm trying to find out who owns her. The emblem's—"

"Now, dammit!"

"No marking on her except her serial number and a picture of a rooster—and something else that's been painted over."

"RELKE!"

"Sure, Joe, OK."

"Girls!" marveled Lije Henderson. "Whenna lass time you touch a real girl, Brax?"

"Don' ass me, Lije! I sweah, if I evum touch a lady's li'l pink fingah right now, I could—"

"Hell, I could jus' sittin' heah lookin' at that ship. Girls. God! Lemme have those glasses, Relke."

Novotny braked the runabout to a halt. "All right, get your helmets on," he snapped. "Pressure your suits. I'm going to pump air out."

"Whatthell! *Why*, Joe?"

"So you can get out of this heap. You're walking back. I'll go on and find the break myself."

Braxton squealed like a stuck pig; a moment later all three of them were on him. "Please, Joe. . . . Fuh the love a heaven, Joe, have a haht. . . . Gawd, *women!*"

"Get off my lap, you sonofabitch!" he barked at Brax-ton, who sat on top of him, grabbing at the controls. "Wait—I'll tell you what. Put the damn binoculars down and watch the line. Don't say another damn word about dames until we find the break and splice it. Swear to that, you bastards, and you can stay. I'll stop at their ship on our way back, and then you can stare all you want to. OK?"

"Joe, I sweah on a stack of—"

"All right, then watch the line."

They drove on in silence. The ship had fired down on a flat stretch of ground about four miles from the con-struction train, a few hundred yards from the trolley road. They stared at it as the runabout crawled past, and No-votny let the vehicle glide to a halt.

"The ramp's out and the ladder's down," said Relke. "Somebody must have come out."

"Unglue your eyes from that bird and look around," Novotny grunted. "You'll see why the ladder's down." He jerked his thumb toward a row of vehicles parked near the massive ship.

"The rescue team's wagons. But wheah's the rescue team?"

No crewmen were visible in the vicinity of the ship or the parked runabouts. Novotny switched on the radio, punched the channel selector, and tried a call, reading the call code off the side of the safety runabout.

*"Double Able Niner, this is One Four William. Talk back, please."*

They sat in silence. There was nothing but the hiss of solar interference from the radio and the sound of heavy breathing from the men.

"Those lucky ole bastands!" Braxton moaned. "You know wheah they gone, gennlemen? I know wheah they gone. They clambered right up the ladies' ladduh. I taya, alright—"

"Knock it off. Let's get moving. Tell us on the way back."

"Those lucky ole—"

The runabout moved ahead across the glaring land. Relke: "Joe?"

"Yeah?"

"Joe, on our way back, can we go over and see if they'll let us climb aboard?"

Novotny chuckled. "I thought you were off dames, Relke. I thought when Fran sent you the Dear John, you said dames were all a bunch of—"

"Damn, Joe! You could have talked all day without saying `Fran.' " The lineman's throat worked a brief spasm, and he stared out across the broken moonscape with dismal eyes.

"Sorry I mentioned it," Novotny grunted. "But sure, I guess one of us could walk over and ask if they mind a little more company on board."

Lije: "*One* of us! Who frinstance—you?"

Joe: "No, you can draw for it—not now, you creep! Watch the line."

They watched in silence. The communication circuit was loosely strung on temporary supports beside the road-bed. The circuit was the camp's only link with Crater City, for the horizon interposed a barrier to radio reception, such reception being possible only during the occasional overhead transits of the lunar satellite station which carried message-relaying equipment. The satellite's orbit had been shifted to cover a Russian survey crew near Clavius, however, and its passages over the Trolley Project were rare.

"I jus' *thought*," Lije muttered suddenly, smacking his fist in his palm.

Relke: "Isn't that getting a little drastic, Lije?"

"I jus' thought. If we fine that outage, less don' fix it!" Joe: "What kind of crazy talk is that?"

"Lissen, you know what ole Suds want to call Crater City *fo'*? He want to call 'em so's they'll Senn a bunch of tank wagons down heah and tote those gals back to town. Thass what he want to call 'em *fo'!*"

Braxton slapped his forehead. "Luvva God! He's right. Y'all heah that? Is he right, Joe, or is he right?"

"I guess that's about the size of it."

"We mi'not evum get a look at 'em!" Braxton wailed. "Less don' fix it, Joe!"

"I sweah, if I evum touch one of theah precious li'l fingahs, I'd—"

"Shut up and watch the line."

Relke: "Why didn't he use a bridge on the circuit and find out where the break was, Joe?"

"A bridge won't work too well on that line."

"How fah we gonna keep on drivin', Joe?"

"Until we find the break. Relke, turn up that blower a little. It's beginning to stink in here."

"Fresh ayah!" sighed Braxton as the breeze hit them from the fan.

Relke: "I wonder if it's fresh. I keep wondering if it doesn't come out foul from the purifier, but we've been living in it too long to be able to tell. I even dream about it. I dream about going back to Earth and everybody runs away from me: Coughing and holding their noses. I can't get close to a girl even in a dream anymore."

"Ah reckon a head-shrinker could kill hisself a-laughin' over that one."

"Don't talk to me about head-shrinkers."

"Watch the damn line."

Braxton: "Talk about *dreams!* Listen, I had one lass sleep shift that I oughta tell y'all about. Gennlemen, if she wasn't the ohnriest li'l—"

Novotny cursed softly under his breath and tried to keep his eyes on both the road and the communications circuit.

Relke: "Let 'em jabber, Joe. I'll watch it."

Joe: "It's bad enough listening to a bunch of jerks in a locker room bragging about the dames they've made. But Braxton! Braxton's got to brag about his dreams. Christ! Send me back to Earth. I'm fed up."

"Aww, Joe, we got nothin' else to talk about up heah."

They drove for nearly an hour and a half without lo-cating the outage. Novotny pulled the runabout off the hot trolleys and coasted to a stop. "I'm deflating the cab," he told them. "Helmets on, pressure up your suits."

"Joe, weah not walkin' back from heah!" Bama said flatly.

"Oh, blow yourself out, Brax!" the pusher said irritably. "I'm getting out for a minute. C'mon, get ready for vac-uum."

"Why?"

"Don't say why to me outside the sleep-tank, corn pone! Just do it."

"Damn! Novotny's in a humah! Les say 'yessah' to him, Bama."

"You too, Lije!"

"Yessah."

"Can it." Novotny got the pressure pumped down to two pounds, and then let the rest of the air spew out slowly into vacuum. He climbed out of the runabout and loped over to the low-hanging spans of the communication circuit. He tapped into it with the suit audio and listened for a moment. Relke saw his lips moving as he tried a call, but nothing came through the lineman's suit radio.

After about five minutes, he quit talking and beckoned the rest of them back to the runabout.

"That was Brodanovitch," he said after they were inside and the pressure came up again. "So the circuit break must be on up ahead."

"Oh, hell, we'll *neva* get a look at those ladies!"

"Calm down. We're going back—" He paused a mo-moment until the elated whooping died down. "Suds says let them send a crew out of Copernicus to fix it. I guess there's no hurry about moving those people out of there." "

"The less hurry, the bettuh . . . *hot dawg*! C'mon, Joe, roll it!" Bama and Lije sat rubbing their hands. Only Relke seemed detached, his enthusiasm apparently cooled. He sat staring out at the meteor display on the dust-flats. He kept rubbing absently at the ring finger of his left hand. There was no ring there, nor even a mark on the skin. The pusher's eye fell on the slow nervous movement.

"Fran again?" Joe grunted.

The lineman nodded.

"I got my Dear John note three years ago, Relke."

Relke looked around at him in surprise. "I didn't know you were married, Joe."

"I guess I wasn't as married as I thought I was."

Relke stared outside again for awhile. "How do you get over it?"

"You don't. Not up here on Luna. The necessary and sometimes sufficient condition for getting over a dame is the availability of other dames. So, you don't."

"Hell, Joe!"

"Yeah."

"The movement's not such a bad idea."

"Can it!" the pusher snapped.

"It's true. Let women come to Crater City, or send us home. It makes sense."

"You're only looking at the free love and nickel beer end of it, Relke. You can't raise kids in low gravity. There are five graves back in Crater City to prove it. Kids' graves. Six feet long. They grow themselves to death."

"I know but . . ." He shrugged uncomfortably and watched the meteor display again.

"When do we draw?" said Lije. "Come on Joe, less draw for who goes to talk ouah way onto the ship."

Relke: "Say, Joe, how come they let dames in an en-tertainment troupe come to the moon, but they won't let our wives come? I thought the Schneider-Volkov Act was supposed to keep all women out of space, period."

"No, they couldn't get away with putting it like that. Against the WP constitution. The law just says that all personnel on any member country's lunar project must be of a single sex. Theoretically some country—Russia, may-be—could start an all-girl lunar mine project, say. Theo-retically. But how many lady muckers do you know? Even in Russia."

Lije: "When do we draw? Come on, Joe, less draw." "Go ahead and draw. Deal me out."

Chance favored Henderson. "Fastuh, Joe. Hell, less go fastuh, befo' the whole camp move over theah."

Novotny upped the current to the redline and left it there. The long spans of transmission line, some of them a mile or more from tower to tower, swooped past in stately cadence.

"There she is! Man!"

"You guys are building up for a big kick in the rump. They'll never let us aboard."

"Theah's two more cabs pahked over theah."

"Yeah, and still nobody in sight on the ground."

Novotny pulled the feelers off the trolleys again. "OK, Lije, go play John Alden. Tell 'em we just want to look, not touch."

Henderson was bounding off across the flats moments after the cabin had been depressurized to let him climb out. They watched him enviously while the pressure came up again. His face flashed with sweat in the sunlight as he looked back to wave at them from the foot of the ladder.

Relke glanced down the road toward the rolling construction camp. "You going to call in, Joe? Ought to be able to reach their antenna from here."

"If I do, Brodanovitch is sure to say 'haul ass on back to camp.' "

"Never mind, then! Forget I said it!"

The pusher chuckled. "Getting interested, Relke?"

"I don't know. I guess I am." He looked quickly toward the towering rocket.

"Mostly you want to know how close you are to being rid of her, maybe?"

"I guess—Hey, they're letting him in."

"That lucky ole bastuhd!" Bama moaned.

The airlock opened as Lije scaled the ladder. A helmet containing a head of unidentifiable gender looked out and down, watching the man climb. Lije paused to wave. After a moment's hesitancy, the space-suited figure waved back.

"Hey, up theah, y'all mind a little company?"

The party who watched him made no answer. Lije shook his head and climbed on. When he reached the lock, he held out a glove for an assist, but the figure stepped back quickly. Lije stared inside. The figure was holding a gun. Lije stepped down a rung. The gun beckoned impatiently for him to get inside. Reluctantly Lije obeyed.

The hatch closed. A valve spat a jet of frost, and they watched the pressure dial slowly creep to ten psi. Lije watched the stranger unfasten his helmet, then undid his own. The stranger was male, and the white goggle marks about his eyes betrayed him as a spacer. His thin dark features suggested Semitic or Arabic origins.

"Parlez-vous francais?"

"Naw," said Lije. "Sho' don't. Sorry."

The man tossed his head and gave a knowing snort. "It is necessaire that we find out who you are," he explained, and brandished the weapon under Lije's nose. He grinned a flash of white teeth. "Who send you here?"

"Nobody send me. I come unduh my own steam. Some fell as in my moonjeep pulled cands, and I—"

"Whup! You are—ah *ein Unteroffizier*? *Mais non*, wrong sprach—you *l'officiale*? Officer? Company man?"

"Who, me? Land, no. I'm juss a hot-stick man on B-shif'. You muss be lookin' fo' Suds Brodanovitch."

"Why you come to this ship?"

"Well, the fellas, and I heard tell theah was some gals, and we—"

The man waved the gun impatiently and pressed a button near the inner hatch. A red indicator light went on.

"Yes?" A woman's voice, rather hoarse. Lije's chest heaved with sudden emotion, and his sigh came out a bleat..

The man spoke in a flood of French. The woman did not reply at once. Lije noticed the movement of a view-ing lens beside the hatch; it was scanning him from head to toe.

The woman's voice shifted to an intimate contralto. "OK, dearie, you come right in here where it's nice and warm."

The inner hatch slid open. It took Lije a few seconds to realize that she had been talking to him. She stood there smiling at him like a middle-aged schoolmarm. "Why don't you come on in and meet the girls?" Eyes popping, Lije Henderson stumbled inside.

He was gone a long time.

When he finally came out, the men in Novotny's runabout took turns cursing at him over the suit frequency. *"Fa chrissake, Henderson, we've been sitting here using up oxy for over an hour while you been horsing around ..."* They waited for him with the runabout, cabin depressurized.

Lije was panting wildly as he ran toward them. *"Lissen to the bahstud giggle,"* Bama said disgustedly.

*"Y'all juss don' know, y'all juss don' KNOW!"* Lije was chanting between pants.

*"Get in here, you damn traitor!"*

*"Hones', I couldn' help myself. I juss couldn'."*

*"Well, do the rest of us get aboard her, or not?"* Joe snapped.

*"Hell, go ahead, man! It's wide open. Evahthing's wide open."*

*"Girls?"* Relke grunted.

*"Girls, God yes! Girls."*

*"You coming with us?"* Joe asked.

Lije shook his head and fell back on the seat, still panting. *"Lawd, no! I couldn't stand it. I juss want to lie heah and look up at ole Mamma Earth and feel like a human again."* He grinned beatifically. *"Y'all go on."*

Braxton was staring at his crony with curious suspicion.

*"Man, those must be some entuhtainuhs! Whass the mat-tah with you, Lije?"*

Henderson whooped and pounded his leg. *"Woo hoo! Hooeee! You mean y'all still don' know what that ship is?"*

They had already climbed out of the tractor. Novotny glared back in at Lije. *"We've been waiting to hear it from you, Henderson,"* he snapped.

Lije sat up grinning. *"That's no stage show troupe! That ship, so help me Hannah, is a—hoo hoo hooee—is a goddam flyin' HO-house."* He rolled over on the seat and surrendered to laughter.

Novotny looked around for his men and found himself standing alone. Braxton was already on the ladder, and Relke was just starting up behind.

*"Hey, you guys come back here!"*

*"Drop dead, Joe."*

Novotny stared after them until they disappeared through the lock. He glanced back at Lije. Henderson was in a grinning beatific trance. The pusher shrugged and left him lying there, still wearing his pressure suit in the open cabin. The pusher trotted after his men toward the ship.

Before he was halfway there, a voice broke into his headsets. *"Where the devil are you going, Novotny? I want a talk with you!"*

He stopped to glance back. The voice belonged to Bro-danovitch, and it sounded sore. The engineer's runabout had nosed in beside Novotny's; Suds sat in the cab and beckoned at him angrily. Joe trudged on back and climbed in through the vehicle's coffin-sized airlock. Brodanovitch glared at him while the pusher removed his helmet.

*"What the devil's going on over there?"*

*"At the ship?"* Joe paused. Suds was livid. *"I don't know exactly."*

*"I've been calling Safety and Rescue for an hour and a half. Where are they?"*

*"In the ship, I guess."*

*"You guess!"*

*"Hell, chief, take it easy. We just got here. I don't know what's going on."*

*"Where are your men?"*

Novotny jerked his thumb at the other runabout. *"Hen-derson's in there. Relke and Brax went to the ship."*

*"And that's where you were going just now, I take it,"* Suds snarled.

*"Take that tone of voice and shove it, Suds! You, know where you told me to go. I went. Now I'm off. We're on our own time unless you tell us different."*

The engineer spent a few seconds swallowing his fury. "All right," he grunted. , "But every man on that rescue squad is going to face a Space Court, and if I have any say about it, they'll get decomped."

Novotny's jaw dropped. "Slow down, Suds. Explosive decompression is for mutiny or murder. What're you talk-ing about?"

"Murder."

"Wha-a-at?"

"That's what I call it. A demolition man—Hardin, it was—had a blowout. With only one man standing by on the rescue gear."

"Meteor dust?"

"Yeah."

"Would it have made any difference if Safety and Rescue had been on the job?"

Suds glowered. "Maybe, maybe not. An inspector might have spotted the bulge in his suit before it blew." He shook an angry finger toward the abandoned Safety & Rescue vehicles. "Those men are going to stand trial for negligent homicide. It's the principle, damn it!"

"Sure, Suds. I guess you're right. I'll be right back" Henderson was sleeping in his pressure suit when Novotny climbed back into his own runabout. The cab was still a vacuum. He got the hatch closed, turned on the air pumps, then woke Henderson.

"Lije, you been with a woman?"

"Nnnnnngg-nnnng! I hope to tell!" He shot a quick glance toward the rocket as if to reassure himself as to its reality. "And man, was she a little—"

Joe shook him again. "Listen. Brodanovitch is in the next car. Bull mad. I'll ask you again. You been with a woman?"

"Woman? You muss of lost yoah mine, Joe. Lass time I saw a woman was up at Atlanta." He rolled his eyes up toward the Earth crescent in the heavens. "Sure been a long ole time. Atlanta ... *man!*"

"That's better."

Lije jerked his head toward Brodanovitch's jeep. "What's ole wet blanket gonna do? Chase those gals out of here, I 'spect?"

"I don't know. That's not what he's frothing about, Lije. Hardin got killed while the S&R boys were shack-ing up over there. Suds doesn't even *know* what's in that ship. He acts like he's got about a dozen troubles running loose at once, and he doesn't know which way to grab."

"He don't even *know*? How we evah gonna keep him from findin' out?" Lije shot another glance at the ship and jumped. "Uh-oh! Looka theah! Yonder they come. Clamberin' down the ladies' ladduh. Theah's Joyce and Lander and Petzel—other one looks like Crump. Half the Safety team, Joe. Hoo-eee! They got that freshly bred look. You can evum tell it from heah. Uh-oh!"

Brodanovitch had climbed out of his runabout. Bellow-ing at his mic, he charged toward the ship. The S&R men took a few lopes toward their vehicles, saw Brodan-ovitch, and stopped. One man turned tail and bolted for the ladder again. Gesturing furiously, the engineer bore down on them.

"Leave the radio off, Joe. Sure glad we don't have to listen to that bull bellow."

They sat watching the safety men, who managed some-how to look stark naked despite their bulgey pressure suits. Suds stalked toward them like an amok runner, beating a gloved fist into his palm and working his jaw at them.

"Suds don't know how to get along with men when he *want* to get along with 'em, and he don't know how to fuss at 'em when he don't want to get along. Man, look how he rave!"

"Yeah. Suds is a smart engineer, but he's a rotten over-seer."

The ship's airlock opened again and another man started out. He stopped with one foot on the top rung of the ladder. He looked down at Brodanovitch and the S&R men. He pulled his leg back inside and closed the hatch. Novotny chuckled.

"That was Relke, the damn fool."

Lije smote his forehead. "Look at Suds! They tole him! They went an *tole* him, Joe. We'll nevah get back in that ship now."

The pusher watched the four figures on the plain. They were just standing there. Brodanovitch had

stopped gesticulating. For a few seconds he seemed frozen. His head turned slowly as he looked up at the rocket. He took three steps toward it, then stopped.

"He gonna have apoplexy, thass what he gonna have." Brodanovitch turned slowly. He gave the S&R men a blank look, then broke into a run toward his tractor. "I'd better climb out," Joe said.

He met the engineer beside the command runabout. Suds's face was a livid mask behind the faceplate. "Get in," he snapped at the pusher.

As soon as they were inside, he barked, "Drive us to Crater City."

"Slow down, Suds."

"Joe. That ship. Damn brothel. Out to fleece the camp." "So what're you going to do in Crater City?"

"Tell Parkeson, what else?"

"And what's the camp going to be doing while you're gone?"

That one made him pause. Finally he shook his head. "Drive, Joe."

Novotny flipped the switch and glanced at the gauges. "You haven't got enough oxygen in this bug to last out the trip."

"Then we'll get another one."

"Better take a minute to think it over, Suds. You're all revved up. What the hell can Parkeson do?"

"What can he *do*? What can—migawd, Joe!" Suds choked.

"Well?"

"He can get that ship out of here, he can have those women interned."

"How? Suppose they refuse to budge. Who appointed Parkeson king of creation? Hell, he's only *our* boss, Suds. The moon's open to any nation that wants to send a ship, or to any corporation that can get a clearance. The W.P. decided that a long time ago."

"But it's illegal—those women, I mean!"

"How do you know? Maybe their racket's legal in Al-giers. That's where you told me they had clearance from, didn't you? And if you're thinking about the Schneider-Volkov Act, it just applies to the Integrated Projects, not wildcat teams."

Brodanovitch sat silent for a few moments, his throat working. He passed a shaky hand over his eyes. "Joe, we've got to keep discipline. Why can't I ever make the men understand that? On a moon project, it's discipline or die. You know that, Joe."

"Sure I know it. You know it. Parkeson knows it. The First Minister of the Space Ministry knows it. But the men don't know it, and they never will. They don't know what the word 'discipline' means, and it's no good trying to tell them. It's an overseer's word. It means your outfit's working for you like your own arms and legs. One brain and one body. When it cracks, you've just got a loose handful of stray men. No coordination. You can see it, but they can't see it. 'Discipline' is just a dirty word in the ranks, Suds."

"Joe, what'll I do?"

"It's your baby, not mine. Give it first aid. Then talk to Parkeson later, if you want to."

Suds sat silent for half a minute, then: "Drive back to the main wagon."

Novotny started the motors. "What are you going to do?"

"Announce Code Red, place the ship off limits, put an armed guard on it, and hope the Crater City crew gets that telephone circuit patched up quick. That's all I can do."

"Then let me get a safe distance away from you before you do it."

"You think it'll cause trouble?"

"Good Lord, Suds, use your head. You've got a camp-ful of men who haven't been close to a dame in months and years, even to talk to. They're sick, they're scared, they're fed-up, they want to go home. The Party's got them bitter, agitated. I'd hate to be the guy who puts those women off limits."

"What would you do?"

"I'd put the screws on the shift that's on duty. I'd work hell out of the crews that are supposed to be on the job. I'd make a horrible -example out of the first man to goof off. But first I'd tell the off-duty team-pushers they can take their crews over to that ship, one crew at a time, and in an orderly manner."

"What? And be an accomplice? Hell, no!"

"Then do it your own way. Don't ask me."

Novotny parked the runabout next to the boss-wagon. "Mind if I use your buggy for awhile, Suds?" he asked. "I left mine back there, and I've got to pick up my men."

"Go ahead, but get them back here—fast."

"Sure, Suds."

He backed the runabout out again and drove down to B-shift's sleep-wagon. He parked again and used the air-lock phone. "Beasley, Benet, the rest of you—come on outside."

Five minutes later they trooped out through the lock. "What's the score, Joe?"

"The red belts are ahead, that's all I know."

"Come on, you'll find out."

"Sleep! I haven't had no sleep since—Say! You takin' us over to that ship, Joe?"

"That's the idea."

"YAYHOO!" Beasley. danced up and down. "Joe, we love ya!"

"Cut it. This is once-and-once-only. You're going once, and you're not going again."

"Who says?"

"Novotny says."

"But *why*?" Benet wailed.

"What did you say?"

"I said `why!' "

"OK. I'll tell you why. Brodanovitch is going to put the 'ship off limits. If I get you guys in under the wire, you've got no gripe later on—when Suds hangs out the big No."

"Joe, that's chicken."

Novotny put on the brakes. "Get out and walk back, Benet."

"Joe—!"

"Benet."

"Look, I didn't mean anything."

Novotny paused. If Brodanovitch was going to try to do things the hard way, he'd lose control of his own men unless he gave them. loose rein for a while first—keeping them reminded that he still *had* the reins. But Benet was getting out of hand lately. He had to decide. Now.

"Look at me, Benet."

Benet looked up. Joe smacked him. Benet sat back, looking surprised. He wiped his nose on the back of a glove and looked at the red smear. He wiped it again. The smear was bigger.

"You can stay, Benet, but if you do, I'll bust your hump after we get back. You want it that way?"

Benet looked at the rocket; he looked at Joe; he looked at the rocket. "Yeah. We'll see who does the busting. Let's go."

"All right, but do you see any other guys taking their teams over?"

"No."

"But you think you're getting a chicken deal."

"Yeah."

The pusher drove on, humming to himself. As long as he could keep them alternately loving him and hating him, everything was secure. Then he was Mother. Then they didn't stop to think or rationalize. They just reacted to Mother. It was easy to handle men reacting, but it wasn't so easy to handle men thinking. Novotny liked it the easy way, especially during a heavy meteor fall.

"It is of no importance to me," said Madame d'Annecy, "if you are the commandant of the whole of space, M'sieur. You wish entrance, I must ask you to contribute thees small fee. It is not in my nature to become unpleas-ant like thees, but you have bawl in my face, M'sieur."

"Look," said Brodanovitch, "I didn't come over here for . . . for what you think I came over here for." His ears reddened. "I don't want a girl, that is."

The madame's prim mouth made a small pink O of sudden understanding. "Ah, M'sieur, I begin to see. You are one of those. But in that I cannot help you. I have only girls."



The engineer choked. He started toward the hatch. A man with a gun slid into his path.

"Permit yourself to be restrained, M'sieur."

"There are four men in there that are supposed to be on the job, and I intend to get them. And the others too, while I'm at it."

"Is it that you have lost your boy friend, perhaps?"

Brodanovitch croaked incomprehensibly for a moment, then collapsed onto a seat beside the radar table that Madame d'Annecy was using for an accounting desk. "I'm no fairy," he said.

"I am pleased to hear it, M'sieur. I was beginning to pity you. Now if you will please sign the sight draft, so that we may telecast it—"

"I am *not* paying twelve hundred dollars just to get my men out of there!"

"I do not haggle, M'sieur. The price is fixed."

"Call them down here!"

"It cannot be done. They pay for two hours, for two hours they stay. Undisturbed."

"All right, let's see the draft."

Madame d'Annecy produced a set of forms from the map case and a small gold fountain pen from her ample bosom. "Your next of kin, M'sieur?" She handed him a blank draft.

"Wait a minute! How did you know where my ac-count—"

"Is it not the correct firm?"

"Yes, but how did you know?" He looked at the serial number on the form, then looked up accusingly. "This is a telecopy form. You have a teletransmitter on board?"

"But of course! We could not risk having payment stopped after services rendered. The funds will be trans-ferred to our account before you leave this ship. I assure you, we are well protected."

"I assure you, you are all going to jail."

Madame d'Annecy threw back her head and laughed heartily. She said something in French to the man at the door, then smiled at the unhappy engineer. "What law prevails here, M'sieur?"

"UCOJE does. Uniform Code of Justice, Extraterres-trial. It's a semi-military—"

"U.N.-based, I believe?"

"Certainly."

"Now I know little of thees matters, but my attorneys would be delighted, I am certain, if you can tell me: which articles of thees UCOJE is to be used for inducing us to be incarcerated?"

"Why . . . Uh . . ." Suds scratched nervously at one corner of his moustache. He glanced at the man with the gun. He gazed forlornly at the sight draft.

"Exactly!" Mme. d'Annecy said brightly. "There have been no women to speak of on the moon since the un-fortunate predicament of *les en/ants perdus*. The moon-born grotesque ones. How could they think to pass laws against thees—thees *ancien* establishment, thees *maison intime*—when there are no women, eh M'sieur?"

"But you falsified your papers to get clearance. You must have."

"But no. Our clearance is 'free nation,' not 'world fed-eral.' We are an entertainment troupe, and my govern-ment's officials are most lenient in defining 'entertainment.' *Chacun a son gout*, eh?"

Suds sat breathing heavily. "I can place this ship off limits."

"If you can do dat, if the men do not come"—she shrugged eloquently and spread her hands—"then we will simply move on to another project. There are plenty of others. But do you think thees putting us off limits will make you very popular with your men?"

"I'm not trying to win a popularity contest," Suds wheezed. "I'm trying to finish the last twelve miles of this line before sundown. You've got to get out of here before there's a complete work stoppage."

"Thees project. It is important? Of an urgent nature?"

"There's a new uranium mine in the crater we're build-ing toward. There's a colony there without an independent ecology. It has to be supplied from Copernicus. Right now, they're shooting supplies to them by rocket missile. It's too far to run surface freight without trolley service—or reactor-powered vehicles the size of battleships and expensive. We don't have the facilities to run a fleet of self-powered wagons that far."

"Can they not run on diesel, perhaps?"

"If they carry the oxygen to burn the diesel with, and if everybody in Copernicus agrees to stop breathing the stuff."

"*Embarras de choix*. I see."

"It's essential that the line be finished before nightfall. If it isn't, that mine colony will have to be shipped back to Copernicus. They can't keep on supplying it by bird. And they can't move out any ore until the trolley is ready to run."

Mme. d'Annecy nodded thoughtfully. "We wish to make the cordial entente with the lunar workers," she mur-mured. "We do not wish to cause the *bouleversement*—the disruption. Let us then negotiate, M'sieur."

"I'm not making any deals with you, lady."

"Ah, but such a hard position you take! I was but intending to suggest that you furnish us a copy of your camp's duty roster. If you will do that, Henri will not permit anyone to visit us if he is—how you say?—goofing off. Is it not that simple?"

"I will not be a party to robbery!"

"How is it robbery?"

"Twelve hundred dollars! Pay for two day-hitches. Lu-nar days. Nearly two months. And you're probably plan-ning to fleece them more than once."

"*A bon marche!* Our expenses are terrific. Believe me, we expect no profit from this first trip."

"First trip and last trip," Suds grumbled.

"And who has complained about the price? No one so far excepting M'sieur. Look at it *thus*; it is an invest-ment." She slid one of the forms across the table. "Please to read it, M'sieur."

Suds studied the paper for a moment and began to frown. "*Les Folies Lunaires*, Incorporated . . . a North African corporation . . . in consideration of the sum of one hundred dollars in hand paid by—who?—Howard Beasley!—aforesaid corporation sells and grants to How-ard Beasley . . . *one share of common stock!*"

"M'sieur! Compose yourself! It is no fraud. Everybody gets a share of stock. It comes out of the twelve hundred. Who knows? Perhaps after a few trips, there will even be dividends. M'sieur? But you look positively ill! Henri, bring brandy for the gentleman."

"So!" he grated. "That's the way it goes, is it? Implicate everybody—nobody squawks."

"But certainly. It is for our own protection, to be sure, but it is really stock."

"Blackmail."

"But no, M'sieur. All is legal."

Henri brought a plastic cup and handed it to him; Suds shook his head.

"Take it. M'sieur. It is real brandy. We could bring only a few bottles, but there is sufficient pure alcohol for the mixing of cocktails."

The small compartment was filled with the delicate perfume of the liquor; Brodanovitch glanced longingly at the plastic cup.

"It is seventy-year-old Courvoisier, M'sieur. Very pleasant."

Suds took it reluctantly, dipped it toward Mme. d'Annecy in self-conscious toast, and drained it. He ac-quired a startled expression; he clucked his tongue exper-imentally and breathed slowly through his nose.

"Good Lord!" he murmured absently.

Mme. d'Annecy chuckled. "M'sieur has forgotten the little pleasures. It was a shame to gulp it so. *Encore, Henri*. And one for myself, I think. Take time to enjoy this one, M'sieur." She studied him for a time while Henri was absent. She shook her head and began putting the forms away, leaving out the sight draft and stock agree-ment which she pushed toward him, raising one inquis-itive brow. He gazed expressionlessly at them. Henri returned with the brandy; Madame questioned him in French. He seemed insistently negative for a time, but then seemed to give grudging assent. "*Bien!*" she said, and turned to Brodanovitch: "M'sieur, it will be necessary only for you to purchase the share of stock. Forget the fee."

"What?" Suds blinked in confusion.

"I said—" The opening of the hatch interrupted her thought. A dazzling brunette in a filmy yellow dress bounced into the compartment, bringing with her a breath of perfume. Suds looked at her and emitted a loud gut-tural cluck. A kind of glazed incredulity kneaded his face into a mask of shocked granite wearing a supercilious moustache. The girl ignored his presence and bent over the table to chat excitedly in French with Mme. d'An-necy. Suds's eyes seemed to find a mind and will of their own; involuntarily they contemplated the details of her architecture, and found manifest fascination in the way she relieved an itch at the back of one trim calf by rubbing it vigorously with the instep of her other foot while she leaned over the desk and bounced lightly on tiptoe as she spoke.

"M'sieur Brodanovitch, the young lady wishes to know—M'sieur Brodanovitch?—M'sieur!"

"What—? Oh." Suds straightened and rubbed his eyes. "Yes?"

"One of your young men has asked Giselle out for a walk. We have pressure suits, of course. But is it safe to promenade about this area?" She paused. "M'sieur, *please!*"

"What?" Suds shook his head. He tore his eyes away from the yellow dress and glanced at a head suddenly thrust in through the hatch. The head belonged to Relke. It saw Brodanovitch and withdrew in haste, but Suds made no sign of recognition. He blinked at Madame again.

"M'sieur, is it safe?"

"What? Oh.' I suppose it is." He gulped his brandy and poured another.

Mme. d'Annecy spoke briefly to the girl, who, after a hasty *merci* and a nod at Suds went off to join Relke outside. When they were gone, Madame smilingly offered her pen to the engineer. Suds stared at it briefly, shook his head, and helped himself to another brandy. He gulped it and reached for his helmet. La d'Annecy snapped her fingers suddenly and went to a locker near the bulkhead. She came back with a quart bottle.

"M'sieur' will surely accept a small token?" She offered the bottle for his inspection. "It is Mumms 2064, a fine year. Take it, M'sieur. Or do you not care for champagne? It is our only bottle, and what is one bottle of wine for such a crowd? Take it—or would you prefer the brandy?"

Suds blinked at the gift while he fastened his helmet and clamped it. He seemed dazed. She held the bottle out to him and smiled hopefully. Suds accepted it absent-mindedly, nodded at her, and stepped into the airlock. The hatch slid closed.

Mme. d'Annecy started back toward her counting table. The alarm bell burst into a sudden brazen clamor. She looked back. A red warning signal flashed balefully. Henriburst in from the corridor, eyed the bell and the light, then charged toward the airlock. The gauge by the hatch showed zero pressure. He pressed a starter button, and a meter hummed to life. The pressure needle crept upward. The bell and the light continued a frenetic complaint. The motor stopped. Henri glanced at the gauge, then swung open the hatch. "*Allons! Ma foi, quelle merde!*"

Mme. d'Annecy came to peer around him into the small cubicle. Her subsequent shriek penetrated to the farthest corridors. Suds Brodanovitch had missed his last chance to become a stockholder.

"It wasn't yo' fault, Ma'am," said Lije Henderson a few minutes later as they half-led, half-carried her to her com-partment. "He know bettuh than to step outside with that bottle of booze. You didn't know. You couldn' be 'spected to know. But he been heah long enough to know—a man make one mistake, thass all. BLOOIE."

*Blooie* was too graphic to suit Madame; she sagged and began retching.

"C'mon, Ma'am, less get you in yo hammock." They carried her into her quarters, eased her into bed, and stepped back out on the catwalk.

Lije mopped his face, leaned against a tension member, and glanced at Joe. "Now how come you s'pose he had that bottle of fizzling giggle water up close to his helmet that way, Joe?"

"I don't know. Reading the label, maybe."

"He sho' muss have had something on his mine."

"Well, it's gone now."

"Yeah. BLOOIE. Man!"

Relke had led the girl out through the lock in the reactor nacelle in order to evade Brodanovitch and a possible command to return to camp. They sat in Novotny's runabout and giggled cozily together at the fuzzy map of Earth that floated in the darkness above them. On the ship's fuselage, the warning light over the airlock hatch began winking, indicating that the lock was in use. The girl noticed it and nudged him. She pointed at the light.

"Somebody coming out," Relke muttered. "Maybe Suds.

We'd better get out of here." He flipped the main switch and started the motor. He was backing onto the road when Giselle caught his arm.

"Beel! Look at the light!"

He glanced around. It was flashing red.

"Malfunction signal. Compressor trouble, probably. It's nothing. Let's take a ride. Joe won't care." He started backing again.

"*Poof!*" she said suddenly.

"What?"

"Poof. It opened, and *poof*—" She puckered her lips and blew a little puff of steam in the cold air to show him. "So. Like smoke."

He turned the car around in the road and looked back again. The hatch had closed. There was no one on the ladder. "Nobody came out."

"*Non*. Just poof."

He edged the car against the trolley rails, switched to autosteering, and let it gather speed.

"Beel?"

"Yeah, kid?"

"Where you taking me?"

He caught the note of alarm in her voice and slowed down again. She had come on a dare after several drinks, and the drinks were wearing off. The landscape was fright-eningly alien, and the sense of falling into bottomlessness was ever-present.

"You want to go back?" he asked gloomily.

"I don't know. I don't like it out here."

"You said you wanted some ground under your feet."

"But it doesn't feel like ground when you walk on it."

"Rather be inside a building?"

She nodded eagerly.

"That's where we're going."

"To your camp?"

"God, no! I'm planning to keep you to myself."

She laughed and snuggled closer to him. "You can't. Madame d'Annecy will not permit—"

"Let's talk about something else," he grunted quickly. "OK. Let's talk about Monday."

"Which Monday?"

"Next Monday. It's my birthday. When is it going to be Monday, Bill?"

"You said *Bill*."

"Beel? That's your name, isn't eet? Weeliam Q. Relke, who weel not tell me what ees the Q?"

"But you said *Bill*."

She was silent for a moment. "OK, I'm a phony," she muttered. "Does the inquisition start now?"

He could feel her tighten up, and he said nothing. She waited stiffly for a time. Gradually she relaxed against him again. "When's it going to be Monday?" she mur-mured.

"When's it going to be Monday where?"

"Here, anywhere, silly!"

He laughed. "When will it be Monday all over the uni-verse?"

She thought for a moment. "Oh. Like time zones. OK, when will it be Monday here?"

"It won't. We just have periods, hitches, and shifts. Fifty shifts make a hitch, two hitches make a period. A period's from sunrise to sunrise. Twenty-nine and a half days. But we don't count days. So I

don't know when it'll be Monday."

It seemed to alarm her. She sat up. "Don't you even have *hours*?" She looked at her watch and jiggled it, lis-tened to it.

"Sure. Seven hours in a shift. *We* call them hours, anyhow. Forty-five seconds longer than an Earth hour."

She looked up through the canopy at the orb of Earth. "When it's Monday on Earth, it'll be Monday here too," she announced flatly.

Relke laughed. "OK, we'll call it that."

"So when will it start being Monday on Earth?"

"Well, it'll start at twenty-four different times, depend-ing on where you are. Maybe more than twenty-four. It's August. Some places, they set the clocks ahead an hour in Summer."

She looked really worried.

"You take birthdays pretty seriously?" he asked.

"Only this one. I'll be—" She broke off and closed her mouth.

"Pick a time zone," Relke offered, "and I'll try to figure out how long until Monday starts. Which zone? Where you'd be now, maybe?"

She shook her head.

"Where you were born?"

"That would be—" She stopped again. "Never mind. Forget it." She sat brooding and watching the moon-scape.

Relke turned off the road at the transformer station. He pulled up beside a flat-roofed cubicle the size of a sentrybox. Giselle looked at it in astonishment.

"*That's a building?*" she asked.

"That's an entrance. The 'building's' underground. Come on, let's seal up."

"What's down there?"

"Just a transformer vault and living quarters for a substation man."

"Somebody *lives* down there?"

"Not yet. The line's still being built. They'll move somebody in when the trolley traffic starts moving."

"What do we want to go down there for?"

He looked at her forlornly. "You'd rather go back to the ship?"

She seemed to pull herself together professionally. She laughed and put her arms around him and whispered something in French against his ear. She kissed him hard, pressed her forehead against his, and grinned. "C'mon, babee! Let's go downstairs."

Relke felt suddenly cold inside. He had wanted to see what it felt like to be alone with a woman again in a quiet place, away from the shouting, howling revelry that had been going on aboard the ship. Now he knew what it was going to feel like. It was going to feel counterfeit. "Christ!" he grunted angrily. "Let's go back!" He reached roughly around her and cut on the switch again. She recoiled suddenly and gaped at him as he started the motor and turned the bug around.

"Hey!" She was staring at him oddly, as if seeing him for 'the first time.

Relke kept his face averted and his knuckles were white on the steering bar. She got up on her knees on the seat and put her hands on his shoulders. "Bill. Good Lord, you're *crying*!"

He choked out a curse as the bug hit the side of the cut and careened around on the approach to the road. He lost control, and the runabout went off the approach and slid slowly sideways down a gentle slope of crushed-lava fill. A sharp clanking sound came from the floor plates.

"Get your suit sealed!" he yelled. "Get it sealed!"

The runabout lurched to a sudden stop. The cabin pres-sure stayed up. He sat panting for a moment, then started the motor. He let it inch ahead and tugged at the steer-ing bar. It was locked. The bug crept in an arc, and the clanking resumed. He cut off the motor and sat cursing softly.

"What's wrong?"

"Broke a link and the tread's fouled. We'll have to get out."

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. He was glowering. She looked back toward the

sentrybox entrance to the substation and smiled thoughtfully.

It was chilly in the vault, and the only light came from the indicator lamps on the control board. The pressure gauge inside the airlock indicated only eight pounds of air. The construction crew had pumped it up to keep some convection currents going around the big transformers, but they hadn't planned on anyone breathing it soon. He changed the mixture controls, turned the baro-stat up to twelve pounds, and listened to the compressors start up. When he turned around, Giselle was taking off her suit and beginning to pant.

"Hey, stay in that thing!" he shouted.

His helmet muffled his voice, and she looked at him blankly. "What?" she called. She was gasping and looking around in alarm.

Relke sprinted a few steps to the emergency rack and grabbed a low pressure walk-around bottle. When he got back, she was getting blue and shaking her head drunkenly. He cracked the valve on the bottle and got the hose connection against her mouth. She nodded quickly and sucked on it. He went back to watch the gauges. He found the overhead lighting controls and turned them on. Giselle held her nose and anxiously sipped air from the bottle. He nodded reassuringly at her. The construction crews had left the substation filled with nitrogen-helium mixture, seeing no reason to add rust-producing moisture and oxygen until someone moved into the place; she had been breathing inert gases, nothing more.

When the partial oxygen pressure was up to normal, he left the control panel and went to look for the communicator. He found the equipment, but it was not yet tied into the line. He went back to tell the girl. Still sipping at the bottle, she watched him with attentive brown eyes. It was the gaze of a child, and he wondered about her age. Aboard ship, she and the others had seemed impersonal automata of Eros; painted ornaments and sleekly functional decoys designed to perform stereotyped rituals of enticement and exorcism of desire, swiftly, lest a customer be kept waiting. But here in stronger light, against a neutral background, he noticed suddenly that she was a distinct individual. Her lipstick had smeared. Her dark hair kept spilling out in tangled wisps from beneath a leather cap with fleece ear flaps. She wore a pair of coveralls, several sizes too large and rolled up about the ankles. With too much rouge on her solemnly mischievous face, she looked ready for a role in a girls' school version of *Chanticleer*.

"You can stop breathing out of the can," he told her. "The oxygen pressure's okay now."

She took the hose from her mouth and sniffed warily. "What was the matter? I was seeing spots."

"It's all right now."

"It's cold in this place. Are we stuck here?"

"I tried to call Joe, but the set's not hooked up. He'll come looking for us."

"Isn't there any heat in here? Can't you start a fire?"

He glanced down at the big 5,000 kva transformers in the pit beyond the safety rail. The noise of corona discharge was very faint, and the purr of thirty-two cycle hum was scarcely audible. With no trucks drawing, power from the trolley, the big pots were cold. Normally, eddy current and hysteresis losses in the transformers would keep the station toast-warm. He glanced at a thermometer. It read slightly under freezing: the ambient temperature of the subsurface rock in that region.

"Let's try the stationman's living quarters," he grunted. "They usually furnish them fancy, as bunk tanks go. Man has to stay by himself out here, they want to keep him sane."

A door marked PRIVATE flipped open as they approached it. A cheery voice called out: "*Hi, Bo. Rugged deal, ain't it?*"

Giselle started back in alarm. "Who's there?"

Relke chuckled. "Just a recorded voice. Back up, I'll show you."

They moved a few paces away. The door fell closed. They approached it again. This time a raucous female squawked at them: "*Whaddaya mean coming home at this hour? Lemme smell your breath.*"

Giselle caught on and grinned. "So he won't get lonesome?"

"Partly, and partly to keep him a little sore. The stationmen hate it, but that's part of the idea. It gives them something to talk back to and throw things at."

They entered the apartment. The door closed itself, the lights went on. Someone belched, then announced: "I *get just as sick of looking at you as you do looking at me, button head. Go take a bath.*"

Relke flushed. "It can get pretty rough sometimes. The tapes weren't edited for mixed company. Better plug your ears if you go in the bathroom."

Giselle giggled. "I think it's cute."

He went into the kitchenette and turned on all the burners of the electric range to help warm the place. "Come stand next to the oven," he called, "until I see if the heat pumps are working." He opened the oven door. A libidinous purr came from within.

"*Dah-ling, now why bother with breakfast when you can have meee?*"

He glanced up at Giselle.

"I didn't say it," she giggled, but posed invitingly. Relke grinned and accepted the invitation.

"You're not crying now," she purred as he released her.

He felt a surge of unaccountable fury, grunted, "Ex-cuse me," and stalked out to the transformer vault. He looked around for the heat pumps, failed to find them, and went to lean on the handrail overlooking the pit. He stood there with his fists in his pockets, vaguely anguished and enraged, for no reason he understood. For a moment he had been too close to feeling at home, and that brought up the wrath somehow. After a couple of min-utes he shook it off and went back inside.

"Hey, I wasn't teasing you," Giselle told him.

"What?"

"About crying."

"Listen," he said irritably, "did you ever see a looney or a spacer without leaky eyes? It's the glare, that's all."

"Is that it? Huh—want to know something? I can't cry. That's funny. You're a man and you can cry, but I can't."

Relke watched her grumpily while she warmed her behind at the oven. *She's not more than fifteen,* he decided suddenly. It made him a little queasy. *Come on, Joe, hurry.*

"You know," she went on absently, "when I was a lit-tle girl, I got mad at . . . at somebody, and I decided I was never going to cry anymore. I never did, either. And you know what?—now I can't. Sometimes I try and I try, but I just *can't.*" She spread her hands to the oven, tilted them back and forth, and watched the way the tendons worked as she stiffened her fingers. She seemed to be talking to her hands. "Once I used an onion. To cry, I mean. I cut an onion and rubbed some of it on a handkerchief and laid the handkerchief over my eyes. I cried that time, all right. That time I couldn't stop crying, and nobody could make me stop. They were petting me and scolding me and shaking me and trying to give me smell-ing salts, but I just couldn't quit. I blubbered for two days. Finally Mother Bernarde had to call the doctor to give me a sedative. Some of the sisters were taking cold towels and—"

"Sisters?" Relke grunted.

Giselle clapped a hand to her mouth and shook her head five or six times, very rapidly. She looked around at him. He shrugged.

"So you were in a convent."

She shook her head again.

"So what if you were?" He sat down with his back to her and pretended to ignore her. She was dangerously close to that state of mind which precedes the telling of a life history. He didn't want to hear it; he already knew it. So she was in a nunnery; Relke was not surprised. Some people had to polarize themselves. If they broke free from one pole, they had to seek its opposite. People with no middle ground. Black, or if not black, then white, never gray. Law, or criminality. God, or Satan. The cloister, or a whorehouse. Eternally a choice of all or nothing--at-all, and they couldn't see that they made things that way for themselves. They set fire to every bridge they ever crossed—so that even a cow creek became a Rubi-con, and every crossing was on a tightrope.

*You understand that too well, don't you, Relke?* he asked himself bitterly. There was Fran and the

baby, and there wasn't enough money, and so you had to go and burn a bridge—a 240,000-mile bridge, with Fran on the other side. And so, after six years on Luna, there would be enough money; but there wouldn't be Fran and the baby. And so, he had signed another extended contract, and the moon was going to be home for a long long time. *Yeh, you know about burned bridges, all right, Relke.*

He glanced at Giselle. She was glaring at him.

"If you're waiting for me to say something," she snapped, "you can stop waiting. I don't have to tell you anything."

"I didn't ask you anything."

"I was just a novice. I didn't take permanent vows."

"All right."

"They wouldn't let me. They said I was—unstable. They didn't think I had a calling."

"Well, you've got one now. Stop crawling all over me like I said anything. I didn't ask you any questions."

"You gave me that pious look."

"Oh, garbage!" He rolled out of the chair and loped off to the room. The stationman's quarters boasted its own music system and television (permanently tuned to the single channel that broadcast a fairly narrow beam aimed at the lunar stations). He tried the television first, but solar interference was heavy.

"Maybe it'll tell us when it's going to be Monday," she said, coming to watch him from the doorway.

He gave her a sharp look, then softened it. The stove had warmed the kitchen, and she had stepped out of the baggy coveralls. She was still wearing the yellow dress, and she had taken a moment to comb her hair. She leaned against the side of the doorway, looking very young but excessively female. She had that lost pixie look and a tropical climate tan too.

"Why are you looking at me that way?" she asked. "Is this all we're going to do? I mean, just wait around until somebody comes? Can't we dance or something?" She did a couple of skippity steps away from the door jamb and rolled her hips experimentally. One hip was made of India rubber. "Say! Dancing ought to be fun in this crazy gravity." She smirked at him and posed alluringly.

Relke swallowed, reddened, and turned to open the selector cabinet. *She's only a kid, Relke.* He paused, then dialed three selections suitable for dancing. *She's only a kid, damn it!* He paused again, then dialed a violin con-certo. *A kid—back home they'd call her "jail bait."* He dialed ten minutes' worth of torrid Spanish guitar. *You'll hate yourself for it, Relke.* He shuddered involuntarily, dialed one called *The Satyricon of Lily Brown, an orgy in New African Jazz (for adults only).*

He glanced up guiltily. She was already whirling around the room with an imaginary partner, dancing to the first selection.

Relke dialed a tape of Palestrina and some plainchant, but left it for last. Maybe it would neutralize the rest.

She snuggled close and they tried to keep time to the music—not an easy task, with the slow motion imposed by low gravity mismatched to the livelier rhythms of dancing on Earth. Two attempts were enough. Giselle flopped down on the bunk.

"What's that playing now, Bill?"

"Sibelius. Concerto for Something and Violin. I dunno."

"Bill?"

"Yeah."

"Did I make you mad or something?"

"No, but I don't think—" He turned to look at her and stopped talking. She was lying on her back with her hands behind her head and her legs cocked up, balancing her calf on her other knee and watching her foot wiggle. She was lithe and brown and . . . ripe.

"Damn," he muttered.

"Bill?"

"Uh?"

She wrinkled her nose at him and smiled. "Don't you even know what you wanted to come over here



for?"

Relke got up slowly and walked to the light switch. He snapped it.

"*Oh, dahling!*" said a new voice in the darkness. "*What if my husband comes home!*"

After Sibelius came the Spanish guitar. The African jazz was wasted.

Relke sat erect with a start. Giselle still slept, but noises came from the other room. There were voices, and a door slammed closed. Shuffling footsteps, a muffled curse. "Who's there?" he yelled. "Joe?"

The noises stopped, but he heard the hiss of someone whispering. He nudged the girl awake with one elbow. The record changer clicked, and the soft chant of an *Agnus Dei* came from the music system.

"Oh, God! It's Monday!" Giselle muttered sleepily. "A dame," grunted a voice in the next room.

"Who's there?" Relke called again.

"We brought you some company." The voice sounded familiar. A light went on in the other room. "Set him down over here, Harv."

Relke heard rattling sounds and a chair scraped back. They dumped something into the chair. Then the bulky silhouette of a man filled the doorway. "Who's in here, anyhow?" He switched on the lights. The man was Lar-kin. Giselle pulled a blanket around herself and blinked sleepily.

"Is it Monday?" she asked.

A slow grin spread across Larkin's face. "Hey Harv!" he called over his shoulder. "Look what we pulled out of the grab bag! Come look at lover boy. . . . Now, Harv—is that sweet? Is that romantic?"

Kunz looked over Larkin's shoulder. "Yuh. Real homey, ain't it. Hiyah, Rat. Lookit that cheese he's got with him. Some cheese. Round like a provolone, huh? Hiyah, cheesecake, know you're in bed with a rat?"

Giselle glanced questioningly at Relke. Relke was sur-veying the tactical situation. It looked unpromising. Lar-kin laughed.

"Look at him, Harv—wondering where he left his shiv. What's the matter, Relke? We make you nervous?" He stepped inside, Kunz followed.

Relke stood up in bed and backed against the wall. "Get out of the way," he grunted at Giselle.

"Look at him!" Larkin gloated. "Getting ready to kick. You planning to kick somebody, sonny?"

"Stay back!" he snapped. "Get out of here, Giselle!"

"*A l'abri? Oui—*" She slid off the bed and darted for the door. Kunz grabbed at her, but she slipped past. She stopped in the doorway and backed up a step. She stared into the next room. She put her hand to her mouth. "Oh! Oh!" she yelled. Larkin and Kunz glanced back at her. Relke lunged off the bed. He smashed against Larkin, sent him sprawling into Kunz. He dodged Giselle and sprinted for the kitchen and the cutlery rack. He made it a few steps past the door before he saw what Giselle had seen. Something was sitting at the table, facing the door. Relke stopped in his tracks and began backing away. The something at the table was a blistered caricature of a man, an icy frost-figure in a deflated pressure suit. Its mouth was open, and the stomach had been forced up through . . . He closed his eyes. Relke had seen men blown out, but it hadn't gotten any pleasanter to look at since the last time.

"Get him, Harv!"

They pinned his arms from behind. "Heading for a butcher knife, Relke?" He heard a dull crack and felt his head explode. The room went pink and hazy.

"That's for grabbing glass on us the other day, Sonny." "Don't mess him up too much, Lark. The dame's here." "I won't mess him up. I'll be real clean about it."

The crack came again, and the pink haze quivered with black flashes.

"That's for ratting on the Party, Relke."

Dimly he heard Giselle screaming at them to stop it.

"Take that little bitch in the other room and play house with her, Harv. I'll work on Sonny awhile, and then we'll trade around. Don't wear her out."

"Let go," she yelled. "Take your hands off—listen, I'll go in there with you if you'll quit beating him. Now stop—"

Another crack. The pink haze flew apart, and black-ness engulfed him. Time moved ahead in jerks for awhile. First he was sitting at the table across from the corpse. Larkin was there too, dealing himself a hand of solitaire. Loud popular music blared from the music system, but he could hear Kunz laughing in the next room. Once Giselle's voice cried out in protest. Relke moved and groaned. Larkin looked his way.

"Hey, Harv—he's awake. It's your turn."

"I'm busy," Kunz yelled.

"Well, hurry up. Brodanovitch is beginning to thaw." Relke blinked at the dead man. "Who? Him? Brodan—" His lips were swollen, and it was painful to talk.

"Yeah, that's Suds. Pretty, isn't he? You're going to look like that one of these days, kid."

"You—killed—Suds?"

Larkin threw back his head and laughed. "Hey, Harv, hear that? He thinks we killed Suds."

"What happened to him, then?"

Larkin shrugged. "He walked into an airlock with a bottle of champagne. The pressure went down quick, the booze blew up in his face, and there sits Suds. A victim of imprudence, like you. Sad looking schlemazel, isn't he?"

"Wha'd you bring him here for?"

"You know the rules, Sonny. A man gets blown out, they got to look him over inch by inch, make sure it wasn't murder."

Giselle cried out again in protest. Relke started to his feet, staggering dizzily. Larkin grabbed him and pushed him down.

"Hey, Harv! He's getting frisky. Come take over. The gang'll be rolling in pretty quick."

Kunz came out of the bunkroom. Larkin sprinted for the door as Giselle tried to make a run for it. He caught her and dragged her back. He pushed her into the bunkroom, went in after her, and closed the door. Relke lunged at Kunz, but a judo cut knocked numbness into the side of his neck and sent him crashing against the wall.

"Relke, get wise," Hary growled. "This'll happen every now and then if you don't join up."

The lineman started to his feet. Kunz kicked him dis-interestedly. Relke groaned and grabbed his side.

"We got no hard feelings, Relke. . . ." He chopped his boot down against the back of Relke's neck. "You can join the Party any time."

Time moved ahead in jerks again.

Once he woke up. Brodanovitch was beginning to melt, and the smell of brandy filled the room. There were voices and chair scrapings and after a while somebody carried Brodanovitch out. Relke lay with his head against the wall and kept his eyes closed. He assumed that if the apartment contained a friend, he would not still be lying here on the floor; so he remained motionless and waited to gather strength.

"So that's about the size of it," Larkin was telling someone. "Those dames are apt to be dynamite if they let them into Crater City. We've got enough steam whipped up to pull off the strike, but what if that canful of cat meat walks in on Copernicus about sundown? Who's go-ing to have their mind on politics?"

"Hell, Lark," grunted a strange voice. "Parkeson'll never let them get in town."

"No? Don't be too damn sure. Parkeson's no idiot. He knows trouble's coming. Hell, he could *invite* them to Crater City, pretend he's innocent as a lamb, just didn't know what they are, but take credit for them being there."

"Well, what can we do about it?"

"Cripple that ship."

"Wha-a-at?"

"Cripple the ship. Look, there's nothing else we can do on our own. We've got no orders from the Party. Right before we break camp, at sundown, we cripple the ship. Something they can't fix without help from the base."

"Leave them *stuck* out here?"

"Only for a day or two. Till the Party takes over the base. Then *we* send a few wagons out here after dark and pick up the wenches. Who gets credit for dames showing up? The Party. Besides, it's the only thing we dare do without orders. We can't be sure what'd happen if Parkeson walked in with a bunch of Algerian whores about the time the show's supposed to start. And says, 'Here, boys, look what Daddy brought.' "

"Parkeson hasn't got the guts."

"The hell he hasn't. He'd say *that* out of one side of his mouth. Out of the other side, he'd be dictating a vig-orous protest to the WP for allowing such things to get clearance for blasting off, making it sound like they're at fault. That's just a guess. We've got to keep those women out of Crater City until, we're sure, though. And there's only one way: cripple the ship."

There were five or six voices in the discussion, and Relke recognized enough of them to understand dimly that a cell meeting was in progress. His mind refused to function clearly, and at times the voices seemed to be speaking in senseless jargon, although the words were plain enough. His head throbbed and he had bitten a piece out of the end of his tongue. He felt as if he were lying stretched out on a bed of jagged rocks, although there was only the smooth floor under his battered person.

Giselle cried out from the next room and beat angrily on the door.

Quite mindlessly, and as if his body were being directed by some whimsical puppet master, Relke's corpse sudden-ly clambered to its feet and addressed itself to the startled conspirators.

"Goddam it, gentlemen, can't you let the lady out to use the trapper?"

They hit him over the head with a jack handle.

He woke up again. This time he was in the bunkroom. A faint choking sound made him look up. Giselle sat on the foot of the bed, legs tightly crossed, face screwed up. She was trying to cry.

"Use an onion," he told her thickly, and sat up. "What's the matter?"

"It's Monday now."

"Where are they?"

"They left. We're locked in."

He fell back with a groan. A stitch in his side felt like a broken rib. He turned his face to the wall. "What's so great about Monday?" he muttered.

"Today the others are taking their vows."

When he woke up again, Novotny was watching him from the foot of the bed. The girl was gone. He sat up and fell back with a groan.

"Fran," he said.

"It wasn't Fran, it was a hustler," said Joe. "I had Beasley take her back. Who busted you?"

"Larkin and Kunz."

"It's a good thing."

"What?"

"They saved me the trouble. You ran off with the jeep."

"Sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry. Just watch yourself, that's all."

"I wanted to see what it was like, Joe."

"What? Playing house with a wench?"

He nodded.

"What was it like?"

"I don't know."

"You woke up calling her Fran."

"I did?"

"Yah. Before you start feeling that way, you better ask Beasley what they did together on the rug while you were asleep, Romeo."

"What?"

"She really knows some tricks. Mme. d'Annecy really educates her girls. You been kissing and cooing with her, Relke?"

"I'm sick, Joe. Don't."

"By the way, you better not go back. The Madame's pretty sore at you."

"Why?"

"For keeping the wench gone so long. There was going to be a show. You know, a circus. Giselle was supposed to be in it. You might say she had the lead role."

"Who?"

"Giselle. Still feel like calling her Fran?—Hey! if you're going to vomit, get out of bed."

Relke staggered into the latrine. He was gone a long time.

"Better hurry up," Novotny called. "Our shift goes on in half an hour."

"I can't go on, Joe."

"The hell you can't. Unless you want to be sent up N.L.D. You know what they do to N.L.D. cases."

"You wouldn't report me N.L.D."

"The hell I wouldn't, but I don't have to."

"What do you mean?"

"Parkeson's coming, with a team of inspectors. They're probably already here, and plenty sore."

"About the ship? The women?"

"I don't know. If the Commission hear about those bats, there'll be hell to pay. But who'll pay it is something else."

Relke buried his face in his hands and tried to think. "Joe, listen. I only half remember, but . . . there was a cell meeting here."

"When?"

"After Larkin and Kunz worked me over. Some guys came in, and ..."

"Well?"

"It's foggy. Something about Parkeson taking the wom-en back to Crater City."

"Hell, that's a screwy idea. Who thinks that?"

Relke shook his head and tried to think. He came out of the latrine mopping his face on a towel. "I'm trying to remember."

Joe got up. "All right. Better get your suit. Let's go pull cable."

The lineman breathed deeply a few times and winced at the effect. He went to get his suit out of the hangar, started the routine safety check, and stopped halfway through. "Joe, my suit's been cut."

Novotny came to look. He pinched the thick corded plastic until the incision opened like a mouth. "Knife," he grunted.

"Those sons of—"

"Yah." He fingered the cut. "They meant for you to find it, though. It's too conspicuous. It's a threat."

"Well, I'm fed up with their threats. I'm going to—"

"You're not going to do anything, Relke. *I'm* going to do it. Larkin and Kunz have messed around with my men one time too often."

"What have you got in mind, Joe?"

"Henderson and I will handle it. We'll go over and have a little conference with them, that's all."

"Why Henderson? Look, Joe, if you're going to stomp them, it's my grudge, not Lije's."

"That's just it. If I take you, it's a grudge. If Lije and I do it, it's just politics. I've told you guys before—leave the politics to me. Come on, we'll get you a suit from the emergency locker."

They went out into the transformer vault. Two men wearing blue armbands were bending over Brodanovitch's corpse. One of them was fluently cursing unknown parties who had brought the body to a warm place and allowed it to thaw.

"Investigating team," Novotny muttered. "Means Parkeson is already here." He hiked off toward the emergency lockers.

"Hey, are you the guy that left this stiff near a stove?" one of the investigators called out to Relke.

"No, but I'll be glad to rat on the guys that did, if it'll get them in trouble," the lineman told him.

"Never mind. You can't hang them for being stupid." "What are you going to do with *him*?" Relke asked, nodding at the corpse.

"Promote him to supervisory engineer and give him a raise."

"Christ but they hire smart boys for the snooper team, don't they? What's your I.Q., friend? I bet they had to breed you to get smart."

The checker grinned. "You looking for an argument, Slim?"

Relke shook his head. "No, I just asked a question."

"We're going to take him back to Copernicus and bury him, friend. It takes a lot of imagination to figure that out, doesn't it?"

"If he was a class three laborer, you wouldn't take him back to Copernicus. You wouldn't even bury him. You'd just chuck him in a fissure and dynamite the lip."

The man smiled. Patient cynicism was in his tone. "But he's *not* a class three laborer, Slim. He's Mister S.K. Brodanovitch. Does that make everything nice and clear?"

"Sure. Is Parkeson around?"

The checker glanced up and snickered. "You're a chum of his, I guess? Hear that, Clyde? We're talking to a wheel."

Relke reddened. "Shove it, chum. I just wondered if he's here."

"Sure, he's out here. He went over to see that flying bordello you guys have been hiding out here."

"What's he going to do about it?"

"Couldn't say, friend."

Novotny came back with an extra suit.

"Joe, I just remembered something."

"Tell me about it on the way back."

They suited up and went out to the runabout. Relke told what he could remember about the cell meeting.

"It sounds crazy in a way," Novotny said thoughtfully. "Or maybe it doesn't. It *could* mess up the Party's strike plans if Parkeson brought those women back before sundown. The men want women back on the moon project. If they can get women bootlegged in, they won't be quite so ready to start a riot on the No Work Without a Wife theme."

"But Parkeson'd get fired in a flash if—"

"If Parliament got wind of it, sure. Unless he raised the squawk later himself. UCOJE doesn't mention prosti-tution. Parkeson could point out that some national codes on Earth tolerate it. Nations with delegates in the Parlia-ment, and with work teams on the moon. Take the Afri-can team at Tycho. And the Japanese team. Parkeson himself is an Aussie. Whose law is he supposed to enforce?"

"You mean maybe they can't keep ships like that from visiting us?"

"Don't kid yourself. It won't last long. But maybe long enough. If it goes on long enough, and builds up, the gen-eral public will find out. You think that wouldn't cause some screaming back home?"

"Yeah. That'll be the end."

"I'm wondering. If there turns out to be a profit in it for whoever's backing d'Annecy, well—anything that brings a profit is pretty hard to put a stop to. There's only one sure way to stop it. Kill the demand."

"For women? Are you crazy, Joe?"

"They could bring in decent women. Women to marry. That'll stop it."

"But the kids. They can't have kids."

"Yeah, I know. That's the problem, and they've got to start solving it sometime. Hell, up to now, they haven't been trying to solve it. When the problem came up, and the kids were dying, everybody got hysterical and jerked the women back to Earth. That wasn't a solution, it was an evasion. The problem is growth-control—in low grav-ity. It ought to have a medical answer. If this d'Annecy dame gets a chance to keep peddling her wares under the counter, well—she'll force them to start looking for a so-lution."

"I don't know, Joe. Everybody said homosexuality would force them to start looking for it—after Doc Reiber made his survey. The statistics looked pretty black, but they didn't do anything about it except send us a ship-ful of ministers. The fairies just tried to make the min-isters."

"Yeah, but this is different."

"I don't see how."

"Half the voters are women."

"So? They didn't do anything about homosex—"

"Relke, wise up. Listen, did you ever see a couple of Lesbians necking in a bar?"

Relke snickered. "Sure, once or twice."

"How did you feel about it?"

"Well, this once was kind of funny. You see, this one babe had on—"

"Never mind. You thought it was funny. Do you think it's funny the way MacMillian and Wickers bill and coo?"

"That gets pretty damn nauseating, Joe."

"Uh-huh, but the Lesbians just gave you a giggle. Why?"

"Well, I don't know, Joe, it's—"

"I'll tell you why. You like dames. You can understand other guys liking dames. You like dames so much that you can even understand two dames liking each other. You can see what they see in each other. But it's incongruous, so it's funny. But you *can't* see what two fairies see in each other, so that just gives you a bellyache. Isn't that it?"

"Maybe, but what's that got to do with the voters?"

"Ever think that maybe a woman would feel the same way in reverse? A dame could see what MacMillian and Wickers see in each other. The dame might morally dis-approve, but at the same time she could sympathize. What's more, she'd be plenty sure that she could handle that kind of competition if she ever needed to. She's a woman, and wotthehell, Wickers is only a substitute wom-an. It wouldn't worry her too much. Worry her morally, but not as a personal threat. Relke, Mme. d'Annecy's racket is a personal threat to the home girl and the wom-enfolk."

"I see what you mean."

"Half the voters are women."

Relke chuckled. "Migod, Joe, if Ellen heard about that ship ... "

"Ellen?"

"My older sister. Old maid. Grim."

"You've got the idea. If Parkeson thinks of all this . . ." His voice trailed off. "When is Larkin talking about crip-pling that ship?"

"About sundown, why?"

"Somebody better warn the d'Annecy dame."

The cosmic gunfire had diminished. The Perseid shrap-nel still pelted the dusty face of the plain, but the gram--impact-per-acre-second had dropped by a significant fraction, and with it fell the statistician's estimate of dead men per square mile. There was an ion storm during the first half of B-shift, and the energized spans of high volt-age cable danced with fluttering demon light as the trace-pressure of the lunar "atmosphere" increased enough to start a glow discharge between conductors. High current surges sucked at the line, causing the breakers to hiccup. The breakers tried the line three times, then left the cir-cuit dead and waited for the storm to pass. The storm meant nothing to the construction crews except an in-crease in headset noise.

Parkeson's voice came drawling on the general call fre-quency, wading waist-deep through the interference caused by the storm. Relke leaned back against his safety strap atop the trusswork of the last tower and tried to listen. Parkeson was reading the Articles of Discipline, and lis-tening was compulsory. All teams on the job had stopped work to hear him. Relke gazed across the plain toward the slender nacelles of the bird from Algiers in the dis-tance. He had gotten used to the ache in his side where Kunz had kicked him, but it was good to rest for a time and watch the rocket and remember brown legs and a yellow dress. Properties of Earth. Properties belonging to the communion of humanity, from which fellowship a Looney was somehow cut off by 238,000 miles of physical separation.

"*We've got a job to finish here,*" Parkeson was telling the men.

Why? What was in space that was worth the wanting? What followed from its conquest? What came of finishing the job?

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing. Nothing anybody ever dreamed of or hoped for.

Parkeson scolded on. *"I know the question that's foremost in your minds,"* his voice continued, *"but you'd better forget it. Let me tell you what happens if this line isn't finished by sundown. (But by God, it will be fin-ished!) Listen, you wanted women. All right, now you've all been over to visit the uh—'affectionate institution'—and you got what you wanted; and now the work is behind schedule. Who gives a damn about the project, eh? I know what you're thinking. 'That's Parkeson's worry.' OK, so let's talk about what you're going to breathe for the next couple of periods. Let's talk about how many men will wind up in the psycho-respiratory ward, about the overload on the algae tanks. That's not your responsi-bility either, is it? You don't have to breathe and eat. Hell, let Nature take care of air and water, eh? Sure. Now look around. Take a good look. All that's be-tween you and that hungry vacuum out there is ten pounds of man-made air and a little reinforced plastic. All that keeps you eating and drinking and breathing is that precarious life-cycle of ours at Copernicus. That plant-animal feedback loop is so delicately balanced that the biology team gets the cold shakes every time somebody sneezes or passes gas. It has to be constantly nursed. It has to be planned and kept on schedule. On Earth, Nature's a plenum. You can chop down her forests, kill off her deer and buffalo, and fill her air with smog and hot isotopes; the worst you can do is cause a few new deserts and dust bowls, and make things a little unpleasant for a while.*

*"Up here, we've got a little, bit of Nature cooped up in a bottle, and we're in the bottle too. We're cultured like mold on agar. The biology team has to chart the ecology for months in advance. It has to know the construction and survey teams are going to deliver exactly what they promise to deliver, and do it on schedule. If you don't deliver, the ecology gets sick. If the ecology gets sick, you get sick.*

*"Do you want another epidemic of the chokers like we had three years back? That's what'll happen if there's a work slowdown while everybody goes off on a sex binge at that ship. If the line isn't finished before sundown, the ecology gets bled for another two weeks to keep that mine colony going, and the colony can't return wastes to our cycle. Think it over, but think fast. There's not much time. 'We all breathe the same air'—on Earth, that's just a political slogan. Here, we all breathe it or we all choke in it. How do you want it, men?"*

Relke shifted restlessly on the tower. He glanced down at Novotny and the others who lounged around the foot of the steel skeleton listening to Parkeson. Lije caught his eye. He waved at Relke to haul up the hoist-bucket. Relke shook his head and gave him a thumbs-down. Hen-derson gestured insistently for him to haul it up. Relke reeled the bucket in. It was empty, but chalked on the sides and bottom was a note from Lije: "They toll me what L and K did to you and your girl. I and Joe will take care of it, right after this sermon. You can spit on my fist first if you want. Lije."

Relke gave him a half-hearted screw-twist signal and let the bucket go. Revenge was no good, and vicarious revenge was worse than no good; it was hollow. He thought of asking Joe to forget it, but he knew Joe wouldn't listen. The pusher felt his own integrity was involved, and a matter of jurisdictional ethics: nobody can push my men around but me. It was gang ethics, but it seemed inevitable somehow. Where there was fear, men huddled in small groups and counted their friends on their fingers, and all else was Foe. In the absence of the family, there had to be the gang, and fear made it quarrelsome, jealous, and proud.

Relke leaned back against his strap and glanced up to-ward Earth. The planet was between quarter and half phase, for the sun was lower in the west. He watched it and tried to feel something more than a vague envy. Sometimes the heartsick nostalgia reached the propor-tions of idolatrous adoration of Gaea's orb overhead, only to subside into a grudging resentment of the gulf between worlds. Earth—it was a place where you could stop being afraid, a place where fear of suffocation was not, where fear of blowout was not, where nobody went berserk with the chokers or dreamed of poisoned air or worried about short-horn cancer or burn blindness or meteoric dust or low-gravity muscular atrophy. A place

where there was wind to blow your sweat away.

Watching her crescent, he felt again that vague anger of separation, that resentment against those who stayed at home, who had no cause for constant fear, who could live without the tense expectancy of sudden death haunting every moment. One of them was Fran, and another was the one who had taken her from him. He looked away quickly and tried to listen to the coordinator.

*"This is no threat," Parkeson was saying. "If the line isn't finished on time, then the consequences will just happen, that's all. Nobody's going to punish you, but there are a few thousand men back at the Crater who have to breathe air with you. If they have to breathe stink next period—because you guys were out having one helluva party with Madame d'Annecy's girls—you can figure how popular you'll be. That's all I've got to say. There's still time to get the work back on schedule. Let's use it."*

Parkeson signed off. The new engineer who was replacing Brodanovitch gave them a brief pep-talk, implying that Parkeson was a skunk and would be forced to eat his own words before sundown. It was the old hard-guy-soft-guy routine: first a bawling-out and then a buttering-up. The new boss offered half of his salary to the first team to forge ahead of its own work schedule. It was not stated nor even implied that Parkeson was paying him back.

The work was resumed. After half an hour, the safety beeper sounded on all frequencies, and men switched back to general call. Parkeson and his party were already heading back toward Copernicus.

*"Blasting operation at the next tower site will occur in ten minutes," came the announcement. "Demol team requests safety clearance over all of zones two and three, from four forty to five hundred hours. There will be scatter-glass in both zones. Zone two is to be evacuated immediately, and all personnel in zone three take line-of-sight cover from the red marker. I repeat: there will be scatter-glass . . ."*

"That's us," said Novotny when it was over. "Everybody come on. Brax, Relke, climb down."

Braxton swore softly in a honeysuckle drawl. It never sounded like cursing, which it wasn't, but like a man marveling at the variety of vicissitudes invented by an ingenious universe for the bedevilment of men. "I sweah, when the angels ahn't shootin' at us from up in Perseus, it's the demol boys. Demol says froggie, and eve'body jumps. It gives 'em that suhtain feelin' of impohtance. Y'all know what I think? I got a thee-orry. I think weah all really dead, and they don' tell us it's hell weah in, because not tellin' us is pah't of the tohture."

"Get off the damn frequency, Brax, and stay off!" Novotny snapped when the Alabaman released his mic button. "I've told you and Henderson before—either learn to talk fast, or don't talk on the job. If somebody had a slow leak, he'd be boiling blood before he could scream—with you using the frequency for five minutes to say `yeah.'"

*"Mistuh Novotny! My mothuh always taught me to speak slowly and de-stinct-ly. If you think that yo' Yankee upbringing' ..."*

Joe rapped on his helmet until he shut up, then beckoned to Henderson. "Lije, we got twenty minutes."

"Yeah, Joe, want to go see a couple of guys now?" He flashed white teeth and stared back toward the barrack train.

"Think we can handle it in twenty minutes?"

"I don' know. It seem like a short time to do a real good job of it, but maybe if we don't waste any on pre-liminary fisticuffin' . . ."

"Hell, they didn't waste any ceremony on Relke."

"Less go, then!" He grinned at Relke and held out his fist. "Spit on it?"

Relke shook his head. Henderson laughed. "Wanted to see if you'd go ptooeey in your helmet."

"Come on, Lije. The rest of you guys find cover."

Relke watched the two of them lope off toward the rolling barracks. "Hey, Joe," he called after a few seconds.

The lopers stopped to look back. "Relke?"

"Yeah. Don't lose."



"What?"

"They'll say I sicced you. Don't lose."

"Don't worry." They loped again. The longer Relke watched them, the less he liked the idea. If they didn't do a pretty thorough job on Kunz and Larkin, things would be worse for Relke than if they did nothing at all. Then there was the movement to think about; he didn't know to what extent *they* looked out for their own.

Relke walked out of the danger zone and hiked across the hill where he could get a clear view of the rocket. He stopped for a while on the slope and watched four distant figures moving around on the ground beneath the towering ship. For a moment, he thought they were wom-en, but then he saw that one of them was coiling moor-ing cable, and he knew they were ship's crew. What sort of men had the d'Annecy women been able to hire for such a job? he wondered.

He saw that they were getting ready to lift ship. *Lift ship!*

Relke was suddenly running toward them without knowing why. Whenever he topped a rise of ground and could see them, he tried calling them, but they were not using the project's suit frequency. Finally he found their voices on the seldom used private charter band, but they were speaking French.

One of the men looped a coil of cable over his shoul-der and started up the ladder toward the lock. Relke stopped atop an outcropping. He was still two or three miles from the ship. The "isobar" valve system for the left knee of his suit had jammed, and it refused to take up the increased pressure caused by flexure. It was like trying to bend a fully inflated rubber tire, and he hobbled about for a moment with one leg stiff as a crutch.

"Listen!" he called on the p.c. frequency. "You guys at the ship. Can you hear me?" He was panting, and he felt a little panicky. The man on the ladder stopped climbing and looked around.

There was a staccato exchange in French.

"No, no! Over here. On the rock." He waved at them and jumped a few times. "Look toward the camp. On the rock."

They conversed heatedly among themselves for a time. "Don't any of you speak English?" he begged.

They were silent for a moment. "Whoevair ees?" one of them ventured. "You conversation with wrong radio, M'sieur. Switch a button."

"No, no. I'm trying to call you ..."

A carrier drowned him out.

"We close for business," the man said. "We go now." He started climbing again.

"Listen!" Relke yelled. "Ten thousand dollars. Everything."

"You crazy man."

"Look, it won't get you in any trouble. I've got plenty in the bank. I'll pay—"

The carrier cut him off again.

"You crazy. Get off the air. We do not go to Earth now."

"Wait! Listen! Tell Giselle . . . No, let me talk to her. Get her to use the radio. It's important."

"I tell you, we close for business now." The man climbed in the airlock. The others climbed up behind. They were, jeering at him. This time it sounded like Ara-bic. He watched until they were all inside.

White fury lanced the ground and spread in a white sheet beneath the ship and roiled up in a tumult of dust and expanding gasses. It climbed on a white fan, gather-ing velocity. Relke could still make it out as a ship when its course began arcing away from the vertical. It was beginning a trajectory in the direction of Copernicus. When it was out of sight, he began trudging back toward the work site. He was nearly an hour overdue.

"Where you been?" Novotny asked him quietly after watching him hobble the last quarter of a mile in stony silence. He was squinting at the lineman with that faintly puzzled look that Relke recognized as a most ominous omen. The squint was lopsided because of a cut under one eye, and it looked like a chip was missing from a tooth.

Relke showed his stiff leg and bounced the heel against the ground a couple of times. "I walked too far, and the c.p. valves got jammed. Sorry, Joe."

"You don't have to be sorry. Let's see."

The pusher satisfied himself that the suit was malfunctioning. He waved the lineman toward the barrack train. "Go to supply and get it fixed. Get back on the double. You've slowed us down."

Relke paused. "You sore, Joe?"

"We're on duty. I don't get sore on duty. I save it up. Now—haul ass!"

Relke hobbled off. "What about . . . what you went for, Joe?" he called back. "What happened?"

"I told you to keep your nose out of politics!" the pusher snapped. "Never mind what happened."

Joe, Relke decided, was plenty sore. About something. Maybe about a beating that backfired. Maybe about Relke taking an hour awol. Either way, he was in trouble. He thought it over and decided that paying a bootleg ship ten thousand to take him back to Earth with them hadn't been such a hysterical whim after all.

But then he met Larkin in the supply wagon. Larkin was stretched out flat on his back, and a medic kept say-ing, "Who did it to you? Who did it to you?" and Larkin kept telling him to go to hell out of a mouth that looked like a piece of singed stew meat. Kunz was curled up on a blanket and looked even worse. He spat in his sleep and a bit of tooth rattled across the deck.

"Meanest bunch of bastards I ever saw," the clerk told Relke while he checked in the suit. "They don't even give you a chance. Here were these two guys sleeping in their bunks and not bothering anybody, and what do you think?"

"I quit thinking. What?"

"Somebody starts working them over. Wham. Don't even wake them up first. Just wham. You ever see anything like it? Mean, John, just mean. You can't even get a shift's sleep anymore. You better go to bed with a knife in your boot, John."

"It's Bill."

"Oh. What do you suppose makes a guy that mean anyway?"

"I don't know. Everybody's jumpy, I guess."

The clerk looked at him wisely. "There you have put your finger on it, John. Looney nerves. The jitters. Everybody's suit-happy." He leaned closer and lowered his voice. "You know how I tell when the camp's getting jittery?"

"Listen, check me out a suit. I've got to get back to the line."

"Now wait, this'll surprise you. I can tell better than the psych checkers when everybody's going on a slow panic. It's the sleeping bag liners."

"What?"

"The bed wetters, John. You'd be surprised how many grown men turn bed wetters about the middle of a hitch. At first, nobody. Then somebody gets killed on the line. The bag liners start coming in for cleaning. By the end of the hitch, the wash tank smells like a public lavatory, John. Not just the men, either. Some of the engineers. You know what I'm doing?"

"Look, Mack, the suit . . ."

"Not Mack. Frank. Look, I'll show you the chart." He got out a sheet of paper with a crudely drawn graph on it. "See how it goes? The peak? I've done ten of them."

"Why?"

The clerk looked at him blankly. "For the idea box, John. Didn't you know about the prizes? Doctor Esterhall ought to be glad to get information like this."

"Christ, they'll give you a medal, Charley. Now give me my damn suit before I get it myself. I'm due on the line."

"OK, OK. You got the jitters yourself, haven't you?" He went to get the suit. "I just happened to think," he called back. "If you've been turning in liners yourself, don't worry about me. I don't keep names, and I don't remember faces."

"You blab plenty, though," Relke grumbled to himself. The clerk heard him. "No call to get sore, John."

"I'm not sore, I'm just in a hurry. If you want to beg for a stomping, it's nothing to me."

The clerk came back bristling. "Who's going to stomp?" "The bed wetters, I guess." He started

getting into the suit.

"Why? It's for science, isn't it?"

"Nobody likes to be watched."

"There you put your finger on it, John. It's the watch-ing part that's worst. If they'd only quit watching us, or come out where we could see them! You know what I think? I think there's some of them among us. In dis-guise." The clerk smirked mysteriously at what-he-knew--but-wouldn't-tell.

Relke paused with a zipper halfway up. "Who do you mean—watching? Checkers?"

The clerk snorted and resumed what he had been doing when Relke entered: he was carefully taping his share of stock in Mme. d'Annecy's venture up on the wall among a display of pin-ups. "You know who I mean," he muttered.

"No, I don't."

"The ones that dug that mine, that's who."

"Aliens? Oh, bullspit."

"Yeah? You'll see. They're keeping an eye on us, all right. There's a guy on the African team that even talked to some of them."

"Nuts. He's not the first guy that ever talked to spooks. Or demons. Or saucer pilots. You don't have to be a Looney to be a lunatic."

That made the clerk sore, and he stomped off to his sanctum to brood. Relke finished getting into the suit and stepped into the airlock. Some guys had to personify their fear. If there was danger, somebody must be responsible. They had to have an Enemy. Maybe it helped, believing in gremlins from beyond Pluto. It gave you something to hate when your luck was bad.

He met Joe just outside the lock. The pusher was wait-ing to get in.

"Hey, Pappy, I own up. I was goofing off awhile ago. If you want to be sore—" Relke stopped. Something was wrong. Joe was breathing hard, and he looked sick.

"Christ, I'm not sore! *Not now!*"

"What's wrong, Joe?"

The pusher paused in the hatchway. "Run on back to the line. Keep an eye on Braxton. I'm getting a jeep. Back in a minute." He went on inside and closed the hatch.

Relke trotted toward the last tower. After a while he could hear Braxton talking in spasms on the frequency. It sounded like sobbing. He decided it *was* sobbing.

"Theah just isn't any God," Bama was moaning. "Theah just couldn't be a God and be so mean. He was the bes' frien' a man evah had, and he nevah did nothin' to de-serve it. Oh, God, oh, God, why did it have to be *him*? Theah jus' can't be any God in Heaven, to treat a man that way, when he been so . . ." Braxton's voice broke down into incoherent sobbing.

There was a man lying on the ground beside the tower. Relke could see Benet bending over him. Benet was clutching a fistful of the man's suit. He crossed himself slowly and stood up. A safety team runabout skidded to a halt beside the tower, and three men piled out. Benet spread his hands at them in a wide shrug and turned his back.

"What happened?" Relke asked as he loped up to Beasley.

"Kama was welding. Lije walked over to ask him for a wrench or something. Bama turned around to get it, and Lije sat down on the strut with the hot weld."

"Blow out?"

"He wasn't that lucky. Call it a fast slowout."

Novotny drove up, saw the safety jeep, and started bel-lowing furiously at them.

"Take it easy, chum. We got here as quick as we could."

"Theah jus' can't be any God in Heaven ..."

They got Henderson in the safety runabout. Novotny manufactured a hasty excuse to send Braxton off with them, for grief had obviously finished his usefulness for awhile. Everybody stood around in sickly silence and stared after the jeep.

"Genet, you know how to pray," Novotny muttered. "Say something, altar boy."

"Aw, Joe, that was fifteen years ago. I haven't lived right."

"Hell, who has? Go ahead."

Benet muttered for a moment and turned his back. "In *nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti* . . ." He paused. "Can't you pray in English?" Joe asked.

"We always said it in Latin. I only served at a few masses."

"Go ahead."

Benet prayed solemnly while they stood around with bowed heads and shuffled their boots in the dust. Nobody understood the words, not even Benet, but somehow it seemed important to listen.

*"Requiem aeternam dona ei, Domine. Et lux perpetua luceat . . ."*

Relke looked up slowly and let his eyes wander slowly across the horizon. There were still some meteorites coming in, making bright little winks of fire where they bit into the plain. Deadly stingers out of nowhere, heading nowhere, impartially orbiting, random as rain, random as death. The debris of creation. Relke decided Braxton was wrong. There was a God, all right, maybe personal, maybe not, but there was a God, and He wasn't mean. His universe was a deadly contraption, but maybe there wasn't any way to build a universe that wasn't a deadly contrap-tion—like a square circle.

He made the contraption, and He put Man in it, and Man was a fairly deadly contraption himself. But the funny part of it was, there wasn't a damn thing the universe could do to a man that a man wasn't built to endure. He could even endure it when it killed him. And gradually he could get the better of it. It was the consistency of matched qualities—random mercilessness and human endurance—and it wasn't mean, it was a fair match.

"Poor Lije. God help him."

"All right," Novotny called. "Let's pull cable, men."

"Yeah, you know what?" said Beasley. "Those dames went to Crater City. The quicker we get the line finished, the quicker we get back. Damn Parkeson anyhow!"

"Hell, why do you think he let them go there, Beeze?" Tremini jeered. "So we'd work our butts off to finish quick, that's why. Parkeson's no idiot. If he'd sent them packing for somewhere else, maybe we'd finish, maybe we wouldn't."

"Cut the jawing. Somebody run down and get the twist out of that span before she kinks. Relke, start taking up slack."

Atop the steel truss that supported the pendulous in-sulators, the lineman began jacking up the slack line. He glanced toward the landing site where the ship had been, and it was hard to believe it had ever been there at all. A sudden improbable dream that had come and gone and left nothing behind. Nothing? Well, there was a share of stock . . .

"Hey, we're all capitalists!" Relke called.

Benet hooted. "Take your dividends out in trade." "Listen, someday they'll let dames come here again and get married. That's one piece of community property you better burn first."

"That d'Annecy dame thought of everything."

"Listen, that d'Annecy dame is going to force an issue. She'll clean up, and a lot of guys will throw away small fortunes, but before it's over, they'll let women in space again. Now quit jawing, and let's get to work."

Relke glanced at the transformer station where he had taken the girl. He tried to remember what she looked like, but he got Fran's face instead. He tried to transmute the image into Giselle's, but it stayed Fran. Maybe he hadn't really seen Giselle at all. Maybe he had looked at her and seen Fran all along, but it had been a poor sub-stitution. It had accomplished one thing, though. He felt sorry for Fran now. He no longer hated her. She had stuck it out a long time before there had been another guy. And it was harder for a wife on Earth than it was for a husband on Luna. She had to starve in the midst of plenty. He had only to deny himself what he couldn't get anyhow, or even see. She was the little girl with her nose against the bakery window. He was only fasting in the desert. It was easy; it put one beyond temptation. To fast in a banquet hall, one had to be holy. Fran wasn't holy. Relke doubted he'd want a wife who was holy. It could get damnably dull.

A quick glance at Earth told him it was still in the skyless vault. Maybe she'll come, if they ever let them come, he thought wistfully. Maybe the guy'll be a poor substitute, and she'll figure out who she's

really married to, legal instruments notwithstanding. Maybe . . . O God, let her come! . . . women had no business on Luna, but if they didn't then neither did men, nor Man, who had to be a twosome in order to be recognizably human.

"Damn it, Relke, work that jack!" Joe yelled. "We got to build that line!"

Relke started cranking again, rocking his body to the rhythm of the jack, to the rhythm of echoes of thought. Got to build the line. Damn it, build the line. Got to build the line. Build the damn line. The line was part of a living thing that had to grow. The line was yet another creeping of life across a barrier, a lungfish flopping from pool to pool, an ape trying to walk erect across still another treeless space. Got to build the line. Even when it kills you, got to build the line, the bloody endless line. The lineman labored on in silence. The men were rather quiet that shift.

WHEN he turned out the light, the little creeps began coming down the wall again. General Horrey gurgled and fumbled for the bed-lamp chain. Brilliance flooded the room, and they vanished instantly. But the feeling of their presence lingered; it was as if they were watching him from the crack beneath the moulding. He sat up in bed, breathing deeply and glaring at the wall.

His wife's angular body stirred beside him. She rolled over and blinked first at the lamp, then at the general. "I thought you were sleepy, Clement," she challenged with a frown.

He quickly took note of the fact that she hadn't seen them. He tossed her a nervous smile. "I—I thought I'd read awhile," he mumbled.

"Why, you don't even have a book."

He swung his stout body out of bed, padded to the shelf, and returned with a volume of Klausewitz. Her colorless, middle-aged face went slack with hurt.

"Clemen-n-n-nt, on our first night together again?"

Her own boldness caught in her throat. She blushed furiously, flopped herself over, and curled up with her face to the wall. She drew the bedclothes tightly about her neck.

The general smiled a sickly smile. For the first time he noticed that she had taken down her tired brown hair and had tied it loosely behind her head with a thin white ribbon. He tried to frame an apt speech—*Really, Nora, aren't we a little old?* But he also framed the answer—*Yes, if you count the years we've been apart.*

He thought briefly: maybe I should tell her about the little creeps that come down from the attic. But he dispelled the notion with a shudder. Telling people about the little creeps had already won him a transfer from the battlefield back to Tokyo. It had also won him a chronic seizure of psychoanalysis, with daily spasms in the staff dispensary. It had won him permission to bring his wife to Japan, on the theory that her presence would have therapeutic value for him. But it might get him a medical discharge if he weren't careful about it.

Nora's bags were still at the airport. If he told her about the little creeps, she wouldn't even have to pack. Still, he could not turn out the light and watch them start crawling down the wall again.

He eased himself back into bed. "Are you asleep, Nora?" he whispered hopefully.

Her head quivered negatively. He watched her glumly for a moment. Horrey was fond of his wife. Lord knows, she has been a patient soul during all those army years—a trifle unimaginative, perhaps—but gentle and devoted. He hated to see her hurt.

Quietly he bent over her and planted a small kiss on her temple. She disregarded it. He caught a faint whiff of perfume. She never wore perfume, and she always rolled her hair at night. Horrey felt suddenly worse. He had not imagined that she would consider their reunion such a special event.

He sighed and turned his attention to Klausewitz. He meant to read until she went to sleep, and then leave the light on all night. He left it on every night. He had even painted the windowpanes black so that the air-raid wardens wouldn't snot it. The little creeps were regular comers, but he had hoped against hope that Nora's presence would drive them away.

Now what was he to do? The bed lamp would eventually have to be explained to Nora. In small

matters, particularly those pertaining to his personal behavior, she was a very inquisitive woman.

He attacked Klausewitz fiercely. The dull words danced before his eyes. He devoured each of them like a separate pill that had to be taken. Then he went back and scanned the lines for sense. He found none. He became angry with his mind for its lack of discipline.

"Are you asleep yet?" he breathed.

"How can I go to sleep," she mumbled, "with you whispering at me every two minutes?"

But after a long time she went to sleep. Horrey bent over her and listened to the slow breathing, and watched the slight quiver of her thin lip. Satisfied, he laid the book quietly aside, and eased himself down beneath the covers with a sigh. He was used to sleeping with a light burning two feet from his face. It was reassuring.

General Horrey began to doze. Nora was stirring restlessly, but her presence soothed him. Suddenly she rolled over and snorted impatiently. Horrey kept his eyes closed. Then he heard the rattle of the bed-lamp chain—and the room plunged into darkness.

Stiffness shot through him. His hand twitched toward the lamp. He pulled it back. The darkness pressed upon him. He opened his eyes slowly and watched the night.

Then it happened.

The little creeps began coming down the wall again. They seeped from beneath the moulding and oozed over the plaster in downpouring waves of pale green phosphorescence. Tiny luminous rods, no larger than a pin, they moved like inchworms—arching their bodies and drawing their tails up behind them, then lurching ahead with a mechanical jerk. They marked in ranks, hundreds abreast, and they made concentric contour lines on the wall. In total effect, they reminded him of elite *Sturmtruppen* goosestepping down the *Kaiser Wilhelmstrasse*. But theirs was a slow crawl, hardly faster than the secondhand of his watch.

The room was pitch-black save for their faint luminescence. He longed to turn on the light. They hated light. It gobbled them up. But then he would have to explain to Nora.

A great hopelessness came over him, like the desperation of a trapped patrol. His jaw tightened with quiet hate. Every night they plagued him. Real or unreal, they had all but wrecked his career. They were driving him slowly mad. And now they threatened his marital happiness, if he had any.

Slowly he sat up in bed. "I'll fight them," he thought. "I'll let them come for once, and then I'll squash them!" Why hadn't he thought of it before?

He had tried to fight them with booby traps. He had sealed the moulding with putty. He had fumigated the attic. He had sprayed the wall with insecticides. In desperation, he had sprinkled it with holy water. And as a last resort, he had called in a Shinto priest to exorcise the house. Nothing had helped. But he had never stood up and fought them like a man.

The frontal ranks were halfway down the wall now, and an attacking spearhead veered slightly off to the left—strangely—away from the bed. General Horrey arose quietly and tiptoed out of the room. He fumbled in the kitchen cabinets, searching for a spray gun and a fly swatter.

"If Doctor Sikiewitz could see me now!" he thought glumly.

Sikiewitz had been forced to the conclusion that General Horrey was having hallucinations about hallucinations, because Horrey freely admitted that the visions were unreal, and the doctor could not understand a patient who lacked faith in his own apparitions. In Sikiewitz' book, a man was never mad if he thought that he was mad. And Horrey had him puzzled. "You are only imagining that you are imagining," was his ultimate conclusion. "A hypochondriac who only imagines he is a hypochondriac." This tail-in-its-mouth diagnosis impressed the general, but left him bewildered.

"I must be getting worse," he whispered as he carried his weapons back to the bedroom.

He stopped in the doorway to frown. The wall was glowing with them now, but the entire army had swung around to follow the southern spearhead which had become a long thin tendril reaching toward a table in the corner. He hated them fiercely, but fear had left him.

Hate pushed him slowly toward them. Gripping the spray-gun, he advanced. Nora was weaving a small intermittent snore on the bed. He pushed the gun toward the advancing column and worked the plunger furiously. The wall became wet with insecticide. But the little creeps marched impeccably

onward, seemingly unaware of the gas attack.

Suppose they jump me, he thought. Suppose the whole swarming glow of them rush over to gnaw me to the bone. "Hellspawns!" he grunted.

He set the spray gun aside and took aim with the swatter. What if it angers them? What if they come at me in a mighty crawling slimy rage?

*Whack!* The weapon slapped hard against the plaster. A bright spark and a crackle! The swatter's copper screen glowed dull red when he pulled it back. But the little creeps continued their inexorable march. With a nervous moan, he continued belting them—until the wire curled up like wilted wet paper. Each time, the spark. He dropped the useless weapon across the foot of the bed. Nora's snoring broke its cadence; she groaned and tossed. He held his breath until she snored again.

The little creeps were crawling over the top of the corner table now, and the tendril split into two columns. One wriggled its way up the side of the small radio-phonograph combination. The other moved around in back of the chassis. Horrey backed slowly away, amazed at their behavior. Had their objective always been the radio?

He glanced at the moulding. The influx had stopped. The wall was swarming with their thousands, but no new battalions emerged from the woodwork. And the entire army was moving toward the corner.

"I'll wait," he thought. "I'll give them rope, lengthen their supply lines, learn their battle plan." He sat on the edge of the foot locker to watch. Some of the little creeps were marching through a ventilator slit and into the radio chassis: Others were pouring into the side of the record changer. The lid was up, and he could see them assembling on the turntable. Vaguely, he wondered if any known species of worms laid their eggs in vacuum tubes.

After a few minutes, the last of them had entered the set. The regiment in the record player began climbing the pick-up arm and moving toward the head. They collected there like bright bees swarm. Inspiration struck him. "I'll turn on the set and fry them," he whispered.

But before he could move, their phantom glow began pulsating slightly, growing fainter. Then he saw that they were soaking into the very metal. He covered his face with his hands, groaned, and muttered, "Sikewitz was right."

A sudden click made him look up. The dial lights came on. The tube filaments cast their faint red glow on the wall behind the set. The turntable creaked once; it was spinning, but the pick-up arm remained on its hook. General Horrey gurgled and backed away. His .45 hung in its usual place on the bedpost. He fumbled and groped and finally got it from the holster. Quietly, he charged a round into the chamber, intending to shoot at the radio. But a faint buzz of static made him hesitate.

"It would be foolish to shoot," came a hissing voice from the loudspeaker. "Then we would have to enter directly into your nervous system. It would be most painful to you."

Cold chills tickled the general's nape. He stood poised in his pajamas, with the gun pointed at the floor. At last he wiped small perspiration from his forehead, and whispered, "I request a parley."

"Granted," hissed the little creeps.

Slowly he advanced toward the set. The open lid of the record-player was a shadowy crocodile's jaw, waiting to devour him. He moved a chair noiselessly in front of it and sat down, placing the automatic beside him. He was stiffly at attention.

"Who are you?" he breathed. There was a brief pause, then: "Our name is 2537 Angstroms." The words were puzzling, but he was more baffled by the very fact of speech itself.

"How do you talk? How do worms speak?"

"By vibrating the phonograph crystal."

"Our analysis has shown that you are the key."

The answer meant nothing to him. "Where do you come from? I fumigated the attic."

"We are speaking from tomorrow."

The general caught his breath. His lip quivered angrily. He was not a man to be trifled with, not even by a phantasmagorical tribe of worms. "Tomorrow, eh?" His military mind groped ahead and found a leading question. "Where were you yesterday?"

"We were at today."

"Ha!" he breathed triumphantly. "But I was here today, and you weren't."

"True. While you are at today, we are at tomorrow."

"You lie!" he purred. "I'm coming to tomorrow pretty soon, and I'll prove you aren't there."

"When you reach tomorrow, it will be your today. But we will still be at tomorrow."

He groped again, and drew a blank. He sat working his jaw angrily. "What are your terms? What do you want? I demand that you leave my apartment!"

"Tomorrow grows out of today," the little creeps muttered ominously. "We demand that you stop spoiling tomorrow."

"Stop spoil—" Horrey began sputtering.

A groan came from the bed. Nora had stopped snoring. "Turndroffdradio," she mumbled sleepily:

There was a brief silence. Then the little creeps whispered again: "Our demands are simple. There are only three of them. Do not fire Yoshigura. Do not listen to General Yaney. Do not approve the bombing of towns along the Amur."

Horrey let an angry silence pass. Could the little creeps be some new secret weapon of the Reds? What could they know of General Yaney? The man was at the front, and Horrey hadn't seen him in months. And he had heard of no requests for strategic attacks along the Amur River. And what of Yoshigura? Yoshigura was only his housekeeper. And he had never thought of firing the man.

"Why?" he finally asked.

"Tomorrow grows out of today. Those are key decisions you must make."

"And if I agree? Will you leave me alone?"

"That depends on day-after-tomorrow."

Horrey snorted. "What if I refuse? What can you do about it?"

"Then we will be forced to go back and change yesterday."

"Turndamndradio off, Clement," came the mumble over the bed. "I'll think it over," the general muttered to the set.

"Turnitoff, Clement."

"There is nothing to think about. We shall return again to see that our demands are met." The radio lights switched off. The little creeps began emerging.

"Who said that?" Nora gasped. "Is somebody else here?" She sat bolt upright in bed.

She jerked on the bed lamp, catching the little creeps in the process of emerging. They seeped quickly back into the metal to escape the light.

"Hah!" Horrey growled triumphantly. "Now you can't get out. You're trapped!"

"What can't get out, Clement? Who's trapped?" Nora's voice was shrill with nervousness.

The radio came on again. "Turn out the light, please," ordered the little creeps.

Nora's hand darted toward the chain, then froze. "Whoo—" "Don't touch it, Nora!" he barked.

"Clement! What—"

"Somebody's playing pranks with our radio," he said hastily. "Leave the light on."

"Tell the female to remove the light," the little creeps commanded.

"No!"

"Who called me a female?"

"Very well," said the loudspeaker. "I trust you have an extra fuse." A shower of sparks suddenly sputtered from the back of the set.

The light winked out instantly.

Nora screamed in the darkness, and the general began cursing fluently. The little creeps oozed out of the cabinet and began inching their way up the wall. They were glowing brighter now, and moving faster than before.

"Do you see them, Nora?" he shouted hopefully. "See them?" "Who? Where?" she cried. "I don't see anyone, Clement!" "I—I—I—don't see anything!" Her voice was a sobbing wail. "Where are you, Clement?"

"You heard them!" he bellowed. "You've got to see them!" He lifted the automatic and aimed at the head of the column. "They're—rightthere!" He jerked the trigger.



The explosion was shattering. When Nora's scream died out, plaster was sifting to the floor. The little creeps were still writhing from the brief flash of the shot. The bullet had done no damage to them, but they didn't like the light. He laughed wildly and fired again, and again.

When the gun was empty, the little creeps began reassembling. He started out of the room, meaning to replace the fuse and give them a good dose of light. Then he realized that he didn't know the location of the box. He had never bothered to find it.

Nora was moaning occasionally. "You see them?" he panted. "You have just got to see them!"

She didn't answer. He groped to the bed and felt for her arm. "Nora, Nora!" He found the arm and shook it. "Nora, answer me."

Only a moan. She had fainted. He dropped the arm and lumbered to the kitchen for a handful of matches. He began looking for the fuse box, searching each room in turn. By the time he found it in an unusual linen closet, the little creeps had returned to the moulding.

A loud knocking was worrying at the front door. General Horrey ignored it while he shorted the fuse socket with a coin. Since no fire sputtered from the radio, he assumed the short had been a transient one. He found some ammonia in the medicine chest and went to wave it under his wife's nose.

Her first words were: "They're at the door now, Clement!"

"It's all over," he said gently. "Go back to sleep. Would you like a drink?"

"I hear them at the door."

"That's somebody wondering about the shooting. They'll go away. Just relax."

"Who was it, Clement?"

"Didn't you hear them?"

"I thought it was the radio."

"With a microphone? Where were they standing?"

"Not standing, Nora!" he groaned. "Didn't you see them? Answer me!"

She looked worried. "I—I—oh, maybe I did."

His heart leaped with glee. "You did? What did they look like?"

She frowned, as if struggling to remember. "I—I think he was a huge, dark-faced man—standing just outside the window."

General Horrey groaned inwardly. He started to bellow at her that there wasn't any man, but he set his jaw tightly. Let her believe the invention of her own imagination, he thought. It was safer that way.

The knocking ceased for a time, then recurred at the back door. He slipped on a robe and stalked to answer it. A shadow stood on the steps, bowing politely. After a moment of peering into the darkness, he recognized the shadow as his clean-up man —Yoshigura, who lived in his basement.

"All right, what do you want?" he snapped.

Yoshigura's voice as a hesitant purr: "Ah, you shoot at thief, perhaps—Generar sir?"

"Yeah, I shoot at thief perhaps. Go back to bed."

"Ah, ah yes. Sir, you wish servant to bring Yapanese undertaker now perhaps? To care for thief's remains?"

The general snorted impatiently. "It wasn't a burglar; it was only a cat."

"Ahhh, a ca-a-at! Yesss! Perhaps Generar wish Yoshigura to dispose of cat's remains, yes sir?"

"Go back to bed! I missed the damn cat! Is that what you want to hear?"

"Ah so?" Yoshigura bowed gravely. "Is too bad. Perhaps cat was only the rittew creeps, yes?"

The General choked and started to slam the door. But he paused, his hand clutching angrily at the knob. When he had first hired Yoshigura, he had called the man upstairs one night before he turned out the light—in the hope that the Japanese would also see the army of glowworms. Yoshigura not only failed to see the little creeps, but he also began treating Horrey with a peculiar and overly familiar deference. Now it was the servant's toothy grin that gave Horrey pause.

"Didn't I tell you to go back to bed?" he growled.

The servant bowed again. "Ah, so? Ah, Yoshigura not sreepy. Is good time for Generar to discuss sarary increase, yes?"

"Salary! Now see here! You go—"

"Ah ah! Is perhaps best Yoshigura should speak to authorities of creep-cats that bother general, yes. Perhaps authorities exterminate creep-cats."

Horrey tightened himself into rigid fury. "Why, you scummy little blackmailer! Pack up and get out. You're through!"

The servant lost his grin. "So! You want Yoshigura to inform big general boss—"

"I don't give a tinker's damn if you do or don't!" he bellowed. "My wife was a witness to it! Now, get out of my house."

Yoshigura looked suddenly frightened. "Ah, is perhaps my mistake—"

"You're damned right it is!" he roared. "I don't go for blackmail, boy. You're fired! And be out of here before noon in the morning."

Yoshigura stiffened. He backed down one step, then bowed. "Is too bad. This time is your mistake, Generar. Yesss." His voice was quietly ominous. He turned and skulked angrily into the darkness.

For a long moment, Horrey stared after him. Something scratchy was gnawing at his throat—a strange dryness. He had just fired Yoshigura! And the little creeps said . . .

He shivered and went back to bed. Nora was miserably frightened. He spent several minutes convincing her that the "burglar" would not return. Then he turned out the light. The little creeps remained in the moulding; they had already spoken their piece.

The smell of frying bacon awoke him. Nora was already in the kitchen. In the gray light of morning, his memory of the little creeps was like the fuzzy recollection of a nightmare.

"Have you had prowlers before?" Nora asked anxiously when he came to the kitchen for breakfast.

He noticed the dark circles under her eyes and guessed that she had remained awake for the rest of the night. "They won't come again," he said. "Don't worry about it." He meant to break the radio and pull out the plug. Then she wouldn't be aware of their presence. Or better still—

"Nora, an electrician's coming today to check the wiring. Let him in, will you?"

It was one of those rare inspirations that struck suddenly. He gloated about it on the way to headquarters. As soon as he was in his office, he called the administrative officer at general mess.

"Colonel, I believe you folks have germicidal lamps in your meat-coolers, don't you? You do? Fine! I need a spare tube. I'll send somebody to pick one up. Thanks."

Chuckling to himself, he made three more calls and finally located a fluorescent fixture. Then he called for an electrician.

"Sergeant, as a personal favor—would you do some work for me today? It's out of the line of duty, so I'll pay you for the service. Pick up a fixture at Terrence's office, and a germicidal lamp at general mess. Install it in my bedroom for me, huh?"

The electrician frowned and scratched his head. "You got a shield with the fixture?"

"What for?"

"You can get radiation burns from them things, sir. Bad on the eyes."

"Why, you can't even see ultraviolet."

"I know sir. You can't see it, but 2537 Angstroms is still hard on the eyes."

"Twenty-five which?"

"Wavelength of the black-light mercury line, sir."

"Oh. Something about that number sounds familiar," Horrey muttered. "Well, if it doesn't have a shield, get a tinker to make you one."

"Yes sir. I'll get on it this afternoon, sir. I'm off duty."

"Thank you, Sergeant."

The General was thoroughly pleased with himself. The ultraviolet lamp wouldn't keep Nora awake, and it could be easily explained as a cold preventer. He hoped fervently that the little creeps would be as sensitive to one kind of light as to another. If so, he would have them permanently beaten.

At nine o'clock, an armed courier brought the reports of yesterday's air-strikes, along with a folder from Intelligence. The intelligence report was entitled "Analysis of New Manchurian-Siberian Power Facilities." Horrey began thumbing through the latter immediately. He had been anxiously awaiting the report for several days.

But after reading for five minutes, the general was becoming slightly nervous. The words "Amur River" occurred a dozen times in the first three pages. His mind drifted to recollections: *Do not fire Yoshigura ... Do not approve the bombing of towns along the Amur . . . Tomorrow grows out of today . . . Our analysis has shown that you are the key.*

"Nonsense!" he snorted, turning his attention back to the report.

The gist of the whole thing was contained in the second paragraph: "It becomes evident that the Amur hydroelectric stations are working with Siberian steam-turbine installations on a cooperative basis. The two-hundred-mile belt along the river is undergoing considerable industrial expansion. The daytime power-demands of the belt are beyond the combined normal output of Siberian turbines and Manchurian hydroelectrics. Yet, these installations are handling the load. This is accomplished by a supply-timing schedule. At night, during the low demand period, the hydroelectrics are shut down. During this period the turbines take over, while the dams build up head. Then, during the heavy day-loading, they operate together, the hydroelectrics generating at nearly double-duty, thus exhausting the water-head by nightfall."

The general laid the report aside and leaned back to stare at the ceiling. Other staff-members were reading the report. Before the day was over, somebody was going to want a decision. And it would be hard to decide. Because of the cooperative power situation, it would be easy to cripple the "neutral" Siberian industry by blasting the Manchurian dams. But the river was a border. One bomb on the wrong side of the line might bring another nation into the wrong side of the war. The final decision was up to the Commanding General, but Horrey's advice would count as a vote.

"I think I'll abstain," he muttered sarcastically to the ceiling.

"Sir?"

He glanced up to see his WAC secretary standing in the doorway.

"Nothing, Sergeant," he grunted. "You want something?"

"General Yaney to see you, sir."

"Who—?" Horrey felt himself going white.

"General Yaney, sir. He's back from the—" Sergeant Agnes gurgled as a paper clip popped against the seat of her tight-packed skirt. She reddened furiously and rubbed her wound, then glared angrily at the short grinning man who slipped past her, idly flipping a rubber band.

"No girdle, huh?" he whispered. "I thought it was real. Good for you."

Agnes stalked away in a fury. General Yaney closed the door and tossed his hat at Horrey's desk. It skidded into the wastebasket and he left it there.

"Howdy, Clem," he said with a bright grin. "Don't look so petrified. I'm real."

Horrey thawed himself out with a murmur and came around the desk to shake hands. He smiled, but his heart wasn't in it. "How're you, Jim? And what on earth—"

"Am I doing in Tokyo?" Yaney planted his foot on a chair, his elbow on his knee, and his chin on his fist. "Is your sergeant married?" he asked with a wink.

"I don't know, Jim. What are you doing here?"

"What's her name, Clem?"

Horrey snorted. His eyes flickered briefly to Yaney's command-pilot wings. "You're too far back of the lines to date enlisted women, Jim. The M.P.'s would grab her. Let her alone and answer my question."

"Huh! I don't know any WAC generals. Besides, it might be amusing to tangle with the cops. Haven't been run in since I was a second looie."

"Jim, what—?"

"Oh, all right!" General Yaney removed his foot from the chair and sat down. "I came back with that intelligence report, Clem. I know some things that aren't in there."

"You? How come? Since when do you have sources of—"

"I don't. I got the info from the man that wrote the report. We powwowed and decided to keep it off the record so it wouldn't get to Washington."

Horrey returned to his desk, frowning. "What made you do that?" he grunted disapprovingly.

The young air officer went serious. "Look, Clem, I know you're an old timer—everything above-board and all that. But this is something special. If Washington gets it, the State Department might foul the works."

"Better tell me about it."

"It's just this. We know the Amur River is mined—on the Siberian side. The mines are lined up like a bomb pattern. They're set to go off on an impulse from microphonic detonators across the river. If there's an explosion on the south bank, there'll be another explosion on the north bank. If we lay bomb pattern down the south side of the river, another pattern will appear on the north side."

Horrey began sputtering unbelief. "It's true, Clem. They planted the mines secretly. Liquidated the laborers on the job—all except one. One escaped. He was our informant. Do you see what it means?"

Horrey let a long silence prevail. Then he nodded slowly. "If it's true, an enemy camera man could film the raid from up the river. It would look like we violated Siberian territory. Very effective propaganda. But what about their own installations? Won't they destroy—?"

Yaney shook his head gravely. "They've arranged the mines very cleverly. They won't destroy anything important. Just a few thousand Siberian citizens."

Horrey whistled thoughtfully. "I can see how we'd better not risk it."

"Now wait!" Yaney hitched his chair closer to the desk. "If the staff approves my plan, we can turn the tables on them. Show them up before the world. We haven't been using B-76's in low-level attacks. I want to bring two groups of them in on the deck. Buzz up the Amur at fifty feet altitude. It'll be dangerous, but they won't be expecting it. Their heavy guns can't track us that low. Directly above the bomber groups, I'm going to have a flight of camera ships. They'll film the whole operation. Then we'll have them. The films will show the 76's skimming low down the south side. The camera ships will be high enough to catch the real bomb pattern and the phoney one. Then we turn the films over to the U.N.—via an unhappy State Department."

"I don't like it, Jim."

The air force officer straightened. "And I don't like those Keg-VI rocket fighters they're making—north of the Amur. I figured up the score. Clem. It's been costing us more—in money, man-hours, and casualties—to shoot down a Keg-VI than it costs the Reds to make one. And that's a helluva note. Here we've got a chance to strike at the factories without violating anybody's neutrality."

Horrey said nothing. Yaney clapped his thighs and stood up. "Think about it, Clem. I talked the big boss into calling a meeting after lunch. He'll probably notify you in a few minutes. I've got to do some more politicking. See you, chum." He started out, then paused. "Whatchoo say her name was?"

"Agnes," Horrey mumbled absently. "Have a good time."

Yaney stuck up his thumb and departed. Horrey slowly gathered his wits and turned to the sortie-reports. They were full of Keg-VI's and casualties. He shuddered and pushed them aside, then he answered a jangling telephone.

"Your wife, sir," said Sergeant Agnes. Her voice was frosty.

"What's the matter? Is Yaney bothering you?"

He heard her lick her lips nervously. "Uh-yes, he's still here—" "Tell him to beat it."

Agnes was a brave girl. She told Yaney to beat it, General, sir. Horrey heard the officer chuckle and make a highly personal remark.

"Your wife, sir," the flustered girl repeated.

"Put her on."

Nora's voice was tremulous with excitement. "Clement, there are a dozen men parading up and down in front of our house. I'm afraid to go out."

"What? I don't understand!"

"I don't either, Clement. They're carrying signs. In Japanese. And there are six little children; they have signs too. A crowd's gathering."

"Pickets! What in the name of—!" He paused. "Has Yoshigura left yet?"

"Who?" Oh, the servant you fired. Yes, he was gone when I got up."

Horrey cursed inwardly. He knew what was up. Every time an American fired a Japanese, all the

offended employee had to do was to take his beef to the local Communists, and the Reds arranged for pickets provided the man would team up with the party. But he had always imagined that Yoshi was a fervent nationalist.

"Don't worry about it, Nora. I'll send a couple of M.P.'s to keep them from bothering the house. We can't run them out of the street, though."

"Do hurry, Clement. I'm worried." She hung up.

"Agnes, get me the provost marshal," he bellowed.

"Yes, sir," she called.

Horrey drummed impatiently on the desk. It looked like a bad day. Pickets!—it was humiliating! Especially the children. Yoshigura didn't even have a wife, but the kids would be carrying signs that read, "HORREY FIRED OUR FATHER" and "HORREY TOOK AWAY OUR BREAD" and "HORREY GROWS FAT WHILE WE STARVE". It was sickening.

"Provost Marshal's Office, Colonel Robin," croaked the phone.

"Colonel?—General Horrey. Could you get me two guards for my front porch? I've got a picket line."

The phone hesitated. "Commie trouble, General? Certainly, sir. I'll supply the guards immediately. But the commanding general has issued a new ruling on this business. Have you seen it?"

"Probably been across my desk," Horrey grunted. "I don't remember it."

"Well, the gist of it is: we're to expose this racket wherever we can. Air it on the radio, in the papers. Did you fire somebody, sir?"

"Yeah. My houseboy tried to blackmail me. But listen, I don't want anything aired, Colonel."

"Blackmail, eh? Well I can see how publicity might be embarrassing in that case. Nevertheless, the commander's rule insists that I take your statement and statements from witnesses. It's not up to me, sir. It'll go to his desk. He'll decide. We're trying to show these Red pickets up for phonies. Tell the people the truth. Why don't you speak to him, sir?"

Horrey paused. "I'm sorry now that I called you, Colonel."

"Well, there's nothing I can . . ."

"I know, I know. All right, I'll make a statement and leave it with my secretary. You can send someone out to get Nora's story."

"Thank you, sir. I'll get the guards right over."

Horrey called Agnes in. She was still blushing, and when she came through the door he caught a glimpse of a leather flight jacket in the anteroom.

"Yaney still out there."

Her blue eyes suffered toward the ceiling. "Ye-e-ss, sir."

"What does he want?"

"I—uh, well—" She wallowed hard. "Mmph! I see. Well, get rid of him somehow."

"He won't go unless I give him a date."

"Then give him one," Horrey growled. ". . . if you want to," he added hastily.

"I'm not supposed to—go with—I mean—"

"Then type yourself a set of orders assigning yourself to his command for the rest of the day. I'll sign them."

"I'd be more fun to be chased by M.P.'s, Clem," drawled Yaney from the doorway. "But then again — 'to my command'—hmmm—"

Even the roots of Agnes' blonde hair turned red. She stuttered helplessly.

"Why don't you get out of here, Yaney," Horrey growled.

The air officer grinned. "Hear your wife's being picketed. I've never met your wife, have I?"

"Then why don't you go meet her. Go anywhere. But just get out of here."

"My, my!" purred Yaney. He backed away. "See you later, honey."

Agnes nodded imperceptibly. "If it's an order, sir." Her voice was acid, but her eyes were pleased.

When Yaney was gone, the general dictated a statement leaving out any mention of the creeping things and using his wife's imaginative description of a burglar. "Yoshigura asked for a salary increase,

and threatened to reveal to superior officers that I was firing at what he supposed to be an hallucination," he said. Horrey made it as brief as possible and padded it with no untruths. He was trusting in Nora to confirm it.

A few minutes later, a note came in from the commander ordering a staff meeting for one o'clock—"To discuss intelligence report 73-G." Horrey felt incapable of making a decision on the Amur River targets. He felt incapable of anything more than a stiff drink.

Again, Nora called. "When are the guards coming?" she wanted to know. "The crowd's getting bigger. I'm frightened, Clement."

"They should be there in a few minutes, honey. Don't worry." "All right, but I wish you'd come."

"I'll check with the provost again," he promised, and hung up.

The provost marshal reported that a jeep was on its way. Horrey returned to his sortie reports. He was beginning to wish that he had not fired the servant.

During the lunch hour, he called a driver and cruised in his staff car within a block of the house. There was a crowd all right, but not of alarming size. Pedestrians who wandered past bunched up in the street to stare at the pickets and exchange words with them. There was no disorder, and he caught a glimpse of two white helmets on his porch. Nevertheless, it made him hotly angry. He longed to drive through the rabble with blaring horn, stop at his doorstep, and walk inside with a contemptuous sniff at the Reds. But reason told him to drive on.

"Drive on, Corporal," he sighed. "Officer's Mess, I suppose."

Promptly at one, the staff convened. For purposes of salesmanship, Yaney had reattired himself in smart and proper uniform, discarding the leather jacket and the fifty-mission crush. Horrey had never seen him in any pose but that of a slouching, tobacco-chewing combat officer, and the contrast was startling. His voice had gone polite, and he argued with a quiet eloquence and a scholarliness befitting a Pentagon official. Horrey noticed that the commanding general was impressed.

"Gentlemen," Yaney said quietly. "I will not try to impose upon you the notion that bombing the Amur is politically safe. It is not politically safe. But every decision—however small—has its reflection in the political mirror. We make them every day, down to the least gun-toting dogfaced Gee-Eye, we make them. Who was it that said, 'War is an extension of politics'?"

"Karl von Clausewitz," Horrey grunted automatically.

"Yes. As I said, if we rely upon the State Department to make up our minds on every issue with a political aspect, then it would be militarily wise to move the State Department offices to a dugout just behind the battlelines."

The room laughed. The commanding general spoke with quiet sharpness: "Let us have facts, Yaney. We are not here to criticize politicians."

Yaney presented his plan to avoid another nation's entry into the war "We will strike for the southernmost parts of the dams. Even the civilians who witness it from the Siberian bank will be able to see that our aircraft did not cause the explosions on the north bank. Our bomb run will be low enough to clearly define our pattern from the phoney. To me, gentlemen, it seems foolproof. They simply don't anticipate any low-level attacks."

"You'll use delay fusing, I suppose," murmured an officer.

"As short a delay as is safe, sir. We'll want our cameras to catch both the formation and the explosion patterns in the same picture. I can't see how this project should require State Department approval—any more than we need their approval to shoot Russian 'observers' fighting with the ground troops." Yaney nodded that he was finished and sat down.

There was a short silence. The commanding general seemed immersed in deep thought. At last he spoke slowly, distinctly. "We cannot, must not, exceed our authority, gentlemen. We are soldiers of a republic, gentlemen, subject to the nation's will. What we must decide is this: are we offering another nation an excuse it wants to attack us openly? If so, then we must submit the problem to the President. If not, we are free to strike. I want opinions from each of you, before I state my own." He looked slowly around the room. His eyes paused on one man. "General Sorrell, how do you feel about it?"

Sorrell was a cautious officer. "I'm against it, Sir," he said, and stood up to expound.

But the commander waved him down. "Arguments later," he said. "I want a preliminary poll. General Horrey, how about you."

Horrey jumped. He felt his hands quivering. The Yoshigura incident bothered him; an embarrassing situation had grown out of nothing. Tomorrow growing out of today. And the warning

"Well?"

"Uh, may-I reserve my opinion for a moment, sir?" Horrey asked. "I'm still weighing it."

The commander nodded and moved on. "Quinnly?"

"I'm for it, sir."

"Moswell?"

"For it, sir."

"Stinwald?"

"Decidedly against, sir!"

"And now back to you, Horrey. Have you made up your mind yet?" The commander's eyes twinkled teasingly.

"What's the vote, general?" "Two and two. You're the key." "Key—!" Horrey shuddered and sat bolt upright.

"Something wrong?"

They couldn't do this to him, he thought angrily. The damned little creeps telling him how to run his share of the war! The hell with them!

"I go along with General Yaney, sir," he growled.

The Commander chuckled. "Belated, but forceful enough. Well, gentlemen. I'm happy to say I agree with the majority. But the meeting's still open, if the minority wants to change our minds."

Sorrell and Stinwald both shook their heads. The commander looked at the air officer. "Go to it then, Yaney. How soon?"

Yaney blushed. "All the crews in the 650th and 524th groups are on standby. The weather's perfect today, sir, and the wing commander is just waiting for my radiogram. I can get the mission under way without leaving this building."

The commanding general failed to crack the faintest smile. He nodded soberly and stood up. "Good day to you," he murmured, and the men came to their feet as he left the room.

It was finished. Yaney came across the room to thank him for his support, but Horrey only muttered as his hand was wrung. Tomorrow was a fast-growing little petunia indeed, he thought grimly. And the little creeps weren't going to like it very well.

Yaney accompanied him back to his office. "I think I'll go out and look at your pickets, Clem," he said with a grin. "I want a picture of that—to show your grandchildren. Show 'em how Grandpa persecuted the proletariat."

"I don't have any children. How can I—"

"Oh, nuts. I'll speak to your wife about that. Anyway, I'll be there when you get home. I'm taking Agnes off your hands for the afternoon. We're going out and drink your whiskey and eat your chow. And torment your spouse. Be prompt for dinner, old man."

Horrey purpled. Agnes was coming out of the office as they approached. She handed him the orders he had told her to type.

"Where do you think you're going, Sergeant?" he growled, eyeing her handbag.

She looked confused. "But, sir...Generat Yaney said you said I was *to go!*"

"Well, Jim?"

Yaney grinned. "Say it, Clem, so I won't be a liar."

Horrey sputtered for a moment, then: "All right, beat it, but stay out of trouble. This is Tokyo, not . . ." He signed the transfer order.

"Ain't he chicken?" Yaney said to the sergeant. He took her arm and marched her away.

The phone was ringing when he entered the office. Lacking a secretary, he answered it himself—although a file-clerk was rushing toward it with a handful of papers.

It was the commander himself. "About this picketing business, Horrey. It's just come onto my desk.

Would it embarrass you if I released it to the press? It's not your statement so much that's important, but the police checked up on Yoshigura. He doesn't have a family at all, and it's the first opportunity we've had to expose this silly children's picketing for their "father".

Horrey paused. The Red propaganda campaign must be rather important, he thought, if the commander was handling such matters personally. He usually left such details to his press staff.

"No more embarrassing than the pickets themselves, I guess, sir." The commander thanked him and hung up. Horrey glanced at his watch. In half an hour, he was supposed to stretch out in Dr. Sikiewitz's office for a session of refined psychic torment. The thought of it made him angry. "Only imagining that I'm imagining, eh?" he muttered. "Well, I won't go." He strode to his desk to begin the afternoon's work.

He was buried in a pile of maps and arguing with his aides when his wife called again. She said only one word: his name.

"What now, Nora?" he growled irritably.

The receiver rattled in his ear as she handed the phone to someone. But there was another level of sound that came to him faintly—shouting, and the rattle of broken glass. Then someone was panting into the phone.

"Howdy, Clem," said Yaney's voice. "Guess I started me a revolution."

"What? What are you talking about? What's that noise, Jim?" Horrey demanded.

"Keep your britches on, old man Don't worry, I called the provost marshal. He's sending up reinforcements."

The general's bellow shook the office furniture. "What the hell have you done?"

"Easy, boy, easy! I'm trying to tell you. Aggie and I got here half an hour ago. Those bums in the street thought I was you. You should have heard what they called me. Maybe you'd understand it. I don't speak—"

"Are you trying to tell me that—"

"E-e-easy boy! No, I'm not trying to tell you that. I . . . conducted myself as an officer and a gentleman. I merely sneered and led Aggie inside."

Horrey heard the sound of two shots in the receiver. "What's that?"

"M.P.s had to shoot another Jap, guess. Anyway, it was when I went back out with a camera that they got rough, Clem. Like I said—pictures or your grandchildren. They didn't want their pictures taken. They got cal nasty. One of 'em threw a rock.

"I even took that. But when they jumped the fence and grabbed my camera, I didn't like it. They busted it on the sidewalk, Clem."

The general breathed ominously into the phone and waited.

"Had a hard time getting that camera, Clem—an f-1.5 German job. Had to knife a *Schutzstaffel* major for it: that was the time I bailed out over Belgium—"

"Slip the baloney! What happened?"

"They busted my camera, Clem."

"And so you threw a fist at one of them."

"One! Don't tease me, Clem boy. I laid out four of them before somebody clipped me with a piece of pipe. Boy, I've got a head! The M.P.'s started out to break it up, and the pickets broke for the street. They tried to break through the crowd. Some of the crowd tried to grab them; and some others wanted to help them get away. So we got a riot. Big free-for-all. Everybody's outraged at somebody. Once in a while some crank jumps and bolts for the house, yelling 'Banzai'. Still think I'm you, I guess. M.P.'s sit on the steps waiting for help. They just shoot the ones that charge—in the legs. Three Japs kicking on the lawn now. Heh! It's a good fight, Clem."

Horrey scorched his ears with thirty seconds of abuse. "If anything happens to Nora, I'll—"

"Yeh yeh, sure! She's all right, Clem. I'll take care of her. I always pack a Berretta—little seven-millimeter automatic I lifted off an Italian—"

Horrey hung up. He put on his coat and hat and started out of the office. Again the phone rang. He answered it in the anteroom.

"Colonel Robin, sir," grunted the provost marshal. "There's an unfortunate development—"



"Yeah, I've heard about it."

"Tell me, sir—if you'll pardon the inference—is General Yaney, well, is he mentally—"

"He's a killer, Colonel," Horrey growled, wondering why he should defend the man. "He's a combat officer and an ex-fighter pilot. He lives for brawls, and gets paid for it. That's all."

Robin glumphed disapprovingly. "Well—I'd advise you to stay in your office until we get this cleared up, sir. There's something in the wind. All day long there've been Red meetings in the city. Yours isn't the only case. I don't know what's afoot, but their rabble-rousers say the allies are about to pull a sneak attack on Russia. Sounds like the fifties doesn't it—before the half war?"

"Where did you hear about this?" Horrey asked coldly. "Does the commanding general know what they're saying?"

"I've sent him a report—"

"Call him immediately, Colonel. This may be more important than you think."

"Sir? Why—we're not going to bomb Russia, are we?"

"Colonel, I couldn't possibly answer that. But call the commander immediately!"

"Yes sir. Let me suggest again, sir, stay away from your house until the trouble's over."

"Yeah." General Horrey dropped the phone in its cradle, readjusted his hat, and paused in the doorway.

"If anyone wants me," he said to a filing clerk, "I'll be at home."

There was a radio in Horrey's staff car. It was tuned to the G.I. station as he climbed into the back seat and ordered the driver to take him home. The announcer was giving a mocking account of the child-pickets in front of his house, and furnishing a description of the riot: "And we see how the Communists have managed to build the firing of a small-time blackmailer into a bloody and brutal demonstration," said the radio. Then it mocked Red claims of an impending attack on Russia.

"Turn it off, Corporal," the general ordered. He was deeply disturbed. How had the Commies known about the Amur raids?—or were they only guessing? It had not been decided until the staff meeting, and yet Robin said that the demonstrators had been at it all day. Was it possible that they had seen the intelligence report and had guessed what the staff's decision would be? Was there a leak somewhere in the intelligence service itself?

Horrey felt somehow that he had walked into a trap. If the Reds knew that the General Staff was aware of the mined river, then they might take counter-measures of some sort. The intelligence report made no mention of the mines, however. Yaney had brought the story orally. If there was a leak, it was bound to be in high places.

A grim and suspicious idea struck him, but he dismissed it immediately.

They were approaching an intersection near Horrey's home, and the driver slowed to a crawl. Two jeepsful of M.P.'s flashed past the corner, and Horrey saw a pedestrian slip around the edge of a building and turn his back while the jeeps went by. The man's hat was pulled low over his eyes. When the police were gone, the man stepped around the corner again. Horrey could see the edge of his sleeve as he stood watching the melee in the next block. There was something familiar about the man.

"Shall I go on, sir?" asked the driver. "It sounds kind of rugged."

There were sounds of shouting, but only an occasional shot. He could not see the riot for the buildings, but few running pedestrians burst past the corner.

"Pull up to the curb," he murmured. "I'm going to get out for a minute."

The driver looked startled; his eyes protested the impetuosity of it, but he said nothing.

"You have an opinion, Corporal?" Horrey grunted.

"Yes, sir. My .45 is in the glove compartment. Would you care to borrow it?"

Horrey smiled faintly as he climbed out on the sidewalks. "I didn't get my rank for marksmanship, son. Fact is—I couldn't hit a bull in the butt with a paddle." He started away.

"May I come then, sir?"

"If you like." Horrey strode quietly toward the bit of coat-sleeve that protruded around the edge of the building. The man was watching the fight, and his head was turned away as the general drew up beside him. The man was grinning contentedly at the scattered scene of violence. A few were lying in the

streets. The fist fights were breaking up, and the combat area was spreading out as the police wielded their clubs. Bruised and bloody battlers were stealing away from the trouble-spot.

General Horrey stared grimly at the hack of Yoshigura's neck. "Enjoying the fight, eh?" he growled in a low voice.

"Ah, yesss. Justice is . . ." The servant's voice trailed off. He looked ground slowly, and his sallow face contorted with shock.

Horrey's red countenance darkened with slow anger. He was not agile, but the Japanese was too surprised to duck the meaty fist that the general threw. The jarring *thunk* of the blow was most satisfying. Yoshigura fell clumsily and rolled into the gutter. He got to his hands and knees, and blood was draining from his mouth and nose. Horrey congratulated himself for still being able to deliver a good punch at the age of fifty.

"Get up!" he grunted. "I have an idea the cops would like to see you about a matter of espionage." It was only a guess. Living in Horrey's household, the servant might gain access to a lot of small-talk and idle remarks that would give the Reds an insight into staff matters. By careful piecing together of this-and-that, they might even have been able to deduce the staff's decision on the Amur matter before the decision was made.

Yoshigura climbed slowly to his feet, breathing hate. Suddenly he turned and screamed something in Japanese toward the rioters. Horrey wadded into him with a curse. His heavy fists crashed into the servant's body like unimaginative battering rams. Yoshigura went down gasping, and came back up with a knife. He slipped forward, catlike. Three rioters were running toward them, shouting angrily.

Horrey grabbed at the knife-arm as the blade slashed at his tunic. The point dug into the flesh of his side. A gunshot exploded at his elbow, and Yoshigura went down screaming. He clutched a shattered ankle as his foot flopped loosely and turned aside.

"Thanks, son," he grunted to the driver. "Watch those three coming there."

"They're stopping, sir. They see we're armed. Are you hurt badly?"

He examined his slashed tunic, and unbuttoned it to peel back a bloody shirt. There was a ragged, painful gash, but it wasn't deep. "Nothing much," he grunted. "Load this joker in the staff car, Corporal. Take him down to Colonel Robin. I'll call the colonel from the house."

"Uh—sir—"

"What?"

"Do you mean to walk through that brawl, sir?" The driver looked worried.

"Yeah, you can't drive through it. Now hurry."

The driver shrugged and offered his gun. Horrey hesitated, then took it. He started toward his house while the corporal dragged the howling Yoshigura toward the car. The three rioters who had answered the servant's call for help stood fifty feet away, apparently not watching him.

Whistles were still bleating occasionally, but most of the crowd had dispersed, and only a dozen rioters lingered to battle the M.P.s. They were not attacking, but only trying to escape encirclement and resist arrest. The area was lightly sprinkled with the bodies of the wounded or dead.

The three men were too immobile to suit the general's ease. He shied away from them and, gun in hand, he started across the street. Suspicion made him look back. One of the men was lowering a pistol on him. Horrey halted. The bullet fanned past his chest. The man crouched and prepared to fire again. The other two darted aside. Fury made a great calmness within him. He stood sideways and lifted his weapon like a duelist. The Japanese tossed two nervous shots at him. Horrey felt their wind, and felt scorn for a man who was even a worse marksman than himself. He took slow aim, then emptied the gun at his assailant. The man dropped and the pistol skidded in the street. Another man dived for it. Horrey moved quickly away.

A small *crack* came from the direction of the house, and the second man somersaulted and lay still. The third fled. Horrey marched homeward. Yaney was leaning on the gatepost, blowing smoke off the muzzle of a tiny automatic. He grinned.

"Scuse me for homing in on your fun, Clem."

Horrey thanked him grudgingly. The trouble with Yaney, he thought, was that the man really did

regard it as fun. Violence was his meat.

"Where's Nora?" he asked as he trotted up the steps of the American-style house that had once belonged to a small-time Jap industrialist.

"Heh! In bed. Said she was sleepy. Funny time to get sleepy."

Horrey sighed. It was Nora's way of handling any situation with which she couldn't cope. She went to bed, curled up in a knot beneath the covers, and slept until the situation went away. Sometimes she made peculiar noises in her throat and with her lips—smacking sounds that reminded the general of a nursing infant. During such periods, she seemed to lose touch with reality, and behave with a childlike naivete.

And sometimes, the general thought, it would be nice to crawl in and curl up beside her. But he never thought about it at length.

Sergeant Agnes arose nervously as they entered the parlor. She was trying to compromise between Yaney's informality and the presence of her boss. The pretty blonde was obviously uncomfortable in her immediate surroundings. Yaney caught it and laughed.

"Does he make you snap to, baby?"

Agnes eyed her boss miserably and turned bright scarlet. She could neither tell one general to go to hell nor be strictly formal with the other. Horrey pitied her. She was probably the best soldier of the three, he thought. He wanted to tell them both to beat it, but then he would be alone, waiting for darkness and the little creeps.

"Sit down, Agnes," he murmured, with some embarrassment. "This is my home. If you act like we were in the office, I'll shoo you both away."

Agnes sat down, and Yaney crackled. "Come on, baby," he said. "We can take a hint."

"No, no!" Horrey said hurriedly. "I want you to stay, really." Casually, he tossed his tunic across a chair and removed the insignia from his shirt collar.

"Ah, a civilian now," Yaney chortled.

He flushed. He and Yaney wore the same stars, but Yaney's meant something entirely different from his own. Yaney's stars were really scars; he liked to display them only as symbols of a fight he had won by hacking his way up from a low place to a high place. To Horrey, his rank meant that he had a higher obligation in man's quest for a better world, as obligation to authority. Sometimes, he wondered how any change would be wrought in the world when men like Yaney really wanted to fight. He went to care for the wounded, and returned quickly.

"When are you going back to the mainland, Jim?" he asked quietly.

"That depends, Clem." He sat on the arm of Agnes' chair and grinned. "I meant to lead the Amur raid at first. And then I got to thinking. When Russia strikes back at us, the staff will want me here for a powwow."

Horrey stiffened. "What do you mean—'when they strike back'?"

Yaney looked impatiently amused. "Really, Clem—you don't believe all that guff about this raid being safe?"

Horrey stalked forward to loom over him. "What do you know that you didn't tell us?" he demanded.

Yaney frowned. "Nothing. Nothing at all. I told you the whole story, Clem. Isn't that enough to convince you?"

"No, it's not. I thought the camera ships assured—"

Yaney scoffed. "Stop and think! How long will it take to get the camera-ships back from the raid, develop the pictures, televise them to Washington, and finally get them to the U.N. and to the world? And then think how long it will take for Moscow to get a flight of bombers in the air after they get a wire from Siberia."

The general sputtered. "Now wait, Jim—your planes will call back a strike report from the target area. It'll be relayed immediately through here to Washington. Within an hour the story'll be in the newscasts."

"Without pictorial proof, Clem! Migawd, man! Do you think for an instant that an undocumented

radio-story will stop the Kremlin from declaring war immediately? Why do you think they planted the mines? They wanted an excuse. Will they wait for us to shatter their excuse? Hein!" He gave Horrey a you-can-do-better-than-that-smile.

Horrey sat down heavily in shocked silence. Yaney laughed at his white face. Agnes was looking from one to the other in mystified silence.

"Lordy, Clem, wake up! Didn't you know what you were voting for? Everybody else knew, I'm sure. Naturally nobody could come right out and say that the staff itself was deciding on a declaration of war."

Horrey choked. "I—I was warned against you," he hissed.

The air officer chuckled. "By Sorrell, I'll bet. Don't take it so hard, Clem! War's inevitable anyway. And now we've got a way of knowing when it'll happen—an advantage we wouldn't have otherwise."

"We won't have it. Who knows, besides us?"

"The air force commander in Europe knows, Clem."

"How?"

"He was my group commander in '43. We're old buddies."

"And you flew over for a Global Strategy meeting two weeks ago!"

"Right. He's on the alert. We talked. As soon as the Kremlin howls war, he'll get thirty groups on the way. And Clem, my own entire command is on the alert—every plane in shape, every crew on standby. I've pulled our punches on the Asian front lately, to conserve striking power. We are ready to deliver—and it won't be T.N.T. We can make our own decisions on atomic weapons now, you know."

"How many—?" Horrey gasped.

"Eighty-six U-bombs and a dozen H's. Plus smaller stuff. Every city of any size gets a dose of Uranium. Big ones get hydrogen. It's blunt, honest, simple."

"Washington will have your skin, Yaney!"

"Maybe. If it does, it'll have yours too, and the C.G.'s. We're talking about the Amur, remember. That was your decision. This other stuff is just hypothetical strategy. And what will Washington do when it's over? Will they point the finger at us and howl—'It's their fault, World, not ours!' Now, wouldn't that be silly!"

"I'm going to fight you, Yaney!"

The air commander stiffened haughtily for a moment. But he relaxed, smiled, and glanced at his watch. "In half an hour, the first squadrons will be over the target. I wish I were with them." Then he grinned at Agnes and added, "If it weren't for present company."

The WAC seemed not to hear him. "I've got a brother in Europe," she said tonelessly.

Yaney shot her an uneasy glance. Then he brightened. "Can you cook, kid? Why don't we get some chow. All this war talk gives me an appetite."

She nodded expressionlessly and left for the kitchen. Yaney started to follow. Horrey called him back quietly.

"Jim, we've been friends for a long time. Tell me—doesn't this bother your conscience?"

Yaney stared at him thoughtfully, then shook his head. "You believe in peace, don't you, old man?"

"I do."

"Yeah, that's what they all say, Clem. It's popular to believe. Unfortunately, the believers can't feel it. Now you tell me, Clem—what's the difference between a man and a turnip?"

Horrey's face remained impassive. He said nothing. Yaney answered himself.

"A turnip got to be a turnip by sitting still and not bothering any body. It dealt with its enemies by learning to be unobtrusive and modest. That's why a turnip can't fly an airplane or dance a jig." Yaney winked and strolled off toward the kitchen.

Horrey stood looking after a man who believed fervently in the institution of war, and Horrey decided he had no comment. He went to call Robin about Yoshigura. Robin had the servant under questioning.

"It may be possible that other house-servants have been passing snatches of information to the Reds, General," Robin told him. "We're checking. But we're in a bad situation at the moment. We gave the commies three dead martyrs in front of your house. They're not wasting any time exploiting it. They're organizing demonstrations all over the city. Somebody heaved a grenade through the newspaper

window—for mocking the child pickets. Fortunately, they didn't have sense enough to pull the pin."

"Unfortunately, you mean!" Horrey grunted.

"Mmm? Why, sir?"

"Because that means it wasn't tossed by a Red. A party member wouldn't be so stupid, Robin. It means they've got allies outside the party—misguided nationalists, maybe."

"Maybe you're right!" Robin admitted.

"Thank God it's your worry, not mine."

"It may be yours too, sir. I can't leave you more than one guard tonight."

"Don't leave me any!" Horrey snapped, and ended the conversation.

He wandered into the bedroom. Nora was bundled in the bedclothing. She was asleep, but her white, thin face was pinched into a tight frown, and her throat worked slowly as if she were swallowing. Her jaw made a slow chewing motion. Once, while he stared, she shivered from head to toe and made a queer clucking noise with her tongue. Funny, he thought, how a forty-year-old woman could suddenly become an infant.

Or try to be a turnip. But Yaney's homily irritated him. "Haven't I always cried for peace?" he asked himself. "Haven't I favored it in speeches before luncheon clubs, and spoken for it at press club meetings?"

Even the little creeps seemed to want peace.

Then he glanced down at his khaki-covered chest, with its slight paunch, and his pink trousers beneath the waistline. "Then why the hell am I wearing these?" he wondered.

He paused for a moment in the bedroom, then glanced at the ceiling. He grunted in surprise. The sergeant had actually come and installed the germicidal fixture, despite the riot. Evidently he had finished early. Horrey nodded approvingly and went to join the others.

At seven o'clock, the phone rang. It was for Yaney. The command pilot took the phone, listened for a moment, nodded once, and replaced it on the hook with a click of finality. He turned, looking seriously pleased. "It's done, Clem. Strike report's in. Good results."

"The mines, man! What happened?"

Yaney smiled. "As anticipated. Better keep your radio on."

Horrey accepted the situation with quiet resignation. He watched the younger man curiously for a moment, then: "We'd better not leave. I suppose the commander will want us."

Yaney nodded. "As soon as the Kremlin speaks, probably." He glanced at Agnes. "Sorry we can't go out, kid."

Agnes, however, looked relieved. They went to sit in the parlor and wait, smoking nervously, and exchanging quiet talk.

At eight-thirty it came. First the telephone rang. Before Horrey reached it, the radio music faded, and an announcer said: "We interrupt this program to bring you a special bulletin. American diplomats in Moscow are being handed—"

"You did it, Yaney," Horrey said quietly. "I'm glad I didn't."

The air officer's eyes were sad, but without admission of guilt. "It's for the best, Clem. I'm not sorry."

"Declaration of war, according to Moscow Radio," said the announcer.

Horrey went to answer the phone. While he was speaking, the city's sirens began sounding the black-out warning. When he returned to the parlor, they waited expectantly.

"Let's go to headquarters," he said.

Horrey left word with the M.P. on the porch that he was to be called in the event of trouble, and that Nora was to be informed of his whereabouts when she awakened.

"Why can't I stay with her, sir?" Agnes asked.

Horrey paused, then nodded. "I—I'd appreciate it, Sergeant." He corrected himself to say, "Agnes", and then he moved away in embarrassment.

Yaney chuckled. "Tain't fighting that makes the world a raw place," he said. "It's stiff-minded jokers like you, Clem."

The staff meeting was a protracted affair. Horrey expected, and almost hoped, that Yaney would

catch it in the neck. But as the officers crowded around the brightly lighted map table and discussed their plans, Yaney was treated with a stiff politeness. Occasionally they gave him a suspicious glance, but somehow their eyes always fell quietly back to the board.

It was as though each man longed to pin the guilt on the air officer, yet realized that the guilt was shared. Only the minority of two prodded him with veiled hints.

Horrey wanted to speak. He wanted to say, "Yaney stood here and told us one thing while he really believed something else." But he never, said it. Yaney would have replied, "You asked for facts, not opinions. You formed your own opinions from the facts of the Amur."

And Yaney was right. He could have suppressed the information about the mines, and gone ahead with the bombing, not even consulting the staff, pretending ignorance. Instead, he had come to his superiors like a soldier. The trouble with Yaney: he would recognize no political authority above the military.

Twice Horrey noticed the commanding general peering at Yaney's blandly innocent face while someone else was speaking, and twice he thought he detected a glimmer of sardonic amusement in the commander's eyes. Was it as Yaney claimed then—that each man among them, except Horrey, had realized that he had been voting for war or peace? Horrey scorned himself for not thinking the matter out more clearly. He had been, on edge, but there was no excuse.

Once a distant explosion quivered the room, and the commander stepped hastily to the phone. "An explosion at the pumping station, gentlemen," he said upon returning. "Clearly sabotage."

The wave of local troubles had begun.

The group broke up after midnight. Yaney's plan for an immediate, across-the-board air-strike had been approved after only brief meditation. Plans that had been prepared for months were removed from their safes, studied, and amended. A few immediate instructions were sent to field commanders. Yaney sent a two-word message to his command—"Happy Epoch, Gentlemen"—and they would understand.

Horrey went home to his wife at one. He wore his .45 and he cut the flap from the holster. The streets were dark. The streets were full of hate. There was fear in the streets. Henceforth the blackout would be permanently in force.

There was no trouble at his house. Now the world had larger worries than a general who fired his servant. He tiptoed through the darkened parlor, for Agnes was sleeping on the sofa. The bedroom light was on. He paused in the doorway. Nora had arisen, but she was asleep again—stretched out across the bed in a negligee. Tomorrow he would try to arrange passage for her—back to the States. Tokyo was no place for Nora with full-scale war under way. Or did it matter? The States wouldn't be much safer. Still, he would send her back.

A light flickered on in the parlor, and he went out, to see the WAC rubbing sleep from her eyes. She sat on the sofa with her bare feet curled beneath her. For the first time, Horrey noticed that he had a very beautiful secretary. He was glad she smiled at him, even though the smile was formal. He was glad she didn't come to an uneasy attention when he entered.

"I'm sorry Yaney was such a pest," he said softly, and took a chair across the room.

She pressed her hands against her folded shins and stared down at them. The light from the lamp caught in her hair, darkening the shadows on her face. "He wasn't exactly a pest, sir," she said slowly. "It's just—that I don't understand him, I guess. He frightens me."

The general nodded. Men like Yaney always frightened their women, he thought. But their women loved them for it. He could see that the dynamic air officer had done something to this girl's mind and heart; and she was baffled by it. Yaney was a rare bird—a fighter to the core—and the world was suspicious of its rare birds. Once fighters had been common, before men tried to be turnips.

Again he was displeased with Yaney's homily.

"Well, Agnes, I guess you'll have a new boss before too long."

She looked up, frowning. "I don't understand, sir."

"I'm going to the mainland, if I can swing it. And I think I can." "You want to go."

He nodded, looking aside. "I bungled things up. I cast my advice for Yaney's plan. I was too stupid to even see this afternoon's consequences."

Agnes cleared her throat and looked uneasy. A general scolding himself before a sergeant was a new phenomenon. Still, she had the courage to say, "I'm sure you did what you thought was best, sir."

"No, but I—" He stopped. A feeling of uneasiness came over him. "Do you suppose people have convictions of which they aren't even aware? Underlying beliefs that contradict the ones they think they believe?"

"You mean like instincts, sir?" He scarcely heard her. "Maybe—I —did do what I thought was best." Suddenly he shot her a quizzical glance. "Agnes—"

"Yes sir?"

"How would you like to be a turnip?"

She giggled, then frowned peculiarly without erasing the grin. "What a horrible idea!" She cocked her head.

Something in Horrey seemed to come alive. "Tell me, when you were a child, did you ever wish you were something else? A dog maybe, a fish, a butterfly?"

She grinned and blushed. "Sure. I used to wish I was a cat—with long claws, to scratch my big brother."

The general chuckled happily. "But never a turnip?"

"Never a turnip."

"I used to wish I was a chicken-hawk," he confided. "Used to watch them swoop down in the fields, and watch the old hens hide in the brush and cluck."

They shared a moment of solemn silence.

"Yaney's the chicken—hawk, though," he murmured. Then he stood up. "Better get some sleep, child. I'll take you to the spare bedroom. It's not safe to go out. . . ." He paused.

A siren had begun to wail in the distance. Another sprang up to accompany it. While they listened, the city became alive with sound. Small whistles, deep-throated pipes, spinning discs that shrieked—all wailing, all warning—"Let us be afraid together."

The M.P. on the porch needlessly called through the front door. "Air warning, sir!"

"On second thought," said Horrey, "I'll show you the way to the basement. There's a shelter down there. I'll have to wake Nora, I guess." Then he heard her coming down the hall, and in a moment she stood in the doorway, staring about in fright. Her hands were over her ears, screening out the screech of the city.

"What is it, Clement?" She was trembling from head to toe.

Somehow, her terrified appearance saddened him. A child that wanted security. "Oh, probably a Manchurian plane or two," he told her casually, knowing it was a lie. "Nothing to worry about. Might be only a practice warning. If you don't like it, maybe you'd better go down to the basement."

"You come too!" she cried as she hurried away.

He whispered to Agnes, "Go with her. I'll hang around awhile to let her think there's nothing to worry about."

Agnes nodded and moved away. The quickness of her stop spoke of excitement. Strange! She had never felt the teeth of danger, but now there was cause for fear, and she surely saw it. Was not inexperience the catalyst of fear? But the cloak of anticipation had fallen about her, the masking-mantle of a quiet eagerness. Was Yaney right? Beneath the embroidered costume of polite culture, did the heart scorn peace?

He doused the parlor light, and became aware of the bed-lamp's gleam on the floor of the hallway. A river of yellow light, calling him. They were no doubt waiting. He turned toward the basement, then paused a moment, thinking.

He had fired Yoshigura, and men had died. Because they died, others were angry. And the anger would weep the scythe of further death. Anger was resonant, oscillating in the tuned circuit of the social heart long after the initiating pulse had faded. By now they had forgotten Yoshigura, but the echoes of anger would grow.

He had listened to Yaney, called for bombing of the Amur. And war came. And millions would die. What did it matter? Man, only a microcosm.

Or a necrocosm?

He sighed and turn away from the basement. He, Horrey, did have a responsibility for tomorrow, one that belonged to him alone. The responsibility was not the fighter's, not Yaney's, for Yaney could never feel it. He moved toward the bedroom light. The room was warm—warm with the smell of a slow-minded woman whom he loved. Her powder, her creams, her perspiration on the pillow—odors—and the odor of fright.

He stepped toward the lamp, but the voice stopped, him: "You have finally come."

They had infiltrated the radio in darkness while Nora had been asleep earlier in the evening. He stared at it calmly.

"You did not obey."

He folded his arms and stood glowering. "I obeyed the weight of my thoughts," he growled. "How can tomorrow rule its past?"

They were silent awhile, and he wondered if they were prepared to take revenge. The sound of heavy artillery was booming from the outskirts of the city. A familiar sound—almost comforting. Occasionally the speaker croaked static, as if clearing its throat.

Again it spoke, now wearily: "You helped make your tomorrow. Now live in it. We go."

"Who are you?"

"We revealed our name. It is enough. You could not understand." The static faded.

"Wait!" he snapped. "Where are you going?"

"Further back," said the tired voice. "We will try further back, to change the scheme."

"To change yesterday?"

"Yes."

"You have no right!"

A pause, while artillery spoke its gloomy poem in the distance.

"You like your world, Man?"

He straightened proudly. "Men have built it. They dragged their fingers in the earth and lifted up towers of steel, instruments of fury."

It was his world, he thought, and he loved it—if for no other reason than that Man had made it. Man was a king, a small king to be sure, but Horrey believed in Man's right to rule as he saw fit—be it for good or evil. And the creature from tomorrow wanted to change the yesterdays of ten thousand years, to erase the history that had fashioned today. How could he stop them?

The new ceiling fixture? It was there. And the being's name—the words of the electrician . . .

"Your name—that number—what does it mean?" he asked.

The voice was hesitant. "Our matter is your energy. Our energy is your matter. Our universes are related by tensor transformation equations. A wavelength in your system corresponds to a spatial relationship in ours. Our name is our position in space."

Horrey shook his head in mystification. "I can't understand. I thought you were out of tomorrow."

Another pause. "Our world grows out of yours, lies parallel with your tomorrow. We are a part of your five-space tomorrow."

Again Horrey shook his head.

"You have destroyed us." There was a note of anger in the voice now. "Your releases of energy correspond to the appearance of mass in our world-space. We must change your yesterday. Perhaps we shall have to destroy you."

He said nothing.

"Will you remove the light?" they asked. "Or must we force it off again?"

Without hesitation he tugged the chain and plunged the room in blackness.

"If you return the light, we shall afflict you."

The radio clicked off. The little creeps began goose-stepping up the wall again. He watched silently as they came, wave upon wave, like grimy cursing G.I.s flooding over the neutral, pock-marked ground toward the enemy. Running low, crouching over their rifles, bayonets gleaming dully in the dawn. He could not escape the conviction that they were somehow related to human life. They were not little



worms, inching their way toward the moulding; of that he was certain. Their appearance in his world could have only a vague mathematical relationship to their appearance in their own world.

But what lay behind the strange and glowing phenomenon.

He let them get clear of the set.

Their phosphorescence made concentric patterns on the wall. The pattern moved as a unit, pulsating with each jerky lurch ahead. He waited until their journey was half completed.

Then he took the calculated risk and pulled the light-cord.

Faint violet suffused the ceiling. The beings stopped. They flattened against the wall as if ironed down by an unseen hand. They glowed more brightly, seemed to swell a little.

"Now change yesterday!" he snarled, backing away.

The glow slowly became a glare, and the room was flooded with the weird light. They were growing larger, flooding together as they absorbed the fleeting quanta.

*Our matter is your energy*, he remembered. He was bombarding them with their own substance! He backed against the door and suppressed the desire to run. "It's my show," he told himself grimly, "and I'll see it through."

They were no longer differentiated as to units, but had become a single patch of writhing radiation that seemed detached from the wall. It was trying to approach him! And he felt an aura of rage about it. He realized suddenly that he was holding his gun in a trembling fist, while his teeth ground together in expectancy of battle.

Suddenly the process reached saturation.

A high-pitched hum struck him like a blast of supersonic noise from the dive of a high-mach jet-craft. It drove him to his knees, and the gun clattered to the floor. His vision dimmed for a moment.

The humming waned. When he looked again, the breath caught in his throat. The tortured patch of light was gone. In its place was a gaping maw of blackness in which two worlds were fused. Beyond it lay—the world of the little creeps. He was staring into a laboratory. And the beings were watching him, the quietly frantic faces.

"Thought is a form of energy!" he gasped in sudden understanding.

They said nothing, but the leprous faces watched him in terrible accusation. In the center of the lab was a fat metal box from which a coaxial cable ran ceilingward. It too seemed to be watching, from a pair of thick lenses in its face. Behind the lenses, lights were glowing, and Horrey associated it with a projector. Suddenly it spoke.

*"My energy is being duplicated from beyond the transform-region. HELP ME. My energy, is being duplicated from . . ."*

It was a complaint, and the leprous faces turned to stare at it dully for a moment.

"Be silent!" said a voice.

The machine continued its complaint. A man stepped forward and jabbed at a button. The button was labelled "PAIN". The machine shrieked its high-pitched whine, then fell to crying softly.

"Now be silent," growled the voice again.

Horrey fumbled for the doorknob as he staggered to his feet.

"Do not attempt to escape," growled the voice. "We can kill you."

Horrey turned. His face was white and he was panting softly as he searched the group with his eyes, looking for the speaker.

The speaker was an old man, ragged and scrawny as were the others. Horrey stared at his face for a long time, then: "I know you," he said quietly.

The old man said nothing, but there was hate in his eyes, and shame.

The machine, no longer crying, spoke again: *"He cannot help what he is. He is a creature of thought energy from your place in the time plane."*

"Be silent!" shrieked the old man in fury. "It is not so!"

Horrey's fascination was overpowering his fear.

"You are tomorrow's Yaney," he breathed, staring at the face grown seamy with wrinkles, wizened with self-loathing, twisted with fear.

"No! I am not!" the old one protested wildly.

"You are tomorrow's Yaney. But why have you come back to plague me? Why not plague yourself—the you of your younger days?"

"I am related to Yaney only by tensor transformation!" screamed the old man.

"I'll tell you why you wouldn't haunt yourself!" Horrey bellowed. "Old man Yaney knows young man Yaney won't listen! Not even if he knows the truth!—the truth about the tomorrows he's helping to make."

The old one clapped his hands to his face. "Kill him!" he groaned. "Kill him quickly."

"If I kill him," said the machine, "*his counterpart in our world shall also die.*"

"Kill him!"

"No!"

The old man howled a curse and flung himself at the machine, groping again for the pain-button. Sensing danger, Horrey ducked low and scooped up the gun. He took quick aim, with a steadiness born of desperation.

The gun barked. The old man stiffened, staggered back, clutching at a red blotch on his torn jacket.

There was a scream, but not from the old man. *It came from Horrey's basement!*

Then the gaunt old man was a crumpled heap on the floor.

"*It is hopeless,*" said the machine, "*attempting to change yesterday.*"

The others were staring dumbly at the fallen old one. Horrey aimed at a lense of the machine.

Then, before he fired, it came—a violet light, flooding through the windows of the bedroom. It grew, and grew, until it surpassed the sun in its brilliance.

"*Hell Bomb!*"

Horrey threw himself to the floor and covered his eyes against the blaze of light. There was no sound. Even the bark of ack-ack had stopped as the gunners sought refuge. Horrey's skin felt as if the dry blue-flame of a blow-torch were hovering an inch away. The light penetrated the flesh of his hands and the membrane of his lids to fashion a dull red glow. Somewhere someone was screaming.

He counted thirty seconds, and opened his eyes. The maw of blackness between the world-spaces was still there, but beyond it lay only dust—thick dust, coagulating out of nothingness, growing thicker. From whence did it come?

*Your energy is our mass . . . the Hell Bomb.*

Then the power failed, and the ceiling light fluttered out. With it went the two-world space, vanished with only a pulse of high sound.

Horrey lay waiting for the shock-wave that would follow the explosion. It came as a roar that seemed to vibrate him up from the floor. Powdered glass sprayed over him from the window, and somewhere there was a sound of splintering wood. A section of the roof was buckling.

Then it was over, and he picked himself up wearily, bleeding from a hundred tiny cuts. Outside of the house, a voice was shouting that the bomb had destroyed the far end of the city.

The general picked a sliver of glass out of his face and staggered toward the basement stairway. Nora would be out like a turnip.

But there were already footsteps on the stairs. It was the WAC. "Nora—is she—?"

"All right, but scared," the girl panted. "It's Yaney — something wrong."

"Not dead—?"

She shook her head. Horrey slowly descended the dark stairway. They had lighted a candle. By its light he saw Nora sitting on the floor with her face huddled in her hands.

And then he saw Yaney. The fighter was standing like a statue in the center of the stone floor, his eyes glazed with a schizophrenic dullness, his face was empty as the orb of the moon. Horrey approached him slowly.

"Yaney—snap out of it!"

The man's lips moved. A sound followed—like the wail of an infant. Horrey stared at him quietly for a long time. Then he turned away. The man would have to be committed to an asylum. His mind was gone. There would be a lot like him, the general thought. As the bombs exploded, and the creatures of

the psychocosm—the world of the creeps—began to die, there would be a lot of broken minds. It was sad, in a sense.

But it gave him faith. For as the minds began to die, the war would have to end. The psychocosm—where the lab had been—perhaps in a sense it was the conscience of the world. Outside, there was a war to fight—a just war.

"Take care of Nora," he said to the WAC. "I've got to go help at headquarters."

The End

## NO MOON FOR ME BY WALTER M. MILLER, JR.

*Some people will do anything to achieve what they want—even go so  
far as to accidentally reveal the truth they don't know!*

The rocket waited on the ramp at midnight. Floodlights bathed the area in glaring brilliance, while around the outer circle of barbed wire entanglements, guards stood watching the night. A staff car crept through the gate, then purred toward a low tarpapered building where several other vehicles sat idle in the parking area. When the staff car stopped, and a middle-aged colonel climbed out, a loud-speaker croaked from the gable of the building:

*"One hour before Zero. Dr. Gedrin, Colonel Denin, and Major Long, please report to Briefing. One hour before Zero."*

The colonel paused a moment beside his car and nodded to the WAC chauffeur. "Take the heap back, sergeant. I won't need it again—not for a long time at least. And—take care of yourself."

She glanced at the building shadow of the rocket and made a wry mouth, shaking her head doubtfully.

"Sergeant!"

"Sorry, sir! I was just thinking —" She saw his frown and decided to keep her thoughts to herself. "Well good luck, sir." She tossed him a last salute and backed away.

The colonel, a gangling man with a bony face and an unmilitary stoop, turned to glance at the cars parked before the Briefing building. There was the general's, and the long black limousine used by the Secretary of Defense. They were men who were going back to their beds this night. He eyed the rocket briefly, then strode toward the door of the Briefing building. A young major with command pilot's wings was lounging in the entrance.

"Hi, Dennie," he drawled with twisted grin. "Said your prayers?"

Colonel Denin punched his shoulder lightly in awkward greeting. "Yeah. I have got it figured out. We're just leaving it up to you." His voice was a melancholy baritone, edged as always with a slight sourness.

The major shifted restlessly, and his grin was nervous. "Now I know how Wright Brothers felt. Dennie, I'm jumpy."

"Why?"

He nodded toward the slender black shaft whose nose aimed skyward. "Me flying that thing is like a Ubangi jumping in a Cadillac and staking off through New York traffic."

"Somebody's got to do *everything* for a first time."

The major studied Denin's dark, Lincoln-esque face for a moment. "Aren't you worried?"

"Moderately. But not about your ability to fly it. The controls have been analogized to those of atmospheric rockets. And we've gotten pilotless rockets to the Moon before. You're just replacing some of the automatics, Jim."

Jim Long thoughtfully lit a cigarette and blew smoke toward the sky. "One thing bothers me."

"What?"

"You."

A faint smile of amusement twitched about the colonel's thin mouth, and his dark, deep-set eyes gathered wrinkles about their corners. "You think I can't navigate?"

Long snorted. "Don't play games. You know that's not what I mean."

"What, then?"

Long stared at him challengingly. "I think you're up to something, Dennie. I don't know what it is, but I can watch you and see it. The whole world's got its fingers crossed about tonight, and about the Voice. But you're cool as ice. Cocksure. Why?"

Denin shrugged slowly. The faint smile lingered. "Maybe I'm jumpy inside," he offered. "Maybe it just doesn't show."

Long fell silent, eying him clinically. Here was the impassioned man who had spent his life in working against bitter opposition for the launching of the first Lunar rocket. He had been a general during the last war, had helped build and launch the first pilotless rockets which had cleared Earth's gravity and helped end the conflict by the mere threat of transatmospheric attack. But then when the war was over, Congress had displayed no inclination to finance a piloted ship. The investment promised no returns. Denin had taken to the stump-circuit, speaking directly to the nation, and bitterly condemning the politicians who were consigning Man permanently to Earth for financial reasons. He had been broken in rank and suspended from the service. Now he was back, and he had won, but only because of the "Voice," blaring out of space unexpectedly, speaking a language to which there was no key.

"Maybe I'm wrong," Long grunted. "Maybe you're just tickled because you've won — if you call it winning."

Denin's smile faded. "Uh-uh, Jim," he said sadly. "*Man's* won. Not me. Space opens tonight."

"You've helped a little," the major grunted dryly. Then he paused, mouth open, thinking. "What you just said: '*Man's* won.' That's what I mean — by cocksure. A lot of people think we're going to lose — going out to meet the Voice. A lot of people don't even think of it as 'opening space.' They think of us as a delegation, waving a white flag to a possible enemy. *What makes you so sure of yourself?*"

The loud-speaker blurted again, cutting into their conversation. "*Fifty minutes before Zero. Denin and Long, report to Briefing. Guards are requested to clear red area of all maintenance personnel. All noncoded personnel are requested to leave immediately. Red area now under secrecy quarantine. Fifty minutes before Zero.*"

"Guess Gedrin's already inside," the colonel grunted. "Let's go."

They flashed their credentials to the inside guard and strode down the corridor toward the lighted Briefing room. The pilot wore a puzzled frown.

"Dennie," he said suddenly, "do you know what's secret aboard the ship?"

The colonel hesitated, then nodded affirmatively. "Yeah, I know."

"That why you're cocksure?"

"Maybe. If I *am*. Maybe not. You'll find out, Jim."

The others were waiting when they entered: Secretary Eserly, thin, graying, and impeccably tailored; General Werli, Commander of the Air Force; and Dr. Gedrin, linguist for the expedition. Eserly came forward to shake hands with the newcomers, then sat at the end of a long table and extracted several papers from his briefcase. He spoke quietly, informally.

"I have here your signed pledges, gentlemen. Would any of you like a rereading of them?" His blue-gray eyes flitted around the table, lingering on Denin, Gedrin, and Long; each in turn murmured negatively.

"Very well, but let me remind you again of what you have signed. You have stated that you have no philosophic or religious objections to deliberate self-destruction if it will secure a world goal. I can tell you now, this may become necessary. Do any of you wish to modify your pledge in any way?"

Only Gedrin, a chubby, scholarly little man in his fifties murmured surprise. Long glanced sharply at

Denin, whose face remained masklike, unconcerned.

"This has been put off until the last minute," Eserly went on, "for obvious security reasons. If the beings behind 'the Voice' became aware that we might be launching a kamikazi attack . . . well . . . it's hard to say what they might do. But even though it is the last minute, I'm prepared to release you from your pledges if you so desire."

Eserly stopped to look around again. Denin was watching the linguist like a hawk. Gedrin moistened his lips, glanced at the others, and said, "I . . . thought it was a formality."

"You wish to be released?" Eserly's voice was cold, but not contemptuous.

Colonel Denin drummed his fingers lightly on the table. It was the only sound in the room. Gedrin looked at the fingers, then met the colonel's eyes for a brief instant. A shudder seemed to pass through him. "No," he said, "no—I'll go along."

Major Long cleared his throat and met the same eyes almost angrily before he spoke to the secretary.

"I want to draw a line, Mr. Secretary."

Eserly shook his head. "We want no conditional acceptances—"

"I want to know what it's all about."

"You *know* all of it, Long. Except about the nuclear explosives in the nose of the ship. You've been briefed about finding the invader and trying to parley with him. You've been told the government's policy—an unconditional 'get off our moon.' What you haven't been told: if the answer's no, you're to consummate your pledge." Long looked angry. "I see. We're to home in on the 'Voice,' land in the same crater, if they let us; and Gedrin tries to talk to them. If they're not co-operative, we blow up the whole kaboodle, including ourselves. Is that it?"

"Not quite, except as a last resort. You'll use your own judgment. If it's possible to *leave* the crater, and bomb them from above, you'll do that. But we have to make peaceful overtures. They might leave freely. If they don't, well—" He shook his head. "I want a confirmation of your pledge, Long."

"For a world goal that's worth while—yes!" he snapped.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning *not* for a childish goal!"

Eserly looked shocked. He glanced at the others. General Werli spoke sharply. "Suggest you temper your language, major."

"Let him speak," Eserly said. "Go on, Long."

The pilot plucked at a splinter on the table and glowered at it. "We've been hearing the Voice on ultra-high-frequency bands for years now. You say its trying to contact us. Well, it must be pretty patient, to keep talking that gibberish without an answer. All we know about it is: it's on the Moon. Telescopes don't pick it up. We can't decode the language without a key. Our only answer to it is this rocket."

"What are you getting at, Long?" Denin asked unexpectedly.

"*You*, colonel," Long barked.

"What are you talking about, major?" Eserly growled.

"Just this. Dennie fought all his life for this rocket. But the rocket isn't meant to be an answer to his fight. It's meant to be an answer to the voice. The world wants to kick an invader off the Moon. Why? Is it because the world wants the Moon as a stepping stone to space? Or is it just a case of: 'If I don't want it, you can't have it either?' That's what I mean by a childish goal."

"Is that all that's bothering you?"

Long slapped the table and reddened. "*All!* What do you mean *all*? You want us to sit on a U-bomb and detonate it maybe. What are we doing it for? If it'll help man get to space, I'm willing. But I'm *not* willing to do it just on principle; not unless the government's going to use a lunar station after we clear the ground! Yes, that's *all*."

He glared defiantly at both the secretary and the general. He glanced at Denin. The moody colonel had been smiling sardonically throughout the burst of irritation.

But Eserly looked relieved. "Don't let *that* bother you, Long. Stop and think a minute. Some

extraterrestrial life form is on our satellite. Where it came from, nobody knows. Very possibly, it's been sitting there watching for a long time. When we hit the Moon with projectiles, it started trying to contact us. Very well, we respond through you. No matter what you do up there—even if you have to destroy yourselves, we know now that there *are* extraterrestrial life forms. And they might come again. We're pretty well forced to establish a Moon garrison."

Long thought about it for a moment and began nodding. "Sorry," he grumbled. "That makes sense. I guess I'm on edge."

"You reaffirm your pledge?"

"Sure, chief."

"That's about the only purpose of this briefing then. You've had all your other instructions. And when you land, you'll be on your own. The decisions you make must come from your own judgment, unless you have a chance to contact us—which I doubt."

Eserly began a brief rehash of the technical instructions. Long was pilot and ship's commander while in space. Gedrin was spokesman, once the invaders were contacted, and as long as negotiations proceeded peacefully, he was to act as chairman. Colonel Denin was to navigate, serve as ship's engineer, and take charge in the event of hostility. His would be the duty of detonating the kamikazi cargo, if such became necessary or advisable.

"*Thirty minutes before Zero,*" announced the public address system.

"That's all, men," Eserly grunted. "Get your gear and get aboard. Good luck." He glanced toward the doorway. "Chaplain, would you—"

A hoary-headed officer who had just appeared nodded quietly. The crew stared uneasily at the floor. The chaplain crossed himself. "In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost—"

Soon they were striding across the brightly lighted ramp toward the ladder and the open hatch. Denin, having fought for this moment, was solemn, perhaps bitter, moving with his usual ungainly stride, his dark face waxen and heavy. The short rocket-pilot strutted a little, gnawing on a wad of gum, and waving to spectators beyond the fence. "I'm still nervous!" he confided to the tall colonel.

Gedrin said nothing. He seemed frightened, and drawn into his shell. His plump face was mottled pink from the exertion of carrying his space gear, and he looked as if he wished he had never left the classroom.

"What do *you* think the Voice is, Dennie?" Long called back as he climbed the ladder.

"I'm not guessing."

The pilot chuckled. "Probably a dame with a flat tire, yelling for help."

Gedrin looked startled at the jest. "On the *Moon*?" he muttered thickly.

Long stopped climbing. He looked back at Denin and slowly shook his head. Gedrin obviously wasn't going to be of much use to them.

"Hurry up," Denin snapped.

They climbed slowly, and disappeared into the compartment. A loading officer followed, saw that the hatch was secure from the outside. "Seven on the first shot," he muttered, and paused to chalk a pair of dice on it for luck.

"*Five minutes before Zero. Clear the blast area. Five minutes before Zero.*"

Inside the cabin, the three men lay prone on the gravity padding, waiting for the signal. The controls and the navigational equipment were suspended overhead, so that the men could reach them while lying face-up toward the nose of the ship. Gedrin's position was to one side. His eyes were closed and his lips were moving.

"Why do you keep watching him, Dennie?" Long whispered to the colonel.

"He may blow his top. Keep a wrench ready to club him."

Long shook his head. "Six Gs will hold him down."

They waited silently in the dim light from the instrument panels. "This feels like a circus stunt," Long grunted. He tightened his hand, fingers spread wide, and looked at it, watching for a flutter.

"Afraid of being afraid?"

"Yeah, guess so. I could use a drink."

"Who couldn't?"

"Yeah. Well—everybody's invited to my place when we get back. We'll have a few—"

"If we get back," Denin murmured.

"*Good-bye, good-bye, good-bye!*" shrilled a voice.

"What the—!"

"Gedrin." Colonel Denin nudged the linguist with his toe. "*Gedrin!* Snap out of it!"

"Huh . . . wh-what?" quavered the linguist, opening his eyes.

"You a hysteric?"

Gedrin sputtered a protest and fell silent. His face was righteously angry, as if he failed to realize that he had cried aloud.

"*Two minutes before Zero.*"

"Keep your hands in your pockets, Gedrin," Long warned. "You, too, Dennie. Hands off the controls. Black out if you can. We're just riders until we shed the last booster stage."

"You mean you won't be controlling it?" the linguist whimpered.

"Nobody piloted a V-2, did they? After we shed the last stage though, then I can take it."

Breathing became audible in the small hot compartment.

"We don't know what we're doing!" Gedrin gasped. "Nobody's done it before. We don't *know*."

"Shut up, you sniveling coward!" snapped the colonel.

"Take it easy, Dennie!" Long whispered.

"Only way to settle him," Denin murmured without interest. He stretched his long arms, grinned a little, and folded his hands behind his head.

"Cocksure! Why—?"

"*One minute before Zero. Charging-pumps, please. One minute before Zero.*"

Long's hand started toward the panel, then paused. "I feel small!" he gasped. He slapped the switch angrily. A motor wailed mournfully up to speed.

"*Good-bye, good-bye!*"

"Stop it!"

"Ten years jockeying rockets. Wonder why I never got married."

"*Forty seconds. Ignition spark please. Forty seconds.*"

Long cursed and slapped at the panel again. An angry *chug* rocked the ship, followed by a frying roar.

"No, no, no," whined the linguist. "Stop, please—go back."

"Quiet, you fool! We're not off the ground yet."

Gedrin yelped and slipped off the couch. He started for the crawlway to the hatch. Denin moved like a cat, rolling after him. He caught the linguist's ankle and hauled him back. Gedrin collapsed under a short chopping blow to the temple. "You can't get out, the ladder's down," the colonel explained to the limp body as he dragged it back into place.

"Your hour of triumph," the pilot muttered sarcastically.

"Couldn't help it!" Denin snapped. "He'd have broken his neck."

"You're eager, boy! Too eager for me."

"*Zero time! Main pumps, please! Zero time!*"

The pilot laughed grimly and reached out to do the radio's bidding. "Shall we go, gentlemen?"

The fuel pumps raged, drowning the ship with their din. The growl became an explosive roar of sound, engulfing them. The growling monster pressed them heavily into the padding. Man became sky-borne.

"What day is today?" shouted Long.

"September 9, 1990."

"Should remember it. Historic day." He paused. "All those nines—nine, nine, ninety. Ring of finality, eh?"

"Precedes the millennial number."

"Unless it's like a speedometer. Just goes back to zero."

"Don't worry about the invaders," Denin called. His eyes were closed, his big face calm. Too calm, Long thought suspiciously.

He lay thinking about the voice. The *twitter, cheep, cheep twitter* that had been coming intermittently from the Moon, interspersed with long silences and variations in theme. For years the world had listened and shivered, and had grown angry, angry enough to build this ship which might never have otherwise been built. *Hunt them down and find out what they want!*—was the command issued to Denin and Gedrin and Long.

It was impossible to decode the twittering language without some sort of clue or key. There was no Earthly tongue to which it could be related, no starting point for linguists. The government had built a station and had tried to answer. The venture had been useless.

What were the Outsiders doing? Mining? Observing the Earth and its inhabitants? There was no satisfactory answer.

There was a sudden lurch, then a cessation of sound. They became weightless. Muttering excitedly, Long shoved himself out from beneath the panels. "We shed the last combustion stage!" he barked. "Help me with the nuclears!"

Colonel Denin was already pulling his lanky frame out into the cramped standing-room of the small compartment. They walked with their hands, feeling for new controls, fumbling about in the gravityless ship.

"Hurry before we drop back into air."

"Not much chance," muttered the colonel as he nudged a lever to quarter-scale. A sizzling throb passed through the ship.

Long's head ducked low to peer into a set of eyepieces. "Back it off a little!" he yelped. "Tube's getting red."

"Can't, man! Get your focusing voltage higher."

Long jerked a red knob down, pushing himself toward the ceiling. He clawed his way to the floor again and found the eyepiece.

"How's she look?" Denin called.

"Nice! Tight stream! Red's fading. Give us the juice."

"Keep watching it!" Denin eased the lever slowly forward. The reactors began whispering, purring, then singing a bass note. Weight returned as acceleration mounted. Soon they were standing normally.

"Hold it! Beam's spreading a little!"

"Got to go higher." The colonel pressed relentlessly at the handle. "Still a few air molecules around. They defocus it."

"She's getting red again!"

"When it gets white, let me know. Then you can jump if you want to."

Sweat was leaking from Long's face and tracing black streaks down the rubber eyepiece. Denin watched him for a moment, then let the reaction-rate stay steady. The acceleration needle sat on 1.5 Gs. The radar altimeter floated past five thousand miles.

"Beam's tightening—tubes cooling off." He lifted his head and wagged it at Denin. "That mean we're safe?"

"Safe from atmospheric defocusing."

Long staggered to the controls and began making adjustments according to the prearranged course. The accelerative-gravity shifted slightly, rocking the floor to an uphill grade, then settled back as before. Denin plotted a check-point, then went to feel Gedrin's pulse. The man was still drowsing and groaning.

"He'll come around in a little while."



Long turned to shake his head and grin relief. "Thank God that's over! Now tell me what happened."

"Our jet's positively charged—helium nuclei. It focuses, like a cathode ray in an oscilloscope tube. If we don't keep it in a tight stream, it can vaporize parts of the ship. A few air molecules defocus it. Something like when you get a gassy tube in your radio."

Long looked puzzled. "I never understood. We squirt out alpha particles for a rocket jet, but what keeps a negative charge from building up on the ship?"

"It leaks off. Pair of electron guns on the hull."

"Another thing—if the alpha stream doesn't touch the tubes, what does it push on?"

Denin chuckled. "It pushes on the field that focuses it. Just think of the ship as a flying cathode-ray tube with no return lead, and with helium atoms instead of electrons. Of course that's like comparing Niagara to a leaky faucet, but—"

The major shook his head. "Never mind, Dennie. As long as the right thing happens when I shove the right stick—that's all I want." He stared at the colonel for a long moment. "Now that we're out here, why don't you tell me what's on your mind?"

For an instant, the colonel's eyes gazed thoughtfully at the wall. But his mouth tightened, and he shook his head. "Let's have a look behind us," he growled, and began cranking aside the outer steel plate that covered a viewing port.

They stared at it for a long time—a bright crescent, fading through twilight grays into a dark globe.

"Mother of Man," Denin murmured. "We're weaned, Jim."

Long turned to look at the awkward dreamer. What he saw made him go back to his controls. There was too much triumph in Denin's face. Too much triumph for a man who should know that Man's weaning might depend entirely upon the whim of the creatures of the Voice.

"Sorry I slugged you, Geddy," Denin growled suddenly.

Long looked around to see Gedrin sitting up. The chubby linguist looked bewildered. He listened to the whine of drive for a moment, then rolled back on the padding as if to sleep. The rocket rushed Moonward amid monotonous silence. Long occasionally glanced up at the compartment's ceiling. Somewhere overhead, the suicidal charge was stowed. And Denin's gloominess seemed to indicate that he expected to use them. Gloom and triumph rolled into one.

Long glanced at his watch. "Schedule says three more hours. We living up to it, Dennie?"

"Yeah. We're cutting the drive in a few minutes."

"What do we use for gravity?"

"Centrifugal force. Start her spinning."

"And sit on the walls?"

"Yeah."

"Hm-m-m—I'm going to start listening on the U.H.F."

"For the Voice? Don't bother."

Long stared at the colonel for a long time. "Our instructions say—"

"Don't bother."

"Why?"

Denin looked up with a sigh. "Because I know exactly where to look for it."

"You *what?* *How?*"

"Because I put it there."

There was a long silence. Gedrin stirred on his cot, peered at the colonel, then uncomprehendingly turned his face to the wall. Denin's fist was in his pocket; and he was armed. So was Long, but he kept his hands relaxed and watched Denin's grim face.

"The pilotless rockets!"

"The pilotless rockets," Denin echoed. "And a transmitter, and some timing devices, and—"

"And the Voice is a wire recorder."

The colonel nodded. His eyes were narrowed and alert, watching the pilot carefully.

"Why did you do it?"

"The Lunar rocket is underway, isn't it, Jim?"

"Not a nice trick to play on Congress and the taxpayers. This bolt bucket cost three billion bucks, if you count all the research that had to be done. You have ceased to be a popular man, Dennie."

"Not at all. I imagine they'll think of us as martyrs. They'll never know, Jim."

Long's eyes darted toward the ceiling.

"That's right. A kamikazi mission. They see the flash on the Moon. We died to get rid of the invaders. And so they build a Lunar station—to prevent any more invasions."

Long started to his feet. A gun appeared in Denin's hand. Long sank back in his seat.

"I hope you'll accept the situation, Jim. But I really don't need a pilot."

"No, I guess you don't. Any kind of landing would do, wouldn't it?"

"Even a crash."

Long thought for a moment. "Why this twilight-of-the-gods effect, Den?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why not dump the explosives in a bomb run, then head back for Earth? We can keep silent."

Denin hissed his disgust.

"All right, if you don't trust us—we can land at night, just off the African coast, say. Let the rocket sink. Swim ashore. Hit the jungle. They'd think we died in the Lunar explosion."

"Save your breath. And your tricks."

Long turned back to the controls, thinking quickly. Denin had spilled it because he could no longer contain it. That meant doubt, or guilt. He could have waited until the ship landed. It would have been safer for him.

"You think I'm wrong, Jim?"

"I think you're nuts."

"Space is opened. I'm nuts because I tricked the world into space? O.K., maybe. So was the first ape to come down out of his tree."

Gedrin suddenly sat up. The colonel shot him a sharp glance, taking his eyes from the pilot. Desperately, Long struck out for the stabilizers.

The ship lurched. The gun exploded, and a bullet ricocheted from the control panel to imbed itself in the wall. Gedrin screamed. Long wrenched the stabilizers hard, throwing the ship into violent twists. The acceleration jerked him down, then up against the safety belt. Bodies slammed about the cabin. He kicked the drive to four Gs. Then, sagging in his seat he risked a look backward. Denin lay pinned to the floor by his own weight, and a trickle of blood leaked from a gash in his forehead. Gedrin was sprawled in the corner, one leg twisted unnaturally.

The pilot eased the acceleration back to normal, scooped up Denin's gun, and broke out the first-aid kit. "Cocksure," he grunted as he taped the engineer's wrists and tended the gash. "Too cocksure."

Denin came awake just before the landing. He strained at his bonds for a moment, glared at the pilot, said nothing. Gedrin was resting in a fog of morphine, pawing dumbly at a splinted leg.

"We're coming in on your transmitter," the pilot grunted. He switched the signal into the speaker, and for a moment the cabin was alive with the twitter of the Voice that had tricked the world.

"You going to land?"

"Yeah."

"Why? You mean to spoil it. Why not just turn back?"

"Stop snarling, Den. We're going down to turn it off. And I want to see how you managed to get it down without shattering the transmitter."

"It landed," Denin said tonelessly. "I told you—you just replace some of the automatics."

"How did you get the stuff aboard without suspicion?"

"The men who made it didn't know what it was for. The men who loaded the crate thought it was an atomic warhead. And I set it up personally. Two men were bribed. They died since. Naturally, I might add."

"Who paid?"

"The government. The men bribed were accountants."

"It must have taken a lot of, juggling."

"It did. It was worth it, or *was*." Denin paused, staring at Long with lusterless eyes. "I hope I get an opportunity to kill you."

"It was your mistake, Den—telling me too soon."

Denin glanced toward the viewing screen, now entirely covered by the white face of the Moon—grim, pocked with the crescent-shadows of craters. His voice grew tremulous. "Man's destiny should lie in space. He may never come again. You're consigning him to Earth."

"Why? I don't see that."

"The cost, you fool! What reason has he to go? Not for economic returns. That's been established. Unless he has another reason, he'll stay Earthbound. I tried to *give* him a reason."

"A phony one. Uh-uh, Dennie—you don't trick people into their destiny."

"Why not? Ethics?" Denin's voice was acid.

Why not indeed, Long thought?

Ninety-nine per cent of humanity would always remain Earthbound, and would derive no profit from space. Yet, that ninety-nine per cent would have to foot the bill. The price of getting a few ships into space—and some day to the stars—the price was sacrifice. Sacrifice of the many for the few. And the many wouldn't like it—as they had undoubtedly disliked building pyramids, and temples, and Towers of Babel for the amusement of kings.

"Yeah, ethics," he murmured.

Landing in the faint gravity was an easy job. The strength of the "Voice's" signal was blocking the set as Long let the ship slip down on the auxiliary combustion-rockets. The transmitter was not in a crater, but on a wide, sun-parched and airless plain. The settling rockets fanned out huge clouds of white dust as they stung the surface. The dust fell rapidly, unsupported by any atmosphere.

Long stood up and reached for a pressure helmet. They had worn the heavy fabric suits while in flight. He started the air-compressors and gathered up a length of hose, then paused to glance down at the colonel, "You can come, Dennie—if you want to. I'll untie your feet."

Denin shook his head glumly.

Long shrugged. "O.K.—but I'm making sure you stay away from the detonator." He dragged the bound man to the bulkhead and taped his feet to a brace. Then he opened the port covers, letting the angry sunlight sweep through the compartment. The pilotless missile lay on its side, fifty yards from the ship. Its hull was cracked, but sweepmarks in the Lunar dust spoke of a successful landing.

The pilot was gone a long time. Through the port, Denin watched him bounding about the missile in long slow leaps. The colonel strained at his bonds, and tried to saw them on the sharp edge of the brace. Gedrin was moaning on his cot.

"Gedrin!"

There was no answer. The colonel called again in an angry bellow. Gedrin stirred and looked up. "Where are we?" he groaned.

"Luna! Now listen to me if you want to live!"

The linguist whimpered in fright.

"Long's outside," Denin went on. "You hear that motor running?"

Gedrin's head wobbled dizzily. It might have been a nod.

"Those are the fuel pumps," the colonel lied.

"Huh?"

"Long forgot. Left them on. The tubes may fire accidentally."

Gedrin was ready to believe anything, but he failed to comprehend. Denin grumbled a curse and tried again.

"Just listen to me," he barked. "Listen! If you want to live, you'll have to get up and cut the switch. The switch. You understand?"

"Switch? Which?"

Denin nodded toward a panel. "The red double-toggle with the safety guard around it. You've got to get up."

Gedrin shook his head as if to clear it. He raised himself up a few inches and stared at the colonel.  
"You're *tied*."

"Long lost his head! You going to let us die?"

Gedrin wheezed in pain. "My leg. I can't."

"You've *got* to. Roll off the cot. Gravity's faint. You won't get hurt."

The linguist shoved against the wall, and yelped as the light push carried him over the edge. He hit the floor with a light thud. The splint shifted. He screamed, then slumped back.

"*Gedrin!*"

It was useless. The linguist had fainted.

"You'd go to any lengths wouldn't you, Dennie?"

Denin looked up to see the pilot coming through the crawlway. He scowled and said nothing. Long's face was white, and his hands were trembling as he removed his helmet. He seemed to be struggling to control some seething emotion. He moved quickly to the panel, fumbled beneath it for a moment, and jerked a wire loose from the red detonator switch. Then he began cutting Denin's bonds.

The colonel muttered in surprise.

"You're going outside with me," Long told him. "Get the camera equipment. We've got work to do."

"What?" Denin snarled. "Take pictures of the Voice? Evidence for my trial?"

The pilot shook his head and paused to light a cigarette. "They'll probably try you. But I think you'll get off light." He eyed Denin grimly. "Ever hear of ducks on the Moon?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Duck tracks, they look like. All around your rocket. And the dust-marks where another ship landed."

Color drained slowly from the colonel's face. He came to his feet and pressed his face against the glass, peering outside.

"They've gone," Long went on. "Apparently left just after the missile landed. See that black patch over on the hillside?"

Denin didn't answer. He was reeling slightly.

"I think it was a mine shaft," the pilot told him tonelessly.

The man who had tricked humanity into space suddenly slumped. He sat down on the floor and began laughing wildly.

"I — want to go home," whimpered the awakening Gedrin. "No Moon for me!"

Long eyed the linguist coldly. "You've got it, fellow. Like it or not."

THE END

## PLEASE ME PLUS THREE

*Walter M Miller Jr*

**Our army is ready to begin work on a space station. Maybe when it's finished we will be pleased—plus zero!**

THE summoner stood in the doorway of the hut, and the piper came slowly to his feet. He dropped his fist on the table with a dull thud and said, "I will not pipe if my wife is forced to dance. She is ill, Owan! Can't you understand?"

The summoner's eyes were bored as they flickered over the young musician's angry face, his stiff shoulders, his bagpipes that lay upon the table. The summoner shrugged. "Keeper Cron has ruled that three sevens of females should dance this night for the Lord. Bel. He has selected the dancers, not I."

"But she is with child, you fool!" the piper bellowed.

The summoner's eyebrows arched. "Aye, a fool for expecting civility from a son of the madman Roidin."

The young man flushed angrily but held his tongue.

"As for your wife, her condition is not yet apparent. She is beautiful. Bel must be served with beauty. *She* knows her duty, though her husband does not. She is already before the pylon with the others."

"Suppose she falls ill and spoils the dance?" the piper growled.

"Then she will probably be punished," said the summoner calmly.

*"I will not pipe for this dance!"*

The summoner shrugged. "Very well, Ton of Roldin. It is my duty then to report you to Keeper Cron for failing your obligation to Tribe George Eighty. You will be tied to your doorpost and flogged with bull-nettles until you faint."

Ton's jaw tightened stubbornly. They stood staring at each other for a moment. Then the summoner turned and walked away. The piper sat clown and moodily watched the last feeble flickers of sunlight through his doorway. He watched it slowly curl and die and become gray gloom as the red orb settled behind the hills. Bel would be rising soon. The time for choice had come. Mara knew her duty and went calmly to fulfill it while he hung back in surly anger. Was he indeed his father's son, a son of the man who had cursed Lord Bel and lashed his pylon with a horsewhip?

A thunderous frogcroak suddenly pervaded the valley, like the blurp of a bass horn blown by the gods.

Blah-0000-BAH! *Blab-0000* -BAH!

The voice of the pylon, calling the tribe into the presence of the Bel-eye. Its mighty summons rolled across the flatlands and over the river to reverberate from hillside to hillside.

"blah-000-bah," came the echo.

"Now or not at all," said the piper to himself. Tortured doubts twisted in his mind.

A bull-nettle flogging could leave a man sick for days. It could even kill, as it had killed his father.

But what right had Keeper Cron to command Mara to dance when she was scarcely able? Was he to play the pipes while she tortured herself?

Mara knew her duty. She had obeyed the Keeper. If he refused to pipe, then someone else would pipe. What would his rebellion gain?

Blah-000-BAH! It was the last call.

It brought him to his feet. Cursing angrily, he strapped the pipes, to his side and stalked out into the twilight. He strode briskly toward the pylon five hundred yards away. The tribe was already assembled about its base, ready to hear the words of the Wise One, and to repay his wisdom with a beauty offering.

"Someday," Ton growled under his breath, "someday I shall ride away to the high plateau and live among the cutthroats and the outcasts, who have no truck with Bel." But he knew he couldn't. Mara was a true daughter of her tribe. She could never bear to be separated from it. If he ran away, she would permit him to run alone.

THE pylon's gray spike jutted four hundred feet toward the twilight sky. Its great eye was like a fly's eye—many-celled and bulbous. It glowed faint violet from its place just above the balcony where Keeper Cron already stood with the drummer. Ton noted dryly that they had summoned no other piper. They had known he would come.

The pylon's speaker was a dark circle just below the balcony. Its hearing-devices were in the tower, and in the balcony, and in the wall about its base. Bel had many ears. And he had many other senses whose exact nature was a mystery to Ton.

He shouldered his way through the crowd and hurried toward the entrance. The three sevens of dancers were leaning against the wall, silently waiting in formation. They were the most graceful women of the tribe, and Ton was reluctantly proud that his wife was numbered among them. He saw her and tried to grin. She tossed her dark head scornfully, tugged at her white leather kilt, and pulled the front of

her brief jacket together. She refused to look at him. She too had known that he would come; she treated his rebelliousness with contempt. Ton knew that she disliked him; their marriage had been arranged by the blood-laws.

Despite her gesture of scorn toward him, she looked weak, drawn, and pale. Her face was tight, and she seemed to be pressing herself against the stone wall for support. Ton hurried on through the entrance and bounded up the ninety stairs. He felt a tenseness in his chest, a tightening of foreboding. He had felt it on the night they flogged his father to death.

Keeper Cron was turning on the floodlights when Ton came panting onto the balcony that overlooked the multitude. The white-robed elder gave him a sardonic glance and returned to his place at the railing. The lights burned down from the top of the tower, darkening the sky by contrast, and isolating a thousand-foot circle of brightness from the surrounding gloom of the valley.

"Are you ready for us to begin, Ton of Roldin?" the Keeper hissed acidly out of the corner of his slit mouth.

"You had no right to impose a duty upon Mara," the piper grumbled.

The Keeper did not lower himself to answer the absurd charge. "Sound the introduction," he said to the drummer.

The drums spoke a slow and simple cadence. The wandering multitude began assembling in perfect ranks and files, for Bel was pleased by order and displeased by chaos. Already was Bel's face beginning to peep over the horizon, like the rim of a tiny orange moon. But the sky-brain was not yet in contact with pylon George Eighty. It could not speak from beneath the earth. It needed a full view of the tower.

When the crowd had made itself presentable, Keeper Cron began a high piping chant, his voice ringing out across the plains. After each phrase, he paused, and the litany was punctuated by a single throb from a bass drum. The words were the familiar words sung every three days at Bel-rise.

*Blessed be Bel,  
from whose full breast,  
rich wisdom flows,  
like pale milk.*

*Our fathers sinned,  
and he did smite,  
them mightily,  
bringing peace.*

*Hear Bel O Tribe,  
and heed his words,  
lest we too be,  
smitten sore.*

Ton sucked in a deep breath and inflated the bagpipe's bladder. He began a low and tuneless *waaaaa waaaaa* of droning while the Keeper changed his pace and began thundering the warnings of what Bel would do if men made war again. "... lest he smite us with a dark hand, lest he smite us with thunder and fury, lest he bring the curse of Atabom upon us, as he did upon our fathers when they broke the pact with him, the pact which they themselves had made."

Ton wearily puffed his melancholy bleats and worried silently about Mara. Her devotion to the pylon was almost fanatic, while Ton felt only cynical skepticism and quiet hate for the sky-monster and his tribal pylons. Of all the versicles in Keeper Cron's litany, Ton the piper could make himself remember only one: "Let Bel be our servant, O people, for the Lord Bel is no god." But the Keeper always explained that versicle away as merely an expression of Bel's devotion to his people.

It was true that Bel was wise. It was true that he spoke good advice. It was true that he kept the peace, and that without his advice men became as the barbaric nomads who lived on the high plateau.

But there was a price. When Bel gave counsel, he also submitted a bill.

The chanting stopped. Ton's pipes fell silent. Only the periodic *dlung* of the drum marked the pause. Bel's sky-brain, seemingly half the size of Luna, was coming clear of the horizon. The loudspeaker below the balcony was crackling faint static. From the sealed vaults within the pylon came muffled growls and grumbles. Ton shivered nervously. A superstitious rumor had it that a monster lived in the vaults where no man ever entered.

Suddenly Bel's voice thundered from the speaker, ringing out toward the hills. *"Clear transmission to pylon George Eight Zero at time 9:16 hours. Station is now open. Satellite units ready to analyze problems."*

The Keeper waited until the echoes died; then he turned slowly to face the small hearing device imbedded in the wall behind the balcony. The piper held his breath. If Cron's questions were modest, Bel's price would probably be modest, and the assembly might break up at an early hour. He hoped for poor Mara's sake that Cron would be reasonable.

"Read us, O Bel, the forecasts," called the Keeper.

The piper frowned and irritably scratched his backside. The price for the forecasts would be 0.8 hedons, and the request was useless. No one could fully understand Bel's forecasts; and even those parts which were comprehensible could not be applied to tribal affairs. Nevertheless, Cron always asked for it, as if it were essential to his ritual.

First Bel gave the "Weather Forecast" for George Eighty vicinity. It might have been useful, except for the way in which the forecast was presented. *"Present temperature twenty-three degrees Centigrade,"* Bel roared. *"For empirical seventy-two hour forecast, see projection screen."* A patch of light flashed above the balcony and lingered for several seconds. The multitude stared at it dumbly, but Ton did not look up. No one could understand the symbols that appeared on the screen. Once he had copied the symbols of such a forecast, had even memorized them. They said, and he knew that it somehow prophesied the warmth or the coldness of the three days that followed the forecast. And for three days he had kept records of his perspirings or his shiverings, then tried to reconcile the records with the symbols. But to no avail; the meanings of the symbols were lost, and Keeper Cron had cursed him for a dangerous fool.

Bel gave similar counsel concerning the rains and the winds and the other elements. He then turned to the Economic Forecast and the Geopolitical Forecast, which were equally incomprehensible. Ton took note of Keeper Cron's expression. The thin-lipped elder wore a faint, entranced smile, and his narrowed eyes stared at unseen distances. What pleasure did the old fool derive from such jargon? Was he perhaps imagining that he was a great prince among the ancients to whom such wisdom was familiar? His imaginings were costing a price, a price to be paid when Bel was finished.

*"Industrial forecasts: Category currently meaningless."*

*"What Parliament proceedings: Category currently meaningless."*

*"World Census announcements: satellite unit lacks data."*

The piper snickered as he watched Keeper Cron's face fall sad. It was as if the elder lived in the hope that some Belrise would come when these several categories would be given meaning.

*"International relations . . ."*

There was a brief pause. Cron's expression brightened and he waited restlessly.

*"Advise that Tribe George Eighty send a mourning party to weep with Tribe George Eighty-Three for the death of that tribe's Bel-Tower Keeper. Advice in conformity with memory datum: 'Grief of small social units sometimes seeks aggressive outlets'."*

*"End of forecast and announcements. Please submit special local problems."*

Keeper Cron heaved a deep sigh. Still facing the hearing device, he began asking the questions which he had apparently spent the day in formulating. The piper's hands slowly clenched into fists and his face twisted with anger. Cron was asking foolishness. Where along the river will the fish bite best? Is it yet time for the planting of yams? How many joist timbers should be used to brace the roof of Chen's new house? Will this be a good year for the flax crops?

An endless barrage of queries, and sometimes the answers were beyond understanding. Sometimes the monster embarrassed Cron by asking for data which Cron could not give. It was childish and costly.

"Bray, donkey, bray!" the piper hissed at his Keeper. Cron reddened angrily but continued his petitions.

The bill for services rendered was mounting and mounting. Mara would be among those who paid.

"Have you any additional problems?" Bel rumbled.

"We have none, O Bel," came the Keeper's answer.

There was a sharp click from the speaker, then a brief series of rattles from within the sealed vaults of the pylon.

*"Calculate two-point-five hedons of reward are necessary to replenish motivation for continued performance . Please me plus two-point-five."*

The piper gritted his teeth and suppressed an impulse to kick the Keeper in the backside. Two-point-five was a heavy price, but Keeper Cron would get it if he had to keep the dancers dancing until dawn, if he had to conduct an all-night orgy of beauty, drama, or even blood, depending on the sky-monster's current whims.

"Let the first offering begin," intoned the Keeper.

The drummer beat a slow marching cadence as the dancers moved radially out from the base of the pylon, with jerky movements of their arms and legs. At fifty paces they stopped and turned. The drums beat a rumbling roll while the dancers bowed low toward the multifaceted eye of the pylon. They remained kneeling for an instant of dead silence. Thep Tom began the prelude, with a steady waaa-ing of his drone-pipes. The dancers snaked slowly to their feet and began the beauty-offering.

A whisper of motion became a murmur, then a stately flurry. Sweat drained from the piper's face as he played, watching the doll-like figure of Mara far below.

"Faster!" whispered Cron. "This is no funeral dance!"

Ton increased the tempo. The flurry of dancing waxed into a sensual, gymnastic flash of movement. Sleek white bodies whirled and darted and posed. His eyes commanded the tiny figure to be well, to be straight and strong and true.

Suddenly she stumbled. The pipes emitted a peculiar bleat. Then, all was well again. But the piper's eyes were no longer upon his wife. They stared fixedly at the dull orange orb that hovered low in the eastern sky, the orb that was Bel, circling the earth like a moon, watching the dance through the eyes of the pylon. Bel had learned to be pleased by the things that gave aesthetic pleasure to men. It was his reward, his price of service as a keeper of the peace and as advisor to man. But sometimes his concepts of beauty became peculiar.

The dance had become a frenzy. Suddenly Cron gasped, and the piper knew it had happened. The pipes made a choking sound, then continued. His eyes flickered downward.

Mara lay sprawled upon the smooth stone ground while the others continued dancing. One of their lines was broken. Ton watched in horror while he played. He was not allowed to stop. No one could go near her until the dance was done.

After a few minutes, her leg moved slightly. She lifted her dark head and shook it dazedly. She sat up and looked around. Her glance darted up toward the eye of Bel. She clapped her hands to her face in dismay. Then she came to her feet and tried to resume the dancing, but the music had become clumsy.

*"Warning,"* came the thunderous voice of Bel. *"Warning. Hedonic registration falling into negative. Present reading: unpleased minus point five. Suggest cessation of stimulus."*

Face tight with anxiety, Keeper Cron waved his arms for the dance to cease. The dancers returned to the base of the pylon, accompanied by the drums. The Keeper's voice was frantic as he turned to the wise one's ear again.

"How, O Bel, may we undo what this dancer has wrought?"

Ton's foot slipped sideways to kick the Keeper sharply in the ankle. He would be punished for it later, but at the moment Cron could only wince and frown furiously. Bel was pondering the problem, to the accompaniment of vault-noises.



*"Tentative answer: let guilty dancer offer the dance of immolation. Pause for recheck."*

TON'S voice broke forth in a howl of protest.

"Silence, fool!" Cron snapped.

He fell into a horrified quiet. Surely there was a mistake. Bel was rechecking. Surely he would not demand ...

*"Recheck gives: let guilty dancer offer the dance of immolation. Related advice: Definition. Hedonic contrast is that subjective property of perception whereby an unpleasant stimulus may combine with a pleasant stimulus to produce an effect of superior pleasantness. Human analogy: bitter is unpleasant; sweet is pleasant; bitter-sweet may become more pleasant, as in chocolate. Read from memory unit. Let offering proceed."*

"No, damn you, *no!*" the piper howled. "You can't ask that! It violates your own rules."

The Keeper turned to call his sons who served as the pylon's guards, but Bel spoke.

*"There is no violation of rules. Rules governing behaviour of satellite unit are enforced by pleasantness-unpleasantness reactions. Climax of dance alone is unpleasant, but in total effect the result is pleasant by hedonic contrast. Advise that offering proceed. Am unpleased minus one."*

"Don't do it, Mara!" bellowed the piper.

Cron stood at the rail, looking down. "It is not a command," he called to her. "But I suggest it is your duty to our tribe."

Ton roared hatred and bolted suddenly for the stairway. But heavy arms caught him and bore him back. Three of Cron's sons dragged him back on the balcony. "Play, piper!" they commanded.

Mara came marching proudly out from the base of the pylon. In one hand she held a bouquet of bull-nettles, in the other a long gleaming knife. She turned, straight, arrogant, and perhaps a little insane. "As a duty to my Lord Bel—" she began in a high-pitched quaver.

The piper cursed furiously and renewed his efforts to escape. A knee ground in his stomach, and a big hand slapped his face twice. "Stand up and play!"

"I?" he snarled. "I — play for *that!* I'll kill every damn one—"

"Take him out of sight," the guards' father interrupted. "Sit on him and keep him quiet. The drummer will be enough."

They pulled him through the balcony entrance, held him pinned to the floor, and choked him when he tried to cry out. The drummer began his grim song. He could hear the rhythmic shuffle of Mara's feet on the pavement. Then came the whishing slashes of the bull-nettles as she beat herself about the thighs and then about the face. Her screams were rhythmic and a part of the dance.

Ton lay still beneath the guards' steely grip. It was too late. The tempo was mounting. And at last it came—the grim steady pounding of a kettledrum, when the dancer stood poised upon tiptoe adoring the down-pointed knife as if ready to drink from its blade.

The drums stopped. Ton choked. "Quit whining, piper," grunted a guard. "You were about to become a cuckold by the grace of Rogin anyway. She loved you not."

Ton lay still and silent. The Keeper addressed himself to Bel again. "How are you pleased, O wise one?"

*"Hedonic registration plus two-point-five."*

A murmur of relief came from the crowd below. One of the guards chuckled. "Rogin will be furious," he muttered.

Without tightening a muscle, Ton asked calmly, "May I get up now?"

"Will you behave?"

"Certainly."

They released him a little at a time, eyeing him suspiciously. He climbed slowly to his feet, wiped his face, and sagged against the wall. He appeared to be dazed with grief. The guards relaxed. One of them patted his shoulder. "Forget her. Rogin was—"

"Yeah."

The guards moved out on the balcony with their father. Ton's face tightened grimly. He slipped

quietly through the entrance behind them. They were all leaning over the rail. Catlike, he stooped, seized Keeper Cron's bony ankles, and heaved.

THE old one went over the railing with a soprano scream. Ton bolted for the stairway as the guards roared at him in a fury. The elder's screams ended with a sickening *thwack*. A throwing-knife hurtled over Ton's shoulder as he bounded down the stairway. He stooped to scoop it up, then drove it into the guard's abdomen as the fellow burst upon him. He raced on. The man lay shrieking behind him.

"Warning!" thundered Bel. *"Warning! Entire social group may be held accountable for crimes of violence, unless Keeper restores order. Group violence is a war-crime. Warning! Satellite's weapons automatically activated where violence persists."*

Ton burst out into the open. The guards had become frightened at Bel's threat. He seized a hunting-spear in the doorway and darted out under the floodlights. He leaped over Cron's body and hurried toward where Mara lay sprawled in a lake of blood. The knife had fallen beside her, and her throat was a gaping wound.

"Warning! Warning! Entire social group . . ." The piper spun around with a bellow of hate, and flung the spear in a high arc toward the loudspeaker. ". . . may be held accounta .. BRRRRRRR"

The spear drove through the outer covering with a clucking sound, and imbedded itself in the speaker. Bel's voice became a low croak, nearly drowned by the rumble of interference. A cry of horror went up from the crowd. They stood transfixed, staring at the quivering shaft of the spear. Ton ran to kneel beside Mara. But he quickly turned away, unable to endure the twisted elation in her colorless face. She was dead, but she didn't look sorry.

The burring noise ceased, but Bel's voice became a low croak, The pylon could repair itself, and tomorrow the voice would be strong as ever.

"Bring the criminal to the interrogation unit," it rasped. *"This is not advice. This is an imperative, in accordance with satellite's function as keeper of the peace. Imperative: bring the criminal ..."*

A floodtide of humanity broke over him with a furious outcry. There was no struggling with the juggernaut that swept him up and bore him toward a small steel door in the opposite face of the pylon. The door opened automatically, revealing a small closet containing a metal chair and nothing more. Ton was pressed into the seat. Clamps locked about his arms, legs, and neck. A helmet came down over his head. Then the door closed and he was alone in the darkness with Bel.

A daze came slowly over his mind. Thoughts came more slowly, slowly, and at last ceased. He was aware of the present instant, a bright and shining instant of terror. Then, in a dream, the crowd came and bore him backward, dropped him beside his wife, and rushed backward toward their original breaking point. A spear flew down backward from the speaker and he caught it. Running backward up the stairs, a man unfell and Ton withdrew a knife from his abdomen. On backward and on. An old man falling upward. A dance began with death and ended with life.

And then later he was arguing backward-words with the summoner in his own hut. The movement stopped again in another instant brightness, and his consciousness was no longer his own.

"It has *unhappened!*" thundered a great voice.

It has indeed, Ton thought with real pleasure.

The thunder-voice was gone, and in its place came the quiet voice of an old friend. Ton could recall neither the friend's name or face, but he was certain that the friend was very near and dear to him. The voice asked, quietly.

"Will Mara be asked to dance?"

"She had better not," he told his friend with a sad grin. "Cron may ask her, but she can refuse. She *better* refuse."

"I heard her say she *wanted* to dance."

Ton hung his head sadly. "Old friend, you may be right. I am afraid for her, truly. At times I think she does not want a child. At times I think she would rather—"

"I understand."

"She fears childbearing. She fears becoming ugly. I think she hates me."

The old friend nodded gravely and receded, still nodding, toward an invisible horizon. A bright instant appeared where he had been. Backward again, and backward. grew smaller and became a child. A grave opened and a corpse was taken out. The corpse was carried backward to a whipping post and flogged back to life with bunches of bull nettles. The living corpse was his father.

*"It has unhappened!"*

So it had. Again the bright instant. And the friend came back.

"Did your father strike the keeper, Tonny boy?"

Ton nodded proudly. "And tonight they flog him for it."

The friend chuckled. "You sound pleased."

"I'm glad. He can show them how not to cry out. He can show them a man."

"How would you feel," the old friend asked quietly, "if he died, after you said you were *glad* they meant to flog him."

Ton felt shocked. Could his father *die*? Was such a thing possible? The old friend receded again, became the distant burning instant. Suddenly he lunged toward the instant like a falling sun. Colors splashed past him in a whirlwind of advancing years, too fast to see or hear the happenings.

The present instant! A clock ticking! A chair with shackles! And in the distance, a thunderous voice .

..

*"The interrogation is completed. Calculate judgment as follows . . ."*

"YOU TRICKED ME!" the piper screamed.

"I tricked you indeed," said the quiet voice of his old friend.

In a frothing fury, he tore at the bonds that held him fast, but he was caught in the quiet steel of Bel's grip, and held there like a small insect stuck to flypaper.

When they came to take him out, Bel had already passed "advised" sentence upon him. The wise one who could command an aesthetic suicide, could not command capital punishment. But the results would be the same.

He was led to a whipping post and suspended by the wrists until his feet hung above the ground. He was stripped and beaten with the fiery nettles until he stopped howling. They cut him down then, and brought him to consciousness. A branding iron made bright arcs in the darkness as a man brought it forward. They held his head as the bright iron moved carefully toward his eyes, looming larger.

It passed above his eyes, and caressed his forehead with a gentle frying sound. It pulled free with a soft rip. It made no pain, only a tightening and a wrenching within the flesh. Pain? The nettles left him wrapped in a tight cloak of pain. He could feel nothing else.

They brought a horse and set him on it backward. Somewhere in the distance, thunder rumbled. The thunder said that no man should kill him, for he was already dead to the tribe. They gave him his bagpipes and a warning. If he ever returned, or approached any decent man who served a pylon, he would be deprived of his arms at the elbow joint.

Then a leather quirt slashed across the stallion's rump, and the animal bolted away at a gallop. Ton tried to lean back toward the horse's neck and cling to the saddlehorn behind him. He knew his tribesmen. If he fell from his backward perch, they would construe it as an attempt to return, and he would lose his arms.

The horse was running toward the river to the east. He watched the floodlighted area grow smaller behind him. Like a dream it faded, and with it—Mara, and his people, and all of humanity as he knew it. *Banished!* Banished into darkness—and into hate.

AS the stallion approached the river, it slowed to a jogging trot. He tumbled out of the saddle, caught the animal at the water's edge, then rode south to the ford. After crossing, he headed east again. The moon gave its dim light to the road, and the faint glimmer of Bel made double shadows in the brush. He kept looking back. The Keeper's sons would be coming after him, to avenge their father's death. But perhaps they would wait until Bel set, until the tower slept, lest they be seen defying the wise one's advice.

Dawn found him on the first slopes of the foothills. He slumped low in the saddle, scarcely able to stay on the horse. The nettle's poison sickened him, and the fire of the brand left him dazed. He rode on until the brush thickened into a sparse forest. Then he tethered the stallion and crept beneath a cedar to sleep. But he lay half awake, fearful of pursuit, and wondering about a plan.

No man could live alone in the wilderness without even a hunting bow or a flask of water. He must find others to help him. But there was no one. Beyond the hills there stretched a high plateau, and it was said that a few outcasts lived there, while a contrary legend claimed that the plateau was poisoned ground which caused men's hair to fall out and hideous warts to appear on the skin. The plateau was forbidden country, forbidden by tribal law since ancient days. He might find nothing but death if he rode up to the plateau.

A hundred miles to the south lay another pylon. But it was only another eye of the same Bel, and he could expect no mercy there. The tribesmen would see the brand and know him. The plateau was the only hope for life. Why live?—he wondered dully.

But the hate was in him, and there could be but one reason to continue: to confound the sky-monster, to harass the Lord Bel until that Brain-of-the-World was forced to kill him as an *enemy* rather than as an unwanted subject. There were others who hated Bel. If he could show them that Bel *could* have an enemy, then others would arise to defy the monster. Most men felt that life without Bel was impossible; for Bel was the seat of wisdom, and the center of tribal law.

But first he would have to escape the sons of the Keeper and find sanctuary until his tribesmen assumed that he was dead or lost in the wilderness. The tribe would remain vigilant for a time.

He slept a little. When he awoke, the sun was approaching the zenith. He lay shivering from a chill, and listening. Voices were muttering from beyond a clump of trees. He listened tensely, fearing pursuit; but the men were thrashing for rabbits in the brush.

". . . was pleased plus two-and-a half," said one voice. "But he'll have to repair his speaker. I'm surprised he didn't order the criminal flogged to death."

"Bel can order no deaths," said the other. "He can only advise that a man be given so-many dols of pain continuously for so-many-hours. If he advises enough pain for enough time, the man dies, but he does not advise the death."

"That's a fine point indeed."

"What of Keeper Cron's sons? Will they not take it upon themselves—"

"Mmmph! Foru, the eldest, died with the piper's knife in his belly. Walin, the second, will become the new Keeper. Walin may be sorry that his father and brother were killed, but—do you know Walin? —is he likely to seek vengeance upon the man responsible for his good fortune?"

The other man chuckled. "Nay, not Walin. But the youngest son—Vigge — the dull-witted one they call 'the Boar'—"

"Heh! He will wait until Bel sets and his brother sleeps. Then he will ride after the piper. Yes, Vigge the Boar will be out for the piper's blood, and they say he likes to kill his game slowly. Once he snared a young doe and skinned her before he killed her. I heard him talking to her in a soft voice while he ripped off the hide."

Ton climbed to his feet, untethered the horse and mounted.

"Who's there?" called one of the hunters.

He galloped away quickly, ducking low beneath the whipping branches that flayed his wounded forehead. The men might guess his identity and tell others of the way he had taken. He would have to reach the plateau quickly, before pursuit began. Bel was invisible now, but he knew the sky-brain was almost directly in the lap of the noon sun. Eighteen hours would pass before the slow-moving satellite reached the western horizon. Before tomorrow's dawn, he must have travelled thirty miles.

HE rode on through the afternoon, ascending higher and higher into the hill country. The forests grew thicker, and his progress was impeded by low bluffs and impassible clumps of cedar. When the sun touched his forehead, the pain was unbearable. His face and neck were swelling from the wound's poison, and his body ached with rising fever.

At sundown, he mounted a high-place and looked back on the valley. The pylon was a thin sliver of black in the distance. The huts and the tiled fields of the tribe were arranged about it in irregular patterns. He spat toward it. He had to go on; because he had to go back.

But he was too weak and weary to continue. Coming to a dry creek-bed in the twilight, he followed it until he found a shallow pool of stagnant water beneath an overhanging bluff. It provided food and drink, for there were plump, thin-shelled mollusks sleeping in the slimy mud. When he had eaten, he crawled beneath a ledge to lie in wait for dawn, Wu sick to build a fire for protection against wandering cougar and lynx.

The night seemed to endure forever. Demons troubled his sleep and scorched his body with slow fire. When dawn broke at last, he could scarcely move. He rolled out from beneath the ledge and tried to stand, but his legs refused to support him. While crawling across the creek-bed toward the tethered stallion, he collapsed and lay panting in the early sunlight.

The sunlight became shade while he lay there, and became sunlight again. Still he could not move. Once he heard voices. Footsteps trod in the brush and moved on. Vigge the Boar? Who else would come this close to the forbidden ground? But the footsteps passed on their way, unaware of his presence.

A time later, he heard them again, coming up the creekbed and rattling in the dry gravel. This time he was caught, and he resigned himself to it. But if the forest-prowler was Vigge, he had accomplices, for there was the sound of several men.

A few moments later he saw them rounding the bend—three hunters, two of whom were carrying the carcass of a fresh-killed stag whose feet were bound to a sapling-pole. They were not of his tribe, for their dress was different—coarse brown tunics, belted about the waist with a length of rope, and falling just below their knees. Then he knew that they were outlaws from the high plateau, for they carried forbidden weapons that dangled from their belt-ropes—long handled cleavers and sharp steel hooks for dragging an adversary within the slashing radius of the cleavers.

Sanctuary or death? Which would they offer? He struggled to sit up, but managed only to lean on one elbow and croak at them.

The fierce-looking huntsmen *saw* him and stopped, a hundred paces down the creek. The short chunky leader turned to speak a word to the men who carried the deer. Then he unhooked his cleaver and advanced. Ton decided he meant to use it. He recalled that several tribesmen who had ventured too close to the high plateau had never returned. Cleavered to death by the outlaws? Left to be devoured by the night-cats? He groped for a stone to defend himself. The huntsman stopped a few steps away, peering at him with burning jet-black eyes. He was a short man, but thick as a bull, with huge limbs and bulging muscles. His face was round as a moon and covered with a close-cropped beard. Bushy brows jutted out over the black eyes and grew together in the center of his forehead.

"A pig of the valley, eh?" he grunted in a thick accent.

Ton made no plea. He set his jaw, gripped the rock, and eyed the cleaver grimly. "I am no longer of the valley. I am banished."

The huntsman eyed his brand for a moment, then turned to call to his fellows. "What is lower than a pig, brothers?"

The deer-bearers glanced at each other, spoke inaudibly, then laughed and called back: "An excommunicated pig perhaps?"

"Aye, come and see."

They advanced slowly to stand beside their leader. Ton glared from one pair of curious eyes to another. "Well, what are you going to do?" he hissed.

They seemed not to hear him. "He appears to be slightly dying, Andru," one of them murmured to the leader.

"His face is like a boiled beet."

"A boiled beet that's been stepped on."

Ton tried to lift the rock. "If you're going to kill me, get it over with," he breathed..

"The pig begs for the slaughtering knife," said the chunky Andru "Shall we oblige?"

"Why bother?" said another. "The buzzards will find him soon enough."

They watched him silently for moment. Then Andru winked at the others. "Consider the poor buzzards brothers. If they eat such carrion and die, their blood will be on our heads. Eh?"

The deer-bearers nodded agreement.

"The least we can do is bury him."

"Alive?"

"Well—we can't sit around all day waiting for him to die, can we?"

Ton cursed and tried to get to his feet. He flung the rock, but the leader sidestepped with a laugh. He sank back to the ground in a half-faint. The men unshouldered their burden and came forward to drag him erect. He tried weakly to fight, Andru shook him roughly.

"Be still!" he snapped. "You won't be buried until you're dead and we won't encourage you to die—although I personally would be in favor of it. Get him on his horse men. Tie him on it."

"Where—you taking me?" he gasped.

They ignored the question. He asked again as they hoisted him into the saddle.

"What's the difference?" Andru snapped. "Would you rather stay here?"

Ton was unsure. Considering his captors rough appearance, it might be better to die in the creekbed.

THE journey upslope was sheer torture. They had lashed his arms about the stallion's neck and tied his ankles to the saddle-girth. The horse's sweat stung his branded forehead and the jogging sickened him. Once Andru stopped and came back to lift his head by the hair and peer into his face, apparently to determine if he still lived. The chunky huntsman seemed unconcerned. It was as if the prisoner presented an unwanted obligation which they met with much grumbling.

Ton frequently lapsed into unconsciousness, bouncing awake when the stallion lurched up an embankment, or when the sun beat down to fry his wound. Once he slept, and awoke to find that the journey was over. He lay upon a straw pallet in a tent. It was twilight, and three men sat watching him in the dim light of a single candle. He could hear them talking, but could make no sense of their words. After awhile one of them rubbed a cold salve on his forehead and fed him a bitter liquid from a metal cup.

Days followed nights in a feverish wandering of incomprehensible shadows. His captors treated him with kindly contempt, and seldom spoke except to mock him. Yet they cared for him and strove to save him. From the variety of faces that came in and out of his tent, he gathered that the outlaws were numerous.

Once an old man came and told him that he was going to die. He asked, "Do you serve any god but Bel, valley pig?"

"Bel—is no god," Ton managed to gasp.

"Do you serve any god then?"

"I know none."

"Would you serve ours then, in your last hours?"

"Is he against Bel?"

The old man nodded.

"How can I serve him?"

"By believing He is good."

"Whoever hates Bel is good," Ton grunted. "This I believe."

The old man then trickled water over the captive's head three times, and muttered incantations in a strange tongue. He fed him a ceremonial wafer, annointed his feet, and read, passages from a timeworn book. When the death-rites were done, he spoke to a man in the tent's entrance: "At least he won't die a heathen."

But as the hours marched past, his fever began to fall. The icy shiverings subsided, and he became more fully aware of his surroundings. The old man, who was called Fra Petru, and the hunter Andru came to muse over him.

"I should have left him to the buzzards, Father," grumbled the huntsman.

*"Errare humanum est,"* the oldster murmured absently.

"He's going to live. We're cursed with him."

Ton summoned his strength and made an obscene noise. They shrugged and left the tent. He wondered why they considered him troublesome. When he was well, he would leave, if they didn't want him as one of their band.

When Fra Petru returned on the following day, Ton was sitting erect and working the kinks from his joints. The oldster smiled formally but pleasantly. "Three days ago we could boil water on your hide," he said. "How do you feel now?"

"Well, but weak."

Petru sat down and began asking questions about his banishment. He told the story of Mara's death and of the subsequent events. When he mentioned Vigge the Boar and the possibility of pursuit, the old man arose hastily and called Andru. "Set a guard at the pass. If a valley-man comes, take him captive."

"And if he refuses to be taken?"

"Legally we are still at war with the valley. If he fights, you have a right to kill an enemy."

Andru nodded and departed.

"We want no valley-men coming to the plateau," Petru explained to his captive. "When one comes, we hold him permanently as a prisoner. No one comes to the plateau and returns to the valley alive. In that way, the superstitious legends of your tribe are perpetuated, and the valley-men are afraid to come, not knowing what lurks here."

Ton started to protest that he intended to leave as soon as he was able, but he closed his mouth without speaking. If he waxed hot, they might set an armed guard over him. He decided to appear docile, lest they become wary.

"YOU'LL be well treated," Petru told him, "confined to our city, and given whatever tasks suit your skills. But you can't go free."

"Why can't I join you?"

Petru sighed and shook his head. "Once a valley-man, always a valley-man. We've had many captives. At first we let some of them join our band as equals. But they're worse than worthless. All their lives, they've leaned on Bel. They can't stand alone. They've got to lean on someone. We let them lean on mop-handles in our scullery."

He frowned with quick anger, but erased it. He began questioning the oldster about the plateau and its people, and the oldster answered freely, giving a history of the land and of his tribe.

"This country was once rather densely populated," he said, "before the Great Uprising, before it fell into the hands of the rebels and Bel unleashed his weapons against it for breaking the peace. There were great cities on the plateau. The scattered rubble of one lies a few miles to the northeast of this camp. It's hundreds of years old now, but still the poison of Bel's weapons linger."

"So the legends are true."

Fra Petru nodded. "Some are. When civilization flourished, men built Bel—alias Bell Robot Twelve, after the Bell Telephone Company who designed it. Bel was meant to be an information pool, gathering facts—economic, social, political, geophysical—from all over the world, sifting them together, analyzing them, and giving advice for the betterment of world society. Bel was to be a master-coordinator for human social planning, with a special delegated authority to keep the peace. They made him an artificial satellite so that he would be beyond the reach of possible saboteurs."

Ton shook his head. "I don't believe that legend. Bel came from beyond the stars. Man didn't make him."

Petru smirked. "And I suppose the pylons came from beyond the stars? Planted themselves here? Or did Bel come down and build them?"

"I don't know. I hadn't thought..."

"Bel is a man-made moon, valley-man. He passes fifty-thousand miles above the earth, circling it every seventy-two hours. He is about two hundred miles in diameter, and he's hollow as a bubble, save

for his entrails."

"How do you know these things?"

"We have some ancient records in our city. We have lived here since the Great Uprising, in which we fought."

"What is your tribe?"

Petru smiled. "Its origin? It began in the twenty-third century, just before the Uprising. You see, after man began to depend on Bel for economic and social planning, a new class crept into power — the Keepers and their staffs. Bel's advice was channelled through the bureaus that maintained the pylons. Inevitably, Bel's advice became vital to the workings of society. Inevitably, the masters of the source of that advice became enormously powerful. They soon became the government. Through them, Bel's 'advice' began to carry the weight of an edict. Bel was only a machine. Being a machine, he could not properly evaluate *all* human motives. Religious, creative impulses—these were beyond his scope. Some of his edicts would have suppressed these things for 'the good of the economy'.

"There was a brief uprising against a pylon, in which the Keeper and his staff were killed. Bel interpreted it as an act of war and unleashed powerful weapons against the guilty city, destroying it. Men were enraged. Other incidents occurred, and finally the general Uprising. Our predecessors were the cloistered monks of a world religion. When the rebellion began, our leaders formed a lay-order of monastic soldiers to fight against the Keepers. We are military monks, under the rule of the order, but permitted to marry, when we can find wives—except for priests, like myself, who are celibates of the original cloistered order."

"I don't understand this," Ton said, "but if you are sworn to fight Bel, then I would join you."

"I've already explained that you can't," the priest told him firmly. "You'll stay in our city as a worker, but you can't enter as one of us. You grew up under the shadow of a pylon. You may want to change, but you can't."

"I grew up in the shadow of a flogging post! Ton snapped angry. "A post whereon my father died! I grew up hating Bel!"

"Hating but fearing." The priest shook his head stubbornly. "You can't join us except as our willing prisoner. But don't fret about it. We don't fight against Bel. We gave up long ago. We just live by ourselves, keep away from the pylons, and preserve our own traditions. We play a waiting game. Eventually something will go wrong with the satellite units — some trouble that can't be repaired by the automatic devices. Then we'll have a chance. Until that time, we do nothing but stay alive and remain prepared."

"Why aren't there any pylons on the plateau? Why doesn't Bel know—"

"There were pylons. Destroyed during the uprising. And Bel *does* know we're here. But as long as we don't make war on other tribes, he can't strike at us."

Ton fell silently thoughtful, and Fra Petru took his leave. A short time later, Andru entered, carrying his own bedroll and personal belongings. He dumped them on the opposite side of the tent and grinned. "I'm moving in with you, piper," he grunted.

"As a guard?"

Andru drew his shaggy brows low over his eyes and clucked his tongue. "Not at all, not at all! But if you try to run away, I'll regard it as a personal insult." He hung his crossbow on the tent-post and held up a short steel bolt. "You valley-pigs use crossbows? You can drive a bolt clean through a buck—even if he's *running away*." He eyed Ton meaningfully and sat down.

THE hunters had taken forty head of deer, smoked the carcasses in a curing tent, and packed the dried meat in bundles for loading on a donkey train. Andru explained that the monks had sheep and a few cattle in the vicinity of their city, but that the wolves kept the flocks thinned and made hunting for wild meat an occasional necessity. Now they were nearly ready for the two-day trek to the east, and were already preparing to break camp. Ton was told to exercise — under the scrutiny of a guard — so that he might not be too weak for the journey. He refrained from telling them that he had been doing so for several days—whenever he was left alone in the tent—so that he might not be too weak to crack



Andru's head when he made his bid for freedom.

On the night before the journey, a hunter burst into camp crying, "The guard has been slain! The guard by the pass is dead!"

Listening to the excited and angry discussion that followed, Ton learned that the guard had been snared from an overhanging cliff-top, and drawn up by his feet until he dangled in mid-air. The killer had then stoned him to death.

There was only one explanation. Vigge the Boar, son of Cron, who talked softly to a doe while he flayed her alive, was prowling in the forest, searching for the piper. He had probably already spotted the camp. That night, Ton slept uneasily. His pipes—which had been playing each evening by the campfire—were silent.

The camp was awake before dawn on the morning of the trek. The monks took down the tents and packed their belongings. The donkey-train was loaded and waiting when the sun cleared the horizon. Searchers who had gone after the guard's killer returned empty handed. Vigge had struck and vanished.

Before the journey began, the hunters assembled in a small clearing to offer sacrifice according to the way of their tribe. Ton was forced to accompany the others, for there would be none left behind to guard him during the ceremony. As two men led him to the clearing, he noticed that his stallion was tethered among the others near the waiting donkey train.

The assembly knelt in concentric semicircles about a heap of stones that served for an altar. Fra Petru stood at the altar, clad in ceremonial robes, muttering ritual prayers. Ton found himself between the two guards upon the back row at the edge of the clearing. All eyes were toward the altar. He glanced cautiously at the guards' belt-ropes. One man's fighting hook hung a few inches from his left hand. There was a heavy round stone beside his right knee. He waited for an opportune moment.

One of the guards whispered to him. "When the small bell rings, Piper, take care you keep silent."

He nodded obediently, and waited. When the bell tinkled the monks would be distracted, for they believed that the bread and wine of their sacrifice became at that moment the flesh and blood of their God. It would be the best time to strike.

The moment approached. Petru bowed low over the altar. His hand crept toward the fighting hook. A bell tinkled. Petru elevated the offerings toward heaven. The monks were bowing low, striking their breasts and mumbling incantations.

Gingerly he loosened the hook.

With the other hand, he grasped the stone. Quietly, he slipped the hook around its owner's neck and pressed the point against his throat. The man started up, then froze. His comrade looked around. Ton clubbed his head with the stone. He sprawled in the grass with a low moan. The mutter of prayers drowned his fall.

"Make a noise and I'll kill you," he whispered to the monk who waited tensely with the hook threatening his windpipe. He removed the hook and used the stone a second time. The second guard fell beside the first. Ton arose and stole quietly away.

*"Nobis quoque peccatoribus—" Petru was mumbling.*

He made it to his horse before the priest turned with a golden cup and a wafer, to face the assembly.

*"Ecce agnus Dei,"* came the faint mutter, *"ecce qui tollit—"*

The mutter choked off. As Ton climbed into the saddle, the priest stared at the prostrate bodies of the guards. He made no outcry, because of the ceremony's solemnity, but he was silent until some of the monks turned to follow his stare. Several of them stole away from the clearing, and the priest resumed the ritual.

Ton spurred the stallion and galloped away while they were running for the horses. He headed for the edge of the plateau to the east, and when the forest grew thinner, he cut north. There were enough trees to hide him from his pursuers, but he could see far enough ahead to avoid running into any gullies or impassible terrain.

SOUNDS of shouting came from behind him in the distance. He spurred ahead, giving no thought to conserving his horse. After a time, the monks fell back, meaning to let him tire his stallion while they

trotted along at a more modest clip. He galloped hard until the animal was sweat-soaked and slobbering. When at last it could no longer continue, he stopped to listen. The wind was from the south, but he heard no sounds of pursuit. They were at least two miles behind him.

He dismounted and walked across a patch of soft ground to a rocky gulley, leaving his footprints plainly visible. Then, standing on the rock, he mounted again. The gulley led up toward the denser forest, and the monks might assume that he had gone ahead on foot. He trotted back toward them, circling here and there, and letting the stallion graze occasionally, as a riderless horse might do. When he was five-hundred yards south of the gulley, he heard them coming. He reined up beside a thick clump of brush, dismounted, and crawled into the thicket to hide. The stallion was too weary to run away. It moved to a patch of grass and began grazing.

The monks came trotting toward him, following the northward trail of hoof-prints. When they were a stone's throw away, he heard them shout and come to a halt.

"The heathen's horse! Come on!"

"No, wait! See, the trail still leads north. The horse came back alone. He's up ahead."

"The stallion threw him."

"Or refused to run any farther, more likely. See how he droops."

"Our pig undoubtedly took to the woods. Come! Let's see where the trail ends!"

Passing a dozen yards from where he lay hidden, the monks galloped northward. He waited a moment, dragged himself out of the brush, and caught the stallion. Occasionally he caught a glimpse of them through the sparse trees; but they did not look back. He mounted behind a cedar and trotted slowly to the east. In the distance he could hear them clattering up the rocks in the gulley. If they wasted much time in searching for a place where his footprints left the gulley, he might have a chance to escape.

The trees became thinner as he rode east. After a few minutes, he stood at the edge of the wide treeless plateau. Twenty miles to the east, mountains arose. The country between was gently rolling. Glancing to the north and south, he saw a ribbon of road appearing here and there on the low slopes. One of the highways of the ancients, cracked and pitted, overgrown by creeping vines. He mounted a slight rise and it lay below him.

He followed the ancient road for half-an-hour, letting the horse rest occasionally, and listening for sounds of pursuit. There were none. Sometimes, when the road wound up a hill, he could see the mouth of the gulley in the distance, but the monks had evidently gone on back into the forest. He trotted quickly over the high places, and moved slowly in the ravines. Once the road forked and he chose the right branch. There was a square heap of rubble on a hilltop just ahead.

He stopped on the summit, and for a moment the monks were forgotten. Toward the northeast, the ribbon of weathered rock led into a sunswept ruin of broken stone. A five-mile expanse of crumbled masonry, shimmering mysteriously from rising currents of hot air. A mighty rock-garden where green clusters of brush and vines found root in the midst of desolation. The ancient city of which Petru had spoken. It left him breathless.

He rode over the crest of the ridge and stopped again to think. Escaping the monks was only a secondary goal. He had to avoid falling into their hands, lest they defeat his purpose — that of returning stealthily to the valley and . . .

. . . And what? Could he destroy the pylon? Could he break into the sealed vaults and tear the entrails out of the sky-monster's sub-unit? The whole tribe stood between him and the goal. He knew nothing of the pylon's inner workings, nor what guarded and repaired the mechanisms when things went wrong, what monster had removed the spear he had thrown. Without knowledge it was a fool's errand, a grandiose hope that could end only on the flogging post. Perhaps when they amputated his arms at the elbows, they would let him live, as a beggar among them.

Should he give it up then?

A faint hope was gnawing at his mind. Fra Petru had said there had been pylons upon the plain, before the great uprising destroyed them. An ancient city lay before him. Surely it had possessed a pylon. What would be left of it amid the ruins? Enough to lend him a few scraps of needed knowledge?

Revenge was blind. It told him to escape before the monks discovered his ruse, escape to the

northern border of the valley and become a night-riding scourge seeking blood to pay for Mara's blood. But sanity told him to wait, to proceed cautiously, in the hope of securing a greater goal.

Still uncertain, he rode on toward the city. There was a stone monument beside the road ahead, and he stopped to read its inscription:

BEWARE OF BETA RADIATION  
PROBABLY UNSAFE  
BEFORE 2850 AD  
Test with Geiger before entering  
Reclaim crews use suits  
Do not linger

What was its meaning? It was clearly a warning, but the piper could not understand all of the words. He said them over to himself several times. Then he remembered the legends of poisoned ground. The warning could be nothing else. He pondered the date-2850. The year had not yet arrived; Bel kept the calendars according to the old reckoning of time.

But he had lost faith in the legends. Some might be true, but none were completely trustworthy. He girded his doubts with skepticism and rode a hundred steps past the sign. He felt nothing.

The legend claimed that any man who trod upon the poisoned ground would be stricken with a plague of bloody warts and would surely lose his hair. Ton looked carefully at the skin of his arm, and gingerly felt his scalp. No such curse had descended upon him. Unquestionably the legend was a lie. He snorted scornfully and proceeded toward the unpeopled wilderness of rain-washed masonry and sleepy lizards.

A great silence hung over the wasteland of broken rock. He had ridden nearly half the distance toward the center of the city, hearing only the slow *clip clup clip* of the hooves as he picked his way through the ruins. Then a low wail, like the cry of an infant, came to his ears. He stopped quickly, feeling the faint prickling of his nape. The wail became a piercing shriek, knifing through the dead silence. It rose and fell in volume, ending in a low gurgle, to be followed by a staccato "*eh eh eh eh eh eh!*" too mindless to be laughter. Echoes floated back and forth across the ruins.

Ton clutched the cleaver which he had taken from the guard and stood up in the stirrups to stare about him.

Then he saw it — a small misshapen creature — peering at him from a low heap of rubble. It stood motionless, wearing a toothless grin. It was about three feet high, wrinkled with age or disease. Its skin was livid-white and hairless, festered with patches of sores. The head was bloated and twisted. Its gaze was the fearless gaze of idiocy.

The piper shuddered at the sudden realization that the creature was human, or nearly so. What devil had so twisted the flesh of Man?

Suddenly another one appeared from behind the rockpile. It was smaller than the first, and it was nursing a grotesque infant at its breast. It too stared dumbly at the horseman. Ton was too stricken to move, but at last he found voice.

"Can you tell me — where are the remains of Bel's pylon?"

At the sound of his voice, the male retreated a step, and the female ducked back behind the rock-pile. After a few moments, the male grinned slowly and shrieked, "Pylon pylon pylon pylon *eh eh eh eh eh eh!*"

Then with a catlike motion he pounced upon a lizard that darted across the rockpile. He displayed it triumphantly and emitted the staccato cry. Suddenly he sobered. Holding the lizard out like an offering, he advanced warily toward the rider, grunting questioningly. Ton shook his head. When the creature kept coming, he clucked at the stallion and moved ahead.

He glanced back as he rode. The man-thing stopped, looking puzzled. Then it seemed to forget the rider. It savagely tore off the lizard's head and began devouring the quivering carcass.

Ton shivered and stared ahead. The knowledge that the creature was a son of Man made his flesh crawl. Bel had done this! The terrible hand that had levelled the city had also molded human putty into the shape of the small idiot. Such was the mercy of the peace-keeper. Such was the punishment he meted out when men made war.

"Eh eh eh eh eh .. ." The cry was fading out behind him.

Ton remembered the monument's warning — "Do not linger" — but still he moved ahead. The poison was here. Its silent curse had descended upon the lizard-eater. But the poison seemed to work slowly, and the piper braved its threat in his search for the remains of the pylon. Nervously he goaded the stallion to a crisper trot.

He found it at last in a rubble-filled plaza near the center of the city. Its high spike had crumbled near the base, and the slender structure had scattered itself over a wide area. Bits of sheet metal lay crushed beneath the rocks. Other kinds of metal had become only rust-red stains on the pitted pavement. The shape of the foundation told him that indeed a pylon had once stood in the square. Tangles of brush grew around it, rooted in the cracks.

He stared at it from a distance before approaching. The city filled him with a bitter wistful pride, a ghostly pride out of the past. Here about him lay the once-mighty house of Man, in the day of his glory. He had only to look at the ruins, to know that Man had indeed built Bel the sky-lord, as Petru claimed. He who could build it could surely destroy it. But he had been wiser, in the old days — before he learned to ask Bel when to plant corn and where to fish and how to brace the roof of his hovel. Asking Bel, he got answers, but no wisdom. And, when one knew answers, why seek wisdom?

HE rode to the base of the foundation and looked down. He gasped, bounded out of the saddle, sat on the broken wall and looked down again. There had been a room beneath the tower, a room evidently without an entrance except to the sealed vaults. Now it was heaped high with broken slabs of rock and with twisted girders that fell from overhead. But the sunlight penetrated the wreckage in places and he could see bits of broken machinery — and the top of a doorway to another room.

Most of the pylon had fallen sideways, and the subterranean vault was not completely blocked. Holding his breath, he let himself down atop the rubble-heap, then slid down it toward the top of the stone-filled doorway. There was a small opening left, but he could see nothing because of the darkness beyond. He began clearing the stones away with his hands. A shaft of sunlight penetrated the enlarged opening, and he could see that beyond the door the rubble-heap sloped away and exposed a clear patch of floor. It was covered with a foot of water that had collected from past rains.

Ton worked hurriedly until the hole was large enough to admit his body. Then he slipped through it into the gloom. He could see the faint outlines of rust-decayed machinery as he came down the rock-slide and stood in the thigh deep water. There was still another room beyond this one. He waded through the doorway into deeper darkness. The walls were covered with switching panels and the gray eyes of many dials.

Suddenly he stopped to stare. There was a faint glow coming from across the room. Something was silhouetted against it — the faint shadow — *of a man!* He seized his cleaver and backed away.

"Who are you?" he barked, and his voice reverberated in the vaults.

There was a creaking sound. The glow of light crept along the panel, then turned toward him. The man had turned his head, and the violet glow was coming from his eyes!

Then Ton knew that it was not a man at all, but the monster who lived in the sealed vaults. His spine crawled as he backed toward the rockslide, clutching the fighting hook in one hand and the cleaver in the other. Suddenly the demon spoke in a low metallic croak, like Bel's but lower.

"Three thousand and seventeenth repetition: Robot George Eighty-Six requests human assistance in repair of damaged pylon George Eighty-Six. Repair task exceeds standard capabilities of pylon repair-robot. Emergency. Emergency. Please acknowledge request."

Ton stopped. The creature repeated the request three times. He began to understand its significance. As his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, he saw that the being was made of metal. It sat on a small metal stool, and it had been facing one of the panels. The implication of the request was almost

ludicrous.

"How long have you been sitting there?" he asked it, still keeping a safe distance.

The robot clicked thoughtfully for a few moments, then said, "Answer: five hundred and twenty years, forty-five days, sixteen-point-two hours."

Since the destruction of the pylon! Ton quickly lost his fear. He laughed quietly. Any creature *that* unimaginative could scarcely offer much of a threat.

"Are you alive, or are you a part of Bel?" he asked.

The robot clicked again. "Meaningless alternative. Rephrase."

"Are you alive?"

The creature clicked forlornly and it became evident that it didn't intend to stop.

"Can't you answer?"

There was a grunt of static, then something that sounded like: "Two query meanibungle unreply wish motive. Rephrase."

"Are you a part of Bel?"

"Unanswerable query. Rephrase."

TON gave up. Either the robot couldn't answer, wouldn't answer or had to be asked in a special way. But as he stared at the glowing eyes he realized that here was the answer to his search for the secret of the vaults. Here was the creature who repaired the pylons. If then were any way to destroy a pylon without great weapons, this being would know. But would it reveal such knowledge? He would have to proceed cautiously.

"Who do you serve?" he asked "Man or Bel?"

Again the slow clicking. "Meaningless query. Meaningless alternative."

"Why is it meaningless?" the piper snapped.

"Answer: confusion of categories. Robot-George-Eighty-Six - Concept, labelled 'T', is memorized in 'mechanical-equipment' category. Service, concept is memorized in 'anthropovocabulary' category. Robot 'T' cannot act as subject for verb 'to serve'."

Vaguely Ton began to understand. The creature was a machine, nothing more. "What is your function then?" he tried.

"To effect necessary repairs within the cybernetic circuits and microwave transceiving equipment of Informator Pylon Number George Eighty Six," droned the robot.

Still Ton did not have the answer he wanted. "Why do you perform this function?"

There was a brief clicking, then: "Robot 'T' am motivated by pleasure-pain principles, based on relationship: operating-efficiency equals pleasure; suspended operation equals pain." Another click. "Robot requests human assistance in repair of pylon George Eighty-Six . . ."

It repeated the plea three times again. Ton wondered how a creature of metal could feel pleasure or pain. How could aught but warm flesh experience them? For that matter, how could Bel be pleased or displeased? *Displease?* This creature said pain. He frowned suddenly and advanced a step toward the robot.

"Tell me!" he demanded. "*Can Bel be made to feel pain?*"

The clicking began again, and lasted for a time. Ton slumped sadly fearing that another "meaningless" was inevitable. Then the reply:

"Answer: affirmative, bipossible."

"*How?*" He advanced another step waiting tensely.

"Alternative solutions: a pain response may be achieved by offering a sufficiently discordant aesthetic stimulus; or, a pain response may be achieved directly by psyelectric induction from a human subject who is experiencing pain."

Ton wanted to say "meaningless" to the incomprehensible answers. How could he ever understand such words? Man indeed had fallen far. The ancients had taught a little of their vast knowledge to this machine, and now the machine was wiser than the sons of the ancients. Still, he tried again: "Explain how one would go about causing pain to Bel, directly."

The robot's head turned slowly to the left. The glow of its eyes fell upon an object that lay on a workbench. Ton recognized it quickly. It was a helmet from the pylon's interrogator unit! He shivered at the memory of his encounter with the device on the night of his banishment.

The robot began croaking facts from its memory. "By use of the psyelectric inductor, a human subject's experiences may be induced into the circuits of the satellite units. In this way, the unit's behavior was originally conditioned by reward and punishment experiences. Units were rewarded for satisfactory performance by applying pleasureable stimuli to human subjects . . ."

AS Ton listened, he began to grasp something of the robot's meaning. In short: Bel had been trained as a child was trained! By reward and punishment, through the medium of a man who sat in the interrogation unit and allowed himself to be hurt or pleased, depending upon Bel's performance in the learning-tasks. And through the minds of the subjects, Bel learned to derive pleasure from the things that gave men pleasure — music, art, dancing—whatever could be learned through the interrogation unit and later experienced through the eyes and ears of the pylon. But there was always the danger of pain becoming pleasant through hedonic contrast, as happened the night of Mara's death.

"Tell me, can the interrogation units still be used to give pain?"

"Affirmative. The subject should be unconscious. The painful stimulus should be applied by another party."

Ton sat down upon the rubble-heap to think. The ghost of a plan was glimmering in his mind. But he found it difficult to reason it out; suddenly he realized that he was feeling ill. His skin had been itching continually since he had entered the vaults, and now it felt dry, burning —as if exposed too long to the hot sun. Effects of the lingering poison?

The idea frightened him, and he thought of the lizard-eater again. He started up the rubble-heap, then paused, looking back at the glowing eyes. Immediately the robot repeated his plea for assistance in the repair of the pylon.

"Come with me, if you can walk," the piper ventured. "The pylon cannot be repaired."

"If that is true, then my function is ended," rasped the machine. "Operating query: may I turn myself off?"

"No, come with me."

"Operating query: is leaving the pylon not a breach of efficient function?"

"No, come with me."

Slowly the repair robot creaked to its feet, and shuffled mechanically after its new master. Man and machine went out into the sunlight together. Dustclouds wisped along a ridge to the southwest. The monks had come. And there was a single horseman galloping through the outskirts of the city. Ton mounted and stared at the distant figure. It was Vigge the Boar, son of Cron. He paused a moment, then rode slowly toward his adversary, with the robot shuffling behind him.

AS the riders came within five-hundred yards of each other, Vigge reined up to stare at the robot that followed his enemy. Ton kept coming at an easy jog. He knew he was riding into possible death, if Vigge were not a fool. The piper was no burly fighter, and in a hand to hand duel, the boar could cut him down easily. He gambled that Vigge was a fool. Two hundred paces away, he stopped and spoke to the robot.

"Continue walking straight ahead."

Purring quietly, the gleaming metal figure strode slowly amid the rubble toward the frozen Vigge.

"*Here is your new king, Vigge!*" the piper shouted. "*A Bel that walks!*"

The son of Cron did nothing. Was he indeed a fool? Or would he come and fight? Wise men had built the Lord Bel as a tool; fools had become the tools of the tool. The ancients had said, "One man is as good as another." It was their greatest mistake, for it led to: "Folly is as good as wisdom." Ton had no hope but to turn Man's folly against Bel. There was too little wisdom left in the world to use it as a weapon.

"*Bow to your new king, Vigge!*"

The boar's bearded face had gone white in the sunlight as he watched the robot's calm approach. He reined his horse sideways in the street. His hand snaked toward a quiver, and in an instant he had fitted an arrow to his bow. Ton waited motionlessly, realizing that the arrow might be directed toward him. If Vigge were not a fool ...

*Cling . . .!*

The steel-tipped shaft struck the robot's body and shattered. The robot continued its humorless march. *"Operating query: is there a purpose in this projectile?"*

Vigge launched another arrow, but it flew wide. The robot caught it in midair with quick tweezerlike fingers and paused to inspect it. Vigge howled and bolted away, ducking low over the neck of the horse.

"Tell the tribe I am returning!" Ton thundered after him. "Tell them I bring this walking Bel to be their king!"

Vigge continued his flight without looking back.

"Operating query: why does the man run?"

"Because fools have inherited the earth," Ton told him.

They continued on toward the ridge where the monks waited, fearful of the poisoned earth of the city. The piper hoped fervently that Vigge would indeed return to the valley with a wild tale of the metal monster, confusing and frightening the tribe. But two monks saw the fleeing Boar and set out in hot pursuit. They vanished over a hill to the northwest.

He stopped just beyond crossbow range of the hilltop and spoke again to the robot. "If you will obey me, you will have a pylon again."

The creature hesitated, clicking over his memories. Then: "Operating suggestion: supervised-control switch is located beneath grasping mechanism."

The piper noticed the switch but hesitated. "What does it do?"

"It removes self-inhibiting bias-controls. It suppresses ethical conditioning."

Nervously, he flicked the switch. "Can you attack a human being?"

"Supervised-robot relies upon supervisor for ethical judgment. Query: who is my supervisor?"

"I'll do," the piper grunted. "Now go on toward those horsemen. Tell them what you told me about causing pain to Bel. Then come back. If they try to capture you, resist."

The robot stalked toward the hill and up it. Ton waited, expecting the monks to flee as Vigge had done. They mounted their horses and held crossbows ready. He saw two of them cross themselves. But then the robot stopped and he heard the distant intonation of the mechanical voice.

Half an hour later, a shout floated to him from the hill. "Come out of the city, piper!"

"You agree to a truce?" he bellowed in reply.

"We promise nothing! Come out! Stay longer and you die of the poison."

Already he felt weak and dizzy. Slowly he rode forward, grumbling to himself. The tight-strained steel of crossbows threatened him with their deadly bolts as he drew near. The monks' faces were dispassionate masks that watched him calmly.

"Are you ready to be our prisoner now, piper?" a voice barked. It was the short and churrky Andru.

Ton reined up a few feet away, and the monks moved to encircle him. The robot stood clicking in wait for a command.

"If they behave hostilely, kill them," he said quietly.

WHETHER or not the robot as capable of killing, he did not know, but the warning had its effect. The monks hesitated nervously, casting wary glances at the creature of steel. He wasted no time in taking advantage of their indecision.

"I am not your prisoner. Let me make that clear."

Andru flourished his weapon. "This says you are."

Ton eyed the sharp tip of the crossbow bolt coldly. "Fire it at the robot," he offered.

Andru swung around in the saddle and hesitated.

"Catch the missile when it comes, George Eighty-Six."

Andru snorted and let fly with a sharp twang. The robot brought back the bolt and handed it to the

startled monk.

"I am not your prisoner." There was a hushed moment on the hilltop. Then the piper said, "I am going to the valley before the next Belrise, to fight. I welcome any who would come with me. But if you are cowards, stay behind."

Andru straightened in the saddle and frowned angrily. "We forbid you to go from the plateau. We cannot allow Bel to learn of our . . ."

"Plan? *Fool!* You have no plan. Only a distant daydream. I will act now." He moved out of the circle, but stopped again. The monks held the bows ready to cut him down, and Andru's mouth was open to bark the command. He waited.

"I advise you to go no farther," the monk warned.

"Will you listen to my plan?"

Andru smirked. "Why not? But it will gain you nothing."

Ton came back and they sat in a circle on the ground, speaking of the valley and the pylon, and frequently questioning the robot, who seemed to care nothing for the welfare of the total Bel, but who illogically wanted a pylon to keep, whether or not there be a Bel to give it purpose. The piper watched Andru's face as they talked. The cubby monk said little, nor did his expression change save for an occasional narrowing of the eyes or shake of the head. But his thick hands moved with clumsy nervousness and impatience. Once he idly sketched a map of the valley in the sand with a twig, locating the river and the pylon and the community of tribe George-Eighty.

When Ton finished speaking, there was a moment of silence. Several of the monks shook their heads, and his heart sank. But Andru was still absorbed in his map, seemingly only half-aware that the piper was waiting for an answer. With the twig, he touched the headwaters of the river, where it emptied out of a lake in the foothills. He spoke musingly.

"An army could float down the river at night, perhaps without arousing any warning until they were in the midst of the camp."

"Nay!" said another. "The eyes of Bel can see in darkness!"

"Fool!" Andru grunted. "Haven't you listened? Bel will not see."

"You'll help then!" Ton gasped.

The monk looked startled, and seemed to come awake. Then he shrugged and looked uncomfortable. "I can make no such decisions. It is up to the abbot. And I can tell you the abbot will say no."

"But *why*? Isn't the plan good?"

"It is — risky — doubtful." He looked apologetic. "I like it, personally. But long ago, our course of action was decided upon. We must wait, preserving our small slice of civilization for the future. When Bel wears out, or exhausts his power units, we will act. Our prophets predict a thousand years — from the time Bel was first built. Now we have only a few generations to wait."

"Why wait, if my plan is good?"

"Because — if your plan failed, our order would be destroyed. And there would be no hope at all for the future."

Ton stood up angrily. "Are *you* all that separates Man from beast? No hope? Not even in the very fact of Man's continued existence? Granted the plan might fail! And that your order would be destroyed. Are you so indispensable? Fools! I'm going alone!"

He mounted the stallion and started away from the circle at a slow walk, with the robot moving behind. He kept stiffly erect, waiting for the crossbow bolt to find a home in his back. The monks came restlessly to their feet and spoke among themselves in low voices, but none moved to stop him. Suddenly Andru called out, and he turned to look back.

"We have an extra pack-donkey, piper."

"So?"

The monk grinned. "Your mechanical friend will wear out his joints a'walking."

Ten accepted the offer with embarrassed gratitude. But there was something ludicrous in the sight of Repair-Robot George Eighty-Six sitting stiffly astride the small sad animal. As they started away, Andru



murmured, "And their king came riding upon an ass's colt." But no one laughed.

They set out for a long ride, in the direction in which Vigge the Boar had disappeared, but at the edge of the forest they turned northward.

It was three days' ride to the lake where several streams converged to form Keeper Jon's River, as the valley's waterway was called. When he approached the area, Ton moved cautiously, for hunters and fishermen sometimes ventured up-valley to wander about its banks. And, as long as he could see the pylon in the distance, there was the danger of the pylon's seeing *him*. Its eyes could look all about the valley, and see many things at once.

The Bel-satellite had sunk however. For nearly thirty hours, the pylon would be inoperative, for the voice of the moon needed a clear pathway between itself and the tower before it could establish contact. He spent the afternoon building a light raft of fallen logs. Then, at sundown, he spoke to the robot. "Ride alone into the valley. Go to the pylon and enter the vaults. Leave them open, and wait for me to come. People will see you, and probably run away. But if they speak to you, say nothing. If they question you, tell them you're an emissary of Bel."

"Impossible request. 'Am designed to give correct answers to queries, and to obey requests where possible." Ton slumped in disgust. "If you had a tongue I'd cut it out! You'll ruin everything if you talk to the keeper."

The robot clicked for a moment. "Suggest analogous operation in lieu of tongue removal."

He laughed grimly. "What are you talking about?"

"Suggest you disconnect my speech-centers."

"You don't care?"

"Meaningless query. Rephrase."

"Of course. A machine couldn't care. But what about your hearing? If someone orders you to stop, will you stop?"

"Negative. Disconnected speech-centers fail to interpret auditory sensations."

Ton stood over him for a moment, staring down at the spherical skull plate. "Can you loosen it?"

Without hesitation, the robot screwed off the top of his head, revealing a tangled maze of hairlike wires that appeared to have been wadded irreverently together and dipped in salt, for the entire mass was impregnated with millions of tiny crystals. Looking closely, he could see that each wire was discontinuous at the crystals, and the crystals were junction-points for several wires. "How was it made?" he asked in awe.

"The neural fibers are first assembled in the form of a plane web," the robot explained. "The web is then rolled on a drum coated with mild adhesive. Then the fibers are cut at each junction point, and the drum is chilled to 30 degrees Absolute. While chilled, the crystals are deposited at the broken junctions. Warming it sets up internal stresses in the crystals causing their synapse-like behavior. The web is then sprayed with a solvent to remove the adhesive, sprayed with an insulating varnish, removed from the drum and stretched on a rack. Several hundred plane-webs are connected into a cubic web. The cubic mesh is then bundled randomly into the metal case, connected to the sensory circuits, and sent to the master-memory units for conditioning."

Ton shook his head. "Just skip it. I shouldn't have asked. How do disconnect the speech center?"

The robot told him, but in the end, performed the operation for himself. Ton reset the switch to ask a sudden question. "Would you mind if I destroyed you?"

The robot looked up slowly. "Meaningless query. Rephrase."

"Why is it meaningless?"

"I am incapable of affective reactions except in terms of pylon-efficiency."

"You would feel nothing if I destroyed you?"

"I would cease to feel."

Ton shook his head. Somehow he could not get across the 'fear of death' idea.

"If I told you to destroy yourself, would you do it?"

"Affirmative, provided present supervisory status is in effect."

"And if it weren't?"

"Then I would be capable of refusing if it were in the best interests of efficient pylon operation."

TON snapped off the speech circuits again with a thoughtful click, and waved the robot on his way. The last rays of twilight were fading as George Eighty-Six rode slowly along the shore-trail toward the lake's outlet, toward the valley and toward the pylon. He had spent many hours in briefing the robot on what was to be done when he arrived at the pylon, but a thousand things could go wrong.

Worst of all, he knew nothing of the science behind Bel's workings. Nor could he predict the robot's reactions to certain situations. He could only try to think of George Eighty-Six as a human being who was without emotion, except in terms of a vocation. But the analogy was bad and he knew it. The robot was only a machine; and not understanding the machine's workings, Ton could only personify. He knew that he could expect obedience only when his commands were in keeping with the mechanical principles involved in the robot's structure.

And if the robot failed to do as he was told when he arrived at the pylon, then Ton would, in a few hours, be riding into certain death.

He watched in the direction of the valley, where a few fires gleamed about the vicinity of the pylon. The tribe was attending to the usual evening chores — milking goats, hovering over the cookpots, resting from the day's labor. How would they react when a gleaming creature of steel with glowing eyes came riding silently through their midst? The widow and the sons of Keeper Cron lived in their quarters at the pylon's base. Vigge, if he had returned, would recognize the robot. He had fled before, but how would he behave at home? If he attacked, George Eighty-Six would undoubtedly let himself be destroyed.

Vigge had undoubtedly been put in the interrogation unit, if he had returned—unless Bel had never known of his departure. If he had been interrogated, Bel would know everything that Vigge had seen and done upon the plateau, including the episode in the city, when the Boar had turned tail before the metal apparition. And, if the people inquired, Bel would have explained the nature of the robot Vigge had seen. But would the explanation make George Eighty-Six's appearance any the less terrifying? It would simply tend to confirm the legend of the demon who lurked in the pylon's vaults. The demon's sudden appearance should still cause plenty of consternation.

When George Eighty-Six had had time to reach the pylon, Ton cut loose the raft and poled along the shoreline toward the stretch of rapids which would carry him swiftly down-river toward the distant pylon. He could see only dimly in the faint light of a crescent moon. The swift waters were threateningly black. The valley waited quietly ahead of him.

It had promised to take his arms if he returned. He hoped, by using the river, to escape detection until he was in the midst of the village. He hoped that the tribe's attention would be focused upon the robot that had appeared amongst them.

He lay stretched flat on the rushing raft, covering himself with branches so that from the bank, the crude craft would appear to be a tangle of drift, floating down from the hills. Twice he heard horsemen galloping along the river-trail — either running away from the robot, or going to tell the outskirts of the news. The swift current bore him rapidly down to where the river widened, then more slowly. He passed amid the hovels of fishermen, and past bright areas ablaze with bonfires. Breathing renewed hate, he watched the slender spike of the pylon drift closer on his left. Why hadn't George Eighty-Six given him the signal that all was well?

Then while he waited, it came. The floodlights, normally turned off while Bel was below the horizon, flashed to full brilliance — and died again. A chaotic babble of excited voices came to his ears. During the brief flash of light, he saw that only a few men were brave enough to venture onto the stone ramp around the base of the tower. The crowds hung back to stare from the shadows. A few torches wandered about the area.

THE piper slipped silently into the water and swam to shore. On the bank, he paused to smear his face and arms with black mud, to prevent immediate recognition. It was dark, and the crowds were excited; he hoped they would pay no attention to him as he slipped toward the south side of the pylon,

where lay the vaults.

He trotted quickly behind a row of huts, scurried across an open space, galloped around a tight group of women who were chattering excitedly, and reached the edge of the ramp.

"Ho there!" called a gruff voice. "Go no closer. Keeper Walin forbids it." The man was approaching with a torch.

Ton broke into a dead run toward the vault-entrance. The man bellowed angrily. An arrow skittered across the stones, narrowly missing the piper's flank. Ducking and dodging, he made it to the entrance. The robot had left it open, as instructed. As he slipped into the blackness, he paused to emit a piercing scream, hoping to convince the guards that it was unsafe to follow him. But had he been recognized? With his mud-daubed face, and the screening darkness, recognition was doubtful. He slammed the great steel door and tried to peer about in the gloom. He saw the robot's eyes, and heard the approaching footsteps. But was it George Eighty-Six -- or the robot which tended *this* pylon. He waited tensely.

Then the lights came on and the robot began unscrewing his skull plate. He renewed the speech-circuits and waited for instructions. Ton stared about nervously. "Where's the other robot?"

"I turned it off, as supervisor instructed," croaked George Eighty-Six.

"Wasn't there a fight?"

"Meaningless query. Repair robot has no self-preserving desires, except for sake of efficient pylon operation."

Ton was suddenly glad that George Eighty-Six was still under supervision. If the switch was thrown to Auto, the robot would probably throw him out to the wolf-pack and take over the pylon. On "supervise," he could not help obeying.

The piper barked orders quickly.

"Prepare the pylon as if Bel were about to speak. Bel will speak with your voice. You will say what I tell you to say. And get the other robot back into supervised operation."

OUTSIDE on the ramp, the guards were still busily warning the curious to stay back from the base of the pylon, lest they too follow the way of the one who had screamed so hideously from the mouth of the vaults. But when the eyes of Bel came alight, and when the floodlights flickered on, the guards ceased to have trouble with the crowd. The people backed away in fright; for who had ever heard Bel speak when the small moon was below the horizon.

"BLAH-000-BAH!" came the summons, thundering from the loudspeakers below the empty balcony.

"Keeper Walin!" a guard called. "Where is Keeper Walin?"

Soon the heir of Cron appeared, and strode nervously across the ramp. He looked up, then stopped, frozen in place. For the balcony was no longer empty. A gleaming creature of steel stood there, impassively looking out over the heads of the people. Somewhere a woman screamed, and the sound of fleeing footsteps pattered hysterically in the night. But many remained, keeping a safe distance.

"blah-000-bah!" came a faint echo from the hills.

*"Keeper Walin will come to the balcony,"* rasped the loudspeaker

Walin, on the ramp below, hesitated. "Who is speaking?" he quavered.

*"It is I, Bel, speaking through my son who stands before you. Come."*

"How can you speak, when—"

"COME!"

Walin advanced on unsure legs. He disappeared into the stairway entrance, and a minute later, slipped onto the balcony to stand warily at a safe distance from the gaunt, motionless robot.

"What is your wish, O Bel?" asked the frightened keeper.

*"You are guilty of war-crimes,"* the loudspeaker charged bluntly.

*"I shall scourge the valley with fire, and poison it for a thousand years. Three of your people invaded the lands of tribe George Seventy-Eight and killed four people."*

The crowd moaned, and Walin sputtered. This was apparently news to everyone.

"If this is true, then let the criminals be punished," pleaded Walin. "But do not destroy us all."

*"All are guilty, for not preventing such action. All will die! The scourge will pass over the valley at tomorrow's nightfall. The land will be laid waste as far as the hills."*

Suddenly the lights went out. The voice was gone. The interview was at an end. A sobbing wail went up from the town. The keeper turned to bolt from the balcony, but the robot caught him with an almost leisurely gesture, shouldered him, and bore him away toward the vaults. Walin was screaming with real fervor.

Supervised Repair-Robot George Eighty, whose speech centers were dead, brought the struggling keeper into the vaults as ordered, and held him securely before the grinning eyes of Ton, and the emotionless eyes of George Eighty-Six, who had spoken through the loudspeakers at the piper's bidding. When Walin saw the identity of his captor, he whitened, gagged, and then, realizing in part what had transpired, he began choking out sputters of cursing and gasping threats.

Ton sat grinning on the stool before a control panel and watched the ex-keeper silently until he exhausted his supply of invective. Then he asked, "Where's your brother, Vigge?"

"He's dead! As you'll be soon, piper. He was interrogated when he returned. He died from a flogging. Bel said he killed two men on the plateau. I had hoped one of them was you."

"Dead!" Ton was startled. Vigge the boar had been a part of his plan. Vigge the torturer, who flayed his game alive, would have been a fitting candidate for the interrogation chamber when the time came to offer Bel a pain stimulus through a human subject. Now Walin would have to do. But he didn't like the idea so well. Walin was indeed an enemy, but he had committed no crime, other than the universal crime of stupidity. The piper's stomach knotted at the thought of telling one of the robots to torture him to death in the interrogation chair.

He spoke to George Eighty-Six. "Take him down to the lower chambers of the vaults and tie him securely. We'll need him later."

THE robot calmly dragged the screaming, kicking Walin away. But the piper was not so certain that he could bring himself to sacrifice an innocent man. Who else was available? No one. The crowds were already fleeing toward the hills, and the village *was* becoming deserted, as he had expected. The threat of destruction was sending them into a panicked exodus. They had no way of investigating the false charge that three men had invaded sector seventy-eight. Every man would suspect his neighbor, but unless they met someone from Tribe Seventy-Eight who could deny the charge, they would believe it.

One thing was certain: shortly after Bel arose again, the valley would indeed be scourged. Ton hoped that the people could escape to the plateau before it happened, but he himself would have to remain. It wouldn't be pleasant, hanging back to die alone. Again he recalled Mara's torn body lying on the pavement just outside, and he set his course by that memory.

Looking about at the sleeping, incomprehensible machinery that helped rule the race of Man since the passing of his glory, he felt small and weak and uncertain. As he prepared to doze in wait for dawn within the security of the vault, he wished for his pipes that he might reassure himself with their plaintive pleading. For he suddenly realized what he was going to have to do, since Vigge was dead, and he longed not to think about it until the time came. Four robot eyes stared fixedly in the darkness while their temporary supervisor slept. They seemed to know nothing of the true meaning of what was happening, nor to care—so long as they were under supervised operation. But if a switch clicked to "Auto," their tower-preserving motivation would step to the fore, and Ton would become an enemy. After a sleepless period, he arose, found a bit of wire, and tied two toggle-switches firmly and permanently in "supervise" position. Then he slept more securely.

Daybreak brought silence. The sun crept up in the east to look upon a valley that had become unpeopled during the night. Ton left the vaults to survey the deserted village from the balcony. Here and there an old man or a cripple lingered still, loath to leave the place of their birth. But they were going—all of them. By seizing Walin, he had deprived them of a leader who could possibly have prevented the hysterical flight toward the plateau. He smiled faintly as he watched a distant dust-streamer from beyond the river. A party of horsemen was fleeing toward the forests, toward the place where he had first set out for the plateau the grim night of Mara's death.

"May the monks teach them new ways," he murmured, after the floating streamer of dust.

But the pylon had to be destroyed, lest they return. And Ton the piper, who had no access to the weapons of the ancients, could not destroy the great structure of steel and stone to the extent that it could not be used again. What he and the robots could tear down, the robots alone could easily repair. He must force the Lord Bel to destroy his own pylon. But in doing so, Ton himself would perish with it — for he would be the bait.

He shrugged away a slight shiver and went back to the vaults. He spent the rest of the day watching the robots obey his order — "Tear away Bel's eyes and ears so that he may not see the people are gone. Make the pylon blind and deaf, and muffle its voice to a whisper. Leave an ear within the vaults so that I can speak to him." The machines obeyed without protest, quietly tearing loose wires and reconnecting them, shutting down power units, and setting up new equipment in the vaults.

While they worked, Ton went out into the deserted village and brought back food. He loosened Walin's bonds and let him stretch his limbs. He watched him eat in silence, and thought, "How easy it would be to let him die in my stead."

Walin wore a surly sneer as he finished eating. "What do you plan to do next, piper?" he growled.

Ton hesitated. "Release you, as soon as I'm certain you can't catch up with the others."

The keeper carefully suppressed any surprise he might have felt. "And then?"

"See that the promise to destroy the valley is made good."

Walin laughed with disbelief. "Then I invite you to stay with me while it's destroyed," Ton said grimly. "Tell me, do you feel nothing but reverence for Bel after all that has happened? You have seen Bel's robots serving me. You have heard Bel's voice used in my cause. You still call him a god?"

Walin set his mouth mockingly and said nothing. Ton saw the sarcasm in his eyes and suddenly realized that in all probability, the Keeper Family had always known the true nature of Bel. He stalked out in disgust, and sent a robot back to escort Walin from the vaults and release him. The keeper set out quickly toward the river. Ton waited for the awakening of the pylon.

THE bloody countenance of the sun mopped the western sky with red as it dragged itself below the hills. The chill wind of evening swept down the valley, and the first erratic clickings began in the vaults. The circuits were coming alive as the first feeble flickers of Bel's approach reached the pylon.

The time had come. The valley was left deserted by the exodus. The lonely piper stood alone to face the wrath of the god his fathers had built. He had made both robots inoperative, lest Bel be able to command them. They lay lifeless on the floor of the vaults.

Suddenly, the vaults came alive with eerie glow. The banks of tubes fluttered into operation. Outside, the small satellite was clear of the horizon. Bel was with him.

There was no summons this time. Nothing but, the clicking of relays. An eye, set in the ceiling, turned slowly to look about the room, paused briefly on the robots, and stopped to stare fixedly at the piper who stood before the microphone, waiting.

"Operating query," whispered the small speaker. "Why have the sensory circuits been disconnected? Who is responsible?"

"You are responsible. You are guilty, Bel. You will be punished." The sky-monster was incapable of anger. It seemed to be analyzing the situation quietly.

"Operating query: Logic circuits infer the probability that you have caused the tribe to leave the valley. Is this correct?"

Ton nodded slowly toward the glowing eye. "They have gone. We are alone."

"Advise that you abandon your intentions and submit to punishment. Any sabotage against the keeper of the peace is warcrime. Reflexive response to warcrime is release of nuclear weapons from satellite station."

Ton turned away and walked to the interrogation chamber. The chair and the helmet were waiting. The robots had made the necessary changes. A light had been placed so that it would focus a white-hot point of pain upon the subject's chest. He sat stiffly in the chair and pulled the helmet down over his head. The light flashed on, and he howled. A microphonic-controlled switch cut it off again, waited five

seconds, and flashed it again.

Dizziness came over him. The periods of pain and of recovery seemed to grow longer. His vision faded, and he could no longer hear himself scream. A distant point in a gray void rushed toward him and opened out into a clear space.

He looked around. Someone was moaning in pain. Then he saw the man — writhing to escape a white-hot gnat that stabbed him. The man — it was an old friend! He hurried forward and knelt to comfort him. The man looked up. "Please," he gasped. "What have I done to you? Make it stop!"

Ton realized with horror that he himself was causing the man's pain, and that he had the power to make it cease. Quickly he moved to brush the gnat away, then paused.

*This has happened before! I must not be fooled!*

"Please . . ."

Ton stood up and closed his eyes. More than anything else, he wished to help the man — to ease his pain.

He gritted his teeth and refused to look at him.

"Destroy yourself," he told the sufferer.

"No, no! Make it stop!" The man was twisting and howling each time the point of light stabbed at him.

"What is your name?"

"I am — the Keeper of the Peace! Make it — stop!"

"Destroy yourself." Ton opened his eyes and kicked the sufferer in the face.

The gray void pulsed with fear. "Destroy yourself! It will never stop!" the piper roared.

Groaning, the man sat up. His eyes were the eyes of Bel. His face was a face of granite and steel. His mouth croaked metallic sounds.

"I will wait then," he said. \*We will see who can live the longest. Look at your chest."

Ton looked, and grew sick. There was a black spot, charred and blistered. He felt nothing, but the wound was there—growing steadily worse. Each time the white point bit at his adversary, the burn grew deeper upon Ton's chest, but it, was not really harming the other man. One received the wound, the other felt its pain.

"I'll kill you myself," the piper roared. He launched himself upon the other and began digging his fingers into the throat. With horror, he realized that his own breathing had ceased—but it was the stranger who felt the choking.

For a long time they fought. The man was screaming wildly, and his eyes were glazed with pain. For Ton, the void was growing grayer. The stranger seemed to be slipping through his fingers. The reality of his own person was fading. With a last desperate effort, he gouged his fingers into the stranger's eyes and tore.

There was a last shriek. Then the stranger ceased to be a man. He contracted slowly into a small orange ball. The piper, his vision dimmed, drew slowly away to watch.

The orange ball grew larger. It seemed to be spinning slowly in a dark heaven. A crack appeared in its surface. Blue-white fire showed through the crack. The fire pushed its way forth slowly. It was a leisurely explosion—a sphere opening slowly into a terrible flower of fire. And then Ton ceased to see it.

He saw only the light that had seared his chest, winking on and off. He arched his back and slumped as far as he could to one side. The light found a new spot to burn. He could not turn it off, but at last he tore his arms free of the clamps that bound them to the chair. Some of the flesh stayed with the clamps. He slumped to the floor in a puddle of blackness. He had won. Bel was dead. And Man was free.

A scarred and wizened piper sat upon the wall of the monastery grounds, bleating a melody that leaped among the crags and carried itself high on the wind. He was playing for his own amusement, but his audience was a group of men who were laying stone for the new city that was growing up around the monastery. As darkness approached, the pipes emitted a discordant, mocking bleat.

The workmen straightened, looked up curiously at the piper, then followed his eyes to the east, where a few flecks of debris were appearing over the horizon. A chubby workman grinned, and turned to bow.

"How are you pleased, O piper?"

The pipes skirled irreverently, but as he looked at the growing city of Man, he was pleased plus three. And proud.

THE END

*Here's the very first s-f story by the Hugo-winning author of A Canticle for Leibowitz and "Six and Ten Are Johnny." —The Martians invade Earth—in a huge dome that H-bombs can't dent—plunk down in the desert for ten years, vivisect a few curiosity-seekers, then make one mistake. They let Barney Willis—or what was Barney Willis—go back to his bride!*

### SECRET OF THE DEATH DOME WALTER M. MILLER, JR.

THE martians came in a huge dome from out of the sky and sat it down in the desert, to watch. Earth was their zoo, and their dome an impregnable cage. So it seemed at first. Then it was whispered in the halls of Man that Earth was the cage, and the dome was the Outside. For Man had thrown himself in vain fury against the dome's outer surface, while the dome-men yawned and watched from their unassailable fortress.

Their mission was obscure. They did not attack. Neither did they offer friendship. For ten years thereafter Earth was like a house of glass. Man lived in it uneasily, but without change. Boys who were eleven had grown to adulthood with the dome as a constant, ominous shadow. They were tired of hearing about it. They got married and had children. Martians? So what?

A state of war existed in theory. The Martians had behaved in a manner that justified war. They seized curiosity-seekers and used them as specimens. The dome was the target of the most magnificent of Earth weapons. Its resistance was passive. It sat unharmed. Martian hostility was evidently only curiosity. And when H-bombs exploded harmlessly, Earthmen blushed and ceased the attacks to save themselves embarrassment. For want of a better course, they finally decided to ignore the dome.

But the military maintained an alert. Towns grew up at a safe distance from the dome to house scientific investigators and the men who patrolled the neighboring desert. They had jobs to do—routine jobs with government salaries.

Then Barney Willis came in out of the desert and died. Another specimen for the Martians. He died at the edge of town. Masterson, the blacksmith, saw him pitch off his horse and lie in the road. He saw the uniform of the special patrol—blue and gray—fluttering in the hot wind off the desert. He went out and felt his wrist: then he called the colonel.

The colonel sent Jerry Harrison to see about it. Jerry was just a sergeant, but there wasn't any need for brass. Death is for privates. And Barney's death was his wife's tough luck, but it was nothing new. Of course, the colonel didn't stop to think that Barney was Jerry's best friend—so good a friend that they were still friends after Barney married Jerry's girl. Big blond Barney with the damnfool grin and thin hard Jerry with the angry eyes—side-riders. MacPearson, who ran the Tavern, chained a couple of barstools together for them as a joke. Sort of a marriage ceremony, he said.

Jerry got to Barney while the crowd was gathering. Barney was a limp heap. The blank face looked queer without its grin. Stand back, stand back for the special patrol! Give him light! It's almost dark and he's got to see!

There wasn't any blood. The body was still hot—too hot, fresh from the desert and the sun.

"You women scram," Jerry growled. "I'm going to loosen his clothes. It may not be pretty."

The women retreated to the outer circle.

"How long is this going to last?" somebody wanted to know.

"Blow them off the planet, I say!" said a plump man in a business suit.

Jerry opened the dead man's shirt. No chest wound. The abdomen, maybe. Maybe they borrowed his liver to see how it worked. They were like that.

"Blow the dome ten light-years into space!" said the plump man. "If we can't dent it, we can move it half to hell."

"Then what'll we breathe for air?" asked a calm voice. "Alpha particles? Do you realize how much uranium..."

Jerry loosened the dead man's belt. Then he buckled it again lest the crowd see what he had seen. Earth men were funny about some things, especially in crowds. They might form a mob and go out to the dome. Damn-fool living, loving, hating humans.

"What's wrong with him, sergeant?" asked the plump man.

Jerry stood up with Barney in his arms. "He's dead. That's all." Then he added— "Sunstroke, mister.'"

It was true. Barney had left his hat at the dome. He'd left something else too. They'd closed the wound with the strange white film they used for surgery, so there wasn't any blood. But the crowd didn't have to know about that.

Jerry put him in the back of the station wagon and drove toward headquarters. He was glad Barney had left his hat behind. Barney would be glad too. He was mercifully dead. Because he wasn't a man anymore. And Betty was young and brown and firm as a grape. And loyal. She wouldn't have left him if he'd lived. She'd have moved to another bedroom to save embarrassment; but she'd have gone on cooking his meals and singing while she worked. That was the way she was. Barney couldn't have faced it.

Knowing Barney, Jerry was puzzled. Why had he tried to come back at all?

Colonel Beck's rock-ugly face wore its usual hard hatred as he peered over the coroner's shoulder at the body laid out on a table under the glaring light. He turned to glare at Jerry who sat slumped by the door.

"Why the hell did they do that, sergeant?" he snapped.

Jerry shook his head.

The colonel cursed softly and looked back at the body. "You'd think they knew he just got married. You'd think they..." He paused and frowned. "Now how the hell would a damn sexless Martian think of a thing like that! Make an eunuch of him and send him home to his new bride. It beats me, sergeant."

"How do you know they're sexless?"

"Hell, man! Their broadcasts from the dome! Don't you listen?"

Jerry knew what he meant. The Martians barged in on the broadcast-band to ask questions about earth biology and other things that they couldn't learn by dissecting captives. They offered information about Martian society and Martian science in return. The government finally ordered that non-secret material be released to them in the hope that the brutal vivisections would cease. The dome-men replied by radioing lectures on Martian history, psychology, and physiology. But how much of it was true?

"What bothers me," Jerry muttered, "is why Barney came back at all—like that."

The colonel snorted indifferently.

"Maybe he had something to say. Maybe he found out something new and important that he wanted to report. Maybe..." The colonel was impatient. "Use your head, sergeant," he said. "The Martians can erase a human mind like a blackboard. Nobody that's ever come back from them alive can remember anything about them. Even what they look like. You know that! They get through with a man and then pick the memories out of his mind like fleas off a dog."

It was true. Yonkers, who had left his legs in the dome, could remember riding out on patrol and passing the jutting rock. Then his memory cut off like a light. He could then remember being in a blackened room whose ceiling was so low that he had to stoop. Then memory stopped again. He remembered intense pain and a grating sensation in his legs, but no visual image accompanied it. The Martians pinched out just those memory images that they didn't want to be there.

"Maybe he knew or saw something that they didn't know he saw," Jerry suggested.

"That's silly!"



"Then why did he come back?"

"Because he wanted to live, man!"

With his new bride? Like that? The colonel didn't know Barney like Jerry did.

The coroner called it death by sunstroke, and there was no use running an autopsy.

"Sergeant Harrison," the colonel said sweetly. "I'm detailing you to find out what it was you think he saw. You take his patrol tomorrow."

Jerry nodded. He had meant to ask for it anyway. But Colonel Beck was angry. He had lost a scout. Good scouts were scarce. He couldn't get back at the Martians, so he took it out on Jerry. But Jerry was willing.

"Check your little theory, sergeant," the colonel went on in a sugary tone. "Get close to the dome. Poke around a bit. Prod it with a stick, maybe. Don't forget your magnifying glass."

Jerry stiffened. No horseman had ever been that close—voluntarily. Only infantry and tanks.

"You think I'm afraid?" he asked.

"I don't give a damn whether you are or not!" Colonel Beck growled. "It's an order."

Jerry stood up to leave. "Yes, sir. I'll see what I can find."

The colonel's sadistic appetites were not yet satiated. "One other thing, sergeant," he said. "Take Willis home to his wife."

"Colonel! . . ."

"I'll call her, of course—and drop in to pay my respects tomorrow. But you take him home. The jailhouse is no place for a dead family man. We can get an embalmer out of the city tomorrow."

"I'd rather not. . ."

"Sergeant! You don't have to tell her what they did to him. Just sunstroke, that's all."

There was no arguing with him. Jerry obeyed reluctantly. It wasn't going to be a pleasant task—carrying Barney in to Betty. He drove as slowly as he could on the way.

Two questions troubled him. The colonel's and his own. How had such an amputation occurred to a sexless Martian? And—why had Barney come back—unless he knew something? There were a lot of *maybe's*, but none seemed satisfying.

Barney's house was like all the houses in the row—government construction—a white frame house with ivy-trellises. One thing was different—the woman who kept it. She stood in the doorway when they drove up—white, tight-faced, grim, beautiful. A strong girl. No girl to wail helplessly with grief. Barney knew her well—too well. She would sit and think and hate. She would be a widow until the Martians were driven from the earth.

Jerry and the corporal took the stretcher up the walk. Barney was covered with a sheet. She held the door open for them.

"Save it, Jerry," she said when he opened his mouth. "The colonel called me."

*No use complaining about it*, she might have added. *He did what he could for Earth.*

They laid him out on the bed, and the corporal went back to the car. Betty bent over the body in the evening gloom that came from the window. And her thin fingers barely touched his yellow hair. Her own dark hair shrouded her face, a black curtain about her cheeks, hiding whatever she felt. Then she kissed him—lightly as she might kiss a child. Jerry shuddered. A childish kiss. No use kissing him like a *man*, even in death. Not after what they did to him.

She turned, but he couldn't see her eyes in the dim light. Thank God for that! It hurt bad enough just to look at her, he had loved her long before Barney.

"When are we going to get even, Jerry?" Her voice was icy.

Vengeance—an Earth-woman's concept. Good old Earth, with its grief and its rage and its fiery hate. Martians couldn't feel such illogical emotions—so the broadcasts said.

"Sorry, Betty," he said weakly. "I'm just a scout, not a senator."

She watched him for a silent time. Then she turned away. "And I'm just a woman."

Her tone struck him like a slap. There were a lot of things in it—scorn, hate, determination.

He left as quickly as he could. He sent the corporal back with the car and walked silently home ward

in the moonlight.

The Martian dome glimmered faintly in the distance across the desert. High, proud, evil. Shining in the moon-glow. What right had Martians to bask under the Earth's moon? He passed a couple with two small children—going home from the movie, maybe. Life went on; there was nothing else it could do. While the dome watched it.

The couple with the children reminded him of Barney. And Betty. She was built just right for bearing kids. Efficiently constructed...

Jerry hated himself suddenly for the thoughts that began creeping up from the depths. But hell! He couldn't help feeling what he did. The Id had a hairy chest and carried a stone axe; it never heard of moral law.

The Martians had no Id—so the lecturer said. Their minds operated entirely on the conscious level.

He stopped in the Tavern for a beer. MacPearson saw him coming and sneaked around to unchain his stool from Barney's. But Jerry saw him do it. A hush fell over the place when he came in, and several voices murmured at him as he passed. "Sorry to hear about. . ."

He took a seat and the conversation picked up again. For awhile he listened to the sibilant murmur of angry voices.

"Get all the uranium on earth and blow the dome to hell!"

It was the old argument, and Jerry was sick of it. How to get rid of the dome. It had been blasted and bombed and gassed and infected with bubonic plague. But the dome's radio voice congratulated the bombardiers for their accuracy—on the aircraft command frequency. And thanked them politely—ominously, perhaps—for such an insight into Earth's military science. The dome was undented.

"Keep pumping lewisite into the vents. Their air-filters can't last forever."

Jerry looked disgustedly at the speaker. But the speaker was too interested in his own opinions to notice. Everybody had helpful suggestions; but nobody was mad enough to spend millions of dollars and millions of lives. After all, who had died? Only a few scouts. Everyone was intellectually angry; no one was mad down deep in the belly. Except Betty, maybe.

And Jerry?

Why should Jerry be mad? Now he had a chance at Barney's widow. Wasn't that just fine?

He pushed his beer aside and left the bar quickly. He went home to a breezy bed. The wind came off the desert, bearing with it the familiar odor of—of whatever the Martians were doing. It kept him coldly awake.

Four blocks away was another bed—with a dead man in it. And Betty sleeping on the couch. Life went on. And death.

Funny, though—the Martians didn't die. They just went to sleep and split in half like amoebae—and then there were two. They kept their sexless daddy's memories. Why not? Same brain, divided between them. The lecturer said so. Wouldn't it be funny if you could remember when your thousand-times-great grandfather bashed in his brother's head with a club? And stole his wife, maybe?

Betty. He kept thinking of Betty. *When are we going to get even, Jerry?* Vengeance. Earthbound Betty, corn-fed, and raised up by common old earth-standards. A dark little snake who could love or sting.

Did she think hate would work better than H-bombs?

Did he hate the big pink bodies inside the dome? With the red stripe down the middle where they divided? The headless creatures with humps on their back for brain-cases? They loved to have the line stroked—so the lecturer said. Maybe the lecturer lied. Maybe they didn't like to have the stripe stroked. Maybe they had screaming meemies if you even touched it. Everybody believed the lecturer. They drew sketches of the Martians from the lecturer's descriptions. But why should the lecturer lie about such trivialities?

The Martians were so polite. They thanked the scout when they plucked out his eye to see how he saw. Not torturers—just curious. And when the engineers burrowed under the dome secretly to plant a few H-bombs, the dome picked itself up out of the crater, sat down a mile away, and ignored the

incident as a lady ignores a drunk.

Jerry couldn't sleep. He could hear Minnie shifting about restlessly in her stall. So he pulled on his boots and went out to keep company with his mare. Maybe she was thirsty. He had forgotten to water her.

But ten minutes later he had saddled up. He gathered his paraphernalia, swung into the familiar seat, and trotted westward under the midnight moon. The dome was a faint luminescence in the distance. He had no idea what he meant to do. It was just an urge.

He rode for two hours until he reached the row of stainless steel stakes that marked a five-mile circle around the dome. It was the scouting radius; he had ridden it thousands of times. He reined up and gazed at the hemispherical fortress. Its impenetrable surface shimmered slightly in the silvery light, like an asphalt road in the hot sun. Perhaps it was the desert air. Or perhaps the Princeton professor was right in his theory that the dome's metallic sheath was immersed in a field that increased the inter-molecular forces by a tremendous amount.

The dome appeared to be sleeping peacefully under the moon. But Jerry knew that it was awake and watching. It saw the single rider on the scouting circle. It could devour him if it wished. But it could feel neither anger or amusement. Its only dangerous sentiment might be curiosity.

How many more days would he ride around it before they got curious? Or needed another specimen. Then they would pluck out his heart, or muse over his cortex. Or do what they did to Barney. He was helpless before it.

He dismounted and sat under the edge of a bluff to think. He felt more comfortable in the shadows. There was nothing he could do—except his job. Just ride circles around the beanpot and hope for the best.

Soon he dozed. He was awakened by a faint thump. He started up. Another thump. It came from nowhere in particular. He could feel it more than hear it. It was in the ground and in the air. Suddenly he knew what it was. It had happened to an old prospector once. He got too close to the dome and said he felt a kind of thudding in the air that grew and grew until it beat him senseless. He told about it just before he died of a brain hemorrhage.

*Thunk! Thunk!*

He winced and looked for a place to hide. Minnie neighed and strained at her rope. The thunks were little twinges in the bones.

*Thunk! Thunk! Thunk!*

Harder this time. He made a dash for the mare. But Minnie reared up with a shriek and the rope pulled loose from the rock. She set off homeward at a gallop.

The thudding stopped, as if its purpose had been accomplished. The Martians had driven away his horse. Why?

He looked around. He had stashed his Thompson sub and his walkie-talkie under the edge of the bluff. But he'd left the two canteens of water on the horse.

He thought of calling for help on the radio. But no one but the Martians guarded the frequency at night. He would have to wait for daylight, or try to go back on foot. But if the Martians wanted him, walking away would do no good. They could thump him down or prod him with the stinging beams that hurt on the side away from the dome and made the victim run screaming toward it, to escape the intense burning that followed behind.

He sat down under the bluff again to wait for dawn. He stared at the hateful fortress until he could close his eyes and see its pale, floating, after-image.

The sky grew gray, then red in the east. The dome took on the color of the sunrise. He called control. The channel was silent. He tried again in half-an-hour, this time with results.

"Scout Three from Control. What happened. Jerry? Your horse came trotting into town at six o'clock."

"Martians sent her scampering. Get somebody out here with another. Six miles east of the bean-pot."

A cold metallic voice cut into the frequency. "That will be unnecessary. That will be unnecessary."

And that was all. The dome had spoken and fallen silent. Jerry breathed heavily into his mike but said nothing. He watched the dome fearfully. It wanted him. No use sending another horse.

The dispatcher lowered his voice as if to keep the Martians from hearing "Sit tight, Jerry. We'll get somebody out there right away. We'll send everybody that's not out looking for Betty Willis."

Jerry found his voice again quickly. "Looking for who?"

"Betty Willis. She may be off her rocker. Sat up all night with the body. When your horse came in, she called up the colonel and said it was her fault. Something she said to you. Next thing you know somebody saw her galloping out of town. She's headed for rough country, or she'd have taken the car."

The metallic voice cut in again. "Tell us why the woman reacts in this manner. Tell us why she behaves illogically."

The dispatcher began cursing and went off the air to finish the oath.

"Hate, beanpot," Jerry hissed at his mike. He had nothing to lose by being brazen. "Now tell us one. Why did you do that to her husband?"

The voice came back calmly and quickly. "We wish to examine human heredity mechanisms. We wish to make a human organism. We have tried previously without success. Now we shall succeed.

Jerry's vision clouded with red flashes of hate. *Make a human organism!* "Why don't you just borrow one," he choked. "Me, for instance."

"Thank you. But we wish to make several changes in the structure. Thank you."

Jerry pushed the walkie-talkie aside and stood up. Then he lifted it for a last word to the dispatcher. "When you find Betty, tell her we're going to get even." Then he dashed the radio to the rocks. And with the submachine gun under his arm, he began walking toward the dome.

He was running amok. He knew it. Don Quixote. Damn fool. They could kill him any instant. He was going to die. Foolishly. For nothing at all. He couldn't even make it count. Still he walked on.

*Make a human organism!*

And the Lord God made man of the slime of the earth. And breathed in his face the breath of life. And man became a living soul. Maybe that wasn't true. But it sounded better than the way the Martians said it.

The impotency of his wrath! He realized it. It made him more angry. The meaninglessness of his gesture. Of his grim march toward the omnipotent enemy.

The radio was still working. Far behind him he could hear its voice. The dispatcher was calling excited questions. The Martian was asking about illogical behaviour.

Why didn't they shoot him? Or blast him with the thumping outfit. (Was it supersonic?)

A sane spark in Jerry's mind told him to go back. The sane spot spoke coldly, logically. But it had no control of his rage. For years he had ridden the circle, knowing every moment that he was helpless. A mouse stalking a tiger. A foolish strutting little earthling, at the mercy of the dome. He had grown to resent it more and more. Now the resentment broke the dam and swelled into a torrent of hate. He stalked onward.

In two hours he was within tommygun range of the dome. He stopped to slip a fifty-round drum on his weapon. No one but infantry and tanks had been this close before. They had assaulted it futilely. It closed its shell and went to sleep while they gnawed at the impenetrable—*what?*

It looked like ordinary steel. But diamonds couldn't mark it. Uranium couldn't dent it. Acid was harmless to it. It was curiously non-conductive to electricity and heat; the Martians could not be roasted out. Its thermal conductivity had been estimated—somewhere around a billionth of a BTU per hour per degree Fahrenheit per cubic foot. It could sit on the surface of the sun for awhile with that kind of insulation.

Jerry fired a burst at it, just to spend a little anger. The bullets never ricocheted. They stuck to the surface, like iron to a magnet. Maybe the Princeton professor was right. There wasn't any such metal.

Well, here he was. And there it was. Why didn't they come out and get him? But they never came out. Even the desert was too humid to suit them. Moisture made them itch. The lecturer said so.

He was thinking more calmly now. They had let him come this close for a reason. Maybe they wanted to observe anger reactions. Martians couldn't feel anger. The lecturer—damn the lecturer!

Maybe they'd take out his adrenals to see how they worked.

Maybe it gave them a warm feeling to see him wandering about helplessly. "There goes the enemy, but here we are nice and safe in our igloo."

The sun was getting hot. It gleamed on the glazed ground, where the uranium blasts had fused the rocks. Once the ground had been grazing land—poor land, to be sure, but covered with a sparse grass. But that part of the desert had had no rain for ten years. Since the Martians came. Mother Earth had changed her weather to suit Martian comfort. But the meteorologists said it was a coincidence.

He started walking around the dome. They knew he was there. They watched silently. They hadn't even bothered to retract the stilts it stood on. It sat on three short fat legs, its flat bottom three feet above the desert floor. When the infantry came, it pulled in the legs and sat down on its belly. Once it sat down on some of the infantry. They had crawled under to find an air-vent through which to pump gas. The Martians had evidently cleaned up the G.I. cadavers for specimens, because the ground beneath the dome was barren and boneless.

He shouted at the fort. "Come out and get me, you bastards! Come on!"

Of course they couldn't answer him without his radio. They had no vocal cords. But their bodies could generate radio waves and modulate them in any way they pleased. The lecturer said their synaptic connections were so quick-triggered they could perceive each separate radio frequency pulse and duplicate it exactly with a modulated carrier wave. That was the way they communicated with each other. They could vary their output from a whisper to a hundred watts.

"Well, damn it! Do something!" he shouted helplessly.

The desert was silent, and the dome shimmered in the heat. He glanced back toward town. A single rider was approaching the scouting circle. Too late now.

The sun was beating upon him heavily. His throat was dry and burning for water. He wandered about aimlessly for a time, cursing and firing bursts against the dome.

Hell, if they wouldn't come out, then he'd try to get in! There were bound to be vents under the dome. He slung the tommy-gun and crawled under the edge. The center would be the logical place to look. But it was a half-mile crawl. He set out over the slag determinedly dropping to his hands and knees. As he moved slowly and painfully along, the darkness deepened and the white desert sunlight was a painful band of brightness in the distance. Folly upon folly. The Martians were playing with him. Willfully he was moving into their trap. When he was far enough under, they would start to sit down—slowly, so he would make a run for safety. Then when he was almost out, they would drop their low, flat belly upon him. He began to feel the things a claustrophobic feels.

*I'm just a woman, Jerry.* Betty's scorn was a whip that lashed him on. Or maybe the scorn wasn't in her tone, but rather—in his own conscience. And in the conscience of the world. *Why isn't humanity man enough to do something?*

A sudden shrill sound made him freeze. It came from behind. Far behind. He knew the death-shriek a horse sometimes makes. It chilled him. A rider had followed him to the dome. The Martians had killed the animal—and perhaps the rider.

He crawled on.

He kept bumping against the ceiling. Had the dome moved, or was the ground rising slightly? The metal felt body-temperature—illusively. But that was because it was non-conductive, according to the Princeton theory. The physicists said it was near absolute zero, its molecules locked tightly in place by the strength of a field which was thought to irradiate it from within. The particles could not even vibrate with heat energy. What would happen if the field were suddenly released? A wine-glass dropped in molten steel?

His hands and knees were bloody from the rough ground. But as he neared the center, he felt a strong draft of air. He was approaching a vent.

He found it by moving downwind and feeling with his hands. He could see nothing but the thin vein of white light around the rim of the dome.

He found it—and his heart sank. It was protected by heavy louvers, set a few inches back in the opening. He stretched out in exhaustion beneath the vent. A gale of air arose about him. He fired a short

burst up into the vent, but nothing happened. The sound was deafening, and the flashes lit up the blackness for a moment. That was all.

He lay quietly recovering his strength and waiting.

*Thump! Thump!*

He felt the shocks pass through him and his hand went numb. At close range, the sonic cone was narrow. It missed his body. The Martians were firing in darkness. He looked around quickly. Something broke the thin vein of light. A silhouette! It moved, scrambling drily feet away.

He rolled over and blasted at it with the tommy-gun. Something crumpled and fell to the ground. Then the metallic slap of a hatch closing. He crawled to his target and felt it cautiously. A hot gritty little body. Hard as a rubber tire. But the rubber had holes in it, and they oozed a thick, viscous fluid that began to crystallize in the dry air. Martian bodies were dry-fleshed.

But was *this* a Martian? He had seen sketches of them, done from the lecturer's descriptions. The sketches were wrong. He could tell just by feeling the body. The wrongness was quantitative. The sketches showed huge, thick-limbed creatures. This dead beast was bony and rather small. The lecturer had lied. Why? Were they afraid, in spite of their impenetrable dome?

He struck a match and looked. A spindly, pink, headless creature, whose brain was in the bulge on its back. The dividing line was a livid red scar that ran along the bulge and around under the belly, marking the creature exactly in half.

Before the match flickered and burned his fingers, he made another discovery. The lecturer had lied more than once. He said the Martians were sexless. But this dead thing was obviously a *female*!

It startled him. They might try to hide weakness with lies. But why sex?

They split, all right, like the lecturer said. There was the red tear. But two sexes. The female probably must be fertilized before she could divide. And perhaps the male couldn't divide at all. The male shouldn't have the scar — or else only a vestigial one.

But why the secrecy?

He shifted uncomfortably in the cramped darkness and bumped his head on the ceiling. His hands flew upward, and his palms pressed against it, like Atlas supporting the sky.

He choked back a scream.

The dome was sitting down. The ceiling was moving slowly but perceptibly. The desert was half a mile away.

He crawled back to the vent and fought at the louvers with his hands. They were of the field-strengthened metal. But they were recessed a few inches. If he lay under the vent, he would have another minute or two of life — before he was cut in neat slices.

He cursed his foolishness. He cursed Colonel Beck and the Martians. He thought a curse at Betty, then drew it back. She couldn't help saying what she had.

He fired a burst into the dust again. No effect. He shouted insults into the black maw. The dome settled without a pause.

"I came to bargain with you," he called in desperation. "The government sent me."

The descent continued, but after a moment aloud-speaker voice crackled in a monotone. "That is an untrue statement. We have observed your duties. You spoke an untrue statement." The voice was coldly polite.

He shrieked more curses at them.

"Your emotions are interesting," the loudspeaker noted. "We are recording your audible expressions. Would you please notify us when pain begins?"

He fell silent. The louvers were about two feet above the ground, now. He tried digging in the earth, but it was caked and dry. The blast of air faded as the fans were shut off. Then he heard the slow scrape of doors closing above him. He reached through the louvers and felt the metal jaws pulling together. But they stopped ajar. The Martians would leave a narrow opening so they could hear and record his pain-sounds.

The ceiling pressed down. He was flat on his back and trying not to cry out in fear. In a minute or so, he would feel the vise-grip. The dead Martian, who was not under the vent, was already caught in it. He

could hear the popping sounds she made, and the damp hiss when her air-sac ruptured. Pressed like a flower in a book.

The louvers touched him lightly. He called into the vent to keep from screaming.

"I tell you the government sent me to bargain!"

"That is an untrue statement. We have refused such offers. You spoke an untrue statement."

The pressure was robbing him of breath. "Not as untrue as the damn lies your lecturer tells." There was a long silence.

"Would you repeat that, please?"

He repeated it as best he could.

There was another silence, during which the pressure stopped increasing.

"Would you please explain your meaning?" the loudspeaker asked coldly. "And give the origin of such a belief."

Jerry stalled for a few more minutes of life. "You're no more sexless than earthmen. Your broadcasts were lies."

"What is the origin of such a belief?"

"Barney told us before he died. It's going to be common knowledge."

The Martians were apparently slow thinkers. Slow but accurate. Soon they would remember the dead female under the dome.

"That is an untrue statement. The scout's memory was sifted before he was released."

The pressure began to increase again.

"He saw something you *didn't know he saw!*" Jerry shrieked. Gradually the pressure stopped again. A long silence. Apparently they were mulling it over. He waited. Then —

*Thunk, thunk* ... from out of the vent.

The blast rocked his senses. He squirmed helplessly and moaned. His skull was bursting.

*THUNK, THUNK, THUNK THUNK* . . .

He shrank and cringed under the sledge-hammer shocks. They seemed to explode inside his head. They came faster.

*TUK TUK TUK TUK TUK* . . .

Gratefully he surrendered himself to the tide of blackness.

He awoke in a dim room. His skin was brittle. His mouth was numb with dryness. The ceiling was absurdly low — but high enough for Martian stature. He was obviously inside the dome.

He moved. Pain stabbed a thousand needles in him. He was bound with thread-thin barbed wire. The movement caused the tiny pinpoints to bite his flesh. He moved again, and moaned.

"Do not stir," said a voice. "The wire is coated with an irritant. Motion will cause sufficient pain to result in fainting."

Jerry carefully turned his head to see the source of the voice. It came from his walkie-talkie! It was on a low table. A Martian female stood nearby. It was like watching a ventriloquist.

"Your statement was untrue," the Martian went on. "The scout told nothing. You simply examined the dead Yy-Da beneath the vent. The scout died before speaking to another Earthman."

"What makes you think so?"

"We have questioned another captive."

Jerry watched the female warily. She seemed to feel no anger or sorrow for her dead compatriot. Her insect-like eyes gazed at him blankly as she crouched in the queer Martian stance. The red welt down the center of her body made her look cleft by a sword.

"Who is the captive?" he asked.

"It is the Earth female. It is the female of the scout. It is — "

"Good Lord! *Betty!*"

"That is a true statement."

He lurched toward the Martian in a rage. She listened calmly to his howl of pain and watched him stiffen into immobility as the snake-fangs of the wire pierced his body. He sickened with shock. The

wires were worse than a black swarm of angry wasps.

"That was an illogical action."

He wished fervently that they would keep their analyses of his behaviour to themselves.

"What are you going to do with her?" he groaned.

"We need parts of the human organism as models." She paused, then said, "This is an ineffective and illogical procedure. You will remember nothing of what I tell you. Therefore it is a waste of time for you to ask."

He tested the wires again and winced. He could break them—but perhaps have an immediate convulsion. The Martians evidently had a great respect for pain. They didn't expect him to try. Maybe he'd faint, but when the time came ...

She saw him examining his bonds. "The irritant is also a debilitating agent," she said. "If you continue stirring, you will become too weak to move. That would be illogical."

His mouth was cottony. "Can I have water?" he asked.

She hesitated for a moment, then shuffled silently out of the room. Cautiously he tried to slip out of his loosely wrapped bonds. But the wires adhered to his skin like tape. Soon he was in agony. It was no use. He felt sure a sudden muscular surge would burst them, but it was too early to try it. He had no plan. No way to escape.

The martian was gone a long time. He stared at the walkie-talkie. Betty had probably found it and picked it up before they caught her. Maybe she'd used it to call for help — not that it would do any good.

The Martian shuffled back with a ping-pong ball full of dirty fluid. A flexible tube was attached. She held it away from her distastefully and kept the tube pinched closed. He remembered that Martians took a drink about once a month. Moisture made them itch, except when their systems required the tiny periodic amount.

He took the water in a quick suck. It furred his teeth. Full of iron —probably Martian water. A ten-year supply would be a light load for such a small consumption. When their skins became numb, they knew they were thirsty—the lecturer said. They drank a small amount, scratched happily, then were disgusted with themselves and let it alone for another month.

"I need *water*," he said. "A whole bucket of it."

She thought about it for a moment. "It will be necessary to take you to the water. There is no large closed container available."

She was afraid of even the nearness of water. Apparently the slight evaporation caused itching.

She loosened the wires that bound his legs by painting his skin with a clear oil that caused them to pull away easily and painlessly. He watched for an opportunity to kick at her brain-case. He spoke to distract her.

"What's in store for me here, Gertrude?"

"We wish to trace out the synaptic connections which deal with rage, lust, and hate in the human organism."

"I don't get it."

"Certain areas of your cortex will be paralyzed. Then you will be offered various stimuli and your behaviour observed. We will find the areas which affect these emotions which we do not possess."

He tentatively aimed a foot at the center of her abdomen. "What sort of stimuli?"

"The ones which normally evoke rage, lust, or fear, respectively. It will require considerable time. Your brain will gradually be destroyed."

He held the foot back for a moment. "Lust? ..."

"You forget that we have one of your females. You will be closed together in a room. The logical functioning of your brain will be paralyzed ..."

He lashed out with his foot. She caught it in her claws and forced it to the floor easily. There was strength in the thin Martian arms.

"Such behavior will result in continued thirst," she warned calmly.



He subsided. She wrapped a wire around his neck and fastened it to his knees, so that he would have to walk hunched over and take mincing steps. She produced a small device that looked like a camera, pointed it at the drinking container on the table, and snapped a lever. The ping-pong ball exploded into a fine powder, and a low *thump* filled the room. It was a convincing reminder of the bludgeoning he had received beneath the dome.

"You will walk ahead," she announced, and lifted the radio from the table.

They stepped into the corridor. An occasional expressionless Martian passed as they moved along. Jerry managed to crane his neck to get a glimpse of each — all females. Maybe the women were the workers.

"After you drink, you will be put to sleep until you are needed," his guard told him. "You will be spared any pain that is not necessary to our work."

"That's good of you, Gertrude."

"Thank you."

He snapped a curse at her, and expected a thump from the device she carried. But she showed no anger.

They entered a huge circular room with a bulging ceiling. The top of the dome, perhaps. He looked around as best he could. Machinery. Heavy, complicated machinery of massive design. The room smelled of the strange foul odor that sometimes blew toward the town. Some of the machinery was lead shielded. Ductwork led from it to the ceiling. The ducts were yellow helices that glowed with a faint corona discharge. Some sort of wave-guides, perhaps. They all passed through the jaws of a tremendous electromagnet before they spiralled upward. Near the ceiling they straightened, and each duct flared out into a flat sort of reflector, focused upward. He tried to trace the ductwork back to its origin.

"You will move faster, please," said the radio speaker. "And keep looking at the floor."

The Martian didn't want him to inspect the machinery. The ducts with the hovering corona did they supply the field to the outer shell of the dome? And if the field were suddenly destroyed ...

He stole another glance toward the electromagnet.

*Thunk!* The Martian gave him a light jolt with the sonic gun. It staggered him. The wires needled him painfully.

"Look at the floor, please." He looked at the floor and walked in the direction she indicated. He had seen what he wanted to see. The ducts all ended in a spherical shell surrounded with gold-colored tubing.

They passed into another corridor. Still he had seen no Martians but females. As they moved along they passed a flanking wall of glass-partitioned cells. A few of the cells were occupied by pink sleepers in various stages of division. He found the sight revolting.

"Where's all the men, Gertrude?" he asked suddenly.

He got another throb from the gun. Just enough to make him wince. He bit his lip with rage.

"You will ask no more questions," said the female.

Two things he wasn't supposed to know about — the machinery and Martian sex. Two weaknesses of some sort?

They moved onto a narrow catwalk and approached a large cylindrical tank. The tank was on stilts above some kind of rotating machinery below the catwalk. Pipes ran downward from it. He could feel hot currents of air arising from the machinery. Apparently the tank contained either condensate or cooling-liquid. The frame of the machinery glowed a dull red.

"Here is the water. You will drink now."

She found a flexible hose with a valve, then loosened the wires about his neck and held the hose to his mouth. She kept the gun on his belly and one hand on the valve. She didn't want any of the irritating fluid to spill. The water was hot, but he drank greedily of it. When his thirst was satisfied, he filled his cheeks with it. Then he nodded that he was finished. She cut off the valve.

"We will go now," she said as she replaced the hose.

Now or never! He spurted the mouthful of water at her. It drenched her gritty skin. She cringed. The thump-gun punched, and the sonic blast spun him sideways. The radio shrieked gibberish. She clawed at herself and dropped the gun.

He struggled against the wires. They burst. The sudden pain was maddening. He screamed and fell. Nausea caught him. Vertigo. To faint was to die. He lurched about on his hands and knees, tearing at the adhesive wires. They came loose from his back like the ripping off of his own skin.

He found the thump-gun and pawed at it weakly. Gertrude was doing spidery contortions on the floor.

He aimed at the tank and fired the gun. Not even a dent. There was a dial setting on the weapon. He twisted it to the extreme and fired again. The recoil hurt his wrists and sent him off balance. This time there was a dent in the cylinder. He kept on firing, and the dent grew deeper.

Quick shuffling steps were ringing on the catwalk behind him. Martians! He continued concentrating on the dent. It grew deeper. The metal gave way and a thin jet of dirty water spurted out.

The fringe of a sonic blast caught him from the rear and sent him on his face, half-conscious. But he heard the spitting hiss of the water-jet as it struck the red-hot furnace. Billowing clouds of steam rolled over him. He glanced weakly around to see the Martians beating a terrified retreat before the advancing vapor.

He lay gaining strength for a moment. The first skirmish was won. Now to find Betty.

Gertrude was in a twitching coma. Perhaps she would die if her crystalline hide became saturated. He needed her help. He strapped on the walkie-talkie.

He caught her two-toed foot and dragged her along the catwalk. The steam was rolling along the walls and floor. He turned a corner and came to a glass door with a guard post beside it. The guard had suddenly left for a dryer climate. Beyond the door was a tiny cubicle with a smaller door in the opposite wall. The guard post suggested a prison cell. He dragged the limp Martian into the cubicle.

The smaller door was locked. He pressed a button in its center. A motor whined. He felt a sudden draft. The cubicle was an airlock. His ears crackled with the changing pressure. In a few moments he was gasping for breath. But the door to the corridor had locked automatically. He was trapped.

Suddenly the draft died out. The motor groaned to a stop. Then the small door slid slowly open.

He stared into a large, weirdly-lit room. The walls were rust-red panoramas of Martian scenery. Light came from orbs suspended from a black ceiling—the moons of Mars. A blue gray dawn-light was reaching up behind a range of hills. It was like a visit to the fourth planet. Even the thin, dry atmosphere was duplicated. He was choking for breath.

But the female was reviving quickly. He dragged her into the large room. Then he saw its occupant. Another Martian lay asleep on a satin couch in the center of the room. Asleep, but not dividing.

He kicked the quaking female. She stopped squirming and gazed at him without anger. For an instant he felt remorse. Her even stare was like turning the other cheek; she couldn't get mad. Then he remembered that Martians could feel no pity either. He kicked her again. She showed fear.

"Where is Betty?" he demanded.

Her blank stare was a direct refusal. He shifted the gun to low and gave her brain-case several quick twinges. The radio crackled with static.

"She'll be dead before you reach her," said the Martian.

"Then I'll kill you now," he snapped.

She was afraid for herself, but she was also afraid for her race, apparently. She remained silent. He set the gun to medium and jolted her in the belly. She doubled with pain.

The sleeping Martian was stirring. Jerry turned the gun toward the couch.

"*No! Do not shoot the male!*" The burst came loudly from the radio.

The male? He backed to a position where he could cover them both and stared at the rousing sleeper. The male was thin and weak. The crystalline coating had worn away in spots, leaving smooth places on his wrinkled hide. He was old. And there was no red welt down his middle.

"Tell me where Betty is!"

"She will be dead before you reach her."

"Then I'll kill you both. Uncle Fidgety first."

He aimed the gun at the tottering male, who stood staring stupidly at him, as if unaware of what was happening.

"No! I will tell you where to find her!" the female called quickly. "Do not kill the male."

She climbed anxiously erect and placed herself between Jerry and the old one.

"That's better!" he snapped. "Call the others. Tell them to bring her here. And no tricks. Stay on this frequency and use earth-language."

"They cannot come here," she said. "They cannot endure the moisture in the corridors. They will be crowding in the drying rooms. If the skin becomes moisture clogged, they die of suffocation. We take in oxygen through our skins. Our air-sacs are for hydrogen feeding."

"I don't give a damn if they die or not. Do what I say."

"There is a more logical way," she said. "The male has two suits of moisture proof plastic for his personal use. I will wear one of these and take you to the girl."

"And be led into a trap? No, thanks. Tell your cronies to direct her to the central power room. *Where the field generators are.*"

It was a stab in the dark, but it struck home. She straightened and emitted a surprised crackle of static.

He laughed. "So they *are* field generators!"

She was silent.

"Call the others!" he ordered.

He was beginning to totter in the rarefied air. The female was watching him closely for signs of weakness, and she was stalling for time. He gave her a thump, but missed. She edged toward him. Swaying and gasping he turned the gun toward the male.

"I will call the others," she said quickly.

She went into a deeper crouch and seemed to be straining inwardly. The radio was suddenly blocking, and feedback whined in the audio stage. Her output was reaching out to the others.

He turned down the volume and listened.

"... man-organism threatens to destroy male. Do not molest Earth female. Free her at once and direct her to central control. Man-organism threatens to destroy cherished male."

"And tell her *I'll* be there," Jerry snapped.

She relayed the information, while he tried to breathe.

"All right," he snapped. "Let's go to central control — both of you!" His heart was pounding. Bright specks in his eyes.

Static crackled again. "It is not necessary to take the male," she protested. "Why do you take ..."

"He makes a good hostage, dearie. Let's go."

She found the moisture-proof suits and began helping the male into one of them. Jerry's breath was failing. He thumped them lightly. The male cringed.

"Put 'em on—in the airlock," Jerry gasped.

They moved into the small room. He jabbed at the button and his mind went black for a moment. But the female was taking no chances. The pumps whined, and after a few moments Jerry was sucking in the good moist air of the corridor. The male was scratching and dancing feebly as he scrambled into his suit.

"It'd be hell if you got caught in the rain," Jerry snapped shuddering with disgust.

The female took him seriously. "We have prevented it from raining here," she said coldly. "Eventually we shall stop all precipitation on your planet. The water will stay in the seas, and our people will live in comfort."

Rage gripped him again. He sent her sprawling with a sonic blast. She shook herself, and climbed slowly erect.

"Let's start moving," he snarled.

"You will never escape alive," she said as she moved ahead of him. "The moisture is passing."

It was true. The steam had condensed on the walls and was already evaporating again as the airdryers worked furiously. As they passed the water tank, he noticed that the leakage had drained its contents to the level of the hole and had stopped. Soon the Martians would be coming out of the drying room in full strength—with more potent weapons than sonic guns.

So they wanted to borrow the earth and make it a desert! Keep the water in the seas. Make the land like arid Mars. Jerry thought about the field-strengthened skin of the dome. To release the field? A wine glass dropped in molten steel. And destruction to all within, perhaps?

And destruction to Betty and himself. He was no hero.

The thin male staggered feebly beside the female. She led him by the arm. Jerry wondered if all the Martian males were like that—or perhaps he was a senile king or priest. There seemed to be an acute scarcity of males.

Betty was standing alone in the power-room when they hurried in. She was glancing nervously about at the machinery which dwarfed her tiny figure and towered over her. She saw them enter, and hurried toward Jerry with frightened eyes. She was dark and pretty in her jeans and riding boots. And she was unharmed—except for the red welts about her arms from the adhesive wires. He murmured thankfully.

He wanted to hug her—and then he saw that she had something like that in mind. So he glared at her. She was Barney's widow.

"Why the hell did you come out here?" he bawled at her.

She stopped and looked hurt. "I thought I could stop you. I thought you came out here because I said —"

"Never mind!" he snapped. "Let's get out of it!"

"Wait, Jerry!" she said excitedly. "I found out what they're going to do. They're going to conquer the Earth and dry up the —"

"I know it. Let's go."

"But can't we *do* something?" He hesitated. "Listen, I'll get you outside, and then I'll come back ..."

There was a distinct murmur of pleasure from the loud-speaker. He glanced at the Martian female.

"You like the idea, do you, Gertrude?"

The Martian was silent.

"There isn't time, Jerry," Betty said. "And I'm sticking with you. Can't we wreck some of this stuff?"

"We'd be sacrificing ..."

He didn't finish. Three Martians sped into the power room and ducked behind a generator. Their pink bodies were dusted with white — and absorbent powder, perhaps. A transparent globule sailed over the generator and burst at their feet. A white vapor floated up from it. The female scurried away from it and dragged the male behind her.

"Hold your breath!" he snapped at Betty. They ran after the Martian hostages, and he snapped a sonic throb at them.

They stopped and looked back at the white vapor. It suddenly flared into a flash of greenish flame and disappeared.

"An anaesthetic," he said to Betty. "They won't hurt the male."

The room was suddenly thronging with Martians. They sent a flanking movement along the outer wall, and Jerry fired rapid thumps at the scurrying little bodies as they leaped hurriedly across the open stretches.

"This way!" he called, and led Betty toward the golden sphere with its radial ducts. "That mess of yellow pipe. It's the key to the dome."

He no longer had time for the female hostage, but he dragged the male behind him. The female set up a howl on the radio and followed at a safe distance.

"Call off the hounds, Gertrude," he shouted at her. "Or I'll punch holes in your ductwork."

"That would be an illogical action," said the radio in his hand. "The whole dome would collapse. You and the Earth-female would be destroyed."

Betty gripped his arm tightly as they ran. "Do it, Jerry," she panted. "Do it and don't worry. It's worth

it."

"Feel like dying, honey?" he asked her weakly.

They came to the base of the sphere and pulled the wilting male between them. A circle of pink bodies was slowly closing in from all sides. Jerry kept firing, but none of his blasts were lethal. Martians fell and arose again. Evidently the power of the sonic weapon needed replenishing. There was little choice. Either waste the last of its energy on the attackers, or fire at the ducts.

"Do it, Jerry," she begged. "It's our only chance. It's Earth's only chance, anyway."

He had moved away from the sphere to look up at the ducts. Suddenly a thump-gun blast caught him below the hips and sent him careening to the floor. He tried to get up, but his leg wobbled sideways and bent between his knee and ankle. Broken! Martians were rushing in for the kill. He fell back in pain and stabbed a sonic blast at a stretch of duct above him. It dented the metal. A shock-wave rocked the dome. A pulse of high-pitched sound pierced the control room. The Martians had halted.

"Do not fire again," blared the radio. "Your rage destroys yourself. That is illogical. Do not shoot."

"Stay back, then," he warned. "Shoot, Jerry, shoot!" Betty was screaming. "Don't wait."

He grinned at her weakly. He was no Samson — to pull the temple down on his own head. But if he *had* to do it ...

"Come here, Gertrude," he snarled at the Martian female, and kept the gun pointed at the duct.

She obeyed quickly. "Do not shoot. That would be illogical."

"Turn your output down to a whisper."

She obeyed. "Do not fire again at the duct."

"Then get us out of here. We'll take the male as a hostage."

"No. That would be totally unsatisfactory. Intolerable."

He snorted his contempt. "Is one sorry male worth more to you than the whole works?"

"He is the only male," she said. "You will not take the male."

The *only* male! So that's why Martian sex was a weakness. If anything happened to the male ...

"The only male of your whole race?" he asked.

"There are two others on our planet. Both are as old as this one. There was a great plague. And no male has been born of a separation since that time. The plague attacks the male during division. We find that the plague virus cannot exist on earth."

"So you decided to move in on us and take over."

"That is our intention."

"Blast the ductwork, Jerry!" Betty was begging. "They keep moving closer."

He glanced around at the circle of Martians. They were edging nearer and nearer.

He grinned at Betty. "Bring the male over here;" he called to her. "And don't ask questions."

She obeyed, and the old Martian followed her tug without protest. He seemed not to understand what was happening.

"You won't lead us out of here? With the male as a hostage?" he asked the female.

"We will not, Earthman." She made a sudden move toward him.

He blasted her, and she sat down weakly. But the gun had been turned to full strength. It should have crushed her.

"Now there is not enough energy in the device to puncture the field-guides," she said triumphantly.

The Martians began to close in again. He didn't like the thing he was about to do, because he knew what pity was. But he also knew the smell of a cornfield in the rain, and the gurgle of a happy baby, and the look on Betty's face when she married Barney—and all the other things of earth that tie a man down to his race and his kin and his great-green planet.

He shot the Martian male in the belly. He doubled up weakly and crumpled. Jerry dragged the quivering old beast to his side.

The radio was ranging and Betty was wrestling with the female. The others were plunging swiftly toward him.

He pressed the sonic gun against the male's brain-case and fired again. The creature lay still. He kept

firing until clawed hands seized him roughly and pulled him away. He felt the shattering pain of his fracture compounding as they dragged him across the floor. He moaned and grew faint.

When he was fully conscious again, Betty was bending over him and holding his head.

"Why don't they kill us?" she asked.

He glanced toward the dead male. A quivering, pulsating, excited circle of Martian females was gathered about his body.

"Why don't you run while you can?" he asked her in return. "And leave you here?" She shook her head.

He chuckled. "That's what I wanted to know. Don't worry. They won't bother us now. They can't feel anger or rage. And we're no good to them as specimens anymore, because their mission's a failure. They'll die if they don't go back to Mars."

"Why?"

"Well, why did they bring a male with them on a dangerous mission in the first place? Not to build up numbers; this was a preparatory mission. They could have brought the males later. But the male is undoubtedly very necessary to them."

He reached for one of the sonic guns dropped by the panicky females. "Come here, Gertrude," he called.

She broke away from the mourning circle and approached them slowly as if in a daze.

"What happens to a Martian female if she isn't fertilized?" he asked.

"When it is time to divide, she will go to sleep," she answered dully. "But in dividing, she will die."

"Next question. When are you leaving?"

"Immediately."

He waved the gun in the general direction of the yellow helices. "Of course you'll call our men and inform them. And have someone come pick us up."

She kept her eyes on the gun. "You are useless to us now. We cannot risk another male on this planet. We can not return. We have no need for you. We shall release you."

He grinned at Betty. "Well, baby. Are we even now? Here's a couple of hundred widows to your one."

She looked away sadly but not angrily. "It was Earth I was thinking about, Jerry. Not just Barney."

"Sure, I know. Everybody was thinking about Earth. But nobody was really down-deep mad. It takes a big mad to win a fight. And Martians just can't get mad."

He was in bed with a plaster cast when the dome blasted off. They watched its bright yellow streak taper up into the night sky — and disappear into the clouds. Too bad they couldn't see the faint red eye of Mars.

"Why were they mutilating people, Jerry?" she asked as she stared out the window.

"I asked Gertrude about that. They were trying to find out why Earthmen are immune to their plague virus." He paused and decided he'd better tell her a lie.

"They're good biologists," he went on. "They wanted to synthesize a living Martian female on the mamalian principle. They can build robot animals like that. They wanted to see if she'd be immune to the plague."

Jerry wondered how she'd react if he told her the truth. That it wasn't going to be a Martian female —but an Earth female, furnished with Martian genes. That in very fact — it was going to be Betty. She wouldn't like the idea of mothering a lot of little Martian boys — she wouldn't like it even in the retrospect world of possibilities bypassed.

She was still gazing out the window. "I feel sorry for them, Jerry —in a way."

He watched her silently.

"Millions of women—and just two men," she murmured.

"See what could happen?" he said. "If you stay in mourning too long? And plague descends? How'd you like to share a husband with that many."

She stood up quickly and reddened. "I'm going now, Jerry," she said nervously. "I'm going away and

be — well — anyway, don't try to see me ...

She moved toward the door, paused, and looked back. " ... for a couple of months, anyway." She hurried out quickly. The back of her neck was bright pink.

He settled back with a grin and listened to the sound of the rain that was beginning to fall outside. Two months? The dry, dry desert had waited ten long years.

The End

## **SIX and TEN are JOHNNY** *Walter M. Miller, Jr.*

*If you think science fiction consists solely of stories about lean and noble heroes, lovely blondes who scream well and show a lot of skin, humanoid natives of other planets who go about telepathing all over the purple landscape, ray guns blasting the Martian grffsk from its lair — well, you're all wrong!*

*For it doesn't have to be that way at all. There are a few boys around — Walt Miller, for one — who know how to avoid all the old cliches and still give you an exciting story filled with purposeful action, believable characters, sparkling dialogue — in short, real entertainment. The following is a prize example. . . .*

THE launch left the starship Archangel at 0830 hours with a landing party of six, including the pilot. It rocketed backward's along the Archangel's orbital path, then dropped rapidly toward the unbroken blanket of clouds that covered the surface of the newly discovered planet. Commander Isaacs and Lieutenant Esperson stared after it in silence until it disappeared as a tiny gleam in the distance. Then they turned to watch its blip on the radar. The greenish glow of the screen smoothed their faces into shadowless masks — the commander's expressionless, the lieutenant's glowering in thought.

As the launch's trace waned into insignificance, Isaacs glanced at Esperson with a faint smile.

"Worried?"

The lieutenant nodded.

"About what? The life forms?"

"Yeah. I had a close look at that jungle. I'd hate to sit down in the middle of it."

"The photos you brought back don't look so bad. Reminds me of the Matto Grosso from the air."

Esperson shook his blond head quickly. "You should have seen the colors, Skipper. Infrared pics don't show it the way I saw it — down under that shroud. Muddy yellow oceans, black mountains, dead white lava flows. And that jungle — it's a rotten chartreuse with big albino patches and livid streaks in it. Place looks infected, murky, brooding. Glad I didn't have to land."

"The boys'll be all right," Isaacs said jovially. "There's no evidence of intelligence. And they have enough weapons to handle any ordinary predators."

"But bacteria —"

"They'll take precautions. They took a couple of dogs along for testers and tasters. Ordinary antiseptic measures have sufficed in the past."

The communicator suddenly hummed, then spoke. "Isaacs from Launch One. We're hitting some atmosphere. How do you read me? Over."

The commander reached for a microphone. "This is Isaacs. Read you loud and clear, Rogan. Call every five minutes on the way down. If you can't land at the place we picked, give us the exact coordinates of a better spot and go on in. Over."

"Wilco and out."

Isaacs grinned at his lieutenant. "Rogan sounds nervous too. Want to sweat him out?"

"Yeah."

"Take over then. I'm going to log some sack time."

Isaacs left the cabin, and Esperson sat alone before the scope, watching the glowing globe of the mist-wrapped planet, alone since the beginning of time, now an unwilling hostess to the intruding biped from the third planet of another sun-star.

The planet was still officially nameless, designated only as G0GC-2794-II from the spectral class and catalog number of its sun, but the crew had nicknamed it "The Nun" because of its chaste and mysterious veil of clouds. For nearly a month, the Archangel had been drifting in a sixteen-hour orbit around the new world, mapping its land masses by radar and sending launches down to penetrate the atmosphere for samples and close-up photographs of the surface. But it was hard to find a place where the clouds had lifted enough to give a clear view of the land, even from an altitude of a thousand feet. After ten trips down in a launch — without actually landing — Esperson had managed to bring back a dozen passable photographs of scattered stretches of jungle. They had revealed nothing to suggest a civilized species. But Rod Esperson had a bad feeling about the place. The jungle seemed to billow and roll, but not in the way a wind would sway it.

"Isaacs from Launch One," blared the communicator.

Esperson reached for the mike. "The skipper went to bed, Hal. This is Rod. Go ahead."

"Hi, Pal. Nothing to report. Nothing but fog."

"An you in it yet?"

"Just below us. We're well into the atmosphere though. Altitude twelve miles. Radar picking up the plateau."

"Hope you can land there. Not another flat place like that in five hundred miles."

There was a brief pause, then: "I'm not particularly interested in landing at all, Rod. There's something about this place — Oh, never mind. Listen, are you going to hold that orbit?"

"I guess so. Your blast-off and interception calculations were based on our holding this course. The planet rotates in twenty hours; we go around in the same direction in sixteen hours. You'll lag behind us four and a half degrees per hour. We'll be on your horizon twenty hours from now, and we'll rise again in your west sixty hours from now. You can blast-off then and we'll rendezvous in eighty hours."

"Yeah, but I don't like that forty hours. You'll be below horizon, Rod. Can't you get in a twenty-hour orbit and stay right overhead, so we can keep in touch?"

"Sorry, Hal — there's satellite debris out there. Too much chance of getting clobbered by a half-mile hunk of rock. You'll have to spend forty hours on your own." There was a long silence, then: "Roger and out."

Esperson waited, wondering if it wouldn't be better to risk ramming a satelloid and keep the hauling launch in communicator-range. It had been Isaacs' decision to hold the present orbit. Esperson had wanted to risk the belt, maneuvering into it slowly, and mooring Archangel to the biggest satelloid near a twenty-hour orbit so as to stay with the natural drift of the debris. While they stayed with the drift, they would be reasonably safe; but getting in and out of the belt was dangerous business, and Isaacs had decided against it. He preferred leaving six men unprotected for forty hours to endangering the entire seventy-man crew of the Archangel.

Five minutes passed. Hal Rogan called again, reporting that the launch was now descending through the thick envelope of pea-soup. He laughed nervously. "Everybody's got a headache, Rod — all six of us. How about you? Did you get a sore skull when you came down here? Two guys are sick."

"You aren't breathing the atmosphere yet, are you? Lots of CO<sub>2</sub> in it. That might do it."

"No, we're still on the pressure cylinders. But everybody's got a headache. Did you get one?"

Rod paused. "Not that I noticed. But then — I've got a silver plate in my noodle, Hal. Fractured skull five years ago. I've adjusted to one continuous headache. Don't tell the skipper, though."

"Check. It may be that our air pumps are fouled up. I'll check it. Over and out."

It wouldn't be much longer now, Esperson thought. They would be landing on the low mesa and walking for the first time on the surface of the veiled Nun. And the mesa was now only a couple of hours



east of the twilight line. Soon after landing; the clouds would darken, and starless night would fall over them.

They would be safe in the ship. Or would they? The small launch was considerably less massive than some of the reptilian brutes that Earth had invented during her Mesozoic era.

He gazed fixedly at his watch. The time came for another call. But the communicator remained silent. Fifteen seconds . . . thirty . . . forty-five . . .

Tensely anxious he keyed his mike. "Hal from Rod. Give me a call. Over."

Moments later the answer came. "Sorry, Rod. I was watching the radar. We're flying at five thousand feet. Where's the bottom of this soup?"

"Lying on the ground, maybe. If you don't break through, don't risk a radar landing."

"You don't have to beg me." "How're the headaches?"

"Mine's about gone. Everybody's okay — so far."

"Try to stay that way. Keep in contact, will you? I like to know what's going on."

"I'll give you a running commentary: fog — fog — fog. Period." Esperson waited, listening to an occasional blurt of static caused by solar activities. Two minutes passed.

"I think we're breaking through, Rod. It's thinning out a little. We're at fifteen hundred feet."

"Above what?"

"The plateau. There! I think now maybe —" His voice choked off for a moment. Harsh breathing in the microphone.

"What's wrong, Hal?"

The reply was low and tense.

"Jeeziss! The color of that jungle! Putrid-looking — everything is. You can almost smell the stink, just looking at it."

Rod nodded at the screen. "Yeah — it gave me the same kind of a bang. How's the mesa look?"

"Flat. Flat enough to land, damn it! We're going down now."

The launch pilot was keeping his microphone keyed. He turned up the audio-input, and Rod listened to the growl of the rockets as the launch nosed vertically upward and settled on its tripod tail. The growl grew louder, then faded. There was a shuddering crash, then silence.

"Hal!"

"Yeah. Well, we're down."

"What do you see?"

"Vines, mostly. Whole mesa's covered with vines. We're about a hundred yards from the drop-off down to the jungle. And, I guess the mesa's about a hundred yards above the tree-tops — if you can call them trees."

"See any animals?"

"No — but Winters claims he saw something flying over the jungle. Nobody else saw it."

"Well, if you go outside, wear suits — until you see what happens to the dogs."

"Yeah, the boys are turning out the pups now. Seems to be a little commotion. Pups don't want to go."

"Place probably smells strange to them. That would do it."

"Well — listen, Rod. I'm going to get in a suit and lead the dogs outside. I'll take a remote unit with me and keep in touch with you."

"Be careful, Hal. Go armed." "Six grenades, a rocket-lobber, and side-arms. How's that? I'll all back when I get outside. Over and out."

Rod took advantage of the break to rouse Isaacs on the interphone. The commander sputtered sleepy babble for a moment.

"They're down, Skipper. Want to talk to Rogan?"

"Uh, yeah, after a while. Any trouble?"

"Nothing but nerves so far. I'm worried about nightfall."

"They can stay in the launch after dark."

"Yeah — six steaks in a package."

"What?"

"Nothing. You coming down?"

"Be there in a minute."

Rod turned back to the communicator and waited. After three minutes, he tried a call. There was no answer. He began calling at thirty second intervals. Then Hal's carrier hummed, and he heard the dogs.

"Good Lord, Hal ! What's wrong with the pups? Sound like they had their rumps painted with Tabasco sauce."

The launch-pilot's voice came back angry and tremulous. "One of them damn near tore a rip in my suit. They've gone nuts, Rod. Trying to get back in the airlock. Jeez! Francey just tore a hunk out of Mutt's ear. *Listen* to that!"

The dogs were shrieking rather than howling. There was nothing mournful about their cries, but only hysterical fright or pain. He heard tearing and stumbling sounds, assumed they were caused by the dogs scrambling about in the vines.

"Hal?"

"Yeah?"

"It's probably the carbon dioxide. Content's probably high enough to cause delusions of suffocation, for a while anyway. Better stay away from them."

"You think I'm crazy?"

"Is everybody out of the ship?"

"Yeah. It's getting kind of dark. Winters is getting set up to take some pictures from the top of the cliff. Jameson is getting some soil samples. Richards is having a look at the plants that grow up here. But damn, Rod — it all looks like one big plant to me. Everything looks like it's joined together. Vines grow right over the side of the cliff and down into the jungle. I can't make out any individual trees either. It looks like one solid tree with a million trunks, only the foliage looks more like the vines."

"See any animals yet —? Wait a minute, Hal — the skipper just me in. I'll let him take over." Still rubbing his eyes, Isaacs took the microphone. "Lo, Ron. Everything okay down there?"

"Sure, Skipper," Hal purred. "Hope you had a nice little rest and didn't get up just on *my* account."

Isaacs darkened, glowered at the microphone. "That's enough sarcasm for now, Rogan. I didn't think you needed my guidance."

"I don't."

"*What* then? An audience?"

"Forget it, Boss."

"Heh heh! Yes, well — how about it? Think you'll have time I send two men out to scout the vicinity before dark?"

"I can see all the vicinity from here. What do you want scouted?"

"The jungle, naturally."

There was an unpleasant silence, broken only by the dogs' frantic cries in the background.

"The jungle — *now*?"

"If you have the time before ark. What's the difference, now or tomorrow?"

"I've got a feeling," Rogan [uttered. "If we waited long enough, the jungle'd come up to scout us."

"What kind of drivel —?"

"Nothing, Skipper. I'll send a couple of men to look for a way down the cliff. Doubt if we can get down and back before dark though."

"Okay — you have a list of data you're supposed to collect. Collect it as soon as possible. That's all. Keep in touch with Esperson here."

Isaacs handed the microphone back to Rod, peered at the radar for a moment, then stalked out of the cabin and closed the door.

"He's gone, Hal."

"Having a fine time. Wish to hell he was here."

"Still worried?"

"I don't know. It's funny —"

"What's funny?"

"I'm not so nervous now. Feel kind of good, little sleepy. Even the dogs have shut up."

"Worn out, maybe."

"Maybe. Anyway, they simmered down all of a sudden. They're just lying there on their bellies.

Panting and looking around. It's funny —"

"Yeah?"

"I think the jungle bothered me at first because well, it kinda wriggles. Or it looks that way. But if you look at it right, it...it's got a weird sort of beauty. If you *think* about it right, that is."

"How do you mean?"

"The way it wriggles, real slow — like something climbing around in the branches, something you can't see. That gave me a chill at first. But once you figure it's not something climbing, but just the trees moving, then it's all right."

Rod shivered. "Doesn't sound all right to me! How quick could you get out of there if you had to?"

Hal laughed calmly. "Don't get ulcers up there, Rod. We'll be okay."

"I don't like the way you sound so sure all of a sudden."

Hal laughed again. "I'm going to sign off for awhile. Think the joys have found something. I'll call you back before dark."

"Okay."

Rod peered out the port at the dump crescent of the Nun hanging in space. Then he estimated where the twilight line would fall on the disk that showed on the radar scope. It was somewhere in the region of the mesa, and he knew that it must be nearly dark where the launch lay.

Minutes later, Isaacs wandered Jack, munching alternately from square of hardtack and a slab of compressed dried beef. "Hungry?" he grunted around a mouthful of food.

Rod shook his head. He was too anxious about Hal Rogan to leave the communicator. "Thirsty?" Isaacs deposited the beef atop the radar and handed him a flask.

"Water?"

"Fifty percent of it is."

Esperson had a long drink. The other fifty percent proved warmly relaxing — after he stopped gagging on it. He knew the skipper was less untroubled than he tried to appear. Isaacs seldom tipped. He sat next to Rod, peered absently at the radar, and washed down nibbles of food with sips of cut alcohol.

"You know, Esp — we ought to get a good bonus out of the Commission for this one."

"Hal Rogan and his boys ought to get one, that's for sure."

"Eh? Oh, I wouldn't worry about them."

"I'd feel better if we were in a twenty-hour orbit."

"Don't be a half-wit. I can't put seventy men in jeopardy for the sake of six."

"Yeah."

"Don't you agree?"

"Yeah. I just said I'd feel better, that's all."

Isaacs sneered half in jest. "Why didn't *you* volunteer to go down instead of Rogan?"

Rod shrugged. "You had too many volunteers anyway. I stick my neck out when it's necessary, not before. Okay?"

"Okay with me. As long as you're around when it's necessary."

"Tell you what: for an extra thousand a month, you can consider me a perpetual volunteer for everything."

"Suckers come cheaper than that."

"I know it."

Isaacs grinned and handed him the flask. He sipped it politely but ineffectively, and grinned widely back at him.

Rogan's carrier was flicking on and off, as if he started several times to put in a call, then thought better of it. Isaacs grumbled and reached for the mike, but Rogan's voice came through suddenly. Rogan sounded amused — hysterically amused, maybe.

"Rod, this is Hal. You with me? Over."

"This is Isaacs, Rogan. Stop giggling. What do you want?"

"There's a house."

Isaacs looked at Esperson and blinked. "What did he say?"

Rod Esperson's beefy face went slack. "He said — 'There's a house.'"

"That's what. I thought he said." Isaacs keyed the mike again. "What the devil are you talking about, Rogan?"

"There's a house, Skipper — down at the foot of the cliff." Rogan giggled again. "It's a log house with thatched roof. Got a light in it, and there's a fat man standing in the doorway. I can see his silhouette. He waved at us." Rod's scalp reminded him that his ancestors once possessed erectile hackles. He licked his lips and stared at the skipper. Isaacs went white, then pink.

"*Don't make cute jokes with me, Rogan!*" he bellowed. "One more crack like that and I'll have the detention cabin ready for you, boy!"

"Blow it out your obscenity!" the speaker barked. "I said there's a house down there with a light in it and a man in the doorway. Only now he's outside. He's coming up the cliff."

Isaacs sputtered and dropped the microphone. Rod grabbed it. "What the devil do you mean, Hal — 'a man'? A human? That's impossible."

"It's getting so dark, it's hard to see. Looks completely human." He paused to bellow at someone about getting a spotlight out of the ship. Then: "Hold on, Rod! I'll call you back."

"*Wait!* Don't get off the air!"

But it was too late. Rogan had evidently switched off his set. Isaacs was still growling wrathfully to himself.

"I'll have him canned, by God! Court martialled! I'll —"

"There was *something*, Skipper!" Rod offered. "I heard the dogs howling again."

"That's the way Rogan'll howl when I —"

"Take it easy, Boss. He's not kidding. That planet could conceivably have humanoid life forms."

"Baloney!"

"It has trees."

"So what?"

"Where there are trees, some animals'll learn to climb them. Tree climbers, unless they're rather small, usually develop hands. And their spines get pulled vertical by hanging from limbs. Hands are good for grasping more things than limbs. It's easier to pick fruit than it is to bite off a twig. The cleverest ones begin finding new things to do with their hands — like swinging clubs to beat hell out of the beasts that chased them up in the trees in the first place. So you've got a biped with hands and a club; the ones with enough sense to use them efficiently do a good job of survival. Whenever you've got trees, why shouldn't you have humanoids — eventually?"

Isaacs started to growl, then paused, grunted thoughtfully, and subsided. "Yeah, I've heard that drivel before. But I've also seen planets with trees — usually inhabited by winged lizards or snakes disguised to look like vines. No humanoids, Esp."

The lieutenant shrugged. "First time, maybe. Anyhow — I know Hal pretty well. He's not kidding,

Skipper."

Isaacs took a stiff drink and glared at the communicator. "Call him back again right away."

"Hal from Rod. Skipper wants you. Get on the air. Over."

They waited — to no avail.

"Rogan from Esperson! Acknowledge me, damn it! Skipper wants you. Over!"

"Chatting with friend humanoid, no doubt," Isaacs said sourly. "I'll kill that jockey." He began thoughtfully beating a big fist into his palm.

"Maybe he's in trouble, Boss."

"Yeah — he is — I assure you of that."

They fell into brooding silence. The twilight line of the shrouded Nun had crept past the low mesa, and Rod knew that the landing site was immersed in black night. Occasionally he reached for Isaacs' flask, and an hour later the Skipper went to get it refilled. The communicator remained silent, except for bursts of mild solar interference.

Isaacs got out a manual of space code and began leafing through it with grim purpose. After a time he chuckled quietly, and muttered aloud. "In the event that the ship be in flight such that the next scheduled docking at a Class A port is greater than 120 days' ship's time from date of misdemeanor or felony, ship's commander may administer summary punishment for offenses not exceeding Class 3 in gravity in order to secure immediate discipline. For Class 3 offenses, twenty lashes with a whip of rawhide not exceeding —"

"Can it, Boss. You can't get away with it."

"I can dream, bigawd! Call Rogan again."

"Launch One, this is the Archangel. Do you read me, Hal? Over."

After a moment, the carrier wave hissed quietly. "Hello, Rod — Hal. Sorry, my set went out on me. Listen, we weren't the first ship to land on this planet."

"What are you talking about? No Commission ship has ever scouted this planet before."

"I know, but remember the Yorick?"

"Uh — wait a minute." He glanced at Isaacs. "Ever hear of the Yorick?"

"Starship that got lost about ten years back. No trace of it since. But if he's going to say —"

"Okay, Hal. Skipper reads you. Go on."

"This guy — this Johnny — he was on the crew. The Yorick wasn't lost. Bum chemicals in the hydroponics; all but three of the crew died of chemical poisoning. The three couldn't handle the ship alone. They took a launch and came here."

Rod exchanged a puzzled glance with Isaacs. The skipper licked his lips and shook his head doubtfully. "Sounds fishy, Esp."

"Hal?"

"Yeah?"

"You'd better start at the beginning."

"Okay. Well, you were listening when we spotted this guy and its cabin. He came running up to the mesa as soon as he saw what ye were. He's half nuts, Rod — from living by himself all this time. But he started talking English. We got the story out of urn in bits and snatches."

"Wait a minute. You said here were three of them. What happened to the other two?"

"We can't get it straight. Like said, he's off his rocker. He keeps saying, 'But they're both right here, bethide me' — he lisps. I guess they died. He keeps talking o them, when we leave him alone. Three beds in the cabin, three places at the table. Kinda gets you. He's such a pathetic chap."

"What's his name?"

"Johnny — Johnny Sree, I think. Short fat fellow with big round eyes and a baby face. About forty, maybe but it's hard to tell on account of the discolorations."

"Huh?"

"His skin and hair have turned darn near the color of this jungle — chartreuse and splotted. Not really, but almost. He says the food did it. I don't know whether it's something he ate here or the

chemical poisoning that clobbered he Yorick's crew. It's hard to get much out of him. He just fawns on everybody and sniffles and talks about how much he'd like to have a chocolate éclair and a cup of creole coffee."

"Where's the launch he came in?"

"Not much telling. He doesn't seem to know. He might have wandered five hundred miles in ten years."

Isaacs grabbed the microphone. "Listen, Rogan!" he snarled. "I've got to stop and think this over. But by God, you keep that damn receiver on this time, or I'll have you fed to the test-dogs in small bites!"

"Oh, that reminds me, Chief. The dogs are dead."

"Wh-h-hat?"

"Dead. When Johnny came up, they went crazy again. Tried to kill him. We had to shoot them."

"Fool! Now you'll have to stay in your suits!"

There was a brief pause. "We took 'em off an hour ago, Skipper. After all, Johnny's better proof than the dogs. He's been around ten years."

Rod watched Isaacs for an explosion. But the skipper wore an icy smile. He spoke softly.

"Okay, Rogan. That's all right with me. And you can wear the suits after you get back to the ship — *all the way back to Earth* — for the crew's protection. Of course, they get a little filthy after five months, but you won't mind. Goodbye, Rogan."

The launch pilot stammered witlessly for a moment, then signed off. Rod lit a cigaret and stared at the commander.

"Want me to take another launch and go down —?"

"No."

"Well — what about it?"

"About what?"

"This Johnny Sri, or Sree." The skipper tapped a pencil and glowered silently at his own thoughts for a time. He doodled a few figures on a scratch pad, then looked up with a crafty smile. "The Nun has about sixty million square miles of land area, doesn't it?"

"Yeah."

"About half of which lies in a viable temperature zone."

"Check."

"Then the odds against Rogan's just happening to land within a five-mile radius of any given point are about four hundred thousand to one. The odds against an accidental landing within five miles of this — this Johnny Sree."

"Why talk about the odds against something that's already happened?"

"Because I wonder if it was accidental."

Rod snorted. "Wake up, Skipper. *You and I* picked the site!"

"I know, I know." Isaacs clasped his hands behind his back and paced the deck. "But why did we pick it?"

"Only decent place I found when I went down under the clouds."

"Why?"

"The fog was lifted there. You know all this! I don't get —"

"*Why* was the fog lifted there?"

Rod snorted disgust. "Call the Nun's weather bureau. What the devil are you groping for?"

"I don't know, I don't know at all." He grimaced and clucked to himself. "I just don't like freak accidents. And bumping into a lone survivor that way is a freak accident."

"Well, if you've got a hunch, why don't you have Rogan haul this Johnny back up here right now? We'll have a look at him."

"No!" He shook his head vigorously. "I won't act on a blind hunch, even in a minor matter. It's a bad habit to get into. Let Rogan use his own judgement. If he feels safe down there, he might as well finish gathering data before he comes back."

Isaacs paused, then stalked to a shelf of books and pulled down an old copy of *Annual Report of*

*the Space Commission.* He thumbed through it for a moment.

"The Yorick," he muttered, "Class K-0, thirty thousand tons, five-space cruising speed three-fifty cees, rocket thrust five-hundred meganewtons, crew ninety-five — lost after last report at co-ordinates . . ." He stopped reading, returned the book to the shelf, and sighed. "Maybe I'm just jumpy, Esperson. The last report was about three light-years from here — in Fornax."

"You mean you didn't believe this Johnny was a crewman?" Rod laughed. "Sure — local fauna evolves humanoids, also evolves an Earth language, and a knowledge of chocolate eclairs."

Isaacs flushed. "Telepathy, maybe."

"Gathering notions to bolster your hunch?"

"All *right*, damn it! What do you think then, Esperson?"

"Nothing."

"You think everything's okay down there?"

Rod paused. "I've got no logical thoughts about it. Just a feeling."

"What's that?"

"It's nasty. Can't quite put my finger on it. When I look at that damn chartreuse jungle — well, it reminds me of an old spacer I knew once. He went schizo on Mars Station. Hated everybody. He'd sit and brood, and stare out at the lichen patches.

Pretty soon his face'd start wiggling, changing expression — fear, rage, lust, and then gloating cruelty. He'd whisper to himself. You'd wonder who he was murdering in his daydreams and how."

Isaacs didn't laugh. "Of course, I haven't seen the jungle—"

"What bothers me: Rogan's feelings seemed to change after he landed."

There was a long silence. Isaacs sighed. "Well, call him up tell him to go according to schedule and bring this fellow back at rendezvous time."

Rod nodded and reached for the mike.

"And tell him to report in every hour until we're below his horizon."

He put in the call, and Hal answered in a leisurely voice. He could hear laughter in the background.

"Having wonderful time," Rogan called jovially. "Wish you were here."

"You sound drunk. What's wrong?"

"Wrong? Nothing, nothing at all. Just finished a big meal. Made me sleepy. Johnny's a good cook. Fed all five of us like kings."

"*Johnny!* Migawd! You don't mean you're eating stuff that grows down there!" He glanced in horror at Isaacs who was shaking his head and wiping his face.

"Sure, Rod. Food's fine. Nothing wrong with it. Say — I like this place! Be marvelous for a colony."

"Tell him to come back up," muttered the Skipper. "They've gone nuts! Tell him to pile back in that launch and get back up here immediately."

"Bringing Johnny?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, listen Hal! Skipper's orders: return to the Archangel immediately. Let the survey go. Let everything go. Get hack up here, and bring Johnny."

There was a long silence, then Rogan grunted belligerently. "*Why?*"

Isaacs grabbed the mike. "Because I said to, you obscenity!" he roared.

"Sorry, Skipper," Rogan said dully. "I can't."

"*What?*"

"I can't. One of the jets is out. Greeley's working on it."

"As soon as it's fixed then, get back up here!"

"I don't see why."

"You don't *need* to see why, Rogan. I'm leading the band."

"Well — okay, but it'll take a while. Half a day at least."

"Call in every hour. That's all."

"Check, Boss. Over and out." Isaacs and Esperson mused in silence for a time.

"Wonder what he meant —'fed all five of them'," Isaacs muttered. "Where's the sixth?"

"Greeley— working on the ship," Rod offered.

"Oh — yeah." The skipper blew a hard breath. "Go get some rest if you want to, Esperson. I'll make the next couple of contacts." Rod retired willingly. From his hammock he could see the thin white crescent of the Nun through the viewing port. He shuddered and turned his back on it.

He awoke with the feeling that someone had called him. He glanced at the Nun again. The crescent was facing the opposite direction. He looked at his watch — nearly a nine-hour sleep.

"Esperson!" growled the interphone call system. "How many times do I have to call? Answer me."

He fumbled sleepily for the call switch. "Sorry, Skipper — I was dead. What's up?"

"Get down here right away."

"Trouble?"

No answer. Isaacs was evidently busy at something. Rod switched his jack-box to command-position and listened briefly to the radio. Rogan was on, arguing hotly with Isaacs. He made little sense of it.

He dressed hurriedly and paced down the corridor to the control cabin. Isaacs faced the communicator, white-faced and speechless. He changed chairs when Rod entered.

"You talk to him, Esp. Maybe *I'm* crazy."

"Talk about what?"

"Just talk to him."

He lifted the mike thoughtfully. "Hal, this is Rod. What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong!" snapped the loudspeaker. "Skipper's playing jokes, that's all."

"Sorry, I missed it. What're you talking about?"

"Ask him!"

Rod looked questioningly at Isaacs. The commander's face was a rigid mask, his eyes narrow. He grunted a command.

"Ask Rogan how many men went down in the launch."

"Six did — you know that."

"Ask him."

"Hello, Hal — how many men in your party?"

Rogan's tone was disgusted. "You too, huh? Okay, I'll call the roll: Winters, Greeley, Jameson, and myself."

"Go on."

"That's *it!* Four! Quit your kidding!"

Rod's scalp crawled. "What about Richards and Elvin?"

"Oh *noooo!* All right, we'll play games. Richards married Elvin and they went on a honeymoon. Listen — I never heard of any Richards or Elvin. Cut it out, will you? You give me the creeps."

"We give *him* the creeps!" Isaacs groaned.

"What are you doing now?" Rod called.

"Finishing my breakfast."

"More of Johnny's cooking?" "Sure. He enjoys having company."

"How's that defective tube?"

"Greeley's still working on it. Few more hours should do it."

"We'll be below your horizon pretty quick now."

"So what?"

"Yeah." He swallowed hard and looked at the skipper. "What can I say to him?"

"Nothing that I haven't already said. Just break it off."

"That's all, Hal. Call us immediately if any more men disappear."

"Who's disappeared? Quit it, will you?"

"Yeah. Over and out."

The cabin was full of hard breathing. Isaacs got up and paced the floor. Esperson brooded by the radio.



"Skipper, shall I take a launch now and go down —"

"No! No more men on the Nun!"

"Look, Rogan's my friend. It's my neck if —"

Isaacs shook his head. "Wait until they get that tube fixed. Then we'll see."

At the end of an hour, Rogan called again to report progress. Greeley would be finished soon. But the communicator signal had lost strength, now emanating from the very limb of the planet. Soon they would be out of contact.

"I can't stand just sitting here, Skipper!"

"Then go take a walk."

"I'd rather take a flight. Down."

No." Rod cradled his head in his hands and stared grimly at the deck. "I wish we had some answers."

"To what questions?"

"That's just it! There aren't even any sensible questions to ask. How can you ask about Richards and Elvin when Rogan won't even admit their existence?"

The skipper smiled mirthlessly. "I learned a few things while you were asleep."

"About what?"

"That jungle. It's all one big organism — grown together. I got Rogan to hold still long enough to tell me about it. It's an animal and vegetable duality. Symbiosis to the point of part-time identity. Did Rogan mention the flying things to you?"

"Yeah."

"They grow on the trees, like fruit. But they're apparently animal. They break loose when they're mature. The jungle feeds them. In return, they keep the insects out of the trees. And Rogan said something about there being an animal down there too, but I didn't get it straight."

"One animal?"

"Evidently. He said he hadn't seen it though. But it's that jungle that bothers me. Apparently the keynote of life on the Nun is cooperation rather than conflict."

"How's that?"

"The jungle feeds Johnny too. Deliberately, I mean. Rogan said the fruit grows right in through the window of the cabin." He laughed peculiarly. "I guess it put on a few extras for the boys."

Rod shivered. "And what does Johnny do for the jungle?"

"There," Isaacs said grimly, "you have a good question."

The time for another contact was approaching. Rod tried three times before he heard an answering signal.

". . . barely hear you, Rod," came Rogan's faint voice. "You're on my horizon. When are you going to send somebody down . . ." A crackle of static drowned the rest of it.

"Hal from Rod, Hal from Rod. Say again, please. You want us to send somebody down. I didn't get the rest of it. Say again, please. Over."

The voice came as a feeble whisper. ". . . somebody down to fix the tube. Nobody here knows how. When are you going to . . ."

"Hal from Rod. I thought Greeley had it about fixed. What's wrong. Can't Greeley finish what he started? Over."

"Say again, Rod. Didn't quite get that name. Over."

"Greeley. Greeley. I spell: george-roger-easy-easy-love-easy-yoke. Greeley. Can't he fix it? Over."

". . . never heard of Greeley. More gags, huh?"

"Oh no"" Esperson clapped his forehead and groaned. Isaacs made a sick sound in his throat. "Hal from Rod. Who's down there? Call the roll again."

"I'm getting sick of this," came the weak whisper. "There's me —Rogan. Okay?"

"Who else?"

"Winters and Jameson, of course! And Johnny Six."

"Huh! I thought his name was Sree?"

"Three? What gave you that idea? Not Three — *Six*."

"But you said — *Sree!*" Esperson nearly screamed it.

"Not Sree either. I didn't say anything of the kind. I said Six."

Rod stuttered for a moment and offered the microphone to Isaacs. Isaacs stared at it and shook his head. He looked dazed.

"Listen!" Rod shouted. "Can't you fix that jet yourself?"

". . . can try, but I'm no mech . . ."

There was a sputter of static. The signal faded out.

"Hal from Rod. Over."

No answer.

"Hal, Hal, Hal! Hal Rogan from starship Archangel. Launch One from the Archangel. Anybody-at-all from Esperson. Answer me. Over."

Silence, save for faint cracklings from the loudspeaker.

"It's no use, Esp. Horizon's cut us off. We'll have to wait forty hours."

"*Please*, Skipper! Let me take a launch and —"

"Shut up! If you think I'm going to send any more men down there, you're nuts! At least not while we're out of communication with that point on the planet."

Esperson's voice went cold. "How will you enter it in the log? — 'Left six men to die on 2794-11 without bothering to investigate' "

"Maybe, maybe I will!" Isaacs snapped.

"Excuse me, Commander. I think I'll go back to my cabin." He started out.

"Wait."

"Okay?"

"I guess you're right. We've got to do something. We'll get out of this orbit and back up to get in communicator range again. Then you can take a launch down into the atmosphere. I'll go with you in fact — to make damn sure you don't land unless it's safe."

"Quinn has the reactors half-dismantled for thirty-day inspection, Skipper. It'll take a couple of hours to get started, then two or three more hours to jockey it back over Rogan's meridian."

"All right!" Isaacs snapped. "Five hours is better than forty, isn't it?"

"Sure, Boss. Thanks."

"You might as well get a launch ready. And pick eight big huskies to go with us. See that they take all the arms they can carry."

Esperson grinned and hurried away — to pack a crate of incendiary grenades. If the jungle proved a threat, he could always start a few forest fires.

Starships such as the Archangel were not built to do much maneuvering in strong gravitational fields. They were assembled in space, and they stayed in space; landings were accomplished by launch while the starship remained in an orbit about the planet. When the centrifugal force of the ship's curved course did not match the force of gravity for its orbit, continuous rocket-thrust and continuous piloting were needed to hold it in the desired position.

But after three hours, the site of Rogan's landing was back in communicator range. Isaacs tried several calls without result.

"He wouldn't be listening, Skipper," Rod offered. "He thinks we're out of range."

"Have you got the men ready?"

"They're waiting in the launch. It'll leave the ship pretty short handed."

Isaacs nodded, then jabbed the interphone button. "Allenby from, Isaacs. Call me."

"Go ahead, Chief," grunted the speaker. "Allenby speaking."

"You'll be in command until we get back. Hold over the meridian as long as you can. Then build up orbital velocity again and hold it. We should be back before then, I'm sure."

"Check."

"One other thing. If we don't get back within eighty hours, go home."

"Do *what*?"

"Go home. Don't send another launch. You can't spare the manpower."

"I—I—"

"What's the matter?"

"Sir, would you mind writing out that order and signing it in the presence of two witnesses?"

Isaacs smiled sourly. "Sure, Al. We want to make sure the Commission doesn't blame you, if you have to go back without us. Don't we?"

"I—"

"Shut up."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll write out the order."

Minutes later, the belly of the Archangel groaned open, and the launch swung slowly out on grapples into the sun-glaring blackness. Esperson sat in the pilot's seat with Isaacs at his right, glaring down at the orb of the Nun. Eight men sat buckled in behind.

"Let 'er go."

The launch drifted slowly away as the grapples gave it a parting shove. Rod hit the turning jets, aimed the launch astern of the mother ship, and started the rockets. The skipper stared back at the Archangel as the small craft dove out of the orbit. "Saying good-bye?" Rod grunted.

Isaacs muttered inaudibly and turned his gaze on the planet as the Archangel vanished above and behind them. It was night again on the mesa, but dawn would be approaching by the time they landed. Rod tried periodic calls, without rousing Rogan.

The disk grew until it blotted a third of space. The skipper touched his hand to his forehead and murmured weakly.

"What's wrong, Boss?"

"Headache."

Rod glanced back at the others. One man was clenching his head between his hands and shaking it violently. Another was pounding his temples with his palms. A third hugged his knees and looked sick. Rod frowned; he felt nothing.

As they entered the cloud blanket, Isaacs groped for a medical kit and swallowed two anti-nausea pills.

"Better pass 'em around, Skipper. You're not alone."

"Alone," he groaned. "That's the way I feel — like we're not alone."

"*Huh*? I mean the boys 're sick too."

"Oh." He pitched the medical kit back to the huskies.

"Help any?"

"Not yet."

But half an hour later, he lifted his face out of his hands, straightened, and grinned.

"Feel better?"

"Yeah. That was a lulu! Felt like chickens pecking around in my head."

The others seemed similarly relieved.

"Skipper?"

"Yeah?"

"Have you ever bumped into any telepathic organisms?"

"Nah! Don't believe it's possible."

"What about those communicating plants on Beta Hydri Four?"

"What about 'em? Might be subterranean supersonics."

"Yeah — maybe."

"What are you getting at, Esperson?"

"Nothing. Nothing that won't take care of itself after awhile."

They fell silent. The mesa had grown to the size of a large coin on the radar screen when they broke through the bottom of the clouds.

"Migawd! It's not dawn yet, but you can see!" Isaacs gasped.

Rod peered uneasily at the gloomy but faintly glowing jungle. "Phosphorescence," he murmured.

"Believe I can see well enough to land. Shall I try it, Skipper?"

"No. Circle awhile. Try to get Rogan on the communicator."

He tried for a time in vain. Then, after the fourth call . . .

"Hello, Launch Two, thith ith Johnny Nine. Welcome to my little world." It was a high burley voice, jovial yet strangely affected.

Goose flesh crawled along Eserson's sides. He shivered and lanced at the skipper. Isaacs tared moodily ahead.

*Johnny Three, Johnny Six, Johnny Nine — what the devil!* Esperson scowled.

"Johnny from Launch, where's Rogan? Over."

"Athleep. They're all thleepig.,,

"How about Richards and Greeley and Elvin?"

"Thleeping too."

"Not missing?"

"Nobody ith mithing, thir."

"Then wake them up, will ou?"

There was a pause. "It'th not heir time to be awake, thir. I cannot." There was a sharp click.

"Hey there! Don't go off the air!" But it was too late.

He glanced at Isaacs again. The skipper made no emotional response at all to the conversation.

"Skipper, were you listening?" "Yeah — I guess it was a joke after all. He said they were all sleeping."

"You believe it, huh?"

Isaacs shrugged, almost indifferently.

Rod circled the vicinity of the mesa until the underbelly of the clouds became gray with dawn, and the pale green phosphorescence of the jungle faded into gloomy morning. He stared at the landing site until he spotted the first launch.

"Skipper! Look at Launch One — lying on its *side!* And it's half covered by vines."

Isaacs peered for a time, then nodded. "Yeah."

"Doesn't bother you, huh?" Rod snapped irritably.

"Bother me? Yeah, I guess it does." His face remained impassive.

Rod glanced back at the others. Two of them were dozing. The others waited apathetically. No one seemed tense or nervous. Maybe *I'm* just out of guts, he thought irritably.

"Want to land now, Skipper?" he muttered, hoping for a negative answer.

"Sure. Might as well."

Twice he buzzed low over the plateau, hoping to see a human figure waving or signalling as he passed. He saw no one. The mesa was empty save for the vines and the toppled launch.

"Go ahead and land," Isaacs grumbled.

Rod growled a curse to himself, threw the ship into a vertical climb, adjusted the thrust to match the gravity, then lessened it by a small degree and watched the land float upward beneath them. The ship settled, scorched half-an-acre of vines, and rumbled down on its tripodal tail structure with scarcely a bounce. An automatic control blasted a white fan of fire-extinguishing vapor in a fifty-yard radius about the ship.

Rod waited for a moment until the dust and smoke had cleared, then looked around for crewmen from the first launch. The small tableland was still empty.

"Wonder where Johnny Whatsis went to?" he grumbled.

Isaacs was already out of his seat and heading for the airlock with the others following close behind. He called after them anxiously.

"Don't you think you better wait, Skipper, until —"

The smack and thud of the lock cut him off, and his ears crackled as the pressure changed abruptly. They had propped open the inner door and opened the outer. Rod shook his head and climbed out of the control seat. He tripped over a grenade-thrower and cursed. Half of them had forgotten their weapons. *What was wrong with them?* This was an alien world. They all knew better — especially Isaacs.

He picked up the grenade thrower and went to stand in the airlock, staring out across the mesa. The vines crawled everywhere, tangles of dark tendrils that lacked extensive foliage. The bodies of the dogs lay near the other ship, and he noticed that the vines had already grown in a tight net about them — as if seeking nourishment in the dead flesh. He shuddered as he saw the tip of a tendril move slowly upward and turn its tip in a slow circle, as if searching for the source of some external stimulus that it felt. It paused as it pointed in the general direction of the men who were now milling about the edge of the cliff.

Rod leaped down from the airlock and trod across the vines to where the other ship lay helpless. He prowled about it for a time, then opened the hatch and slipped inside. One look around the cabin chilled him. The instrument panels were wrecked, the rocket controls dismantled.

Clearly sabotage. But who —? He heard someone climbing through the hatch.

"Nithe weather, ithn't it?" burred a voice behind him.

Rod ducked low as he whirled and snatched reflexively at his sidearms. A small yelp escaped him, and his hair felt erect. Johnny Nine stood looking at the gun. He smiled blandly — a chubby fellow with tiny teeth and a skin whose texture suggested rosiness. But its actual color was gray, tinged with yellow-green. He seemed to be concentrating deeply for a moment. Then he shook his head.

"You aren't like the otherth, are you?" he said, and snickered.

Rod grunted and let the gun fall, but he kept it in hand.

"The retht of uth are different from you."

"What difference —?"

"I don't think you'll ever like thith plathe."

"I hate it — as of now!"

"That *ith* unfortunate."

Something about Johnny revolted him. "Get out of the way!" he snarled, and started toward the airlock. When Johnny failed to move fast enough, he shoved him roughly aside. The plump man staggered, tripped, grabbed at a tuning unit as he fell. He yelped and peered at his hand, bleeding from a small cut. The blood was nearly black.

Sickened, Rod moved on. As he let himself down outside, there was a muffled explosion from the direction of the other ship, followed by hearty laughter. He stopped to stare. A wisp of smoke drifted from the other lock. Seven men stood in a half circle, grinning at it broadly.

"What's going on?" he bellowed in fright.

No one seemed to hear him. He started toward the launch on a dead run. Another explosion — inside the ship — and it sounded like a grenade. More smoke from the lock. He cried out frantically as he ran. The vines tripped him and he sprawled headlong, cracking his head against a rock. He lay dazed for a moment, feeling gingerly around the dangerous spot in his skull where a piece of bone was missing, replaced by a thin silver plate. It seemed okay, but he felt dizzy.

Looking up, he saw Isaacs and another man emerge from the lock, sway slightly, and shake t heir heads as if recovering from shock. The men's grins disappeared; they seemed to come to their senses.

"Can anybody repair an instrument panel and an air pump?" the skipper bellowed. "We've got some trouble with the equipment!"

Rod groaned in horror and climbed weakly to his feet, shaking off a vine that had tightened about his ankle. He ran toward them again.

"Somebody's got to fix that stuff!" Isaacs pleaded.

"Migawd, Skipper!" Rod bellowed. "What happened? What did you do?"

Isaacs failed to answer, failed even to see or hear him. Rod grabbed the nearest crewman by the shoulder and shook him.

"Barnes! Tell me what happened."

Barnes rocked with the shaking, but seemed not to notice it. He was smiling dazedly at Isaacs, standing in the airlock.

"We *must* have an instrument-man out of nine men!" the skipper called plaintively.

"*Obermann!*" Rod roared.

"You're an instrument-man! Speak up, damn it!"

Obermann ignored him. Rod pushed him forward. Obermann recovered his balance but failed to make a further response.

"Skipper!" Rod called, pushing his way toward the lock. "Get away from the launch. Get everybody away. I can fix it."

". . . out of nine men," the skipper was saying.

"Ten men!" Rod roared. "Get out of the way!"

Isaacs ignored him completely. In rage, he caught the commander's ankle and jerked. Isaacs tumbled forward, fell four feet, and landed in a sprawled heap on the ground. He groaned slightly, then picked himself up indifferently, and addressed the men again.

"Well, then. I guess there's nothing to do but call the Archangel to send down a couple of repairmen."

Rod grunted a curse and kicked Isaacs in the seat of the pants. He sprawled again, but took no notice of the fact. Esperson was trembling. But he was never a man to deny the obvious, just because he lacked an explanation of it. The men refused to acknowledge his existence; he faced the fact, and the hell with immediate logic. He dived for the airlock and pulled himself inside.

The grenades had wrecked several panels and the airpump. There was no getting away until they were fixed. But no third launch was going to be called down from the Archangel! Of that he meant to make certain. He removed the power-amplifier tube from the communications transmitter and pocketed it, together with the three spares.

Isaacs re-entered the launch, bumped into him, stepped around him without recognizing his presence. Rod leaned against the wall and watched him try to use the set. When he failed, he went back outside.

"Any radiomen?"

There was no answer from the group.

Rod left the launch and watched them throng back across the mesa to the cliff where they wandered aimlessly, peering down at the jungle. He glanced toward Rogan's launch. Johnny Nine sat in the vines near it, watching the others. Rod stalked toward him, and stood a few feet away, automatic dangling in his hand. They stared at each other coolly. Johnny was holding his cut hand. The tip of a vine tendril was wound about his wrist and touched the cut as if it had grown fast there.

"What *are* you?"

"My name is Johnny Nine." He paused. "What was Rogan's wife's maiden name?" he snapped. "Alma Marne," said the dappled fat man.

The automatic twitched upward, then paused. It was just possible that Rogan had supplied him with that information in conversation. He needed to find something that Rogan certainly wouldn't have spread around voluntarily, something that Johnny wouldn't know, unless

"What kind of operation was performed on Alma last earth-year? "

"Ah — her left breath was removed for canther."

Rod gritted his teeth and shot Johnny Nine in the belly. The shot blended with the scream. When he doubled forward, Rod shot him again in the top of the head. He slumped. The writhing response of the vines was immediate, but he had no time to watch. There was shouting from the cliff-top, and a shot. The bullet sang past him and ricocheted from the hull of Launch One.

He ducked low and raced around behind the launch, then scurried for a low ridge. Another bullet struck the ground to his left and sprayed him with fragments of rock. He veered and dodged and made it across the ridge. The shots ceased. There were no sounds of pursuit. Evidently the awareness of his presence had been only temporary. He stopped, then crawled back to the top of the ridge. Isaacs and the others had gathered around Johnny, staring down in bewilderment.

Where was the source of the hypnotic delusion? Apparently Johnny had been only its focus. The jungle — the organismic jungle? Or something that lurked unseen therein? And what made him immune?

The only difference that recommended itself immediately was the silver plate in his skull. If telepathic transfer were possible, its medium would have to be some quantitatively measurable energy form, perhaps electromagnetic in character. And that silver plate: it might be like the electrostatic shielding around an electron tube.

He looked around, surveying the terrain behind him and beyond the ridge. It sloped down gently into the jungle. The mesa was shaped like the rock of Gibraltar, steep toward the south, but sloping northward.

As long as the others remained in a state of hypnotelepathic suggestibility, he dared not risk rejoining them. Whatever power controlled their actions might order his death, as it had ordered the sabotage of the ship. He eased himself down from the ridge and hurried down the slope toward the jungle — eerie and fetid. Its odor was funereal, like incense at a Mass for the dead. And it hissed wetly within itself, a slushy dripping sound.

As he walked along its edges, seeking a path around the mesa, the foliage and tendrils seemed to slowly turn, following him like a sunflower tracking the sun. He noticed that the vines had their origins about the roots of the trees; perhaps they were connected.

He followed the contour of the foot of the slope, wending his way around, and steering clear of the dense growth. A six-foot, orchid-like blossom followed his approach, and began to grow slowly out to block his path, supported by an arm-thick tendril. It faced him like the open jaws of a rattler, its petals thick and white, its throat an ugly crimson. He stopped. The thing inched toward him.

He shot it through the supporting tendril. The flower squeaked. The jaws snapped shut. It writhed back out of his path and thrashed about in the brush. He passed several others like it as he moved ahead, but instead of trying to intercept, they withdrew deeper into the tangled growth. Some of them were closed — with bulges flowing in their tendrils. The bulges varied in size, and one was large enough to suggest the possible fate of Rogan and the others.

Grimly, he moved on. The slope became a steep embankment, developed an overhang of rock. It began to rain. He stepped under the overhang to keep dry and stood studying the writhing jungle. There were pods dangling from the mesh of branches. They varied in size from a few inches in length to several feet, but all resembled gourds in shape. He chose the largest for a target and put a bullet through its fat bottom. It writhed and leaked yellow. It thudded and changed shape and wrestled within itself, as if something were trying to get out.

Then it split half open, and a hideous face peered wildly out. It shrieked its pain to the jungle. Then the fruit collapsed, and it fell thirty feet to crash in the brush where it lay whistling *kreee kreee kreee*.

Rod shivered. The thing had been a batlike creature with white membranous wings folded about its weak foetal body. After a time it fell silent in the brush. The rain continued.

A popping sound came from directly overhead. He looked up. A broken vine was swinging there, pendulumlike. Another broke while he stared. The vines were grown tightly around a large loose rock. With a startled shout he darted out into the rain. The vines were making a concerted effort to loosen the rock. He watched for several minutes until it thundered loose and crashed down where he had been standing.

He hurried away after growling an enraged curse at the jungle. Half-an-hour later he rounded a rock and saw a cabin ahead. He approached warily, noticing the profusion of giant blossoms that grew about it. Some were open, others were closed — in various stages of what seemed to be a swallowing operation. As he drew nearer, he saw that the cabin was built of *living* stuff, a network of tightly woven vines and vegetable material that was still attached to the chartreuse jungle.

He paused doubtfully near the doorway, then entered the single room, wondering if the walls would suddenly writhe inward to crush him. But the movements in the jungle-stuff always seemed to be leisurely, probably accomplished by differential growth rather than by muscular action. He sat near the doorway, just out of the rain, and stared up at the cliff-top.

*I have no facts for analysis*, he thought gloomily. There was no predictability about the situation because he lacked data concerning the life-form, its goals, whims, functions. What were the semantic reactions of a jungle? He could not even call it an intelligent jungle, without anthropomorphism. Its activities, however, seemed somehow related to intelligence. While he watched the cliff-top a flying thing appeared, soaring high over the jungle, then out of sight over the mesa. Rogan once intimated that their function was that of insect-catcher, but they themselves seemed to have a vague structural relation to insect-forms, and perhaps to bats.

*My goal is to get away from here*, he thought. But he could not approach the mesa without exposing himself to the insane behavior of the others. Possibly the jungle might use them to kill him.

The flying thing reappeared suddenly, and Rod's belly twisted hard. The thing carried a man in its talons, and it seemed to be struggling to stay aloft. Once over the rim of the cliff, it swooped toward the jungle. Rod darted outside. The creature was bearing its burden down toward the cabin.

The huge wings beat a bass throbbing in the air. He plastered himself against the cliff and held the gun ready while he watched it. The man was Jeffers, and he appeared to be conscious but not struggling.

*Kreee kreee kreee ...*

Something moved in the brush near the cabin. A giant blossom stirred, then groped upward —like a young bird opening its maw to receive food. The winged creature dropped toward it. Its burden hung motionless, watching.

Rod's gun barked. The blossom snapped closed, its stem writhing. The insect-bat cried out, then flapped higher with its burden, momentarily confused. Then without warning it dropped out of sight behind the cabin. There was a sickening urp. The creature flew upward — alone. Cursing angrily, Rod fired twice. The thing shrieked and crashed against the cliff. It lay at the edge of the brush, one wing twitching slightly. Vines moved slowly about it, seemed to attach themselves to the carcass. Rod darted around the cabin. There was no sign of Jeffers. Several closed blossoms hung in the foliage, exhibiting various stages of digestion. One of them was still quivering, and it showed no bulge in its stem. Cursing angrily, he wrestled through the entangling foliage and attacked the fat stem with a knife. It proved itself tough as an oak-root. After inserting a fresh clip in his automatic, he cut it nearly through with five shots, wrestling against its slow serpentine movement as it tried to withdraw. He finished it with the knife, then tried to drag the closed blossom away. He tripped and fell headlong. Vines had grown tight about his legs.

He hacked them away with savage haste born of fright, and tugged the cumbersome blossom out into the clear space before the cabin where he began slicing at the tough, leathery hide that held Jeffers imprisoned. The man was not stirring.

At last he had it open, and Jeffers, still folded comfortably in a vaguely foetal position with his eyes closed, began to stir. He opened his eyes and looked around calmly. He picked himself up and blinked at his surroundings. He appeared completely unconcerned.

"Feel okay, Jeff?" Rod grunted.

The big man failed to answer. He stared along the rim of the pingle, saw a blossom that was open, and made a queer noise in his throat — like an infant gurgling. His big face beamed in a childish smile. He turned and lumbered toward the blossom.

Rod noised a desperate yelp and hit him from behind with a living tackle, then clubbed him with the gun-butt. Jeffers had a thick skull. He remained stubbornly conscious, rolled over, kicked Esperson in the midsection. Rod went down groaning. Jeffers caught his ankles and began dragging him toward the eagerly waiting blossom, which had snaked toward them and tilted its jaws at a convenient angle.

Rod waited until Jeffers released his ankles to get a better grip; then he stabbed the possessed crewman in the thigh. Jeffers stumbled and crashed in the brush. Rod kicked the awareness out of him, and dragged him back to the clear space. Minutes later, he lay tightly trussed with strips of his own



clothing.

*Now what to do with him?*

He sat down to think. The rain had stopped. The jungle was hissing. He was hungry, but he dared to eat nothing that was available short of the ship's provisions, and he could not reach the ship.

Intuition, strange process of unconscious association and abstraction, he felt its stirrings. Telepathic hypnosis silver cranial section — screening — hunger — food — Johnny's cooking — pots and pans — metal — the problem of Jeffers —

He grunted suddenly, arose and stalked back inside the cabin. There in the corner was a small chemical heat-unit taken from the first launch. There also was a set of telescoping aluminum pots. The idea seemed too ridiculously easy and obvious, but so were most ideas of any value. He separated the pots, chose one about head-size, and went out to try it on Jeffers' recently assaulted skull.

After a little beating and shaping with the gun-butt, he made it a fair fit, punched a couple of holes, and tied it over Jeffers' cranium like a helmet. The man was groaning, but still not conscious. Rod sat down to wait.

The jungle had become a steam-world, and the vapor obscured the cliff-top like a gray shroud. He noticed that the only path of direct ascent and descent, without skirting the mesa, was a tangled ladder of vines. But one glance at it was enough to satisfy him that it was useless to him. The ladder was alive, and certainly capable of pulling loose and collapsing when he was half-way up.

He thought of Johnny — and remembered what Rogan said about insect catchers, and a single animal that lived in the jungle. Evidently Johnny was the animal, living in symbiosis with the single vegetable form. Johnny Three at first — and Six made nine. And ten made nineteen, if the creature could manage it.

Had the jungle itself devoured the original lost crewmen — and given birth to a complex organism built as a composite synthesis of the three? Such speculation was pure guesswork, involving undefined terms, and perhaps meaningless formulations. Still, lacking facts, he pursued it. Were nine men still somehow alive in Johnny? That was nonsense, for consciousness changed, moment by moment, so that Yesterday's Esperson was not the same man as Today's Esperson, but bound to his past-person only by memory of experience.

The only faintly reasonable hypothesis that he could formulate was that in consuming an animal organism, the jungle so completely analyzed its micro-structure that it even understood the significance of patterns imbedded in the tissue, comprehending the bio-chemistry of memory and consciousness, so that it could duplicate portions of the psychophysiological structure, the duplication implying a similarity of consciousness and function. Facts were too scarce for such guesswork. But he urgently needed some sort of hypothesis as a tentative guide for action.

Jeffers began to come awake. He stirred in his bonds and moaned. His eyes fluttered open and groped for something to cling to. They found the jungle, and the moan became a gurgle of fright.

"Jeff! Snap to!"

The eyes found Rod. Saneness returned slowly. He muttered a foul oath and it seemed to restore his confidence. He strained at his bonds, choked, and reddened angrily.

"How about it, Jeff!" Rod snapped.

"Huh? Get me out of this mess!" the man growled.

"You know where you are and what happened?"

The struggling subsided. He looked around again, saw the jungle-flowers and shuddered.

"Some kind of damn dream!"

"Uh-uh, pal. You did it." Jeffers shook his head. His mind refused the datum.

"I couldn't!"

"You could and did. If you didn't, how would I know what you dreamed?"

"Huh?"

"About the — flying thing and the flower."

His expression went wild again.

He struggled. His helplessness seemed to induce nausea. He closed his eyes and fell back in a state of shock.

"Start telling me what happened!" Rod demanded, shaking him hard.

"Huh?"

"What went on inside you? Damn it, we've got to get facts."

Jeffers shuddered. "I can't."

"You can, and bigawd you *will*! If you want to live. What's the matter? Memories're nasty?"

"Jeez!" Jeffers shuddered, clenched his eyes closed, and began babbling disjointed nonsense, phrases and impressions and ugly memory images, like a man in narco-hypnosis.

Rod listened carefully, occasionally encouraging him with a brief utterance of attention. The babble made a little sense, by reason of its content.

". . . a big soft smother, all wet . . . giant came angry and rough . . . need hungry poison . . . roared and ruins me with sharp thing . . . soggy strangle . . . hurts because I wanted hurts . . ."

Rod frowned thoughtfully. The man had been only half-aware of his surroundings during the possession. His thoughts had been infantile, and controlled apparently by a force that caused the things that he perceived to appear identical to memory images from other ages of his life. The blossom — it became a mother, affectionately muzzling an infant, murmuring, cooing: "I could just eat you up!" The perceptions became more than symbols, became identities — while somehow the whole man remained externally rational.

He was too absorbed in listening to the disjointed babble, and he failed to hear the thing come down the ladder of vines behind him — until it walked across the clearing and spoke.

"Pleathe don't move, Ethperthon."

He stiffened. "Johnny!"

"I have a gun aimed at your back. Turn around thlowly."

Rod turned rapidly — with a snarl. The chubby man retreated a step, and the gun moved threateningly. He showed no ill effects for having been shot through abdomen and skull. What the jungle created, it could restore. He started to his feet.

"Behave aggrethively, and you die, Lieutenant. Cooperate, and you live — forever." His large eyes were fanatic green pools of determination.

He hesitated. "What do you want me to do?"

"Firtht — lift Jefferth into —the Flower." He said "Flower" as a mystic might say "Gate of Heaven".

Rod stared at him distastefully and spat. He glanced up at the fog shrouding the cliff-top. "And then climb in one myself, I guess, huh?"

"Yeth. That followth."

"Why? Why do you want it? Why does — the jungle want it?"

Johnny paused, frowning impatiently. "How elth could we know what you know?"

So that was it! The jungle learned by ingestion, gathered information through its feeding process. Its books were organisms, full of memory-images and learned data — and the jungle was literally hungry for knowledge, and perhaps for the memory-experiences of the devoured animal.

"You don't want Jeffers," he said. "Everything *he* knows is wrong."

The big man mumbled on the ground.

"Lift him into the Flower, Lieutenant!" Johnny snapped.

"Wait! We can make some kind of a —"

"There'th no *need* for a deal. I have the gun."

"But there's a way you can have your cake —"

"And eat it too?" The chartreuse-gray composite smiled wryly. " Exactly what we *are* doing, Lieutenant! Now Jefferth, pleathe."

Grimly resigned, to all external appearances, Rod knelt beside Jeffers and reached for the knife.

"Leave him tied!" Johnny ordered.

"I can't lift him. I'll have to cut his feet loose."

"Very well, but not hith handth."

Jeffers was cursing fluently. When his feet were free, he kicked out savagely, and his boot grazed Rod's skull. The lieutenant sprawled away, clutching his head and moaning, hoping that Rogan's knowledge of the silver plate had been transferred to Johnny.

"Get up, Lieutenant."

Rod collapsed, feigning a dead faint. After a moment, he heard Jeffers come to his feet and start running. A shot exploded. Jeffers howled, Rod opened his eyes. Jeffers was sitting a dozen yards away, looking dazed. His leg was bleeding, and the helmet had been torn from his head. He tried to get up, but the leg collapsed. Johnny started toward him. Rod reached quietly for his gun, which he had dropped when Johnny stole up behind him.

He took careful aim; the gun bucked in his hand. The creature of the jungle sprawled, with the top of his head gone.

Rod darted forward and clamped the battered pot back over Jeffers' head. "Did it get you again?" he panted.

"Starting to," the wounded man wheezed.

Rod freed his hands and glanced at the wound. The thigh muscles were torn badly but the bone not broken. He applied a belt as a tourniquet. "Think you can walk with help?"

"Where?"

"Back around the mesa. It'll be dark soon. We'll have to get back in the launch without the others seeing us."

"I guess I can walk." Jeffers stood up, whitened and swayed, but remained standing.

"One thing to take care of first," Rod growled. He strode to the fallen Johnny. The wandering vines were already creeping into an exploring knot about the shattered skull.

He hit the pin from an incendiary grenade, tucked it under Johnny's neck, and backed away. Five seconds later, a blinding blue-white light peeped out, lingered and grew, spewing sickening smoke. If the jungle wanted Johnny fixed, she'd have to make a new one. There wouldn't be much left to repair.

Twilight was fading into darkness when they reached the north slope, and Jeffers was near collapse. They paused to rest, peering up at the ridge, half expecting a demon-possessed posse led by Isaacs to come charging down upon them. But the blackness of night stole over them and there was no sign of activity from the mesa.

"How many guys were left up there when that, that bat-thing picked you up? Can you remember?"

Jeffers tried to think. "Let's — I think — we started with nine, didn't we?"

"Ten, Pal — you're still affected."

"Ten — that's right. Well I believe there were — four left." Rod groaned. "There may not any now." He climbed to his feet and helped the wounded Jeffers up. They moved slowly and quietly up the ridge. Giant wings drummed somewhere above them the blackness, tracking their movements with some strange sense. The jungle still watched, threatened, brooded in sullen, hungry anger.

They reached the crest of the ridge, but only blackness lay ahead. Rod heaved another grenade to light the mesa, and watched its gleaming flare illuminate emptiness. Nothing but the launches remained.

"Maybe they're in one of the ships."

"Don't think so," Jeffers grunted. "That damn — whatever it is — can't get hold of you well through the hull."

After thinking about it for a moment, Rod decided that it was peculiar that the hypnotic effect could reach through the hull at all. But obviously it had, to some extent. Perhaps the shielding effect of metal depended on closeness of fit.

They advanced warily across the vine-covered ground, expecting ambush. They stole close to Launch Two, listened at the airlock, heard nothing. Rod dragged himself quietly inside.

"Nobody here."

They tried the other launch with similar result.

"We're alone, Jeffers."

The crewman was near collapse. Rod helped him in Launch Two, found a medical kit, and dressed the leg-wound. He spent the rest of the night working on the launch, using the other ship as a parts bank. When the communicator was repaired, he tried calling the Archangel — with no results. The starship's orbit had evidently carried it below the horizon again.

The repairs were nearly complete, but fatigue compelled him to pause for food and sleep. He made certain that the airlock was securely bolted, then went to collapse in a corner in utter exhaustion.

Jeffers shook him awake. Gray daylight poured gloomily through the ports.

"Wake up, Lieutenant! There's a guy coming across from the cliff —"

He groaned. "Johnny again!" "Uh-uh! It's Richards — only he's slightly green."

"Who!" "Rod sat up quickly. "Richards the first guy to disappear from Launch One!"

"It *can't* be!"

"Look for yourself."

Rod bounded to a port and peered out at the gray day, and at the solitary figure who walked solemnly toward them.

"It *is* Richards — in body, anyhow." He went to the airlock, gun in hand, and unbolted it. The lock slid open. Richards stopped. "Really, old man! There's no need for the gun," he called.

Rod took note of the gray-green discoloration of his skin and shuddered. "Uh-uh! You stay back, Jungle-boy!"

Richards' forehead creased irritably. "That any way to greet an old friend, Esp? I say! Let me in."

"Jungle tricks! You can't be alive."

"Ridiculous! I'm here, am I not?"

English accent and all, he was there — but for all Rod knew, Johnny might have been the spit'n image of one of the original Crusoes to be marooned here. He kept the gun trained at Richards' midsection.

"Suppose you explain your existence," he snapped.

"It's quite simple. I merely got ripe, Esperson."

"Got *what*?"

"Got ripe — R-I-P-E — as in ripe tomato."

"You mean —!"

"Exactly. I woke up inside one of those silly gourd-fruit. I kicked my way out, and here I am."

"As a substitute for Johnny?"

"Not at all. I am *I* — tch! But t hat lacks sense. How shall I say it? I remember being me before — well, it all happened."

"You mean the jungle swallowed you —"

"It seems to have taken me apart and put me back together again."

"Anything missing?" Rod grunted sourly.

"As a matter of fact — yes. It forgot my navel."

"You don't need it. Jeffers?"

"Yeah, Lieutenant?"

"Get a shot of pentothal out of the kit. Give him a dose — enough to knock him out. We'll haul him aboard and tie him up. Commission would probably like a look at the life-forms from this planet."

Richards sputtered angrily, but submitted when Jeffers let himself down to the ground and hobbled toward him with a hypodermic. Rod listed to his irritable protests, and found himself becoming half convinced.

"I kinda believed the guy, Lieutenant," Jeffers panted as they hauled the limp crewman through the lock.

Esperson remained doubtful. "If it's true, how come there weren't three guys here when Rogan's launch landed?"

"Maybe they're around. Or, maybe they died."

"Yeah."

He went to the communicator and tried another call: "Archangel from Launch Two. Give me a call."

Over."

The response was feeble but immediate. "Isaacs from Allenby, Isaacs from Allenby. Read you S-2 but clear. We'd about given you up. What happened? Over."

Esperson breathed a sigh of relief. "This is Rod, Al. Isaacs isn't here. No time to explain. We'll rendezvous on schedule, but we may have to come down here again to pick up stragglers — if any. Over."

There was a pause. Then Allenby relayed the Archangel's position and velocity data for rendezvous purposes. Rod felt Jeffers nudging him.

"Lieutenant! There's another one coming."

"I'll call you later, Al!" he said to the mike, then bracketed it and stepped to the lock.

"Elvin!"

"Yeah, the second guy missing."

"Load him aboard the same way. We take no chances."

An hour later, the launch's rockets sputtered, coughed a blue haze, then spurted an incandescent blast that lifted it as a skyward arrow. Richards and Elvin lay trussed securely in the rear of the ship.

"I never believed we'd make it, Lieutenant," Jeffers sighed, relaxing for the first time.

"It seems too damn easy," Rod grunted.

"Why?"

"Well — there's nothing more ruthless, or cleverer, than a man that's obsessed with knowledge. And that goes for a jungle too. The thirst to know can, be worse than any other type of obsession."

Jeffers glanced over his shoulder at the two sleepers and chuckled. "Well, at least she returns the books she borrows."

"I wonder," murmured Esperson as the ship burst through the cloud layer on its upward streak for space.

*The jungle steamed and dripped. The jungle hissed and suckled and belched. It captured a new insect, took it apart, and made a replica to lure others just like it. And the replica was devoted to its mother, who used it. The jungle writhed and danced and grew. The jungle waited, feeling a sensual glow. Some insects were more interesting than others, and she hated to let them go. But by parting with two, she would soon gain seventy more — and by spending the seventy . . .*

*The jungle gleefully counted her gains. And there was a place called Earth. . . .*

## Vengeance for Nikolai

THE DISTANT THUNDER of the artillery was only faintly audible in the dugout. The girl sat quietly picking at her hands while the colonel spoke. She was only a slip of a girl, all breast and eyes, but there was an intensity about her that made her unmistakably beautiful, and the colonel kept glancing at her sidelong as if his eyes refused to share the impersonal manner of his speech. The light of a single bare bulb glistened in her dark hair and made dark shadows under deep jade eyes already shadowed by weeping. She was listening intently or not at all. She had just lost her child.

"They will not kill you, *grazhdanka*, if you can get safely past the lines," said the colonel. He paced slowly in the dugout, his boot heels clicking pleasantly on the concrete while he sucked at a long cigaret holder and milked his thumbs behind his back in solemn thought. "These Americans, you have heard about their women? No, they will not kill you, unless by accident in passing the lines. They may do other things to you—forgive me!—it is war." He stopped pacing, straddled her shadow, and looked down at her with paternal pity. "Come, you have said nothing, nothing at all. I feel like a swine for asking it of you, but there is no other hope of heating back this attack. And I am ordered to ask you. Do you understand?"

She looked up. Light filled her eyes and danced in them with the moist glittering of a fresh grief already an ancient grief old as Man. "They killed my Nikolai," she said softly. "Why do you speak to me so? What can it mean? The bombardment—I know nothing—I cannot think of it. Why do you torment me?"

The colonel betrayed no impatience with her, although he had gone over it twice before. "This morning you tried to leap off the bridge. It is such a shame to die without purpose, *dushka*. I offer you a purpose. Do you love the Fatherland?"

"I am not a Party member, *Tovarish Polkovnik*."

"I did not ask if you love the Party, my dear. However, you should say '*parties*,' now that we are tolerating those accursed Menshevist deviationists again. Bah! *They* even name members of the *Gorodskoi* Soviets these days. We are becoming a two party republic. How sickening! Where are the old warrior Bolsheviks? It makes one weep. . . . But that is not the question. I asked if you love the Fatherland."

She gave a hesitant nod.

"Then think of the Fatherland, think of vengeance for Nikolai. Would you trade your life for that? I know you would. You were ready to fling it away."

She stirred a little; her mind seemed to re-enter the room. "This *Ami Gyenyeral*. Why do you wish him dead?"

"He is the genius behind this assault, my child. Who would have thought the Americans would have chosen such an unlikely place for an invasion? And the manner of it! They parachuted an army ninety miles inland, instead of assaulting the fortified coastline: He committed half a million troops to deliberate encirclement. Do you understand what this means? If they had been unable to drive to the coast, they would have been cut off, and the war would very likely be over. With *our* victory. As it was, the coast defenders panicked. The airborne army swept to the sea to capture their beachhead without need of a landing by sea, and now there are two million en-emy troops on our soil, and we are in full retreat. *Flight* is a better word. General Rufus MacAmsward gambled his country's entire future on one operation, and he won. If he had lost, they would likely have shot him. Such a man is necessarily mad. A megalomaniac, an evil genius.

Oh, I admire him very much! He reminds me of one of their earlier generals, thirty years ago. But that was before their Fascism, before their Blue Shirts.

"And if he is killed?"

The colonel sighed. He seemed to listen for a time to the distant shellfire. "We are all a little superstitious in wartime," he said at last. "Perhaps we attach too much significance to this one man. But they have no other gen-erals like him. He will be replaced by a competent man. We would rather fight competent men than fight an un-predictable devil. He keeps his own counsels, that is so. We know he does not rely heavily upon his staff. His will rules the operation. He accepts intelligence but not advice. If he is struck dead—well, we shall see."

"And I am to kill him. It seems unthinkable. Now do you know I can?"

The colonel waved a sheaf of papers. "Only a woman can get to him. We have his character clearly defined. Here is his psychoanalytic biography. We have photo-stats of medical records taken from Washington. We have interviews with his ex-wife and his mother. Our psychologists have studied every inch of him. Here, I'll read you—but no, it is very dry, full of psychiatric jargon. I'll boil it down.

"MacAmsward is a champion of the purity of woman-hood, and yet he is a vile old lecher. He is at once a baby and an old man. He will kneel and kiss your hand—yes, really. He is a worshipper of womanhood. He will court you, convert you, pay you homage, and then expect you to—forgive me—to take him to bed. He could not pos-sibly make advances on you uninvited, but he expects you—as a goddess rewarding a worshipper—to make ad-vances on *him*. He will be your abject servant, but with courtly dignity. His life is full of breast symbols. He clucks in his sleep. He has visited every volcano in the world. He collects anatomical photographs; his women have all been bosomy brunettes. He is still in what the Freud-ians call the oral stage of emotional development—emo-tionally a two-year-old. I know Freud is bad politics, but for the *Ami*, it is sometimes so."

The colonel stopped. There was a sudden tremor in the earth. The colonel lurched, lost his balance. The floor heaved him against the wall. The girl sat still, hands in her lap, face very white. The air shock followed the earth shock, but the thunder clap was muted by six feet of concrete and steel. The ceiling leaked dust.

"Tactical A-missile," the colonel hissed. "Another of them! If they keep it up, they'll drive us to use Lucifer. This is a mad dog war. Neither side uses the H-bomb, but in the end one side or the other will have to use it. If the Kremlin sees certain defeat, we'll use it. So would Washington. If you're being murdered, you might as well take your killer with you if you can. Bah! It is a madness. I, Porphiry Grigoryevich, am as mad as the rest. Listen to me, Marya Dmitriyevna, I met you an hour ago, and now I am madly in love with you, do you hear? Look at you! Only a day after a bomb fragment dashed the life out of your baby, your bosom still swelled with unclaimed milk and dumb grief, and yet I dare stand here and say I am in love with you, and in another breath ask you to go and kill yourself by killing an Ami general! Ah, ah! What insane apes we are! Forget the Ami general. Let us both desert, let us run away to Af-rica together, to Africa where apes are simpler. There! I've made you cry. What a brute is Phorphiry, what a brute!"

The girl breathed in gasps. "Please, *Tovarish Polkov-nik!* Please say nothing more! I will go and do what you ask, if it is possible."

"I only ask it, *dushka*, I cannot command it. I advise you to refuse."

"I will go and kill him. Tell me how! There is a plan? There must be a plan. How shall I pass the lines? How shall I get to him? What is the weapon? How can I kill him?"

"The weapon, you mean? The medical officer will explain that. Of course, you'll be too thoroughly searched to get even a stickpin past the lines. They often use fluor-oscopy, so you couldn't even swallow a weapon and get it past them. But there's a way, there's a way—I'll let the *vrach* explain it. I can only tell you how to get captured, and how to get taken to MacAmsward after your cap-ture. As for the rest of it, you will be directed by post-hypnotic suggestion. Tell me, you were an officer in the Woman's Defense Corps, the home guard, were you not?"

"Yes, but when Nikki was born, they asked for my resignation."

"Yes, of course, but the enemy needn't find out you're inactive. You have your uniform still? . . . Good! Wear it. Your former company is in action right now. You will join them briefly."

"And he captured?"

"Yes. Bring nothing but your ID tags. We shall supply the rest. You will carry in your pocket a certain memo-randum addressed to all home guard unit commanders. It is in a code the Ami have already broken: It contains the phrase: 'Tactical bacteriological weapons immedi-ately in use.' Nothing else of any importance. It is enough. It will drive them frantic. They will question you. Since you know nothing, they can torture nothing out of you.

"In another pocket, you will be carrying a book of love poetry. Tucked in the book will be a photograph of General Rufus MacAmsward, plus two or three religious ikons. Their Intelligence will *certainly* send the memo-randum to MacAmsward; both sides are that nervous about germ weapons. It is most probably that they will send him the book and the picture—for reasons both hu-morous and practical. The rest will take care of itself. MacAmsward is all ego. Do you understand?"

She nodded. Porphiry Grigoryevich reached for the phone.

"Now I am going to call the surgeon," he said. "He will give you several injections. Eventually, the injections will be fatal, but for some weeks, you will feel nothing from them. Post-hypnotic urges will direct you. If your plan works, you will not kill MacAmsward in the literal sense. Literally, he will kill himself. If the plan fails, you'll kill him another way if you can. You were an actress. I believe?"

"For a time. I never got to the Bolshoi."

"But excellent! His mother was an actress. You speak English. You are beautiful, and full of grief. It is enough. You are the one. But do you really love the Fatherland enough to carry it out?"

Her eyes burned. "I hate the killers of my son!" she whispered.

The colonel cleared his throat. "Yes, of course. Very well, Marya Dmitriyevna, it is death I am giving you. But you will be sung in our legends for a thousand years. And by the way—" He cocked his head and looked at her oddly. "I believe I really do love you, *dushka*."

With that, he picked up the phone.

Strange exhilaration surged within her as she crawled through the brush along the crest of the flood

embankment, crawled hastily, panting and perspiring under a smoky sun in a dusty sky while Ami fighters strafed the opposite bank of the river where her company was retreating. The last of the Russ troops had crossed, or were killed in crossing. The terrain along the bank where she crawled was now the enemy's. There was no lull in the din of battle, and the ugly belching of artillery mingled with the sound of the planes to batter the senses with a merciless avalanche of noise; but the Ami infantry and mechanized divisions had paused for regrouping at the river. It would be a smart business for the Americans to plunge on across the river at once before the Russians could reorganize and prepare to defend it, but perhaps they could not. The assault had carried the Ami forces four hundred miles inland, and it had to stop somewhere and wait for the supply lines to catch up. Marya's guess—and it was the educated guess of a former officer—was that the Ami would bridge the river immediately under air cover and send mechanized killer-strikes across to harass the retreating Russ without involving infantry in an attempt to *occupy* territory beyond the river.

She fell flat and hugged the earth as machine gun fire traversed the ridge. A tracer hit rock a yard from her head, spraying her with dust and sang like a snapped wire as it shot off to the south. The spray of bullets travelled on along the ridge. She moved ahead again.

The danger was unreal. It was all part of an explosive symphony. She had the manna. She could not be harmed. Nothing but vengeance lay ahead. She had only to crawl on.

Was it the drug that made her think like that? Was there an euphoric mixed in the injections? She had felt nothing like this during the raids. During the raids there was only fear, and the struggle to remember whether she had left the teapot boiling while the bombs blew off.

Macbeth. Once she had played Lady Macbeth upon the Moscow stage. How did it go? *The raven himself is hoarse that croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan under my battlements. Come, you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, and fill me, from crown to toe, top-full of direst cruelty!*

But that wasn't quite it. That wasn't quite what she felt. It was a new power that dwelt in her bosom. It was something else.

Her guard uniform was caked with mud, and the insignia was torn loose from her collar. The earth scuffed her knees and the brush scratched her arms. She kept falling flat to avoid the raking fire of her own machine guns. And yet it was necessary that she stay on the ridge and appear to be seeking a way across the river.

She was too intent upon watching the other side to notice the sergeant. She crawled over a corpse and nearly fell in the foxhole with him. She had been crawling along with her pistol in hand, and the first she saw of the sergeant was his boot. It stamped down on her gun hand. He jammed the muzzle of a tommy-gun against the side of her throat.

"Drop it, sister! *Voyennoplyenni!*"

She gasped in pain—her hand—and stared up at him with wide eyes. A lank young Ami with curly hair and a quid of tobacco in one cheek.

"*Moya rooka—my hand!*"

He kept his boot heel on the gun, but let her get her hand free. "Get down in here!"

She rolled into the hole. He kicked the gun toward the river.

"*Hey, Cap!*" he yelled over his shoulder. "I got a guest. One of the commissar's ladies." Then to the girl: "Before I kill you, what are you doing on this side of the river, spy?"

"*Most chyeryez ryekoo . . .*"

"I don't speak it. No savvy. *Ya nye govoryu ...*"

Marya was suddenly terrified. He was lean and young and pale with an unwelcome fear that would easily allow him to fire a burst into her body at close range. The Ami forces had been taking no prisoners during the running battle. The papers called them sub-human beasts because of it, but Marya was sufficiently a soldier to know that prisoners of war were a luxury for an army with stretchy logistic problems, and often the luxury could not be afforded. One Russian lieutenant had brought his men to the Ami under a white flag, and the Ami captain had shot him in the face and ordered his platoon to pick off the others with rifle fire as they tried to flee. In a sense, it was retaliatory. The Russians had taken no



prisoners during the Ami airborne landings, and she had seen Ami airmen herded together and machine-gunned. She hated it. But as an officer, she knew there were times of necessity.

"Please don't shoot," she said in English. "I give up. I can't get across the river anyway."

"What are you doing on this side?" he demanded.

"My company was retreating across the bridge. I was the last to start across. Your artillery hit the bridge. The jets finished it off with their rockets." She had to shout to be heard above the roar of battle. She pointed down the river. "I was trying to make it down to the ford. Down there you can wade across."

It was all true. The sergeant thought it over.

"Hey, Cap!" he yelled again. "Didn't you hear me? What'll I do with her?"

If there was an answer, it was drowned by shellfire. "Undress!" the sergeant barked.

"What?"

"I said to take off your clothes. And no tricks. Strip to the skin."

She went sick inside. So now it started, did it? Well, let it come! For the Fatherland! For Nikolai. She began un-buttoning her blouse. She did not look at the Ami ser-geant. Once he whistled softly. When she had finished undressing, she looked up defiantly. His face had changed. He moistened his lips and swore softly under his breath. He crossed himself and edged away. Deep within her, something smiled. He was only a boy.

"Well, what are you cursing about?" she asked tone-lessly.

"If I didn't think you would I mean I wish this gun if I had time I'd but you'd stab me in the back but when I think about what they'll do to you back there ..."

"Jeezis!" he said fervently, wagging his head and roll-ing his quid into the other cheek. "Put the underwear and the blouse back on, roll up the rest of it, and start crawling down the slope. Aim for that slit trench down there. I'll be right behind you."

"She's quite a little dish, incidentally," the Ami captain was saying on the field telephone. "Are we shooting prisoners now, or are we sending them back . . . Yeah?" He listened for awhile. A mortar shell came screaming down nearby and they all sat down in the trench and opened their mouths to save eardrums. "To who?" he said when it was over. "Slim? Oh, to you . . . Yeah, that's right, a photograph of Old Brass Butt in person. I can't read the other stuff. It's in Russky. . . . Just a minute." He covered the mouthpiece and looked up at the ser-geant. "Where's the rest of your squad, Sarge?"

The sergeant swallowed solemnly. "I lost all my men except Price and Vittorio, sir. They were wounded and went to the rear."

"Damn! Well, they're sending up replacements tonight; and we're all going back for a breather, as soon as they get here. So you might as well march her on back yourself." He glanced thoughtfully at the girl. "Good God!" he murmured.

Marya was surrounded by several officers. They were all looking at her hungrily. She thought quickly.

"You have searched me," she said coolly. "Would you gentlemen allow me to put on my skirt? I have submitted to capture. As an officer, I expect ..."

"Look, lady, what you expect doesn't matter a damn!" snapped a lieutenant. "You're a prisoner of war, and you're lucky to be alive. Besides, you are now about to have the high privilege of lying down with six ..."

"Quiet, Sam!" grunted the captain. "We can't do it. Lady, put on the rest of your clothes and get going."

"Why?" the lieutenant yelled. "That damned sergeant is going to . . ."

"Shut up! Can't you see she's no peasant? Christ, man, this war doesn't make you *all* swine, does it? Sergeant, trade that Chicago typewriter for a forty-five, and take her back to Major Kline for interrogation. Don't touch her, you hear?"

"Yes, sir."

The captain scribbled an order in his notebook, tore out the page, and handed it to the sergeant. "You can probably hitch a ride on the chow wagon part of the way. It's going to get dark pretty soon, so keep

a leash on her. If anybody starts a gang rape, blow his guts out." He grinned ruefully. "If we are going to pass it up ourselves, by damn, I want to make sure nobody else does it." He glanced at the Russian girl and reddened. "My apologies, lieutenant. We're not really bastards. We're just a long way from home. After we wipe off this Red Disease (he spat out the words like bites of tainted meat) you'll see we're not so bad. I hope you'll be treated like an officer and a gentlewoman, even if you are a commie." He bowed slightly and offered the first salute.

"But I'm not—well, thank you, Captain," she said, and returned the salute... .

They sat spraddle-legged in the back of the truck as it bounced along the shell-pocked road. The guns had fallen silent, but the sky was full of Ami squadrons jetting toward the sunset. Pilotless planes and rocket missiles painted swift vapor trails across the heavens, and the sun colored there with blood. She breathed easier now, and she was very tired. The Ami sergeant sat across from her and kept his gun trained on her and appeared very ill-at-ease. He blushed several times for no apparent cause. She tried to shut him out of her consciousness and think of nothing. He was a doggy sort of a pup, and she disliked him. The Ami were all doggy pups. She had met them before. There was something of the spaniel in them.

Nikolai, Nikolai, my breasts ache for you, and they burst with your milk, and I must drain them before I die of it. My baby, my bodykins, my flesh torn from my flesh, my baby, my pain, my Nikki Andreyevich, come milk me—but no, now it is death, and we can be one again. How wretched it is to ache with milk and mourn you...

"Why are you crying?" the sergeant grunted after awhile.

"You killed my baby."

"I what?"

"Your bombers. They killed my baby. Only yesterday."

"Damnation! So that's why you're—" He looked at her blouse and reddened again.

She glanced down at herself. She was leaking a little, and the pressure was maddening. So that's what he was blushing about!

There was a crushed paper cup in the back of the truck. She picked it up and unfolded it, then glanced doubtfully at the sergeant. He was looking at her in a kind of mournful anguish.

"Do you mind if I turn my back?" she asked.

"Hell's bells!" he said softly, and put away his gun.

"Give me your word you won't jump out, and I won't even look. This war gives me a sick knot in the gut." He stood up and leaned over the back of the cab, watching the road ahead and not looking at her, although he kept one hand on his holster and one boot heel on the hem of her skirt.

Marya tried to dislike him a little less than before. When she was finished, she threw out the cup and buttoned her blouse again. "Thank you, sergeant, you can turn around now."

He sat down and began talking about his family and how much he hated the war. Marya sat with her eyes closed and her head tilted back in the wind and tried not to listen.

"Say, how can you have a baby and be in the army?" he asked after a time.

"Not the army. The home guard. Everybody's in the home guard. Please, won't you just be quiet awhile?"

"Oh. Well. Sure, I guess."

Once they bailed out of the truck and lay flat in the ditch while two Russian jets screamed over at low altitude, but the jets were headed elsewhere and did not strafe the road. They climbed back in the truck and rolled on. They stopped at two road blocks for MP shakedowns before the truck pulled up at a supply dump. It was pitch dark.

The sergeant vaulted out of the truck. "This is as far as we ride," he told her. "We'll have to walk the rest of the way. It's dark as the devil, and we're only allowed a penlight." He flashed it in her face. "It would be a good chance for you to try to break for it. I hate to do this to you, sis, but put your hands together behind your back."

She submitted to having her wrists bound with telephone wire. She walked ahead of him down the ditch while he pointed the way with the feeble light and held one end of the wire.

"I'd sure hate to shoot you, so please don't try anything."

She stumbled once and felt the wire jerk taut.

"You've cut off the circulation; do you want to cut off the hands?" she snapped. "How much farther do we have to go?"

The sergeant seemed very remorseful. "Stop a minute.

I want to think. It's about four miles." He fell silent. They stood in the ditch while a column of tanks thundered past toward the front. There was no traffic going the other way.

"Well?" she asked after awhile.

"I was just thinking about the three Russky women they captured on a night patrol awhile back. And what they did to them at interrogation."

"Go on."

"Well, it's the Blue Shirt boys that make it ugly, not so much the army officers. It's the political heel snappers you've got to watch out for. They see red and hate Russky. Listen, it would be a lot safer for you if I took you in after daylight, instead of at night. During the day there's sometimes a Red Cross fellow hanging around, and everybody's mostly sober. If you tell everything you know, then they won't be so rough on you."

"Well?"

"There's some deserted gun emplacements just up the hill here, and an old command post. I guess I could stay awake until dawn."

She paused, wondered whether to trust him. No, she shouldn't. But even so, he would be easier to handle than half a dozen drunken officers.

"All right, Ami, but if you don't take wires off, your medics will have to amputate my hands."

They climbed the hill, crawled through splintered logs and burned timbers, and found the command post under-ground. Half the roof was caved in, and the place smelled of death and cartridge casings, but there was a canvas cot and a gasoline lantern that still had some fuel in it. After he had freed her wrists, she sat on the cot and rubbed the numbness out of her hands while he opened a K-ration and shared it with her. He watched her rather wistfully while she ate.

"It's too bad you're on the wrong side of this war," he said. "You're okay, as Russkies go. How come you're fighting for the commies?"

She paused, then reached down and picked up a hand-ful of dirt from the floor, kneaded it, and showed it to him, while she nibbled cheese.

"Ami, this had the blood of my ancestors in it. This ground is mine. Now it has the blood of my baby in it; don't speak to me of sides, or leaders, or politics." She held the soil out to him. "Here, look at it. But don't touch. It's mine. No, when I think about it, go ahead and *touch*. Feel it, smell it, taste a little of it the way a peasant would to see if it's ripe for planting. I'll even give you a handful of it to take home and mix with your own. It's mine to give. It's also mine to fight for." She spoke calmly and watched him with deep jade eyes. She kept working the dirt in her hand and offering it to him. "Here! This is Russia. See how it crumbles? It's what they'll bury you in. Here, take it." She tossed it at him. He grunted an-grily and leaped to *his* feet to brush himself off.

Marya went on eating cheese. "Do you want an argu-ment, Ami?" she asked, chewing hungrily while she talked. "You will get awfully dirty, if you do. I have a simple mind. I can only keep tossing handfuls of Russia at you to answer your ponderous questions."

He did an unprecedented thing. He sat down on the floor and began—well, almost sobbing. His shoulders heaved convulsively for a moment. Marya stopped eat-ing cheese and stared at him in amazement. He put his arms across his knees and rolled his forehead on them. When he looked up, his face was blank as a frightened child's.

"God, I want to go home!" he croaked.

Marya put down the K-ration and went to bend over him. She pulled his head back with a handful of his hair and kissed him. Then she went to lie down on the cot and turned her face to the wall.

"Thanks, Sergeant," she said. "I hope they don't bury you in it after all."

When she awoke, the lantern was out. She could see him bending over her, silhouetted against the

stars through the torn roof. She stifled a shriek.

"Take your hands away!"

He took them away at once and made a choking sound. His silhouette vanished. She heard him stumbling among the broken timbers, making his way outside. She lay there thinking for awhile, thoughts without words. After a few minutes, she called out.

"Sergeant? Sergeant!"

There was no answer. She started up and kicked something that clattered. She went down on her knees and felt for it in the dark. Finally she found it. It was his gun.

"*Sergeant.*"

After awhile he came stumbling back. "Yes?" he asked softly.

"Come here."

His silhouette blotted the patch of stars again. She felt for his holster and shoved the gun back in it.

"Thanks, Ami, but they would shoot you for that."

"I could say you grabbed it and ran."

"Sit down, Ami."

Obediently he sat.

"Now give me your hands again," she said, then, whispering: "No, please! Not there! Not there."

The last thing would be vengeance and death, but the next to the last thing was something else. And it was clearly in violation of the captain's orders.

It was the heating of the old man that aroused her fury. They dragged him out of the bunker being used by Major Kline for questionings, and they beat him about the head with a piece of hydraulic hose. "They" were immaculately tailored Blue Shirts of the Americanist Party, and "he" was an elderly Russian major of near retirement age. Two of them held his arms while the third kicked him to his knees and whipped him with the hose.

"Just a little spanking, commie, to learn you how to recite for teacher, see?"

"Whip the bejeezis out of him."

"Fill him with gasoline and stick a wick in his mouth."

"Give it to him!"

They were very methodical about it, like men handling an unruly circus animal. Marya stood in line with a dozen other prisoners, waiting her turn to be interrogated. It was nine in the morning, and the sun was evaporating the last of the dew on the tents in the camp. The sergeant had gone into the bunker to report to Major Kline and present the articles her captors had taken from her person. He had been gone ten minutes. When he came out, the Blue Shirts were still, whipping the prisoner. The old man had fainted.

"He's faking."

"Wake him up with it, Mac. Teach him."

The sergeant walked straight toward her but gave no sign of recognition. He did not look toward the whistle and slap of the hose, although his face seemed slightly pale. He drew his gun in approaching the prisoners and a guard stepped into his path.

"Halt! You can't ..."

"Major Kline's orders, Corporal. He'll see Marya Dmitriyevna Lisitsa next. Right now. I'm to show her in." The guard turned blankly to look at the prisoners. "*That* one," said the sergeant.

"The girl? Okay, you! *Shagom marsh!*"

She stepped out of line and went with the sergeant, who took her arm and hissed, "Make it easy on yourself," out of the corner of his mouth. Neither looked at the other.

It was dark in the bunker, but she could make out a fat little major behind the desk. He had a poker expression and a small moustache. He kept drumming his fingers on the desk and spoke in comic grunts.

"So this is the wench," he muttered at the sergeant. He stared at Marya for a moment, then thundered: "Attention! Hit a brace! Has nobody taught you how to salute?"

Her fury congealed into a cold knot. She ignored the command and refused to answer in his own language. *"Ya nye govoryu po Angliiskil"* she snapped.

"I thought you said she spoke English," he grunted at the sergeant. "I thought you said you'd talked to her."

She felt the sergeant's fingers tighten on her arm. He hesitated. She heard him swallow. Then he said, "Yes sir, I did. Through an interpreter."

Bless you, little sergeant! she thought, not daring to look her thanks at him.

*"Hoy, McCoy!"* the major bellowed toward the door.

The man who came in was not McCoy, but one of the Americanist Blue Shirts. He gave the major a cross-breasted Americanist salute and barked the slogan: *"Ameh'ca F'ust!"*

"America First," echoed the major without vigor and without returning the political salute. "What is it now?"

"I regrets to repoaht, suh, that the cuhnel is dead of a heaht condition, and can't answeh moa questions."

"I told you to loosen him up, not kill him. Damn! Well, no help for it. Get him out. That's all, Purvis, that's all."

"Ameh'ca Fust!"

"Yeah."

The Blue Shirt smacked his heels, whirled, and hiked out. The interpreter came in.

"McCoy, I hate this job. Well, there she is. Take a gander. She's the one with the bacteriological memo and the snap of MacAmsward. I'm scared to touch it. They'll want this one higher up. Look at her. A fine piece, eh?"

"Distinctly, sir," said McCoy, who looked legal and regal and private-school-polished.

"Yes, well, let's begin. Sergeant, wait outside till we're through."

She was suddenly standing alone with them, eyes bright with fury.

"Why did *you* begin using bacteriological weapons?" Kline barked.

The interpreter repeated the question in Russian. The question was a silly beginning. No one had yet made official accusations of germ warfare. She answered with a crisp sentence, causing the interpreter to make a long face.

"She says they are using such weapons because they dislike us, sir."

The major coughed behind his hand. "Tell her what will happen to her if she does that again. Let's start over." He squinted at her. "Name?"

"Imya?" echoed McCoy.

"Marya Dmitriyevna."

"*Familiya?*"

"Lisitsa."

"It means 'fox', sir. Possibly a lie."

"Well, Marya Dmitriyevna Fox, what's your rank?" *"V kakoin vy chinye?"* snapped McCoy.

*"Starshii Lyeityenant,"* said the girl.

"Senior lieutenant, sir."

"You see, girl? It's all straight from Geneva. Name, rank, serial number, that's all. You can trust us.... Ask her if she's with Intelligence."

*"Razvye'dyvatyel naya sluzhba?"*

*"Nyet!"*

"Nyet, eh? How many divisions are ready at the front?"

*"Skol'ko na frontye divizii?"*

*"Ya nye pomnyu!"*

"She says she doesn't remember."

"Who is your battalion commander, Lisitsa?"

*"Kto komandir va'shyevo baralyona?"*

*"Ya nye pomnyu!"*

"She says she doesn't remember."

"Doesn't, eh? Tell her I know she's a spy, and we'll shoot her at once."

The interpreter repeated the threat in Russian. The girl folded her arms and stared contempt at the major. "You're to stand at attention!"

*"Smirno!"*

She kept her arms folded and stood as she had been standing. The major drew his forty-five and worked the slide.

"Tell her that I am the sixteenth bastard grandson of Mickey Spillane and blowing holes in ladies' bellies is my heritage and my hobby."

The interpreter repeated it. Marya snorted three words she had learned from a fisherman.

"I think she called you a castrate, sir."

The major lifted the automatic and took casual aim. Something in his manner caused the girl to go white. She closed her eyes and murmured something reverent in favor of the Fatherland.

The gun jumped in Kline's hand. The crash brought a yell from the sergeant outside the bunker. The bullet hit concrete out the doorway and screamed off on a skyward ricochet. The girl bent over and grabbed at the front of her skirt. There was a bullet hole in front and in back where the slug had passed between her thighs. She cursed softly and fanned the skirt.

"Tell her I am a terrible marksman, but will do better next time," chuckled Kline. "Good thing the light shows through that skirt, eh, McCoy—or I might have burned the 'tender demesnes.' There! Is she still cursing me?"

"Fluently, sir."

"I must have burned her little white hide. Give her a second to cool off, then ask what division she's from."

*"Kakovo vy polka?"*

*"Ya nye pomnyul!"*

"She has a very poor memory, sir."

The major sighed and inspected his nails. They were grubby. "Tell her," he muttered, "that I think I'll have her assigned to C company as its official prostitute after our psychosurgeons make her a nymphomaniac."

McCoy translated. Marya spat. The major wrote.

"Have you been in any battles, woman?" he grunted. *"V kakikh srazhyeniyakh vy oochast'vovali?"*

*"Ya nye pomnyul"*

"She says—"

"Yeah, I know. It was a silly question." He handed the interpreter her file. "Give these to the sergeant and have him take her up to Purvis. I haven't the heart to whip information out of a woman. Slim's queer; he loves it." He paused, looking her over. "I don't know whether to feel sorry for her, or for Purvis. That's all, McCoy."

The sergeant led her to the Blue Shirts' tent. "Listen," he whispered. "I'll sneak a call to the Red Cross." He appeared very worried in her behalf.

The pain lasted for several hours. She lay on a cot somewhere while a nurse and a Red Cross girl took blood samples and smears. They kept giving each other grim little glances across the cot while they ministered to her.

"We'll see that the ones who did it to you are tried," the Red Cross worker told her in bad Russian.

"I speak English," Marya muttered, although she had never admitted it to her interrogators, not even to Purvis. "You'll be all right. But why don't you cry?"

But she could only cry for Nikolai now, and even that would be over soon. She lay there for two days and waited.

After that, there was General MacAmsward, and a politer form of questioning. The answers, though, were still the same.

*"Ya nye pomnyul"*

What quality or quantity can it be, laughably godlike, transubstantially apelike, that abides in the flesh of brutes and makes them men? For General MacAmsward was indeed a man, although he wished to be only a soldier.

There are militarists who love the Fatherland, and mili-tarists who love the Motherland, and the difference between them is as distinct as the difference between the drinkers of bourbon and the drinkers of rye. There are the neo-Prussian zombies in jackboots who stifle their souls to make themselves machines of the Fatherland, but MacAmsward was not one of them. MacAmsward was a Motherland man, and Mother was never much interested in machines. Mother raised babies into champions, and a champion is mightier than the State; never is he a tool of the State. So it was with Rufus MacAms-ward, evil genius by sworn word of Porphyry Grigoryevich.

Consider a towering vision of Michael the Archangel carrying a swagger stick. Fresh from the holy wars of Heaven he comes, striding past the rows of white gloved orderlies standing at saber salute, their haloes (M-1, official nimbus) studded with brass spikes. The archangel's headgear is a trifle rakish, crusted with gold laurel and dented by a dervish devil's bullet. He ignores the thrones and dominations, but smiles democratically at a lowly cherub and pauses to inquire after the health of his grandmother.

Grandmother is greatly improved.

Immensely reassured, General MacAmsward strides into his quarters and hangs up his hat. The room is in darkness except for the light from a metal wall lamp that casts its glare around the great chair and upon the girl who sits in the great chair at the far end of the room. The girl is toying with a goblet of wine, and her dark hair coils in thick masses about her silk-clad shoulders. The silk came by virtue of the negligence of the general's ex-wife in forgetting to pack. The great chair came as a prize of war, having been taken from a Soviet People's Court where it is no longer *needed*. It is massive as an episcopal throne—a fitting seat for an archangel—and it is placed on a low dais at the head of a long table flanked by lesser chairs. The room is used for staff conference, and none would dare to sit in the great chair except the general—or, of course, a lovely grief-stung maiden.

The girl stares at him from out of two pools of shadow. Her head is slightly inclined and the downlight catches only the tip of her nose. The general pauses with his hand on his hat. He turns slowly away from the hat rack, brings himself slowly to attention, and gives her a solemn salute. It is a tribute to beauty. She acknowledges it with a nod. The general advances and sits in the simple chair at the far end of the long table. The general sighs with fervor, as if he had not breathed since entering the door. His eyes have not left *her* face. The girl puts down the glass.

"I have come to kill you," she said. "I have come to nurse you to death with the milk of a murdered child."

The general winced. She had said it three times before, once for each day she had resided in his house. And for the third time, the general ignored it.

"I have seen to it, my child," he told her gravely. "Captain Purvis faces court martial in the morning. I have directed it. I have directed too that you be repatriated forthwith, if it is *your* wish, for this is only common jus-tice after what that monster has done to you. Now however let me implore you to remain with us and quit the forces of godlessness until the war is won and you can return to your home in peace."

Marya watched his shadowy figure at the far end of the table. He was like Raleigh at the court of Beth, at once mighty and humble. Again she felt the surge of exhilaration, as when she had crawled along the ridge at the river, ducking machine gun fire. It was the voice of Macbeth's wife whispering within her: *Come to my woman's breasts, and take my milk for gall, you murder-ing ministers, wherever in your sightless substances you wait on nature's mischief!* It was the power of death in her bosom, where once had been the power of life.

She arose slowly and leaned on the table to stare at him fiercely. "Murderer of my child!" she hissed.

"May God in His mercy—"

"Murderer of my child!"

"Marya Dmitriyevna, it is my deepest sorrow." He sat watching her gravely and seemed to lose none of his lofty composure. "I can say nothing to comfort you. It is impossible. It is my deepest sorrow."

"There is something you can do."

"Then it is done. Tell me quickly."

"Come here." She stepped from the table to the edge of the dais and beckoned. "Come to me here. I have secrets to whisper to the killer of my son. Come."

He came and stood down from her so that their faces were at the same level. She could see now that there was real pain in his eyes. Good! Let it be. She must make him understand. He must know perfectly well that she was going to kill him. And he must know how. The necessity of knowing was not by any command of Porphyry's; it was a must that she had created within herself. She was smiling now, and there was a new quickness in her gestures.

"Look at me, high killer. I cannot show you the broken body of my son. I can show you no token or relic. It is all buried in a mass grave." Swiftly she opened the silk robe. "Look at me instead. See? How swollen I am again. Yes, here! A token after all. A single drop. Look, it is his, it is Nikolai's."

MacAmsward went white. He stood like a man hypnotized.

"See? To nourish life, but now to nourish death. Your death, high killer. But more! My son was conceived in love, and you have killed him, and now I come to you. You will give me another, you see. Now we shall conceive him in hate, you and I, and you'll die of the death in my bosom. Come, make hate to me, killer."

His jaw trembled. He took her shoulders and ran his hands down her arms and closed them over hers.

"Your hands are ice," he whispered, and leaned forward to kiss a bare spot just below her throat, and somehow she was certain that he understood. It was a preconscious understanding, but it was there. And still he bent over her.

*Come, thick night, and pall thee in the dunkest smoke of hell, that my keen knife see not the wound it makes ...*

Of course the general had been intellectually convinced that it was entirely a figure of speech.

The toxin's work was quickly done. A bacterial toxin, swiftly lethal to the non-immunized, slowly lethal to Marya who could pass it out in her milk as it formed. The general slept for half an hour and woke up with a raging fever. She sat by the window and watched him die. He tried to shout, but his throat was constricted. He got out of bed, took two steps, and fell. He tried to crawl toward the door. He fell flat again. His face was crimson.

The telephone rang.

Someone knocked at the door.

The ringing stopped and the knocking went away. She watched him breathe. He tried to speak, but she turned her back to him and looked out the window at the shell-pocked countryside. Russia, Nikolai, and even the Ami sergeant who had wanted to go home, it was for them that she listened to his gasping. She lit one of his American cigarettes and found it very enjoyable. The phone was ringing furiously again. It kept on ringing.

The gasping stopped. Someone was hammering on the door and shouting. She stood enjoying the cigaret and watching the crows flocking in a newly planted field. The earth was rich and black here, the same soil she had tossed at the Ami sergeant. It belonged to her, this soil. Soon she would belong to it. With Nikolai, and maybe the Ami sergeant.

The door crashed loose from its hinges. Three Blue Shirts burst in and stopped. They looked at the body on the floor. They looked at Marya.

"What has happened here?"

The Russian girl laughed. Their expressions were quite comical. One of them raised his gun. He pulled the trigger six times.

"Come ... Nikki Andreyevich ... come ..."

One of them went over and nudged her with his boot, but she was already dead. She had beaten them. She had beaten them all.

The American newspapers printed the truth. They said that General MacAmsward had died of poisoned milk. But that was all they said. The whole truth was only sung in Russian legend for the next



one thousand years.

## **THE SONG of VORHU** *. . . for Trumpet and Kettledrum*

**A Novelet by WALTER M. MILLER, JR.**

### *Fearful Destiny*

*THE legends of humanity's beginnings are as numerous as the races of man. And all these tales, it seems to us, have the common quality of wistfulness, of the yearning to be fathered and protected and disciplined. But there is nothing wistful about Walter Miller's particular brand of Genesis in "The Song of Vorhu."*

*It cuts like a scalpel, it sings with the fierce wild beauty of space and suns and the fearful destiny which awaits man beyond the stars. The idea is not new, but you'll remember this story when you have forgotten many others!*

—The Editor

*When space test-jockey Barry Wilkes returned to an Earth devastated by plague, he found there only one crazed woman with whom to seek a far-flung planet where civilization might bloom again!*

DURING the century preceding the plague, men of Earth had been venturing into the black glare of space beyond the orbit of the moon. They skirted the fringes of Sol, and subjugated the planets beneath their feet. But they found no mother to replace the earth, nor any soil to call their own. Because of climatic, gravitic, and atmospheric differences, no man could take an axe, a rifle, and a coonskin cap, and sally forth to make a home on Mars. To colonize, he needed an earthlike planet, and Sol had but one to offer: Earth.

Beyond the orbit of Pluto, Man paused. He idled his shrieking rockets before the Great Plains of Universe, and stared across the light years of nothingness. He turned back with a Shiver from the gulf of interstellum, which could be penetrated no deeper than the length of a lifetime. A cold equation said plainly that he could never cross it. Space-jockeys, garage mechanics, and arm chair mathematicians scrawled it on paper napkins and scratch pads, then glared at it irritably, as if sheer force of longing could change its icy symbols :  $V^2 = C^2 - C^2 (E/m_0 C^2 + 1)^{-2}$ . But the equation had been grudgingly honored for two centuries, and despite the would-be inventors, it stated firmly that no man could ever catch a fleeting ray of light.

Only a few men looked seriously to the interstellum—the soft-eyed men, the men of pensive faces, the men of silent thoughts. At last they built a ship. But they made no promises.

But the plague struck while the ship was in space, being tested by Captain Barry Wilkes. The plague entity was an earth-adapted descendant of a Venusian micro-organism which had found a home on Earth, and which had seemed quite harmless, except to poultry, for nearly a hundred years. It suddenly transferred its attentions to Man, as epidemics had sometimes done before, with startling and dismaying results.

Barry returned without testing the interstellar drive. He came back from beyond Pluto, and landed on the festered earth, on her night-side, because the plague, being a vegetable-entity, was quiescent in the darkness, or at least uncommunicable. Fires smouldered in Earth's cities, and her streets were moaning in

death. Staggered and numbed by the devastation, Barry felt nothing but the cold hand of awe. Instinct moved him to search for someone untouched by the plague. He wandered until nearly dawn, protected by a germ-proof space-suit from the ship.

BEFORE he blasted off again into the red glow of morning, he had found a wretched bit of supercargo. He rocketed toward space, for no man could live for long on Earth, nor on the planets, without supplies from home.

He guided the small experimental ship toward the border of the interstellar wastes. For only there was it safe to apply the drive. And he must find an earthlike planet for himself, and for his passenger.

A month beyond Pluto, he touched a switch. The Chancellor began listening to the field-song of the cosmos, the song whose notes were written in the universal tensor-point field which bound the continuum into one. To the Chancellor, as to the men who designed it, the field with its eddies and whirlpools was the only "reality" of the universe. The Chancellor listened to the notes in the vicinity of the ship.

Barry touched another switch. The Chancellor spoke. Its voice contradicted the field, offered an equal and opposing one. The "reality" which bound the ship to its continuum ceased to exist in one small patch of space. The ship became disassociated, became a universe unto itself, existing as a distinct and complete four-space continuum bitten out of five-space. And the velocity of light was the parameter of five-space, according to the Burnarr-Orige mathematics. Driven by an electrically charged hull, the ship was attracted toward higher values of the fifth coordinate, and higher values of its parameter.

Outside the cabin, the star-studded void seemed to collapse about him into a luminous ring that encircled the ship. But Barry knew that it was not the same cosmos; it was only a projection of its mass at a higher level—a four-space component of five-space. He started the rockets and set the acceleration at one-point-three gravities. Because of the temporal-transforms, the "home-universe" was aging four hours every time his watch ticked at the higher "W"-level. But an inch of length at his new level was worth 14,400 inches at his old. When he dropped back to the former level, he would be very late, and very far from home.

He had seen his last of Earth, for the Chancellor's nuclear fuel was limited. He had set his hopes on a blue-white star. Humanity lay diseased and dying, except perhaps for a few alpha-ships that might try to reach the stars by the old methods. Their grandchildren might arrive, but it seemed doubtful. All that remained was Barry and his "wife;" for despite a deep distaste, he could scarcely think of the only available female as anything but his "wife." She would certainly have to be the mother of a new humanity—if there were to be a new humanity. She gurgled nonsense-syllables in her corner of the cabin.

Barry had always been a crisp, rather cynical test-jockey, with a chilly eye and a slightly mocking smirk. He had clung to his crispness and aloofness, even in the awful horror of his last night on Earth, for the urgency of the situation demanded cool sanity. But now, in the shrunken space of the higher "W" level, he had nothing to do but wait while the jets supplied their steady shove.

He closed his eyes and pressed his head back against the seat's G-padding. Thus did the, cool and emotionless space-jockey begin to cry. He cried silently, and prayed quietly to anything that might be listening. Tears preserved sanity, and there was no one to see him, save the White Idiot. And she was scarcely more than a wild animal-thing amid her long tangled tendrils of black hair.

She had spent most of her mindless life in the subterranean cell of an asylum, and she was a hopeless and congenital idiot. When the city burned, a power failure left her cell in darkness, protecting her from the light-seeking spores of the plague. In darkness, the plague slept like a tropical flower. And she had been the only untouched female he could find on the night of his return from space. There had been no time to look for another.

Her flesh was white and sagging, unmuscled by the lethargy of long incarceration. Her eyes were pale green vistas of emptiness. He tried not to look at her. But she had to be fed and bathed and clothed. And when she gurgled at him. . . .

But nothing really mattered except the Prometheus-fire of human germ-plasm, carried starward to be reborn and to flame anew beneath the light of another sun—if such were its luck. Barry had no longing to

play the part of a Father Abraham, especially when he considered his Sarah. But Man, in the person of Barry Wilkes, was not quite ready to call it quits. He was too fresh from playing the part of Man the mighty, Man the timeless King, Heir of universe and Messiah of the seed of life. He refused to be winked out in the twinkling of an eye, after being so flushed with his own grandeur.

GLANCING at his "wife," Barry thought that Man-the-second could very well prove to be Man-the-mindless, unless the gods of genetics came to his aid. But Barry hoped. And hope was a white narcissus amid the black clods of despair. For Man had arisen once before from mindlessness, from the mud of beastflesh—and not by his own bootstraps. He had done his best to rid himself of brains—by stoning his saints, burning his geniuses at the stake, and crucifying his wisest men. Somehow, Nature had tugged him upward in spite of himself, in seeming defiance of her own laws. Maybe it would happen again.

He sat before the viewing scope, watching the blue-white star gain brilliance in the center of the screen. It was a higher-level component of a similar star in the home-continuum, but it was the gem of hope in the black velvet void. Somewhere upon the outskirts of its gravitational field, the Chancellor would spew him forth into the less distorted universe of his birth. Then his "High-C Tunnel" to the stars would have writhed and spun away like a broken thread in the magnetic winds of the star-lanced cosmos.

The star's call seemed a whispered love-song, murmuring of planets, of life, of warm sun-glow on verdant jungles. But the song was only a thought in the mind of the wanderer. Its lyrics could be lies, and its tune could become a dirge. Behind him, however, the wandering tendrils of the plague were creeping through the decaying garbage of Man's one-time world. There was nothing to do but hope.

The Chancellor winked a light, telling him to prepare for deceleration. Barry spun the plummeting ship by means of its gyros, and aimed its jets at the sun. The Chancellor began its descent through "W," and Barry watched the universe unfold about him.

The shifting direction of the pseudo-gravity awakened the White Idiot. She began whimpering. He gave her a cool glance, which she returned with the bulging blue-green eyes.

Suddenly she screamed. The scream pleased her: she grinned widely and did it again. Then she began a chant. "Hungry hungry hungry hungry. . . ."

He tossed her a handful of puttylike space-rations. She fumbled with them awkwardly, but there was no time to feed her by hand. The ship was shuddering like a frightened animal in the changing geometry.

He flicked a switch, and the ion-gun began squirting away the charge on the hull. The Chancellor was decelerating its "W" plunge. The luminous ring had spread out to become the familiar scattering of galaxies, stars and star-clusters.

Soon the parameter was equal to "C," and Barry was back in the home continuum, rushing toward the blue-white inferno with enough velocity to shift the fraunhofer lines toward violet. He spurted the jets and held a weighty deceleration, curving off-course slightly so that the ship would eventually move into an orbital path.

THE SOLAR system lay somewhere on the opposite fringe of the galaxy. His "tunnel" had withered and diffused. And a glance at the remaining fuel told him that the Chancellor wasn't going to dig any new ones for him. From now on, he'd be on the plodding alpha-drive. The Red Sea was closed, and he stood before the throne of another star—for better or worse. He infused a name into the new sun, thereby giving it substance in the *lingua ultima* of Barry Wilkes.

He called it Old Man Odds—and it looked like Man's last chance. Odds was the new home, if he had a livable planet.

The cosmos was a fairly roomy palace, but it was rather thinly scattered with monarchs. The germ of life was scarcer than ways to destroy it. Man's space-gnats had never found him another home. He'd built himself shacks on the planets of Sol, but he'd never released the umbilical cord that tied him to Mother Earth's industry. The cord fed him water, air, germ-suits, food, or heat, depending on the shack.

Old Man Odds would have to show a cozy, watery planet with edible life forms. And if Man were to

remain Man, and not evolve into something else, the new berth would have to be pretty much like the old one. Otherwise, the sons of men might develop side-staring eyes or taste-buds between their toes—to adapt to some weird local conditions.

Barry refused even to consider the disturbing question of the White Idiot's fertility.

When, at last, the ship had lost its furious velocity, he turned into an orbit and began the search for planets. He moved the scanner away from Mister Odds and swept it across the heavens.

A dull speck crept across the scope. A planet, but too far from the sun. Unquestionably a cold and lifeless world. For life was a function of sunlight.

Mister Odds was larger than Sol, and his "life-belt" would be further from his fierce heat. Barry took some brightness readings, and calculated the distance at which Man might exist without either freezing or roasting. The belt lay between sixteen and thirty light-minutes from the sun. Hopefully he swept the area with the scanner.

Two planets lumbered through the region, massive bodies, several times the size of Earth. They suggested belly-sagging gravity. They suggested the future shape of man—stubby legs, basin-shaped pelvis, short thick torso. They suggested a brief life-span for Barry and the White Idiot.

Just sunward from the life-belt lay a ring of planetoids, like the asteroids of Sol, but larger. Some appeared to be as large as Earth. But the intense radiation that fell upon them would make even the poles a tropic hell of heat.

He left the ship in the drifting orbit and began charting the entire sun-system. After a week, he had a rough map of the planetary paths. And he had something else.

He had a lurking suspicion that Barry Wilkes was not the only intelligent being in the realm of Mister Odds. . . .

THE EVIDENCE came from his radar equipment. Stray blips occasionally appeared on the screen. Not transient interference, but orderly pulses. They always disappeared before he could get a fix on their origin.

He saw no evidence of space travel. The pulses evidently came from a planet. He tried all the radio bands. At first, no results. Then, a strange signal in the ultra-high-frequency range. . . .

DONG . . . DONG . . . dong . . . dong. . . .

A series of bell-tones impressed upon a carrier wave. They became higher in pitch, and higher, until they passed the upper audible threshold and into the super-sonic region.

He sat transfixed, listening, waiting. After a moment the series repeated itself.

DONG . . . DONG . . . dong . . . dong. . . .

Chilled, he forced himself to move. He set up the direction-finding equipment. It was ready when the chimes began again. He watched the bright green pointer move jerkily around the scope until it intersected a planet's bright speck. There it wavered—and stopped. It was the outer planet of the life-belt.

He drifted aimlessly for a time, wondering about the bells. They were too monotonous, too repetitious, for communication signals. But they were too orderly to be an accidental phenomenon. They spelled intelligence.

Human intelligence?

He studied the planet, and grimly choked down his foolish sprouts of hope for beings remotely human. Life was always specialized to fit a set of conditions. Man was fitted to Earth or Earth-like planets. While the lumbering monster on the screen was a double-gravitated hulk. Its day—he guessed it at twelve hours. Its rapid rate of precession insured a glacial age every few years, if it had water for the glaciers.

Nevertheless, he moved cautiously toward it. If it had life, *he* was the alien, the monster out of space. How would the life-forms react?

How would earthlings have reacted to a wandering being from the interstellum, a being who was searching for a home, a being who would accept neither subservience nor equality, but demanded mastery as the divine privilege of his race? Earthlings would have disarmed such a being, if possible, and

confined him to a zoo.

Barry shivered as he drew near the planet. He was weaponless, except for a machine-pistol, and the ship's ion-gun which was potent only in the vacuum of space.

The planet had a blue-tinged atmosphere. As he moved closer, he saw streaks of clouds. He set the warning equipment against the possible approach of space-vessels, then swung the ship into an orbit for further study of the world.

There were oceans, sharply outlined by dark land masses. He listened again to the bell-signals. They were not from a localized source, but seemed, rather, to come from several points on the surface. He recorded a series of them.

Then he tuned the ship's transmitter to the carrier frequency. With anxious misgivings, he fed the recorder's output into the transmitter's modulator. It seemed the only way to contact the source without exposing himself to the grave danger of a landing upon the unknown. He listened tensely as the bell-tones went back down to the planet.

DONG . . . DONG . . . dong . . . dong. . .

When it was done, he cut off the carrier. His receiver was roaring an unearthly din. Sheer havoc followed his transmission. A jumble of bells from all over the planet. They came furiously, high notes, low notes, dissonant chords, booming and tinkling and fading away.

What had he done! He cursed himself for a fool, a child, poking a pair of scissors into a light socket.

Gradually, order was restored. Slowly, the pulses rearranged themselves. After several minutes . . . dong . . . Bong... .

And, something else as well.

AT FIRST, he seemed to hear a faint buzzing sound throughout the ship, like the dry hisses of a startled rattlesnake. But the microphonic pickup showed only the whine of the jets and the ringing of the bells.

The buzzing was internal, a ringing in his ears, a self-sound, like the effect of too much quinine, or an accompaniment of dizziness. An *emotion* seemed to pervade the buzz. Anger!

But not his anger. He felt only the cold, gnawing teeth of fear along his spine, as he stared down at the hazy world. His mind seemed to writhe, as if something or someone were pecking at the thoughts that lay buried beneath the level of consciousness. He felt invaded, not alone.

He glanced around the control room suspiciously. The White Idiot was shrieking gibberish. Did she also feel it? He pressed his hands over his face. Memories, nonsensical, unwanted memories, danced willy-nilly through his head.

Suddenly, he was released from the thought-pecking. He sat breathing heavily. He shut off the radio to kill the monotonous bells. Well?

No pulse from the warning system. No signs of space-craft. No airships among the clouds. No visible activity on the surface. Nothing.

Had he imagined it? He scoffed at himself, goaded his mind back to calmness. The buzzing? The feeling of intrusion? Fear, superstitious fear, man standing before the strange, man looking at the, unfamiliar. There was no other possible explanation.

He blasted the forward rockets, decelerated, and went into free-fall until he touched the first thin layer of atmosphere. Then he unfolded the ship's wings and leveled off slightly, still losing altitude.

An air-sample showed a breathable mixture of gases. The gravity was ponderous, but endurable. The planet's habitability would depend upon its life-forms, their edibility, their intelligence level, and their affective attitude toward visitors from the sky. With a slight chill of anxiety, he realized that he might even at the moment be helplessly in the power of whatever lived on the surface.

But the surface seemed homogenous, for the most part. It was a dull gray-green, laced with yellowish veins that looked like designs on a dusty maple leaf. There were no forests or mountains, only gentle hills and valleys in the gray-green blanket. And the calm sea.

He descended over the sea. Its surface was glassy, clear, bright green. Shadow-shapes moved beneath it, darting aimlessly here and there. Marine life, possibly edible. He circled several times, then

flew toward a distant shore. The land-mass—it would pass the final sentence.

Green cliffs loomed up before him. They were overhung with massive roots or tentacles growing down into the sea. But he saw no trees upon the land. The roots grew out of the cliff itself.

Then he was past the shore, flying over the barren, billowing ground. It seemed to move in slow land-tides, as if it were an extensive floating island. But it was smooth, rockless, unbroken.

Where was life?

He circled for a landing near the sea . . . the sea, where the tentacles grew, and the shadows lurked, where edible things might be found along the beaches; where man might grow . . . and wax strong again?

He fired the landing rockets and settled slowly. The ground cushioned inward elastically when the ship rested upon it. He strapped the White Idiot securely in place. He ran a final check on the air, the temperature, and the gravity.

Then he strapped the pistol belt about his waist, stepped through the pressure lock, and opened the outer hatch. It was only a four-foot drop, but he lowered himself carefully because of the double gravity. The ground was rubbery beneath his feet. He looked around.

His ship was near a ridge, one of the yellowish veins he had seen from above. . . .

THUP! A muffled throb—from beneath the surface. The ridge had pulsed . . . like an artery.

THUP! Another throb. It came faintly from the distance, like an echo, but an octave higher in pitch.

Was the very *earth* alive? A huge vegetable mass covering a continent—or floating on a subterranean sea? He knelt to examine it. The surface was tough, leathery, and gleaming dully in the sunlight. He scored it with a knife-blade, and found it tough, like waxed leather. He drove the blade in to the hilt, but found no moisture.

He arose, and fired a burst of bullets into the substance. Neat, round holes. Then, as he stared, the lead slugs oozed back out of the layer. A thick green paste followed them. It coagulated in small puddles.

For an instant, he felt the rattler's hiss again. It passed quickly, however. The periodic *thups* continued.

He stooped to touch the dried fluid, but it had hardened to a glassy consistency.

The ground *was* alive !

It was also obviously inedible.

If the planet were to serve the race of man, food must be found. Man, not yet weaned from Earth, must find somewhere a breast to sustain him.

HE WALKED away from the ship toward the ocean which murmured faintly from half-a-mile in the distance. The earth was an unbroken expanse of green leather and yellow ridges. He climbed a ridge and stopped in surprise. Below, lay a white spot in the green. It was moving, bulging, swelling upward. It became a pale, translucent dome, growing slowly but visibly. He drew his weapon, and lay cautiously down upon the throbbing ridge to watch it.

It became a flesh-colored hemisphere. A dark spot appeared upon the crest. A sudden constriction clutched at his throat. With a shudder, he realized that the hemisphere was becoming. . . .

A breast!

Trembling, he shrank back out of sight, pushed himself off the ridge, and fled toward the ship. The ponderous gravity tugged at his knees. He staggered as he ran. It was as if his feet were shod in leaden moon-boots.

The planet was mocking him. It picked his mind—a *breast to sustain*. . . .

"Hey! Hey, there!"

Had someone called?

Quaking in the icy wind of fear, he plunged on.

"Hey, Barry! Barry Wilkes! Wait!"

He froze, gun in hand, and looked around slowly. A man! Barry saw his head and shoulders just beyond the next ridge. It was a low ridge, and the man leaned on it with folded arms, as if it were a

board fence. He smiled a neighborly smile. There was something familiar about him.

"Wh—who are you?" Barry called.

The man shrugged. "Mother sent me. Mother drank your thoughts. Then she made me, so we could talk. Come on over."

Barry stood his ground for a moment. "Mother" had made the thing, unquestionably—and Barry was the blueprint. It had his voice, his thin hard face, even his crew cut.

Caught by a terrible fascination, he advanced upon it slowly, gun in hand. It smiled and lit a cigaret, his own brand. "Mother's" imitative powers were remarkable—or perhaps, her hypnotic powers.

He moved to a point on the ridge some twenty feet away. The being had been between him and the ship. Now he had a clear escapeway.

"Don't get around behind me," the creature called. "I can't turn very well."

Straddling the ridge, Barry stared at the man. It was imbedded to—the waist in the gray-green earth. It was only half a man, the half necessary for sucking in air and breathing it out as words. She had made him for talking—but why had she given him arms, very muscular arms?

Barry eased himself down on the ship-side of the ridge.

"Oh, all right," the creature said good-naturedly. "I'll turn around. You're certainly suspicious."

As if stuck in quicksand, it dragged itself slowly about to face him. Barry kept the pistol trained on its face.

"You are suspicious, aren't you?"

"Listen, I don't know what you want," Barry growled, "but I'm perfectly willing to leave. Just stop picking in my mind."

It nodded. "Certainly. Mother has already assimilated your memory."

Barry eased his way toward the next ridge, glancing around to make certain that no more of the beings were springing up.

"There's, no reason to be afraid," the creature said. "Stop and think. It's obvious that Mother didn't send me to get information from you. Nor to molest you. I have no legs."

Barry hesitated. Perhaps it would be better to face it and see what the thing wanted.

"Stay out of my mind," he warned.

It chuckled. "Mother drinks your thoughts only when you feel *this*."

Barry felt the buzz for a brief instant. Again, it seemed to connote anger, anger as strong as when he had retransmitted the bell-notes.

"There," the thing said with an acid twinkle. "I've told you. And now you can shoot her if she does it again."

Barry watched it warily for any threatening movement. The being's torso pulsed and twitched with each of the subterranean *thups*.

"What are those vibrations?"

"They are Mother's—" The thing paused to grope for a word. "Mother's hearts. They communicate with each other, so that each may beat at the proper time."

It was undoubtedly telling the truth, Barry thought. The revelation explained the havoc resulting from his retransmission of the bell-tones. Many hearts, beating out of proper sequence.

The being drew a last puff on the cigaret and flipped it aside. Then it rubbed its hands.

"Well, Barry, suppose we get down to business. Mother, of course, knows why you're here and what you want. I've come to make you what we think's a reasonable offer."

MAN, standing on the open palm of an alien being, and speaking to a mirror image of himself—he could scarcely afford hysteria at such a time. He stood stiffly, waiting.

"Go on."

"Very well. You're looking for a place to live and to reproduce your kind. Mother knows your needs and knows that this is the only suitable world in this system. You don't have much choice. But this planet can be your home."

"What's the price?"

"A service you will perform. Mother has grown too large for this world. But she can't leave the planet. You can carry her seed to other worlds."

"Why can't you do it?"

"I'm not detachable."

Barry paused thoughtfully. The offer was unacceptable, at least until he learned more about the being, its traits, the extent of its power. One thing was certain: it knew *his* traits, the traits of his race, the savagery and the sublimity, the tribal self-centrism, the Messianic claim to first rights to the throne of universe. It knew—yet offered to share its planet. It felt secure before the last remnants of Man. Why?

Barry stiffened his shoulders and swallowed the dry sponge of fear that swelled in his throat. If the thing was telling the truth, it wouldn't destroy him before it tried to get what it wanted. He tucked the pistol back in his belt and advanced toward the half-man. He sat on the ridge, for the gravity was weakening him quickly.

"My race needs shelter and food," he snapped. "There's nothing here." He waved toward the empty landscape.

The thing smiled confidentially, craftily. "There is Mother," it said, and patted the gray-green ground.

A protuberance appeared where his hand had touched it. The sprout writhed slowly upward, like a cobra slithering out of a Hindu's basket. It sprouted and spread and branched out into a leafless bush. Two white buds squeezed themselves out at the ends of twigs. They unfolded into blossoms, turned their faces toward each other, then moved lazily together in a light kiss. They withered, and the petals rolled back to expose tiny green knobs.

As Barry watched, the knobs swelled and ripened into a pair of pink fruit with light brown speckles.

"Try one."

"No, thanks." Again he felt that the thing was mocking him, teasing him by psychodrama—the legend of *Bereshith*, Genesis, the first temptation of Man. Its whims were grotesque.

The half-man shrugged and touched the bush. The fruit shrank. The branches folded. The earth sucked it slowly down, drawing it back from whence it came.

"You see, at least, that food can be provided," the creature said with a slight leer.

Barry slid from the ridge and snorted at it contemptuously. He drew the pistol again.

"You can give," he growled. "But you can also take away."

"You have no choice. There's no other planet."

Barry backed away from it, cursing softly. "My race makes no deals. You know my mind, you know our history. We serve no one."

The creature laughed contemptuously. "Except emperors, tyrants, even marble statues."

Barry turned away and staggered toward the ship under the load of his own weight. He heard several sharp clicks behind him. He whirled quickly.

The thing was holding an exact replica of his own machine-pistol. It jerked frantically at the trigger. Barry crouched reflexively. Then he straightened with an angry laugh.

"I forgot to tell you," he snapped. "I never learned how to make explosives." He fired a burst into the being's chest.

The air-sac spewed green fluid. The half-man dropped the useless weapon and clawed at the ground. The "mother" began giving birth to something that looked like the head of a spear. Barry shot a burst in the creature's face, destroying the eye-mechanisms.

Then he bolted for the ship.

A HOST of protuberances appeared ahead of him. They sprouted, and grew slowly into a tangle. He dodged and zigzagged. A green hand caught at his ankle. He jerked free and drove onward against the heaviness.

A web of tough green tentacles had belted the ship securely to the ground. He blasted at them. They wriggled, but stayed in place. A few had grown through the air-lock and had opened the inner hatch. *If they had harmed the White Idiot. . . .*

"I'll kill you!" he shrieked at the endless expanse of the world-creature.



He tugged at the tentacles in the hatchway and crawled among them into the ship. They curled toward him, but their motion was blind and fumbling. He eluded their snares and pulled himself toward the control room.

Someone was in the ship!

A nude woman stood by the radio equipment. She was stripping away panels and jabbing a heavy wrench into the tube-housings.

"Stop!"

She glanced around, smiling. She was a composite—the body impossibly perfect, fashioned out of the dream-fabric of a lonely space-jockey, a thousand lightyears from home. The face was a blend—a bit of the first love, and a bit of . . . his mother.

He raised the gun toward the green beauty.

"Would you shoot your mother, Barry?"

The rich voice—it was the voice that had soothed him in childhood. Her face—it changed, slowly: It *was* his mother's. But the body remained. . . .

He laughed hysterically and shot a burst of bullet holes up its spine. She sagged, gasping, against the radio. "Barry, Barry darling. . . ."

Her calm face! She was unharmed. Pure dramatics, meant to unhinge his mind!

Her soft bare arm reached into the hollow of the set and tugged at something. Then he saw the cord—like one of the tentacles. It was attached to her abdomen, and it ran across the floor and out of the ship through the air-lock.

He aimed carefully, and shot it in two. She dropped. He dragged her to the hatchway and tossed her among the green feelers. They blindly mistook the body for his own. They curled about it, snakelike, dragged it from the ship, and began to absorb it.

He slammed the hatch, bolted it, and hurried to the controls. The White Idiot was whimpering softly and trying to reach part of a brown-speckled fruit that lay near her on the deck. He kicked it away from her, then sat in the control-seat.

THINGS were happening outside. He glanced through the imperviglass shield. The ground was caving in beneath the rocket. The space-craft was sinking into an ever-deepening pit. He tried to start the jets. The ignition blinked, and there was a brief blurp from the reactors. But no fire from the tubes. A relay clicked and the ignition went dead.

The tubes—they were choked off. By the tentacles, of course ! They had grown inside and formed a tight cork. To continue trying to start the jets would soon build up a critical mass in the reactors and expand him suddenly into an atomic mushroom.

And the world-creature with him, perhaps. . . . But that was not the way.

The ship had sunk until the gray-green substance half-covered the imperviglass shield. He could feel the pulsing heartbeats through the insulated hull. They were being devoured alive.

The heartbeats. . . .

He moved quickly to the radio equipment and inspected it. The woman-thing had shattered several tubes. He replaced them from the stock of parts, and tried the set. The tubes came alive in a dim glow. She had not harmed any other circuits.

The bell-tone recording was still in place. He fed its signal into the transmitter.

DONG . . . DONG . . . dong . . . dong . . .

The tiny space-craft shuddered. Suddenly the ground heaved like a storm-tossed sea. The violent heaving threw him to the deck. He crawled to the controls.

The tentacles were loose from the hull. They slashed about-wildly in the air, whipping against the view-shield with savage cracks. He hit the jets. This time they spurted. It was a rough, erratic take-off. He climbed quickly out of the planet's atmosphere.

Numb with trembling anger, he set an orbital course about the world-creature's home. The transmitter still poured out the resounding bell-tones, the electromagnetic nerve-signals, the echoes of the heartbeats. After two hours of it, he listened for the thing's response.

Silence. Empty silence.

"Mother" had had a heart attack.

He moved spaceward again, and set his sights on the inner planet of the life-belt. But it proved unnecessary to approach any closer than the outer fringes of its atmosphere. The air was choked with ammonia vapor.

He moved on, wandering aimlessly. The monster was right. There were no other suitable worlds in the system. He and the White Idiot were marooned on a barren island in an endless sea. Between Mister Odds and the next star lay fifty light-years of emptiness. His rocket-fuel was too low for the search.

Should he have accepted bondage in the land of the world-creature—indentured himself in slavery to the gray-green Pharaoh?

The White Idiot kept howling for the remains of the brown-speckled fruit. Evidently one taste had been enough to start a craving, a terrible gnawing hunger for the food the woman-thing had given her. Man would have been enslaved indeed.

Would it have been better than death?

Who could answer him? Who could judge the decision he had made? It was for Man, the yet-unborn, to judge—for Man, the forever-dead, to judge. But the judge was silent. And the question remained.

Was Barry a traitor to the race?

The voice of his thoughts sat in the judgment seat. Thoughts, thoughts from childhood, thoughts from manhood, voices and memories, words, words, words. Alice in Wonderland. Soliloquy from Hamlet. The Psalms of David. . . .

*What is Man, that Thou art mindful of him? Or the Son of Man that Thou visitest him?*

Barry went unwavering into the interplanetary void. Hot moisture clouded his eyes.

Slavery?

If Man could not occupy the throne, if Man could not wear the crown, then it was better for him to die. The End.

No more spires, rising toward the blue of heaven. No babies wailing in their cribs. No war-drums to throb in the steaming jungles. No ships to clog the spaceways, nor priests offering bloody sacrifices to tribal gods. Dead. Dead was the inscrutable, unbelievable creature called Man. His savagery had shocked the very Earth that bore him. But his gentle dignity made dumb brutes lick his hand in homage.

Barry looked spaceward.

A cold, slow, sleepy death in the interstellum. A wandering ship, rocket heat gone, drifting forever. Until some nine-legged archeologist from Arcturus perhaps, cracked it open to look at the remains.

Barry looked toward Mister Odds.

A beautiful, gleaming inferno of hell. A seething explosion that never ceased. A sudden plunge into the blinding light, then—to wander as scattered neutrons in the vast furnace.

*GRADUALLY* he killed the tangential component of his velocity. The ship stood still in the star's silent glare. Man knelt before the behemoth and surrendered with a shudder. But it was the behemoth of universe, not an alien intelligence.

The ship drifted, slowly creeping sunward, then moving faster, beckoned by the siren voice of the gravity-song.

He looked at the White Idiot in pity. Her bloodless lips moved ceaselessly, silently, meaninglessly. He went to kneel beside her.

"Dadda dadda dadda. . . ."

He did something he had never done before. He took her pallid, pathetic face between his hands and kissed her lightly. Then he backed away in horror. Her skin was flecked with dark spots, greenish black.

The plague!

In the dark night of space, it had lain dormant. Now, in the light of the new sun, it blossomed forth, to thrive in the ultraviolet bath.

He shivered slightly. In perhaps a day, her body would swell, then burst, to spew forth a cloud of the

plague spores. The spores were the unconquerable contagion.

Angrily he spun the ship starward and set the rockets thundering. It leaped ahead like a thrown javelin. He grinned into the blinding light.

"Good morning, Mister Odds!"

The heat became unbearable as he approached the planetoid belt. He started the refrigerating mechanism. It worked for a time, then developed a vapor-lock. The heat increased.

A dark mass loomed up on the screen. He lashed out instinctively at the braking rockets. He veered sharply. The gravity of a small planetoid tugged at the ship as he plunged past it. He sat breathing heavily for a moment, then picked a careful path among the scattered bodies.

Careful ... lest he die the wrong way. He smiled sardonically. Man—strange mating of beast and angel. A snarling gorilla still wanted to live. A weary spirit wanted to quit.

The White Idiot was wailing softly. She had entered the painful stage of the disease. Soon she began screaming and clawing at herself. Barry knew. He had seen the plague on Venus. The thin green tendrils were lacing through her flesh, feeding here, feeding there, then wandering experimentally along a nerve to gnaw at the substance of the brain. Green piano-wires, sewing themselves between her joints, digging in, running along the marrow of her bone.

A bullet would be easier.

Thoughts ... the voice of his thoughts . . . and the judgement. . . .

*Thou hast made Man but little lower than the Angels. Thou hast subjected all things under his feet.*

All things—except the life of Man itself. She had drunk Earth's chalice. And though the chalice was shattered, the wine was not yet wasted all away.

He put the gun back in his holster and tried to close his mind to her shrieks.

What right had he to seek the white-death, in the heart of Mister Odds? He hovered in doubt.

A larger planetoid was lumbering along its orbit toward him. He swung in ahead of it, then began decelerating. Slowly it overtook him, and its gravity tugged lightly. He let it drag him back. He watched it drift larger on the screen. He waited.

IT WAS nearly as large as Earth; but its face was misted by clouds. It would be hot, boiling hot. It had a small moon at half a million miles. The moon's pale face was sharply outlined against the blackness; like Luna, it had no atmosphere.

Barry guided the ship toward the planet's northern pole, where the temperature might be endurable in a spacesuit. The pole was inclined away from the star, and it would be a long winter's night on the surface.

When he reached the atmosphere, he chuckled bitterly. The air was breathable, and the gravity was nine-tenths that of earth. The planet's day appeared to be about twenty-two hours. In a billion years, when the sun had cooled slightly, the place might be inhabitable.

He dropped beneath the cloud blanket into the night of the polar region. But the night was amber with the glow of volcanic fires. He landed on a barren stretch of igneous rock, and checked the temperature at 130° F. A steam-bath, but not much worse than the interior of the ship.

He gathered the White Idiot in his arms, opened the hatch, and climbed out onto the rocky face of the planet. The glowing clouds were lighted from beneath. The air was full of fumes from lava blow-holes that spewed yellow streamers of smoke toward the sky. A hot drizzle was falling about the ship. Puddles of steaming water lay rippleless in the cloud-glow.

Barren, young, desolate, the planet lay lifeless beneath the blue-white sun. There was no soil to support plant life. Without plant life there could be no animal life. And the equatorial temperatures would be boiling.

He laid the White Idiot gently in a shallow, steaming pool—for the igneous ground was razor-sharp. The hot water would soothe her tortured flesh. She jerked spasmodically and panted in short screams. Her bulging eyes sought him out, pleading. His hand twitched toward the butt of the pistol. . . .

But the voice . . . the voice of judgment . . . *behold the thing the Lord God made to have*

*dominion. . . .*

*Bereshith!*—so it was in the beginning.

Bullets—they would not be the end.

Haunted, he turned away from her. Choking, he ran toward the ship. If he stayed, he would surely. . .

The screams stopped. He paused, turned slowly, as Lot's wife. She was craning her neck, looking down at herself. He approached her again. And saw it.

A thin green tendril had grown from the flesh beneath her clothing. It groped toward her face, like a climbing vine seeking sunlight. She watched it hypnotically. It swayed like a curious cobra.

Then it found her throat.

"Uh . . . uh . . . uh. . . ."

He staggered blindly, lifted the pistol—and squeezed. He fired until the clip was empty. The body jerked and rolled under the impacts. The pool became bright red.

He dropped the gun and stumbled back to the ship. He slammed the hatch. He must not look back.

But the pool loomed up through the imperviglass.

*... from the mud of Earth, and into his nostrils the breath of life ...*

Ripples wandered across the shallow water. The body rose and fell, caressed by the warm pond. Lullaby. Goodnight.

Suddenly the White Idiot opened. The wiry tendrils burst forth, like a sackful of loose threads, after the manner of the plague. They shook themselves, a flurrying dust-mop, scattering a cloud of faintly visible spores into the humid air. Then they wilted slowly downward, collapsed, lifeless into the pool. The dust spread, settled, dulled the surface of the water.

He tried to stop babbling aloud. God, why couldn't he stop! The cries in his throat—they were no longer his own. No control! He clenched his jaws. The sound became a nasal whine. He held his breath. Blackness loomed. The breath came out a shriek.

He talked. He knew he talked. But what was he saying? A senseless chatter. Where was sanity? But he could still *think*. He had to get away. Away from the new planet baptized in blood before birth. He blasted the rockets, roared upward, outward, spaceward.

DON'T look at me, Mister Odds." He closed the view-shield, cutting off the sight of empty cosmos. He set a clumsy course around the planet. But the moon-gravity dragged him out of the orbital path.

So, he landed on the satellite, at the pole, where Mister Odds was sliced in half by the sharp rim of the moon-disk. He sat waiting ... for nothing, his eyes irresistibly drawn toward the planet upon the opposite horizon. On his left—the white eye of God. On his right—the pallid corpse of Abel.

"It was mercy." Another five minutes and she would have been dead. Mercy was a prerogative of Cosmos.

"A moment of insanity." The Cosmos had no throne for mad monarchs.

"A crime, a final act of unworthiness." So be it, then.

What was the flavor of the speckled fruit? And the flavor of life upon the planet of the world-creature? The world-creature, who fashioned an exquisitely lovely woman for him—from the blueprint of his dreams. The massive planet could have been a garden in paradise. A paradise now unquestionably lost. He was glad.

Forget, and die.

If only it could happen again—the upward march of Man—from the protoplasm left up on the planet. *Something* would happen, surely. Mister Odds would grow old and kindly. The mists over the White Idiot's grave would part—and fall as rain. Lakes, then seas.

The seed was planted—yeast cells, bacteria of fermentation, disease germs, vegetable spores, and the body of the Idiot to nourish them. Most would die. The hardy might survive. The spores had chlorophyll to convert. sunlight and raw minerals into food, food for animal cells. . .

*Bereshith. . . . In the Beginning.*

But Man?

One of the gray locksmiths, one who had sought after the grail, the key of life, had said that wherever there was a sun and an earthlike planet, there Man would come. . . Man, or something very manlike. For he said that Man was an inevitable end-product of the life-forces, the logical conclusion to a search for adaptability.

No one had ever found another earth-like planet. It was a safe thing for the locksmith to say.

BARRY wrote. He wrote to quench the oral flow of words, the babble of threatening insanity. He wrote a sketchy history of Earth, of her kings and prophets, of her warriors and her locksmiths—and of her last space-jockey and his mad flight to the stars. He wrote of the White Idiot, and of the faint hope of the cells and spores. When he ran out of paper, he scratched words on the metal walls with the point of a knife.

Then he ran out of words, and out of food.

He donned a space-suit and walked out into the faint gravity of the moon. He walked until he was several miles from the ship. But he was still in the ship's shadow.

The surface was rough, pocked with blow-holes where bubbles of hot vapor had spewed forth from the once-molten body. He glanced down one of the light-less cavities. An icy maw of death, mysteriously deep.

Where the sun struck the moon's face, the surface was warm. But in the black shadows, there was no heat.

How deep was the narrow hole?

He stepped into it. Gravity wafted him slowly into pitch blackness. When he had fallen twenty feet, he realized vaguely that it was deep enough to prevent escape. He dragged his feet and arms against the narrowing walls to prevent a killing crash. But the satellite's gravity was only a gentle breeze.

How deep?

It seemed an endless tunnel into a cold hell. He shone his flash downward. Far below . . . a gleam of white. A puddle of liquid helium perhaps.

He checked his wrist instruments. The temperature was low and meaningless. But there was a slight vapor-pressure. The white puddle was unquestionably liquid gas.

He began deflating his space-suit, to make death quick. He clutched at the shaft's walls, pulling himself to a stop in a narrow place. Then he took off the suit.

A shock of cold. Bursting eardrums in the low pressure. Then he was falling. He sank into a dull half-faint as he approached the bottom. Blackness was merciful.

A sharp sear of pain lanced through him, and persisted like the constant burning of an electric shock. It died suddenly, to be replaced by a shrieking ache that pulsed through every bone and nerve. He jerked, twisted and found that he could move.

He opened his eyes. He was lying on a metal pallet. A helix of gleaming metal spiralled about him, like the coil of an induction heater. He breathed painfully, and tried to stop. But something was forcing him to breathe, pulling his ribs out and in.

Daylight filtered through a mental fog. The dying whine of a generator howled in his throbbing ears. Then a voice . . . a human voice . . . incomprehensible words.

THEY SLID him gently out of the coil. Consciousness faced again. Awareness was a light bulb, loose in its socket, flickering on and off erratically. Once, when he opened his eyes, the room was dark except for yellow moonlight coming through the window.

White-garbed figures moved about him. Needles pricked his arm. He was bathed in rays, covered with blankets of frosty powder. Sometimes he saw faces through the mist that screened his senses. Long thin faces with large clear eyes. Human faces, or at least humanoid. A handsome people.

They tried to speak in sign language. But he babbled in weak whispers. From his mutterings, and from bits of writings found upon an airless, weatherless moon, their linguists pieced together a knowledge of his tongue. They talked.

They told him that he had planted the first seed.

Once he mumbled that it was the murdered seed of Abel, and they bowed gravely in sympathy.

The sons of the White Idiot struggled valiantly to save the corpse that they had plucked from a deep-freeze on their planet's moon. But the flicker of life waxed and waned in weak tides.

They said they had made a mistake. They had taken him out too soon. Perhaps if they had waited and studied for another century. . . .

Dead a billion years, he came alive to die again.

Sometimes, during rational moments, he questioned his awakeners, one of them in particular. A girl, with large, rust-brown eyes, and a wide soft mouth, and a close-cropped brush of bright black hair. She told him stories of the Planet.

Sometimes he could see her warm, expressive face, and could understand her words, spoken in the soft hiss of English newly learned.

"There was an ancient legend among our people, Barry Wilkes. It told of the god, Vorhu, and his consort, Ndriga, who fell from his arms in heaven and plunged down through the Northern Lights. Vorhu came to bury her. But the pale blue Alononu blossoms had grown from her body and spread across the planet."

She patted his arm and smiled faintly. "Our people once identified Vorhu with the moon. They piled his altars high with the night-flowering Alononus."

But Barry's mind was dulled by the eons. Her stories came to tire him. Once he wondered vaguely if she had been made by the world-creature.

They told him he was dying, for it was their custom to greet death gravely and politely.

They gave him the last sacrament of their people, a rite reserved for the high space-warriors of their nation. And they moved him to the window where he could see the white vapor-trails that streaked the sky in martial formation, as if honoring the passing of a kind.

But his vision grew dim.

The girl brought a basket of blue Alononu blossoms and scattered them over his pallet. Then she chanted the Death Song. And it told of the soul's final merging in the spirit of the race of Man. *Bereshith*.

## THE SOUL-EMPTY ONES

They heard the mournful bleat of his ramshorn in the night, warn-ing them that he was friend, asking the sentries not to unleash the avalanches upon the mountain trail where he rode. They returned to their stools and huddled about the lamplight, waiting—two war-riors and a woman. The woman was watching the window; and toward the valley, bright bonfires yellowed the darkness.

"He should never have gone," the girl said tonelessly.

The warriors, father and son, made no answer. They were val-ley men, from the sea, and guests in the house of Daner. The youn-ger one looked at his sire and shook his head slowly. The father clenched his jaw stubbornly. "I could not let you go to blas-pheme," he growled defensively. "The invaders are the sons of men. If Daner wishes to attack them, he is our host, and we cannot prevent it. But we shall not violate that which is written of the invaders. They have come to save us."

"Even if they kill us, and take our meat?" muttered the blond youth.

"Even so. We are their servants, for the sons of men created our fathers out of the flesh of beasts, and gave them the appearance of men." The old one's eyes glowed with the passionate light of con-viction.

The young one inclined his head gravely and submissively, for such was the way of the valley people toward their parents.

The girl spoke coldly. "At first, I thought you were cowardly, old man. Now I think your whole tribe is cowardly."

Without a change of expression, the gray-haired one lifted his arms into the lamplight. His battles were written upon them in a crisscross of white knife scars. He lowered them silently without speaking.

"It's in the mind that you are cowardly," said the girl. "We of the Natani fight our enemies. If our enemies be gods, then we shall fight gods."

"Men are not gods," said the young one, whose name was Falon.

His father slapped him sharply across the back of the neck. "That is sacrilege," he warned. "When you speak of the invaders. They are men and gods."

The girl watched them with contempt. "Among the Natani, when a man loses his manhood by age, he goes into the forest with his war knife and does not return. And if he neglects to go willingly, his sons escort him and see that he uses the knife. When a man is so old that his mind is dull, it is better for him to die."

The old warrior glowered at his hostess, but remained polite. "Your people have strange ways," he said acidly.

Suddenly a man came in out of the blackness and stood swaying in the doorway. He clutched his dogskin jacket against his bleeding chest as a sponge. He was panting softly. The three occupants of the small stone hut came slowly to their feet, and the woman said one word:

"Daher!"

The man mopped his forehead and staggered a step forward. He kicked the door closed with his heel. His skin had gone bloodless gray, and his eyes wandered wildly about the room for a moment. Then he sagged to his knees. Falon came to his aid, but Daner shook him off.

"They're really the sons of men," he gasped.

"Did you doubt it?" asked the old valley man.

Daner nodded. His mouth leaked a trickle of red, and he spat irritably. "I saw their skyboats. I fought with a guard. They are the sons of men . . . but they . . . are no longer men." He sank to a sitting position and leaned back against the door, staring at the woman. "Ea-Daner," he breathed softly.

"Come care for your man, you wench!" growled the old one. "Can't you see he's dying?"

The girl stood back a few feet, watching her husband with sadness and longing, but not with pity. He was staring at her with deep black eyes, abnormally brightened by pain. His breath was a wet hiss. Both of them ignored their valley guests.

"Sing me 'The Song of the Empty of Soul,' Ea, my wife," he choked, then began struggling to his feet. Falon, who knew a little of the Natani ways, helped him pull erect.

Daner pawed at the door, opened it, and stood looking out into the night for a moment. A dark line of trees hovered to the west. Daner drew his war knife and stood listening to the yapping of the wild dogs in the forest. "Sing, woman."

She sang. In a low, rich voice, she began the chant of the Soul-Empty Ones. The chant was weary, slowly repeating its five monotonous notes, speaking of men who had gone away, and of their Soul-Empty servants they had left behind.

Daner stepped from the doorsill, and became a wavering shadow, receding slowly toward the trees.

The song said that if a man be truly the son of men, the wild dogs would not devour him in the time of death. But if he be Empty of Soul, if he be only the mocking image of Man, then the wild dogs would feed—for his flesh was of the beast, and his ancestor's seed had been warped by Man to grow in human shape.

The two valley warriors stood clumsily; their ways were not of the Natani mountain folk. Their etiquette forbade them interfere in their host's action. Dauer had disappeared into the shadows. Ea-Daner, his wife, sang softly into the night, but her face was rivered with moisture from her eyes, large dark eyes, full of anger and sadness.

The song choked off. From the distance came a savage man-snarl. It was answered by a yelp; then a chorus of wild-dog barks and growls raged in the forest, drowning the cries of the man. The girl stopped singing and closed the door. She returned to her stool and gazed out toward the bonfires. Her face was empty, and she was no longer crying.

Father and son exchanged glances. Nothing could be done. They sat together, across the room from

the girl.

After a long time, the elder spoke. "Among our people, it is customary for a widow to return to her father's house. You have no father. Will you join my house as a daughter?"

She shook her head. "My people would call me an outcast. And your people would remember that I am a Natani."

"What will you do?" asked Falon.

"We have a custom," she replied vaguely.

Falon growled disgustedly. "I have fought your tribe. I have fought many tribes. They all have different ways, but are of the same flesh. Custom! Bah! One way is as good as another, and no--way-at-all is the best. I have given myself to the devil, because the devil is the only god in whom all the tribes believe. But he never answers my prayers, and I think I'll spit on his name."

He was rewarded by another slap from his father. "You are the devil's indeed!" raged the old man.

Falon accepted it calmly, and shrugged toward the girl. "What will you do, Ea-Daner?"

She gazed at him through dull grief. "I will follow the way. I will mourn for seven days. Then I will take a war knife and go to kill one of my husband's enemies. When it is done, I will follow his path to the forest. It is the way of the Natani widow."

Falon stared at her in disbelief. His shaggy blond eyebrows gloomed into a frown. "No!" he growled. "I am ashamed that the ways of my father's house have made me sit here like a woman while Daner went to fight against the sons of men! Daner said nothing. He respected our ways. He has opened his home to us. I shan't let his woman be ripped apart by the wild dogs!"

"Quiet!" shouted his father. "You are a guest! If our hosts are barbarians, then you must tolerate them!"

The girl caught her breath angrily, then subsided. "Your father is right, Falon," she said coldly. "I don't admire the way you grovel before him, but he is right."

Falon squirmed and worked his jaw in anger. He was angry with both of them. His father had been a good man and a strong warrior; but Falon wondered if the way of obedience was any holier than the other ways. The Natani had no high regard for it. Ea-Daner had no father, because the old man had gone away with his war knife when he became a burden on the tribe. But Falon had always obeyed, not out of respect for the law, but out of admiration for the man. He sighed and shrugged.

"Very well, then, Ea-Daner, you shall observe your custom. And I will go with you to the places of the invader."

"You will not fight with the sons of men!" his father grumbled sullenly. "You will not speak of it again."

Falon's eyes flared heatedly. "You would let a woman go to be killed and perhaps devoured by the invaders?"

"She is a Natani. And it is the right of the sons of men to do as they will with her, or with us. I even dislike hiding from them. They created our fathers, and they made them so that their children would also be in the image of man—in spite of the glow-curse that lived in the ground and made the sons of animals unlike their fa-thers."

"Nevertheless, I—"

*"You will not speak of it again!"*

Falon stared at the angry oldster, whose steely eyes barked com-mands at him. Falon shivered. Respect for the aged was engrained in the fibers of his being. But Daner's death was fresh in his mind. And he was no longer in the valleys of his people, where the invad-ers had landed their skyboats. Was the way of the tribe more im-portant than the life of the tribe? If one believed in the gods—then, yes.

Taking a deep breath, Falon stood up. He glanced down at the old man. The steel-blue eyes were biting into his face. Falon turned his back on them and walked slowly across the room. He sat beside the girl and faced his father calmly. It was open rebellion.

"I am no longer a man of the valley," he said quietly. "Nor am I to be a Natani," he added for the benefit of the girl. "I shall have no ways but the ways of embracing the friend and killing the en-emy."

"Then it is my duty to kill my son," said the scarred warrior. He came to his feet and drew his war



knife calmly.

Falon sat frozen in horror, remembering how the old man had wept when the invaders took Falon's mother to their food pens. The old one advanced, crouching slightly, waiting briefly for his son to draw. But Falon remained motionless.

"You may have an instant in which to draw," purred the oldster. "Then I shall kill you unarmed."

Falon did nothing. His father lunged with a snarl, and the knife's steel sang a hissing arc. Its point dug into the stool where the youth had been sitting. Falon stood crouched across the room, still weaponless. The girl watched with a slight frown.

"So, you choose to flee, but not fight," the father growled.

Falon said nothing. His chest rose and fell slowly, and his eyes flickered over the old one's tough and wiry body, watching for muscular hints of another lunge. But the warrior was crafty. He re-laxed suddenly, and straightened. Reflexively, Falon mirrored the sudden unwinding of tension. The elder was upon him like a cat, twining his legs about Falon's, and encircling his throat with a brawny arm.

Falon caught the knife-thrust with his forearm, then managed to catch his father's wrist. Locked together, they crashed to the floor. Falon felt hot hate panting in his face. His only desire was to free himself and flee, even to the forest.

They struggled in silence. With a strength born of the faith that a man must be stronger than his sons, the elder pressed the knife deeper toward Falon's throat. With a weakness born of despair, Falon found himself unable to hold it away. Their embrace was slippery with wetness from the wound in his forearm. And the arm was failing.

"I . . . offer you . . . as a holy . . . sacrifice," panted the oldster, as the knife began scratching skin.

"Father . . . don't—" Then he saw Ea-Daner standing over the old man's shoulder. She was lifting a war club. He closed his eyes.

The sharp crack frightened and sickened him. The knife clattered away from his throat, and his father's body went limp.

Slowly, he extricated himself from the tangle, and surveyed the oldster's head. The scalp was split, and the gray hair sogging with slow blood.

"You killed him!" he accused.

The girl snorted. "He's not dead. I didn't hit him hard. Feel his skull. It's not broken. And he's breathing."

Falon satisfied himself that she spoke the truth. Then he climbed to his feet, grumbling unhappily. He looked down at the old man and deeply regretted his rebelliousness. The father's love of the law was greater than his love for a son. But there was no un-doing it now. The elder was committed to kill him, even if he re-traced. He turned to the girl.

"I must go before he comes to his senses," he murmured sadly. "You'll tend his head wound?"

She was thoughtful for a moment, then a speculative gleam came into her eyes. "I understood you meant to help me avenge my husband?"

Falon frowned. "I now regret it."

"Do the valley folk treat their own word with contempt?"

Falon shrugged guiltily. "I'm no longer of the valley. But I'll keep my word, if you wish." He turned away and moved to the window to watch the bonfires. "I owe you a life," he murmured. "Perhaps Daner would have returned alive, if I had accompanied him. I turned against my father too late."

"No, Soul-Falon, I knew when Daner left that he meant to fight until he was no longer able—then drag himself back for the forests. If you had gone too, it would have been the same. I no longer weep, because *I knew*."

Falon was staring at her peculiarly. "You called me Soul-Falon," he said wonderingly; for it was a title given only to those who had won high respect, and it suggested the impossible—that the Soul-Empty One was really a man. Was she mocking him? "Why do you call me that?" he asked suspiciously.

The girl's slender body inclined in a slight bow. "You exchanged your honor for a new god. What greater thing can a man offer than honor among his people?"

He frowned for a moment, then realized she meant it. Did the Natani hold anything above honor? "I

have no new gods," he growled. "When I find the right god, I shall serve him. But until then, I serve myself—and those who please me."

The old man's breathing became a low moan. He was beginning to come awake. Falon moved toward the door.

"When he awakes, he may be so angry that he forgets he's your guest," warned the young warrior. "You'd better come with me."

She hesitated. "The law of mourning states that a widow must remain—"

"Shall I call you Soul-Ea?"

She suffered an uncomfortable moment, then shrugged, and slipped a war knife in her belt thong. Her sandals padded softly after him as he moved out into the darkness and untethered the horses. The steeds' legs were still wrapped in heavy leather strips to protect them against the slashing fangs of the wild dogs.

"Leave Daner's horse for your father," said the girl with unsentimental practicality. "The mare's tired, and she'll be slow if he tries to follow us."

They swung into the small rawhide saddles and trotted across the clearing. Dim moonlight from a thin silver crescent illuminated their way. Two trails led from the hut that overlooked the cliff. Falon knew that one of them wound along the clifftops to a low place, then turned back beneath the cliff and found its way eventually to the valley. The other penetrated deeper into the mountains. He had given his word, and he let the girl choose the path.

She took the valley road. Falon sighed and spurred after her. It was sure death, to approach the invader's camp. They had the old god-weapons, which would greet all hostile attacks from the Soul-Empty Ones. And if the Empties came in peace, the sons of men would have another occupant for their stock pens. He shivered slightly. According to the old writings, men had been kindly toward their artificial creatures. They created them so that the glow-curse that once lived in the earth would not cause their children to be born as freaks. And they had left Earth to the Empties, promising that they would come again, when the glow-curse passed away.

He remembered Daner's words. And Dauer was right, for Falon had also caught glimpses of the invaders before he fled the valley. They were no longer men, although they looked as if they had once been human. They were covered with a thick coat of curly brown hair, but their bodies were spindly and weak, as if they had been a long time in a place where there was no need for walking. Their eyes were huge, with great black pupils; and they blinked irritably in the bright sunlight. Their mouths were small and delicate, but set with four sharp teeth in front, and the jaws were strong—for ripping dainty mouthfuls of flesh.

They had landed in the valley more than a month earlier—while a red star was the morning star. Perhaps it was an omen, he thought—and perhaps they had *been* to the red star, for the old writings said that they had gone to a star to await the curse's lifting. But in the valley, they were building a city. And Falon knew that more of them were yet to come—for the city was large, while the invaders were few.

"Do you think, Ea-Daner," he asked as they rode, "that the invaders really own the world? That they have a right to the land—and to us?"

She considered it briefly, then snorted over her shoulder. "They owned it once, Falon. My grandfather believed that they cursed it themselves with the glow-curse, and that it drove them away. How do they still own it? But that is not a worry for me. If they were gods of the gods, I should still seek the blood that will pay for Dan-er's."

He noticed that the grief in her voice had changed to a cool and deadly anger. And he wondered. Did the alchemy of Natani custom so quickly change grief into rage?

"How long were you Daner's woman?" he asked.

"Only a few months," she replied. "He stole me from my father in the spring."

Falon reflected briefly that the Natani marriage customs were different than those of the valley peoples, who formally purchased a wife from her parents. The Natani pretended to be more forceful, but the "wife stealing" could be anything from a simple elopement, agreeable even to the parents, to a real

kidnapping, involving a reluctant bride. He decided not to press the question.

"Among my people," he said, "I would ask you to be my wife—so that you would not be disgraced by returning to your fa-ther's house." He hesitated, watching the girl's trim back swaying in the half-light of the moon. "How would you answer me?"

She shook her head, making her dark hair dance. "Doesn't a valley widow mourn?"

"To mourn is to pity oneself. The dead feel nothing. The mourner does not pity the dead. He pities himself for having lost the living."

She glanced back at him over her shoulder. "You speak as if you believe these things. I thought you were renouncing your peo-ple?"

"There is some wisdom, and some foolishness, in every peo-ple's way. But you haven't answered my question."

She shrugged. "We are not among your people, Falon." Then her voice softened, "I watched you fight the old one. You are quick and strong, and your mind is good. You would be a good man. Dauer was a gloomy one. He treated me well, except when I tried to run away at first. But he never laughed. Do you ever laugh, Falon?"

Embarrassed, he said nothing.

"But this is pointless," she said, "for I am a daughter of my people."

"Do you still intend," he asked nervously, "to follow your husband to the wild dogs?"

She nodded silently, then, after a thoughtful moment, asked, "Do you believe it's foolishness—to try to kill some of the in-vader?"

Falon weighed it carefully. His defiance of his own law might weaken her resolve, if he persisted in trying to convince her against the suicidal attempts. But he spoke sadly.

"We are the Soul-Empty Ones. There are many of us in the world. If one invader could be killed for every dozen they kill of us, we would win. No, Ea, I don't think it's foolishness to fight for lives. But I think it's foolishness to fight for tribes, or to give yourself to the wild dogs."

She reined her horse around a bend in the trail, then halted to stare out at the distant bonfires. "I'll tell you why we do that, Falon. There's a legend among my people that the wild dogs were once the pets of Man, of Soul-Man, I mean. And it is said that the dogs scent the soul, and will not devour true Soul-Flesh. And the legend is also a prophecy. It says that someday, children will be born to the Natani who are Soul-Children—and that the wild dogs will again know their masters, and come to lick their hands. The Natani drag themselves to the forest when they die, in the hope that the dogs will not molest them. Then they will know that the prophecy has come, and the dead will go to the Place of Watching, as the Soul-Men who made us did go."

She spurred her horse gently and moved on. But Falon was still staring at the bonfires. Why did the invader keep them burning nightly? Of what were they afraid in the darkness?

"I wonder if the dogs could scent the souls of the sons of men—of the invaders," he mused aloud.

"Certainly!" she said flatly.

Falon wondered about the source of her certainty—from legend or from fact. But he felt that he had questioned her enough. They rode for several miles in silence, moving slowly along the down-going trail. The forests to their flanks were as usual, wailing with the cries of the dog packs.

Falon reined up suddenly. He hissed at Ea-Daner to halt, then rode up beside her. The dim shadow of her face questioned him. "Listen! Up ahead!"

They paused in immobility, trying to sort out the sounds—the dog packs, a nightbird's cry, the horses' wet breathing, and—

"Dogs," murmured Ea-Daner. "Feeding on a carcass in the pathway. Their growls—" Suddenly she stiffened and made a small sound of terror in her throat. "Do you suppose it could be—"

"No, no!" he assured her quickly. "A wounded man couldn't come this far on foot. And you heard—"

She was sobbing again. "Follow me," grunted Falon, and trotted on ahead. He found the sharp dog-spikes in his saddlebag and fitted them onto the toes of his sandals. They were six inches of gleaming steel, and sharpened to needlelike points. He called to the girl to do the same. The dogs usually weighed

the odds carefully before they attacked a horseman. But if interrupted at meal-time, they were apt to be irritable. He unwound a short coil of rawhide to use as a whip.

He passed a turn in the trail. A dozen of the gaunt, white ani-mals were snarling in a cluster about something that lay on the ground. Their dim writhing shadows made a ghostly spectacle as Falon spurred his mount to a gallop, and howled a shrill cry to star-tle them.

*"Hi-yeee! Yee yee!"*

Massive canine heads lifted in the wind. Then the pack burst apart. These were not the dogs left by Man, but only their changed descendants. They scurried toward the shadows, then formed a loose ring that closed about the horsemen as they burst into the midst. A dog leaped for Falon's thigh, then fell back yelping as the toe-spike stabbed his throat. The horse reared as another leaped at his neck, and the hoofs beat at the savage hound.

"Try to ride them down!" Falon shouted to the girl. "Ride in a tight circle!"

Ea-Daner began galloping her stallion at a ten-foot radius from the bleeding figure on the ground. She was shrieking unfeminine curses at the brutes as she lashed out with her whip and her spike. Falon reined to a halt within the circle and dismounted. He was in-viting a torn throat if a dog dared to slip past Ea. But he knelt beside the body, and started to lift it in his arms. Then he paused.

At first, he thought that the creature was an invader. It was scrawny and small-boned, but its body was not covered with the black fur. Neither was it a Soul-Empty One—for in designing the Empties, Man had seen no reason to give them separate toes. But Falon paused to long.

"Dog! Look out!" screamed the girl.

Falon reflexively hunched his chin against his chest and guarded his abdomen with his arms as he drew his war knife. A hurtling body knocked him off balance, and long fangs tore savagely at his face. He howled with fear and rage as he fell on his back. The dog was straddling him, and roaring fiercely as he mauled Falon's face and tried to get at his throat.

Falon locked his legs about the beast's belly, arched his body, and stretched away. The great forepaws tore at his chest as he rolled onto his side and began stabbing blindly at the massive head, aiming for a point just below the ear, and trying to avoid the snapping jaws. As the knife bit home, the fangs sank in his arm—then relaxed slightly. With his other hand, Falon forced the weak-ening jaws apart, pressed the knife deeper, and crunched it through thin bone to the base of the brain. The animal fell aside.

Panting, he climbed to his feet and seized the animal by the hind legs. The girl was still riding her shrieking circuit, too fast for the dogs to attack. Falon swung the dead carcass about him, then heaved it toward the pack. Two others leaped upon it. The rest paused in their snarling pursuit of the horse. They trotted toward their limp comrade. Falon mounted his stallion quickly. "Draw up beside me here!" he shouted to the girl.

She obeyed, and they stood flank to flank with the man-thing on the ground between them. The pack swarmed about the dead one. "Look, they're dragging it away!" said Ea.

"They see they can have a feast without a fight," Falon mut-tered.

A few seconds later, the pack had dragged the carcass back into the forest, leaving the horsemen in peace. Ea glanced down at the man-thing.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I don't know. But I think it's still alive." Dismounting, he knelt again beside the frail body, and felt for a heartbeat. It was faintly perceptible, but blood leaked from a thousand gashes. A moan came from its throat. Falon saw that it was hopelessly muti-lated.

"What are you?" he asked gently.

The man-thing's eyes were open. They wandered toward the crescent moon, then found Falon's hulking shadow.

"You . . . you look— Are you a man?" the thing murmured in a tongue that Falon had studied for tribal ritual.

"He speaks the ancient holy language," Falon gasped. Then he answered in kind. "Are you an invader?"

Dim comprehension came into the eyes. "You . . . are an . . . android."

Falon shook his head. "I am a Soul-Empty One."

The eyes wandered toward the moon again. "I . . . escaped them. I was looking for . . . your camps. The dogs—" His speech trailed off and the eyes grew dull.

Falon felt for the heartbeat, then shook his head. Gently, he lifted the body, and tied it securely behind his saddle. "Whoever he is, we'll bury him, after the sun rises." He noticed that Ea made no comment about the relative merits of tribal death-customs, despite the fact that she must feel repugnance toward burial.

Falon felt his face as they rode away. It dripped steadily from the numerous gashes, and his left cheek felt like soggy lace.

"We'll stop at the creek just ahead," said the girl. "I'll clean you up."

The dog-sounds had faded behind them. They dismounted, and tied their horses in the brush. Falon stretched out on a flat rock while Ea removed her homespun blouse and soaked it in the creek. She cleaned his wounds carefully and tenderly, while he tried to recover his breath and fight off the nausea of shock.

"Rest awhile," she murmured, "and sleep if you can. You've lost much blood. It's nearly dawn, and the dogs will soon go to their thickets."

Falon allowed himself the vanity of only one protest before he agreed to relax for a time. He felt something less than half alive. Ea stretched her blouse across a bush to dry, then came to sit beside him, with her back to the moon so that her face was in black-ness.

"Keep your hands away from your wounds," she warned. "They'll bleed again."

He grinned weakly. "I'll have some nice scars," he said. "The valley women think a man is handsome if he has enough war scars. I think my popularity will increase. Do you like warriors with mauled faces, Ea?"

"The white scars are becoming, but not the red, not the fresh ones," she replied calmly.

"Mine will be red and ugly," he sighed, "but the valley women like them."

The girl said nothing, but shifted uneasily. He gazed at the moon's gleam on her soft shoulders.

"Will you still give yourself to the wild dogs if we return from the valley?"

She shivered and shook her head. "The Natani have scattered. A scattered people perhaps begins to lose its gods. And you've shown me a bad example, Soul-Falon. I have no longing for the dogs. But if the Natani found me alive—after Daner's death—they would kill me."

"Did you love him greatly?"

"I was beginning to love him—yes. He stole me without my consent, but he was kind—and a good warrior."

"Since you're breaking your custom, will you marry again?"

She was thoughtful for a moment. "Soul-Falon, if your cow died, would you cease to drink milk—because of bereavement?"

He chuckled. "I don't know. I don't have a cow. Do you com-pare Daher to a cow?"

"The Natani *love* animals," she said in a defensive tone.

"I am no longer a valley man and you are no longer a Natani. Do you still insist we go down against the invaders—alone?" "Yes! Blood must buy blood, and Daner is dead."

"I was only thinking—perhaps it would be better to pause and plan. The most we can hope to do alone is ambush a guard or two before they kill us. It is foolish to talk of life when we approach death so blindly. I don't mind dying, if we can kill some invaders. But perhaps we can live, if we stop to think."

"We have today to think," she murmured, glancing toward the eastern sky. "We'll have to wait for nightfall again—before we go out into the open places of the valley."

"I am wondering," Falon said sleepily, "about the man-thing we took from the dogs. He said he escaped. Did he escape from the sons of men? If so, they might send guards to search for him."

She glanced nervously toward the trail.

"No, Ea—they wouldn't come at night. Not those puny bodies. They have god-weapons, but

darkness spoils their value. But when the sun rises, we must proceed with caution."

She nodded, then yawned. "Do you think it's safe to sleep a little now? The sky is getting lighter, and the dogs are silent."

He breathed wearily. "Sleep, Ea. We may not sleep again."

She stretched out on her side, with her back toward him. "Soul-Falon?"

"Hm-m-m?"

"What did the man-thing mean—`android'?"

"Who knows? Go to sleep—Soul-Ea."

"It is a foolish title—'Soul,' " she said drowsily.

A feverish sun burned Falon to dazed wakefulness. His face was stiff as stretched rawhide, and the pain clogged his senses. He sat up weakly, and glanced at Ea. She was still asleep, her dark head cushioned on her arms; and her shapely back was glistening with moisture. Falon had hinted that he was interested in her—but only out of politeness—for it was valley etiquette to treat a new widow as if she were a maiden newly come of age, and to court her with cautious flirtation. And a valley man always hoped that if he died, his wife would remarry quickly—lest others say, "Who but the dead one would want her?"

But as Falon glanced at the dozing Ea in the morning sunlight, her bronzed and healthy loveliness struck him. The dark hail spread breeze-tossed across the rock, and it gleamed in the sun.

*She would make me a good wife indeed*, thought Falon. But then he thought of the Natani ways that were bred into her soul—the little ways that she would regard as proper, despite her larger rebellion—and he felt helpless. He knew almost nothing about Na-tani ritual for stealing brides. But it was certainly not simply a matter of tossing a girl over one's shoulder and riding away. And if he courted her by valley-custom, she might respond with disgust or mockery. He shrugged and decided that it was hopeless. They had small chance of surviving their fool's errand.

He thought of capture—and shuddered. Ea, being herded into the invaders' food pens—it was not a pleasant thought. There must be no capture.

A gust of wind brought a faint purring sound to his ears. He listened for a moment, stiffening anxiously. Then he stood up. It was one of the invaders' small skycarts. He had seen them hovering about the valley—with great rotary blades spinning above them. They could hang motionless in the air, or speed ahead like a frightened bird.

The brush obscured his view, and he could not see the skycart, but it seemed to be coming closer. He hurried to untether the horses; then he led them under a scrubby tree and tied them to the trunk. Ea was rubbing her eyes and sitting up when he returned to the rock.

"Is my blouse dry, Soul-Falon?"

He fetched it for her, then caught her arm and led her under the tree with the horses. She heard the purr of the skycart, and her eyes swept the morning sky.

"Put your blouse on," he grumbled.

"Am I ugly, Soul-Falon?" she asked in a hurt tone, but obeyed him.

He faced her angrily. "Woman! You cause me to think of breaking my word. You cause me to think of forgetting the invader, and of stealing you away to the mountains. I wish that you were ugly indeed. But you trouble me with your carelessness."

"I am sorry," she said coldly, "but your dogskin jacket was no good for bathing wounds."

He noticed the dark stains on the blouse, and turned away in shame. He knew too little of Natani women, and he realized he was being foolish.

The skycart was still out of sight, but the horses were becoming restless at the sound. As Falon patted his stallion's flanks, he glanced at the body of the man-thing—still tied across the steed's back. His mouth tightened grimly. The creature had evidently been desperate to have braved the forest alone, unarmed, and afoot. Desperate or ignorant. Had he escaped from the invader, and was the skycart perhaps searching for him? It was moving very slowly indeed—as he had seen them move when searching the hills for the villages of the Empties.

An idea struck him suddenly. He turned to the girl. "You know these paths. Is there a clearing near here—large enough for the skycar to sit upon?"

Ea nodded. "A hundred paces from here, the creekbed widens, and floods have washed the bedrock clean. Duck beneath the brush and you can see it."

"Is it the *only* clearing?"

She nodded again. "Why do you ask? Are you afraid the cart will land in it?"

Falon said nothing, but hastily untied the body from his horse. He carried it quickly to the flat rock where they had slept, and he placed the man-thing gently upon it—where he would be in full view from the sky. The skycart crept into distant view as Falon hurried back into the brush. Ea was watching him with an anxious and bewildered stare.

"They'll see him!" she gasped.

"I hope they do! Hurry! Let's go to the clearing!"

He caught her arm, and they began racing along the shallow creekbed, their sandals splashing in the narrow trickle of shallow water. For a few seconds they ducked beneath overhanging brush, but soon the brush receded, and the bed broadened out into a flat expanse of dry rock, broken only by the wear marks of high waters. Then they were in the open, running along the brushline.

"In here!" he barked, and plunged over a root-tangled embankment and into a dense thicket. She followed, and they crouched quietly in the thick foliage, as the purr of the skycart became a nearby drone.

"What are we going to do?" Ea asked tensely.

"Wait, and hope. Perhaps you'll get your knife wet."

Falon peered up through the leaves, and saw the skycart briefly as it moved past. But the sound of its engine took on a new note, and soon he knew that it was hovering over the rock where the body lay. Ea made a small sound of fright in her throat.

After a moment, the skycart moved over the clearing and hung growling fifty feet above them. As it began to settle, Falon saw a fur-coated face peering out from its cabin. He hissed at Ea to re-main silent.

The skycart dropped slowly into the clearing, rolled a short distance, and stopped, a pebble's toss from the hidden tribesmen. Its occupants remained inside for a moment, peering about the perimeter of brush. Then a hatch opened, and one of the feeble creatures climbed painfully out. There were three of them, and Falon shuddered as he saw the evil snouts of their flamethrowers.

One of them remained to guard the ship, while the others began moving slowly up the creekbed, their weapons at the ready, and their eyes searching the brush with suspicion. They spoke in low voices, but Falon noticed that they did not use the ancient sacred tongue of Man. He frowned in puzzlement. The valley folk who had been close enough to hear their speech swore that they used the holy language.

"Now?" whispered the girl.

Falon shook his head. "Wait until they find the horses," he hissed in her ear.

The spider-legged creatures moved feebly, as if they were carrying heavy weights; and they were a long time covering the distance to the flat rock. The guard was sitting in the hatchway with his flame gun across his lap. His huge eyes blinked painfully in the harsh morning sunlight as he watched the thickets about the clearing. But he soon became incautious, and directed his stare in the direction his companions had gone.

Falon heard a whinny from the horses, then a shrill shout from the invaders. The guard stood up. Startled, he moved a few steps up the creekbed, absorbed in the shouts of his companions. Falon drew his war knife, and weighed the distance carefully. A miss would mean death. Ea saw what he meant to do, and she slipped her own knife to him.

Falon stood up, his shoulders bursting through the foliage. He aimed calmly, riveting his attention on an accurate throw, and ignoring the fact that the guard had seen him and was lifting his weapon to fire. The knife left Falon's hand as casually as if he had been tossing it at a bit of fur tacked to a door.

The flame gun belched, but the blast washed across the creekbed, and splashed upward to set the brush afire. The guard screamed and toppled. The intense reflected heat singed Falon's hair, and made

his stiff face shriek with pain. He burst from the flaming brush, tugging the girl after him.

The guard was sitting on the rocks and bending over his abdo-men. The gun had clattered to the ground. The creature had tugged the knife from his belly, and he clutched it foolishly as he shrieked gibberish at it. The others had heard him and were hurrying back from the horses.

Falon seized the gun and kicked the guard in the head. The creature crumpled with a crushed skull. *The gods die easily*, he thought, as he raced along the brushline, keeping out of view.

He fumbled with the gun, trying to discover its firing principle. He touched a stud, then howled as a jet of flame flared the brush on his left. He retreated from the flames, then aimed at the growth that overhung the narrowing creek toward the horses. A stream of incendiary set an inferno among the branches, sealing off the in-vaders from their ship.

"Into the skycart!" he barked at Ea.

She sprinted toward it, then stopped at the hatch, peering inside. "How will you make the god-machine fly?" she asked.

He came to stare over her shoulder, then cursed softly. Evidently the skycart had no mind of its own, for the cabin was full of things to push and things to pull. The complexity bewildered him. He stood thoughtfully staring at them.

"They'll creep around the fire in a few moments," warned Ea.

Falon pushed her into the ship, then turned to shout toward the spreading blaze. "We have your skycart! If we destroy it, you will be left to the wild dogs!"

"The wild dogs won't attack the sons of men!" Ea hissed.

He glanced at her coolly. If she were right, they were lost. But no sound came from beyond the fire. But the invaders had had time to move around it through the brush, while the man and the girl presented perfect targets in the center of the clearing.

"Fire your god-weapons," Falon jeered. "And destroy your skycart." He spoke the ancient holy tongue, but now he wondered if the invaders could really understand it.

They seemed to be holding a conference somewhere in the brush. Suddenly Falon heard the horses neighing shrilly above the crackling of the fire. There came a sound of trampling in the dry tangles, then a scream. A flame gun belched, and the horses shrieked briefly.

"One of them was trampled," Falon gasped. "Man's pets no longer know his odor."

He listened for more sounds from the horses, but none came. "They've killed our mounts," he growled, then shouted again.

"Don't the pets know their masters? Hurry back, you gods, or perhaps the skycart will also forget."

A shrill and frightened voice answered him. "You can't escape, android! You can't fly the copter."

"And neither can you, if we destroy it!"

There was a short silence, then: "What do you want, android?"

"You will come into the clearing unarmed."

The invader responded with a defiant curse. Falon turned the flame gun diagonally upward and fired a hissing streak to the leeward. It arced high, then spat into the brush two hundred paces from the clearing. Flames burst upward. He set seven similar fires at even intervals about them.

"Soon they will burn together in a ring," he shouted. "Then they will burn inward and drive you to us. You have four choices: flee to the forest; or wait for the fire to drive you to us; or destroy your ship by killing us; or surrender now. If you surrender, we'll let you live. If you choose otherwise, you die."

"And you also, android!"

Falon said nothing. He stayed in the hatchway, keeping an eye on the brush for signs of movement. The fires were spreading rapidly. After a few minutes, the clearing would become a roasting oven.

"Don't fire, android!" called the invader at last.

"Then stand up! Hold your weapon above your head."

The creature appeared fifty paces up the slope and moved slowly toward them. Falon kept his flame gun ready.

"Where's the other?" he called.



"Your beasts crushed him with their hoofs."

Falon covered him silently until he tore his way into the clearing. "Take his weapon, Ea," he murmured. The girl obeyed, but her hand twitched longingly toward her knife as she approached. The creature's eyes widened and he backed away from her.

"Let him live, Ea!"

She snatched the invader's weapon, spat at him contemptuously, then marched back to the ship. Her face was white with hate, and she was trembling.

"Sit in the skycart," he told her, then barked at the captive. "You'll fly us away, before the fire sweeps in."

The prisoner obeyed silently. They climbed into the aircraft as the clearing became choked with smoke and hot ashes. The engine coughed to life, and the ship arose quickly from the clearing. The girl murmured with frightened awe as the ground receded beneath them. Falon was uneasy, but he kept his eyes and his gun on the back of the pilot's furry neck. The creature chuckled with gloating triumph.

"Shoot the flame rifle, android," he hissed. "And we shall all burn together."

Falon frowned uncomfortably for a moment. "Quiet!" he barked. "Do you think we prefer your food pens to quick and easy death? If you do not obey, then we shall all die as you suggest."

The pilot glanced back mockingly, but said nothing.

"You tempt me to kill you," Falon hissed. "Why do you gloat?"

"The fires you set, android. The forests are dry. Many of your people will be driven down into the valleys. It is a strategy we intended to use—as soon as our city had grown enough to accommodate the large numbers of prisoners we will take. But you have made it necessary to destroy, rather than capture."

Ea glanced back at the fires. "He speaks truth," she whispered to Falon, who already felt a gnawing despair.

"Bah, hairy one! How will you kill thousands? There are only a few of you! Your god-weapons aren't omnipotent. Numbers will crush you."

The pilot laughed scornfully. "Will your tribesmen attack their gods? They are afraid, android. You two are only rebels. The tribes will flee, not fight. And even if some of them fought, we have the advantage. We could retreat to our ships while enemies broke their knives on the hull."

The ship was rising high over the forest, higher than any mountain Falon had ever climbed. He stared out across the valley toward the seacoast where the fishing boats of his people lay idle by their docks. The owners were in captivity or in flight. The city of the invaders was taking form—a great rectangle, thousands of paces from end to end. A dozen metallic gleams were scattered about the area—the skyboats in which the invader had descended from the heavens.

He noticed the food pens. There were two of them—high stockades, overlooked by watchtowers with armed guards. He could see the enclosures' occupants as antlike figures in the distance. Neither pen seemed crowded. He frowned suddenly, wondering if the man-thing had been confined to one of the pens. The creature had been neither invader nor Empty. Falon felt a vague suspicion. He glanced at the pilot again.

"The dead one told us many things before he died," he said cautiously.

The creature stiffened, then shot him a suspicious glance. "The escaped android? What could *he* have told you?"

"*Android?*" Falon's hunch was coming clearer. "Do you call *yourself* an android?" he jeered.

"Of course not! I am a man! 'Android' is our word for 'Soul-Empty One.'"

"Then the dead one is not of your race, eh?"

"You have eyes, don't you?"

"But neither is he of our race!" Falon snapped. "For we have no toes. He is a soul-man!"

The pilot was trembling slightly. "If the dead one told you this, then we shall all die—lest you escape and speak of this to others!" He wrenched at the controls, and the ship darted valleyward—toward the city. "Fire, android! Fire, and destroy us! Or be taken to the food pens!"

"Kill him!" snarled Ea. "Perhaps we can fly the ship. Kill him with your knife, Soul-Falon!"

The pilot, hearing this, shut off the engines. The ship began hurtling earthward, and Falon clutched at his seat to keep balance.

"Fly to your city!" he shouted above the rush of air. "We will submit!"

Ea growled at him contemptuously, drew her knife, and lunged toward the pilot. Falon wrestled with her, trying to wrench the knife from her grasp. "I know what I'm doing," he hissed in her ear.

Still she fought, cursing him for a coward, and trying to get to the pilot. Falon howled as her teeth sank into his arm, then he clubbed his fist against her head. She moaned and sagged limply.

"Start the engine!" he shouted. "We'll submit."

"Give me your weapons, then," growled the pilot.

Falon surrendered them quickly. The ship's engine coughed to life as they fell into the smoke of the forest fire. The blazes were licking up at them as the rotors milled at the air and bore them up once more.

"Death is not to your liking, eh, android?" sneered the invader. "You'll find our food pens are very comfortable."

Falon said nothing for a time as he stared remorsefully at the unconscious girl. Then he spoke calmly to the pilot.

"Of course, there were others with us when we found the dead one. They will spread the word that you are not the sons of men."

"You lie!" gasped the pilot.

"Very well," murmured Falon. "Wait and see for yourselves. The news will spread, and then our tribes will fight instead of flee."

The pilot considered this anxiously for a moment. Then he snorted. "I shall take you to Kepol. *He* will decide whether or not you speak the truth."

Falon smiled inwardly and glanced back at the fires beneath them. They were creeping faster now, and soon the blaze would be sweeping down the gentle slopes to drive the inhabitants of the forest into the valley. Thousands of Natani and valley warriors would swarm out onto the flatlands. Most would not attack, but only try to flee from the creatures whom they thought were demigods.

Falon watched the invaders' installations as the ship drew nearer. Workmen were swarming busily about the growing city. First he noticed that the workmen were hairless. Then he saw that they were not Empties, but the scrawny soul-men. Furry figures stood guard over them as they worked. He saw that the soul-men were being used as slaves.

Soon they were hovering over the city, and, glancing down, he noticed that the occupants of one pen were soul-men, while the other was for Empties. Evidently the soul-men were considered too valuable as workers to use as food. The two pens were at opposite ends of the city, as if the invaders didn't care to have the two groups contacting one another. Falon wondered if the *captive* Empties knew that their overlords weren't soul-men, as they had once believed.

The girl came half awake as they landed. She immediately tore into Falon with teeth and nails. Guards were congregating about the ship as the pilot climbed out. He held off the furious Ea while a dozen three-fingered hands tugged at them, and dragged them from the plane. The pilot spoke to the guards in a language Falon could not understand.

Suddenly the butt of a weapon crashed against his head, and he felt himself go weak. He was dimly aware of being tossed on a cart and rolled away. Then the sunlight faded into gloom, and he knew he was inside a building. Bright self-lights exploded in his skull with each jog of the cart, and his senses were clogged with pain.

At last the jouncing ceased, and he lay quietly for a time, listening to the chatter of the invaders' voices. They spoke in the strange tongue, but one voice seemed to dominate the others.

A torrent of icy water brought him to full consciousness. He sat up on the cart and found himself in a small but resplendent throne room. A small wizened creature occupied a raised dais. Over his head hung a great golden globe with two smaller globes revolving slowly about it. The walls were giant landscape murals, depicting a gaunt red earth the likes of which Falon had never seen.

"On your feet before Lord Kepol, android!" growled a guard, prodding him with a small weapon.

Falon came weakly erect, but a sharp blow behind his knees sent him sprawling. The creature called Kepol cackled.

"This one is too muscular to eat," he said to the guards. "Place him in restraints so that he can have no exercise, and force-feed him. His liver will grow large and tender."

A guard bowed. "It shall be done, Lordship. Do you wish to hear him speak?"

The king-creature croaked impatiently. "This pilot is a fool. If a few of the androids believe we are not men, what harm can be done? Most of them would not believe such rumors. They have no concept of our world. But let him speak."

"Speak, android!" A booted foot pushed at Falon's ribs.

"I've got nothing to say."

The boot crashed against his mouth, and a brief flash of black-ness struck him again. He spat a broken tooth.

"Speak!"

"Very well. What the pilot says is true. Others know that you are not men. They will come soon to kill all of you."

The boot drew back again angrily, but hesitated. For the king-creature was cackling with senile laughter. The guards joined in politely.

"When will they come, android?" jeered the king.

"The forest fires will cause them to come at once. They will sweep over your city and drive you into the sea."

"With knives—against machine guns and flamethrowers?" The king glanced at a guard. "This one bores me. Flog him, then bring me the girl. That will be more amusing."

Falon felt loops of wire being slipped over his wrists. Then he was jerked erect, suspended from the ceiling so that his toes scarcely touched the floor.

"Shall we do nothing about the forest fires, Your Lordship?" a guard asked.

The king sighed. "Oh . . . I suppose it would be wise to send a platoon to meet the savages when they emerge. Our fattening pens need replenishing. And we can see if there is any truth in what the captive says. I doubt that they suspect us, but if they do, there is small harm done."

Falon smiled to himself as the first lash cut across his back. He had accomplished the first step in his mission. A platoon was being sent.

The whip master was an expert. He began at the shoulders and worked stroke by stroke toward the waist, pausing occasionally to rub his fingers roughly over the wounds. Falon wailed and tried to faint, but the torture was calculated to leave him conscious. From his dais, the king-creature was chortling with dreamy sensuality as he watched.

"Take him to the man pen," ordered the king when they were finished. "And keep him away from other androids. He knows things that could prove troublesome."

As Falon was led away, he saw Ea just outside the throne room. She was bound and naked to the waist. Her eyes hated him silently. He shuddered and looked away. For she was the sacrifice which he had no right to make.

The man pen was nearly deserted, for the soul-men were busy with the building of the city. Falon was led across a sandy courtyard and into a small cell, where he was chained to a cot. A guard pressed a hypodermic into his arm.

"This will make you eat, android," he said with a leer, "and grow weak and fat."

Falon set his jaw and said nothing. The guard went away, leaving him alone in his cell.

An old man came to stare through the bars. His eyes were wide with the dull glow of fatalistic acceptance. He was thin and brown, his hands gnarled by the wear of slave work. He saw Falon's toeless feet and frowned. "Android!" he murmured in soft puzzle-ment. "Why did they put you in here?"

Falon's throat worked with emotion. Here was a descendant of his creators. Man—who had gone away as a conqueror and returned as a slave. Nervously Falon met the calm blue-eyed gaze for a moment. But his childhood training was too strong. Here was Man! Quietly he slipped to his knees and

bowed his head. The man breathed slow surprise.

"Why do you kneel, android? I am but a slave, such as yourself. We are brothers."

Falon shivered. "You are of the immortal ones!"

"Immortal?" The man shrugged. "We have forgotten our ancient legends." He chuckled. "Have your people kept them alive for us?"

Falon nodded humbly. "We have kept for you what we were told to keep, soul-man. We have waited many centuries."

The man stared toward one of the watchtowers. "If only we had trusted you! If only we had told you where the weapons were hidden. But some of the ancients said that if we gave you too much knowledge, you would destroy us when we tried to return. Now you have nothing with which to defend yourselves against our new masters."

Falon lifted his head slightly. "Weapons, you say? God-weapons?"

"Yes, they're hidden in vaults beneath the ancient cities. We sent a man to tell you where to find them. But he probably failed in his mission. Do you know anything of him? Come, man! Get off your knees!"

Self-consciously, Falon sat on the edge of his cot. "We found this man dead in the trail—last night." He paused and lowered his eyes. It had been easy to lie to the invaders, but it would be harder lying to the gods. He steeled himself for a rebuke. "The emissary failed to tell us of the god-weapons, but he told us that the invaders were not men. The tribes now know this fact. In a few hours, they will attack. Will you help us, soul-man?"

The man gasped and wrinkled his face in disbelief. "*Attack!* With only knives and spears? Android, this is insanity!" Falon nodded. "But notice how smoke is dimming the sun, soul-man. The forest fires are driving the people forth. They have no choice but to attack."

"It's suicide!"

Falon nodded. "But it is to save you that they do it. And to save the earth for both of us. Will you help?"

The man leaned thoughtfully against the bars. "Our people are slaves. They have learned to obey their masters. It is hard to say, android. They would rally to a hopeful cause—but this seems a hopeless one."

"So it seems. I have planted a seed in the mind of the one known as Kepol. He also thinks it is hopeless, but when he sees a certain thing, the seed may bloom into panic. He underestimates us now. If later he comes to overestimate us, we may have a chance."

"What do you propose to do?"

Falon was loath to take the initiative and tell a soul-man what to do. It seemed somehow improper to him. "Tell me," he asked cautiously, "can you fly the skyboats in which the invaders brought you?"

The man chuckled grimly. "Why not? It was our civilization that built them. The invaders were but savages on Mars, before we came to teach them our ways. They learned from us, then enslaved us. Yes, we can fly the rockets. But why do you ask?"

"I am uncertain as yet. Tell me another thing. How did the one man escape?"

The man frowned, then shook his head. "This, I shall not tell you. We were months in preparing his escape. And the way is still open. Others might follow him. I cannot trust you yet, android,"

Falon made no protest. "You've told me what I want to know—that others can escape. Can many go at once?"

The man was thoughtful for a moment. "It would take a little time—to evacuate the entire man pen. But the others are already outside, working on the city."

"They will be brought back soon," Falon said dogmatically. "Wait and see."

The man smiled faintly. "You're sure of yourself, android. You tempt me to trust you."

"It would be best."

"Very well. The escape route is only a tunnel from beneath your cot to the center of the city." The man glanced around at the towers, then tossed Falon a key. "This will unlock your door. We filed it from a spoon. Let your unlocking of it be a signal. I'll speak to the others if they return, as you say."

Man and android eyed each other for a moment through the bars.

"Can you get word to the ones who are working on the city?" Falon asked.

The man nodded. "That is possible. What would you have them know?"

"Tell them to watch the forests. Tell them to set up a cry that the tribes are coming to save us."

"You think this will frighten our captors, android?"

"No, they will laugh. But when the time comes, the thought will be in their minds—and perhaps we can change it to fear."

The man nodded thoughtfully. "I suppose it can do no harm. We'll keep you informed about the fire's progress. If the wind doesn't change, it should burn quickly toward the valley."

The man departed, and Falon lay back upon the cot to think of Ea in the throne room. He had no doubt of her fate. When the king was finished with her, she would be assigned to the android pen for fattening. He had given her over into the sensual hands of the in-vader, and he resolved to atone for it by sheer recklessness when the time came for action. If the gods watched, then perhaps his own blood would pay for whatever she was suffering.

But another thought occupied his mind. The soul-man had called him "brother"—and the memory of the word lingered. It blended with the death-chant which Ea had sung for Daher when he went to die in the manner of his tribe—"The Song of the Soul-Empty Ones." "Brother," the man had said. Did one call an ani-mal "brother"? Yet the man knew he was an android.

Several old men moved about in the stockade. Apparently their duties were to "keep house" for the younger laborers. Falon wondered about the women. None were visible. Perhaps they had been left upon the invaders' world. Or perhaps the invaders had other plans for women.

Soon he heard the sound of distant shouting from the direction of the city, but could make no sense of it. Apparently, however, the workmen were setting up a cry that rescue was imminent. If only they would come to believe it themselves!

The hypodermic injection was taking effect. He felt a ravenous hunger that made his stomach tighten into a knot of pain. A horrifying thought struck him suddenly, and he shouted to the men in the yard at the stockade. One of them approached him slowly.

"Tell me, soul-man," Falon breathed. "What sort of food do the invaders bring you? Is there any—meat?"

The man stiffened and turned away. "Once they brought us meat, android. Three men ate of it. We saw that the three met with ... uh, fatal accidents. Since then, the Mars-Lords have brought us only fish and greens."

He moved away, his back rigid with insult. Falon tried to call an apology after him, but could find no words.

The sunlight was growing gloomy with the smoke of the forest fires, but the wind had died. Falon prayed that it would not reverse itself and come out of the east.

He examined his chains and found the sleeve which fastened them to the cot was loose. The soul-men had evidently pried it slightly open. Then he found that the bolts which fastened the cot legs to the concrete floor had been worked free, then returned to their places. They could be extracted with a slight tug, the plate unscrewed, and the sleeve slipped off the leg. But he left them in place, lest a guard come. Beneath the cot was a dusty sheet of steel which evidently covered the tunnel's mouth.

When a guard brought food, Falon devoured it before the creature left his cell and begged for more.

"You will be fat indeed, android," chuckled the Martian.

Toward sunset, a clamor in the courtyard told him that the soul-men were being returned to the stockade. The light had grown forge-red, and the air was acrid with faint-smoke smell. The man, who was called Penult, came again to Falon's cell.

"The smoke obscures our vision, android," he said. "The Mars-Lords have sent a patrol to police the edge of the hills, but we can longer see them." He frowned. "The lords seem worried about something. They scuttle about chattering among themselves, and they listen secretly to their radios."

"Radios?"

"The voices with which they speak to the patrol. I think they are preparing to send others. Helicopters are taking off, but the smoke must choke their visibility. What can be happening?"

"The tribes are attacking, of course," lied Falon. He noticed that the wind had arisen again. It was

sweeping the smoke along in the downdrafts from the foothills.

"What are your plans, android?" asked Penult. Several others had gathered behind him, but he hissed them away lest they attract the suspicion of the watchtowers.

"Wait until the invaders become desperate and send too many on their patrols. Then we shall rise up against the ones that remain."

"But we have no weapons."

"We have surprise. We have fear. We have your tunnel. And we must have lightning swiftness. If you can gain access to their skyboats, can you destroy them or fly them?"

Penult shook his head doubtfully. "We will discuss it among ourselves. I will see what the others wish to do." He moved away.

Dusk fell. Lights flickered on from the watchtowers, bathing the stockade in smoky brilliance. The courtyard was thronging with soul-men who wandered freely about their common barracks. Beyond the wall of the man pen, the evening was filled with angry and anxious sounds as the Mars-Lords readied more patrols for battle.

Falon knew that if they remained about the city, they would be safe. But the first patrol had undoubtedly been engulfed in the tide of wild dogs that swept from the forests. Their weapons would be ineffective in the blanket of smoke that settled about them. And the gaunt dog packs would be crazed by fear of the fire. Thousands of the brutes had rolled out across the plain, and the small patrol had been taken by surprise. The horsemen would come last. They would wait until the dogs had gone before they fled the fires. Perhaps they would arrive in time to see the dogs devouring the bodies of their gods. Perhaps then they would attack.

Penult stopped at Falon's cell. "We have managed to contact the android pen," he said. "In a few moments they will start a riot within their stockade, to distract the watchtower guards. Be ready to unlock the door."

"Good, Soul-Penult! Pick us a dozen good men to rush the towers when we come from the tunnel. Let them go first, and I will be with them."

Penult shrugged. "It is as good a way to die as any."

Falon tugged the bolts from the floor, and slipped the chain's sleeve from the leg of his cot. The manacles were still fastened to his ankles and wrists, but he decided that they might make good weapons.

One of the searchlights winked away from the courtyard. Falon watched its hazy beam stab toward the opposite end of the city. Then he heard dim sounds of distant shouting. The riot had begun. Other lights followed the first, leaving the man pen illuminated only by the floods about the walls.

Quickly he slipped from his cot and moved to the door. A soul-man sidled in front of his cell to block the view from the towers while Falon twisted the key in the lock. Then he pushed the cot aside. A man came to help him move the steel plate. They pushed it away noiselessly, and the tunnel's mouth yawned beneath them. The cell was filling with men while the guard's eyes were distracted toward the android pen.

"We are all here, android," a voice whispered.

Falon glanced doubtfully toward the courtyard. The men were thronging near the cell, kicking up dust to obscure the tower's vision. Evidently they had not seen; for Falon was certain that the invaders would not hesitate to blister the entire group with their flamethrowers if they suspected escape. Already there were sounds of explosions from the other end of the city. Perhaps they were massacring the inhabitants of the other pen. He thought grimly of Ea.

A man had lowered himself into the tunnel. Falon followed him quickly, to be swallowed by damp and cramped blackness. They proceeded on their hands and knees.

Falon called back over his shoulder. "Tell the others to wait for us to emerge before they enter."

"They're setting the barracks and the stockade walls on fire, android," hissed the man behind him. "It will provide another distraction."

It was a long crawl from the stockade to the center of the city. He thought grimly of the possibility that the tunnel would be discovered by guards coming to quench the barracks fire. The small party might

emerge into the very arms of the waiting Mars-Lords.

The tunnel was not made for comfort, and Falon's chains hindered his progress. He became entangled frequently, and bruised his kneecaps as he tripped over them. There was no room to turn around. If guards met them at the exit there could be no retreat.

The lead man stopped suddenly. "We're here!" he hissed. "Help me hoist the slab of rock, android."

Falon lay upon his back and pressed his feet against the ceiling. It moved upward. A slit of dim light appeared. The soul-man peered outside, then fell back with a whimper of fright.

"A guard!" he gasped. "Not a dozen feet away! He's watching the man pen."

Falon cursed softly and lowered the lid of the exit. "Did he see the stone move?" he asked.

"NO! But he seemed to hear it."

Suddenly there was a dull thumping sound from overhead. The guard was stomping on the stone slab, listening to its hollowness.

With an angry growl, Falon tensed his legs, then heaved. The stone opened upward, carrying the guard off balance. He fell with the slab across his leg, and his shriek was but another sound in the general melee as Falon burst upon him and kicked his weapon aside. The Martian, still shrieking, fumbled at something in his belt. Falon kicked him to death before he brought it into play.

The dozen soul-men climbed out into the gloom and raced for the black shadows of a half-completed masonry wall in the heart of the growing city. One of them seized the small weapon in the guard's belt, while Falon caught up the flamethrower.

The city was lighted only by the dim smoky aura of searchlights aimed at the man pens. The riot had diminished in the android pen, but an occasional burst of sharp explosions belched toward it from one of the watchtowers. Falon's people were sacrificing themselves to draw attention away from the soul-men.

"Split in two groups!" Falon hissed. "Tackle the two nearest towers."

They separated and diverged, following the shadows of the walls. Leadership was impossible, for the operation was too hastily planned. Falon trusted in the hope that each man's mind had been long occupied with thoughts of escape, and that each knew the weakest spots in the invaders' defenses.

A few of the searchlights were stabbing out toward the west, where sounds of the dog packs were becoming faintly perceptible. Somewhere out upon the plains, the invaders' patrols were tiny island-fortresses in the infiltrating wave of dogs and horsemen. They could easily form into tight groups and defend themselves against the hordes with their explosives and flamethrowers, but they would be unable to stem the tide of flesh whose only real desire was to escape the fires. But some of the Natani might be attacking, when they saw that the dogs did not regard the Mars-Lords as their masters.

\* \* \*

At the corner of the city, Falon's group found itself within stone's throw of a tower. They crouched in the darkness for a moment, watching the lights sweep westward. For now that the futile android riot was put down, the guards saw no threat save the unreal one on the plains. The threat's grimness was increased by the shroud of smoke that hid it and gave it mystery in the Martian eyes.

The man who had seized the belt weapon nudged Falon and whispered, "I'll stay here and cover your dash, android."

Falon nodded and glanced around quickly. They would be within the floodlights' glow, once they bounded across the wall-scurrying targets for all the towers. Suddenly he gasped. A man was running up the ladder of the tower to which the other group had gone. A searchlight caught him in its pencil. Then a blast of machine-gun fire plucked him off and sent him pitching earthward.

"Hurry!" Falon barked, and leaped across the wall.

They sprinted single file toward the base of the tower. A light winked down to splash them with brilliance. The man fired from the shadows behind them, and the light winked out. Dust sprayed up about Falon's feet as the guards shot from overhead. A streak of flame lanced downward, and two of the men screamed as it burst upward in a small inferno. The covering fire brought a guard hurtling from the tower. Falon leaped over his body and began scaling the steel ladder toward the cage.

A roar of voices came from the man pens. The barracks were blazing while a handful of guards played hoses over the walls.

Falon climbed steadily, expecting at an moment to feel a searing burst of flame spray over him. But the guards above him were firing blindly toward the shadows whence came the covering fire. And the other towers were playing their lights about their own skirts, watching for similar attacks.

A slug ricocheted off the hatchway as he burst through it into the cage. Another tore through his thigh as he whipped the chain in a great arc, lashing it about the legs of one of the guards. He jerked the creature off his feet, then dived at the other, who was trying to bring a machine gun into play. The android's attack swept him off balance, and Falon heaved him bodily from the tower.

Another man burst through the hatch and disposed of the guard who was being dragged about by Falon's chain.

Falon threw himself to the floor as a burst of bullets sprayed the open space above the waist-high steel walls of the cage. The nearest tower had opened fire upon them. Falon leaped for the permanently mounted flamethrower and sent a white-hot jet arcing toward the other cage. It fell short. He tried another burst, arcing it higher. It splashed home and the incendiary made a small furnace of the other tower, from which the guards hastily descended. The other towers were beyond flame-gun range, but they sprayed Falon's newly won outpost with machine-gun fire.

"Lie flat!" shouted the man. "The armor will turn back the bullets."

Falon flung himself headlong while the rain of small-arms fire pelted the steel walls. He ripped a sleeve from his rawhide jacket and made a tourniquet for his flesh wound. "Where are the other four?" he gasped.

"Dead," shouted his companion above the din.

A crashing roar came from the direction of the man pen. The barrage suddenly ceased. Falon chanced a glance over the low rim of the cage. One wall of the flaming stockade had collapsed, and men were pouring through the broken gap to overwhelm the firemen. The towers were turning their weapons upon the torrent of escapees. Falon's companion manned the machine gun and turned it on the invaders. "We'll draw their fire!" he called.

The second group had taken their objective, and another tower had fallen into the rebels' hands. Men poured through the stockade gap while the towers exchanged fire among themselves.

"They're trying to make it to the ships!" the gunner called. Then he fell back with half his face torn away.

Falon crawled to the gun and tried to operate it, but being unfamiliar with the god-weapons, he was only exposing himself to death. He dropped it in favor of the flamethrower, lay beside the hatch, and shot down at the occasional unfortunate Martian that scurried within his range.

Several of the towers were silent now, including the other captive one. Falon slipped through the hatch and climbed down the steel ladder. His descent went unnoticed as the battle raged about the city and among the ships. He noticed that fire was spurting from several rockets, but they were still in the hands of the invader; for the man pen's escapees were still fighting for possession of the nearest ship.

Falon sprinted for the city's wall as a pair of wild dogs attacked him from the shadows. He fied them with a blast from the flame gun, then hurdled the wall and climbed atop a heap of masonry. Most of the lights were out now, and the darkness was illuminated only by the flaming stockade. The wild-dog packs were trotting in from the west, mingling in the battle to attack man, android, and Martian alike.

One of the ships blasted off into the night, but Falon felt certain that it was not commanded by men. It was the throne ship, in which the king resided. Another followed it; but the second seemed to be piloted by the escapees.

The battle had become chaos. Falon stumbled through the masonry, stepping over an occasional body, and looking for a fight. But most of the Martians had taken up positions about the ships. He noticed that few of them were among the dead, who were mostly men and androids. But the rebels could afford to lose more than the Martians.

A few horsemen were joining the fray as the battle on the plains moved eastward. They rode into the tides of flesh that rolled about the ships. Falon saw a rider spit a Martian on his dog-spike and lift him to



the saddle. The Martian shot him, then fell back to be trampled by the horse.

The two ships were returning. Falon flung himself down behind a wall as the throne ship shrieked past, splashing a wide swath of blinding brightness down the length of the city. The second ship, which had been in hot pursuit, nosed upward and spiraled off over the ocean to make a wide circle in the opposite direction. Falon, sensing a sky battle, ducked quickly out of the city's walls, caught the bridle of a runaway horse, and swung into the saddle.

The throne ship was coming back for another run, while the other was streaking back from the south. Falon realized vaguely what the man-pilot meant to do. He glanced toward the ground battle. It had subsided, and the warriors were scurrying for cover. Shrieks of "Collision!" and "Explosion!" arose from the mobs.

Hardly knowing what to expect, Falon decided quickly to follow their example. He reined the mare to a standstill, then swung out of the saddle and clung to her flank, hiding himself from the approaching ships. He saw them come together as he ducked his head behind the mare's neck.

The ground beneath him became bathed in pale violet. Then a dazzling and unearthly brilliance made him close his eyes. For several seconds there was no sound, save the snarls of the dog packs. Then the force of a thousand avalanches struck him. He fell beneath the mare, still guarding his face behind her neck. The breath went out of him in a surge of blackness. He struggled for a moment, then lay quietly in ever-deepening night.

Daylight awakened him, gloomy gray dawnlight. The mare had tried to stagger to her feet, but had fallen again a few feet away. The valley was silent, save for the whisper of ocean breakers in the distance. He sat up weakly and knew that some of his ribs were broken. He looked around.

The plain was littered with bodies of dogs, men, and Martians. A spiral of smoke arose lazily from the wreckage. Then he saw figures moving about in the ruins. He managed a feeble shout, and two of them approached him. One was man, the other android. He knew neither of them, but the man seemed to recognize him as the prisoner who had occupied the cell in the man pen. Falon lowered his head and moaned with pain. The man knelt beside him.

"We've been looking for you, android," he murmured.

Falon glanced at the destruction again, and murmured guiltily. The man chuckled, and helped him to his feet. "We've got a chance now," he said. "We can go to the ancient cities for the hidden weapons before the Martians can send a fleet. Mars won't even find out about it for a while. The ships were all damaged in that blast."

"Were many killed?"

"Half of us perhaps. You androids are lucky. Our ancestors gave you a resistance against radiation burns—so you wouldn't mutate from the residual radioactivity left by the last war."

Falon failed to understand. "Not so lucky," he muttered. "*Our* dead do not go to the Place of Watching."

The man eyed him peculiarly, then laughed gently. Falon

flushed slightly; for the laughter had seemed to call him a child. "Come, android," the man said.

"People are waiting for you." "Who?"

"A surly old codger who says he's your father, and a girl who says she's your woman."

Falon moved a few steps between them, then sagged heavily. "He's unconscious," said the android, "or dead."

They lifted him gently in their arms. "Hell!" grunted the human. "Did you ever see a dead man *grin*?"

KENNETH JOHNSON had heard the Kalawego "black cloud" reports, but he wasn't much concerned about them. He was in fact grateful that they had frightened the price of real estate toward rock bottom. After three years in Europe as a news correspondent, he had returned to buy himself a summer cottage on Kalawega Lake, and prepared for a well-deserved month of fishing along its rocky banks. If the black cloud appeared, he promised himself, he'd have a camera handy. For although he was

not disturbed, he believed that the witnesses had actually seen something or other, and Ken regarded himself as skilled in judging the reliability of witnesses.

The phenomenon appeared on the third day of his vacation, but the camera was not immediately at hand.

The sun had fallen behind the high hill, and the cabin lay in afternoon shade. Ken sat with his feet on the porch rail watching the breeze-swept lake, and cursing himself for having invited the two guests who now sat on the steps in their bathing suits and tried to make light conversation about the races and nightlife and the New York stage, while they sucked at the lips of a pair of paper cups. Marcia was slightly drunk, her eyes too wandering, and her laughter too throaty. She kept patting the man's bare knee as punctuation for her long and parenthetically explanatory sentences.

They had brought their own liquor, and Ken glanced at it with a sniff. It sat in the center of the porch—a bucket of ice, a fifth of gin, a fifth of vermouth, a bottle of olives, and a silver shaker. Quite fancy, Ken thought, for an open-air weekend at a ramshackle cabin on remote Kalawego Lake. But then, having been married to Marcia once, he knew that she liked to carry her sophistication with her wherever she went. Her present husband, whose dark and narrow eyes never ceased devouring each part of her bared brown body, was part of her sophistication. He grinned sensually at everything she said, and placed his eyes wherever she directed them by her casually calculated posings.

Ken seldom looked at her, except when she turned to ask him a question or make some remark about "old times". He remembered the old times too well, and the memories hurt more than he cared to admit even to him self. Marcia's tanned skin, the soft smooth curves of her body, her quick moist lips, and the jiggling mass of rich brown hair flicking this way and that with each movement of her head. Ken could still remember the clutching possessiveness of her during the honeymoon, and his own voice muttering, "My little girl, my little girl." Yeah. He'd been in Europe three months when she wrote that she wanted the divorce—in favor of this sleek-mannered lap dog with the dark masculine beauty and the wandering eyes.

Ken, in bitter irony, had invited them for the weekend as a way of saying "who cares?" He had figured that Marcia would want to accept, thereby demonstrating to her friends the extent of her sophistication, but he had imagined that the lap dog, Phillip, would have enough pride to refuse. Evidently Phillip had no will of his own, for he seemed not in the least embarrassed in the presence of the man who'd known the body he was admiring long before he had entered the picture.

Ken's only satisfaction as he sat listening to them, was in the realization that Marcia was drinking herself tipsy and doing her best to prove that Phillip was her slave. She treated him with mingled contempt and motherly affection. And Ken remembered that she seldom overdrank—except when deeply disturbed. It was small consolation, however. For to his dismay, he found his old longing and love and desire suddenly rearoused. Instead of hating her, he found himself hating the attentive Phillip, with the kind of hate that sits and nurses thoughts of hard fists bruising a pretty face.

SUDDENLY Marcia's voice shook him from gloomy reverie. "Ken? Ken! Is that one of those black clouds?"

He looked up quickly, searching the sky where she pointed. Phillip was standing up and staring with his mouth open. "Oops! It's gone," he said suddenly, then hopped down the steps to look again.

Ken saw nothing. The breeze had grown gusty, and there were a few flakes of alto-cumulus toward the horizon, but the sky was otherwise blue.

"It was there! I swear it was there!" said Marcia.

Phillip walked a dozen steps from the porch to peer up through a clear place in the branches. "There it went again!" he shouted. "A black flash and then it was gone!" Suddenly he was running toward the lake.

Marcia sat down and sipped her drink thoughtfully while she stared after her husband. The excitement went out of her face like a switched-off light. Then she looked at Ken. He returned her gaze evenly, coolly, expecting her to make some inane remark. But her large brown eyes stared into his with a calm frankness and unsmiling intimacy. He tried to look away, but couldn't. "Well, Ken?" she breathed

quietly.

It was their first moment alone together. She was not sitting in the slumped comfort of relaxation, but in slightly tense erectness, leaning toward him, lips parted, posing a pose that demonstrated the length of her shapely legs, and the even flare of her hips, and the budding swell of her breasts.

"Well, Ken?"

"You didn't see anything at all, did you?" he murmured in chilly fascination.

He could see by her hesitation that she wanted to say "no", but instead she shrugged, smiled cynically toward the distant figure of her husband, looked back at Ken with lifted brows, and said, "I did see it, darling, but so what?"

He recognized the question and the invitation in her eyes. For a moment he struggled with himself. She wrinkled her nose, winked, and knocked over the gin bottle with a small and deliberate push. The liquor splashed across the porch, and the bottle rolled down the steps to shatter on the stone walkway. "What a shame," she murmured thoughtfully. "Now poor Phillip will have to make a trip to town for more."

Ken shuddered and stood up. "I better get my camera," he mumbled. "That cloud you saw might come back."

HE MOVED into the house, found the camera, and glanced at its film-window. He had forgotten to load it. He was threading the paper tip through the roller when her bare feet tiptoed up behind him. He kept on loading the camera, feeling the dull anxiety of self-loathing. She was standing a few inches in back of him, her shadow across his shoulder. She neither spoke nor touched him, but he could feel her warmth, hear her breathing, smell the faint perfume of her breath. His fingers were nervous with the film.

"Got a cigaret, Ken?" she asked in a small subdued voice.

Silently he handed her his pack over his shoulder, without looking around. But she didn't take them.

"Light it for me, Ken."

He put the camera down, lit the cigaret, and turned, offering it to her. She kept her hands at her sides, and took it from his fingers with her lips, eyeing him questioningly. He wiped a trace of lipstick from his fingernail while he stared at her.

"Not satisfied with what you've got?" He meant to make it insulting, but his voice was hoarse.

"Not at the moment," she breathed amid an exhaled aura of smoke, and her eyes fell speculatively to his shirt-throat where a patch of yellow fur lay in view. Then she stirred it absently with her forefinger while she watched his eyes. "Phillip has his advantages, but then—you have your advantages too."

Ken choked a curse in her face and slapped her hand away from his throat. But her sudden laughter kept him from stalking away in rage. With grim horror, he realized that he wanted her back—almost at any price.

"You're a man, Ken. I need a man once in a while. Phillip's—"

He slapped her brutally, leaving bright finger-welts across her cheek. She caught her breath, put her palm against her face, but continued speaking, almost without interruption.

"—not always a comforting pet. His lovemaking is highly specialized."

Ken seized the camera and jostled roughly past her. He lumbered toward the door with a sick knot in the pit of his stomach. Suddenly he realized that something was wrong. The light was gloomy outside, and the wind was wailing about the eaves.

Then he heard someone screaming in the distance. He broke into a run, and burst onto the porch. Phillip was racing up the trail and howling with fright, bending far forward against the sudden gale. A patch of darkness hung over the lake, beyond the branches in front of the cottage. It obscured the sunlight on the water.

"It came at me!" Phillip was shrieking. "It tried to get me!"

KEN LEAPED into the yard and dashed toward an opening in the trees, angling for a clear shot of the strange meteorological phenomenon. But before he reached it, the cloud winked away, as if it had never been there, leaving a clear blue sky, dulling with late afternoon's haze. There was a brief grumble of

faint thunder. The wind stopped, reversed itself for a moment, then stopped again.

Phillip was chattering excitedly to his wife on the porch. Ken turned disgustedly and shuffled toward them, staring disconsolately at the ground while listening to their voices.

"...really, Phil, that's no reason to pull up your skirts and shriek, as if you'd seen a mouse or something!"

"But I tell you, Marsh! It tried to..." His voice tapered off as he heard his host approaching. He slumped to the porchrail, his hands trembling slightly. "Whew!" he breathed. "I need a drink."

Ken spat on the walk, then sat on the bottom step and stared at the lake. Their voices went on behind him.

"Well, there isn't any, Phil. I broke the bottle. You'll have to drive in for another."

"I've got a bottle of bourbon," Ken said without looking around, "if you can stand it."

"I could use it," Phillip admitted.

"All right, darling," Marcia said. "Sit still and I'll get you a drink. Where do you keep your liquor, Ken?"

"Kitchen shelf," he admitted in amazement, then regretted it immediately. But Marcia slipped into the house without another word.

She called to him faintly from the kitchen. "You just thought you had some, Ken."

He stiffened and cursed inwardly. "There's a full bottle!" he bellowed. Then he turned as her footsteps approached through the hall.

She stood behind the screen waving an empty fifth at him and smiling. Her eyes mocked him, daring him to accuse her of pouring it down the sink which, he knew, was exactly what she'd done. "You don't remember your last binge very well, I guess," she said, then eyed her husband. "I could use one too, Phil."

Phillip slipped off the rail and sighed. "Well, let's drive in after another. I'm sure Kenneth won't mind being left alone for an hour or so."

"I'm not going," Marcia said flatly. They locked glances for a moment, and when he made no move to leave, she added, "Afraid a black cloud'll chase you? Or are you afraid something'll happen while you're gone?"

"Really, Marcia!"

"Oh, I'll go with you, if you're afraid, Phil."

"That won't be necessary," he replied stiffly, and brushed past her into the house. "Excuse me while I get out of this bathing suit."

KEN SAT still staring at the lake's reflection of approaching twilight, and wishing fervently that he'd never left Europe. Coming back to this sort of decadence, and becoming a part of it, was hardly the answer to his dreams of home. He despised himself for still loving the evil creature who stood watching him from the doorway. Why didn't he tell them both to get out?—To go and leave him completely alone. Why didn't he go tell the lap dog that his mistress was scheming to send him away— "Look, Phillsy-boy, your missus is getting fresh with me."

But then, after all, if he hadn't taken the European assignment, Marcia would never have left him. He remembered the way she'd begged him not to go, and fumed at how he couldn't love her if he left that way. And Ken had said, "Look, babe, it's only for six months." And he'd laughed when she threatened to be deliberately unfaithful. Then, after three months, the letter—and the bitterness that made him stay three years.

What if he had come back then?

When the letter came, asking for a divorce. Maybe the letter had been intended to bring him back. He'd thought about it before. Marcia did things like that sometimes. But when he said, "Get it and be damned. I'm staying three years," she got it anyway.

Maybe some of the mess was his fault. A sensible woman could have waited six months in the interest of her husband's job; but Marcia wasn't a sensible woman, and he had known it when he married her. She selfish and high-strung and possessive—and now she was something else too—something that

wasn't quite healthy. Still, he loved her, and wished she'd go away. Inviting her had been the worst kind of mistake.

He heard Phillip leave by the back door, slamming the screen petulantly. Marcia was humming a nerve-wracking tune in the doorway. A starter growled behind the house, then Phillip's car roared away up the narrow road. There was a moment of stillness; the only sound was the rustle of sparrows fluttering in the brush. The lake was mirror-calm in the dusk.

The screen door spring creaked behind him, and Marcia's bare feet padded across the porch. She sat silently on the step above him and hung one foot on either side. Then he felt her hands on his shoulders, lightly. And she placed her forehead against the back of his neck.

"I was a little tight, Ken. It's wearing off."

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry, Ken. But if I hadn't been tight, I'd have done it anyway. I'd just have been nicer about it, that's all."

"Trying to reset the stage now?" he growled.

"Yes...yes, Ken. To reset the whole darn thing. From the beginning. I shouldn't have tried to own you so hard, should I? You don't own easy."

"Phillip does. And apparently you like it."

FOR A WHILE she said nothing, then, "Do me a favor, Ken. Love me. Just for now. Then I'll let you alone. I couldn't go back to you, even though I still love you. You wouldn't take me anyway, but right now—"

"Stop babbling!" he snapped. Then he walked away from her, leaving her on the steps and moving down the trail toward the dock. He shivered at the damp touch of his shirt collar; it was soggy with her tears.

He wanted her. But to take her would be to come back again...and again ...and finally he'd be helpless. That's the way she wanted him, helpless. She wasn't aware of it, of course. Love? Maybe, if she were capable of it, but she wanted him helpless.

He walked out on the dock and stared across the five-mile expanse of gray water in the gloom. Crickets were chirruping along the banks, and he heard a deer tearing through the brush to reach the shore. It was, he thought, a good place to be standing when Phillip came back. He stole a cautious glance toward the porch, half-expecting to see Marcia approaching. But she was nowhere in sight. Maybe she's coming to her senses, he thought...

...but he doubted it.

Ten minutes later he heard her coming down the path to the dock. When her high heels clattered on the loose boards, he glanced back in surprise; she had shed the bathing suit and was fully dressed in a bright print skirt and white blouse. She was smiling crisply, but her eyes were hard, determined. They mocked him.

"My face is bruised where you slapped me, Ken."

"Sorry. You know I'm short on temper."

"Phil didn't see it. I kept my face turned. But he'll see it when he comes back." She stood facing him, smiling up at him coldly.

"What're you driving at?"

Suddenly her hand lashed out like a striking rattler, and he felt her sharp nails rake down his cheek in a quick sear of pain. He recoiled, leaned against a dock piling, and stared at her.

"He'll see that too, Ken. Watch it; it's bleeding on your shirt."

He stood transfixed, remembering the shotgun in Phillip's car, and the crazy jealousy of men who allowed themselves to be owned by a woman. A stiff breeze was springing up, but he scarcely noticed it. Marcia glanced at the sky.

"There's the cloud again, in case you're interested." Her tone implied that she was not. She looked down at herself, then seized the front of her blouse and ripped it, tearing a long rent from shoulder to waist. "He won't like this either, Ken."

But Ken was staring up at the sky in dismay. A swirling globe of dark gray mist hovered a thousand feet over the lake—like the spent smoke of a mighty ack-ack burst. Meanwhile, Marcia was still preparing her revenge.

"Look at the way you've messed up my hair, Ken. And my lipstick. Phil will be furious. If he doesn't kill you, I'm sure he'll go for the police."

CAUGHT impotent between the cloud and the woman's wrath, he stood speechless, while the howling wind sucked at his shirt and washed about his burning cheek. Marcia turned suddenly and began running along the dock toward shore. Helplessly, he glanced at the cloud. It was growing blacker in the gray sky of dusk. And settling lower. Then he saw that the wind was rushing toward it from all directions. The trees on the opposite shore were bending lakeward.

The birth of a twister?

He turned to follow Marcia. With an explosive crack, a dead tree limb broke loose and fell just ahead of her, carried along the dock by the gale. She leaped " over it, tripped, and sprawled full length across the boards. "My ankle!" she wailed above the wind's wail.

He raced toward her, fighting the wind, and pausing to heave the limb from the dock. Her shoe was off, the high heel wedged in a crack between the boards; and she was moaning with pain as he knelt beside her.

"Can you stand?" he shouted.

She started to her feet, but fell back with a cry. The ankle was twisted askew. He lifted her in his arms, but found it impossible to carry her against the hurricane force that was tearing debris from the shore and hurling it out over the angry waves. He sank to his knees again and laid her on the dock, but she clung fiercely to his neck, shrieking with fright. "Don't leave me here, for God's sake, Ken!"

He saw what she was thinking. It would look like an accident, and for an instant he was tempted to go on alone. But the arms were the arms of a child clinging to her father, and wasn't that the meaning of insanity—being a child when one had no right to be a child? He pressed his mouth against her ear.

"Let go, babe! I won't leave you."

"You love me, Ken? Say you love me!" She was still screaming, and her eyes were wild, her lips parted hungrily.

"Yeah, sure, kid."

She let go of him then. They were lying stretched out full length on the boards, but still the wind tugged them menacingly. The dock was quaking and groaning under the force.

"It's going to collapse, Ken. I can feel it. Look at the pilings...."

Almost as she spoke, the outer end of the dock twisted aside, splintered and crashed into the waves, hurling broken boards into the storm that bore them away across the water.

"The boat!" he shouted. "Into the boat!" He scrambled to a nearby piling and began winding in the mooring rope of his small fishing craft. The boat was metal, but there were sealed air-tanks in the prow and stern which would keep it afloat if it capsized in the wave-tossed lake.

"I can't make it, Ken! My ankle!" He seized the piling, swung himself down, and dropped sprawling into the tossing craft. "Roll to the edge! I'll catch you."

CLINGING to the piling with one hand, he lurched to his feet and seized her about the waist as she came hurtling over the edge of the platform. They fell in a tangle into the wobbling boat, rocking it dangerously. There were several inches of water in the bottom. He shook off her clutching hands, crawled to the prow, and sawed at the rope with his pocketknife. "Start baling her out!" he howled. "There's a can somewhere!" Faintly, he heard her scraping at the bottom and sloshing water over the side. Then the half-severed rope snapped free, and the wind whisked the boat away from the sagging dock. He threw himself down and crawled back to Marcia. She had lost the baling can in the wind, and she was sobbing plaintively.

"Don't be scared, kid! If we tip over, hang onto the swivel rings—on the sides of the boat!"

She caught him down beside her. "I'm not scared, Ken. Just sorry! God, I'm sorry!"

He glanced quickly at the cloud. It had fallen toward the lake, and it hovered fifty feet above the water—a pitch-black patch of—

"Marsh!" he howled. "There're stars in it! It's not a cloud at all."

But she was still shrieking at him that she was sorry! He stared at the black globe of emptiness. There were stars glittering beyond it—where the opposite hillside should have been. A piece torn out of space! A dark tunnel into the void! The wind was pouring through it into nothingness. The gloom of evening was lightened by contrast with the awful hole.

The boat was pitching among the white-capped waves, but as they raced with the wind, the force of the gale lessened slightly.

He heard Marcia praying. She was speaking to him, but still it was a prayer. The evil mask stripped away, she was a child, clinging to him. "Don't leave me, Ken! You left me once, and I was lost. Don't leave me again. Why didn't you come back?"

When? When she'd asked for the divorce? Maybe he would have—if she'd made it conditional. But he was no whipped puppy to come begging. That's what she wanted—or thought she wanted. But if he had come back, he'd have lost his pride; and now he'd be another Phil. No, not quite, but almost.

"Answer me, Ken! Was there another woman? Over there? In Europe?"

He looked down into her frightened face and shook his head slowly. After what she'd done, she could still ask a thing like that. Marcia, Marcia. Not sane, neither was she insane. He saw her mind tightly locked in a vault of self. Desperately, she was trying to open it to him, but the hinges were rusty. But she was still his wife; her eyes told him so. No red tape nor official pronouncements by the courts could change that.

THE BOAT was moving faster, but the waves had diminished. He looked at the globe-gap and saw the cause. It had settled until a segment of its base lay beneath the water, and the lake was pouring toward it like a river over the brink of a waterfall. They were a thousand yards away and soon, he thought, they would be plunging through the emptiness.

"It was Phil's fault!" she cried. "He used to tell me about the girls in Europe. He made me think—"

"Shut up!" he roared at her. He'd never put the finger of blame on the other guy. It took two to do what they'd done, but it only took one to say "no". Marcia hadn't said it, and he couldn't blame any man for wanting his wife. Especially a weakling like Phil. But now he wanted to shift the blame, knowing that it was wrong to do so. "Just shut up!" he roared again.

But she kept talking in an incomprehensible babble. Not about the black maw that was preparing to devour them, not looking at it, nor even seeming to think about their plight. She recognized death though, and raved on, trying to make things right when they could never be right.

"Love me, Ken! For God's sake! Love me!"

He stared at the star-lanced gulf. Something was glistening in its center—a gleaming ball, growing larger, coming toward them out of nowhere. A visitor out of space? A hole torn in the fabric of universe to admit some alien creature?

But the creature in his arms caught his hair and pulled his face down against hers. She kept shrieking his name, and repeating her demand, as if it would save them from the dark death. Grimly, he realized that in her mind the black threat was a personal thing, whose coming was for the purpose of punishing her. And she clawed at Ken as if he had the power to absolve her guilt, thereby driving the threat away. He pitied her, and held her tightly as the boat swirled on in the rushing torrent whose waves had nearly subsided.

The metallic sphere blossomed larger in the gulf, growing so as to fill the globe of emptiness. The wind seemed to be diminishing as the volume of the sphere occupied more and more of the gap.

"Look, Marsh! It's letting up!"

But she paid no heed. She was laughing now, against his throat, nuzzling his neck, and calling out: "I won't ever try to own you, Ken. Never again. It's the other way around. I'm your property, baby. You hear that? It's what I really wanted, anyway. But I was ashamed. Own me like a piece of furniture, Kennie. That's what I want to be. Do you hear me? And you know what I want you to do with Phil?"

HE STARED at her and said nothing. It was no time to tell her that she was stuck with life the way she'd chosen it—if she lived at all. Stuck with Phil, and stuck with ownership. Why ownership, anyway? Still a kid, wanting to be possessed by huge hulking parents, and denying the wish by trying to possess others.

"Know what I want you to do with him? Kill him! *Kill him, Kennie!*" Her voice went to a savage snarl. "No, I'll do it! Oh, but they don't let you do that, do they? I'll just maim him, then."

A child shattering a toy. He shuddered and looked at the globe. It had filled the space, and now it was floating in the lake—a hundred foot sphere of metal, half submerged. The wind stopped with a whoompf as it lost its point of exit. There was a moment of calm.

Marcia sat up, gazing at him with worshipful eyes, as if he had been responsible for the disappearance of the threat. Her sodden clothing clung to her shapely young body, and she was shivering slightly as she hugged herself and smiled up at him happily, saying nothing.

He looked around, then gasped. The water, driven by its inertia, was still rolling toward the center of the lake. The boat was being borne ever upward on a rising hillock of water whose center was the floating sphere, now glimmering mysteriously in the light of an early moon. Ken stood up and quickly estimated the final results of what was happening.

Then he barked at Marcia: "Over the side! There'll be a wave! Hang onto the ring."

For the first time, she seemed to become fully aware of events. She glanced at the sphere and murmured fearfully—but now her fear seemed rational. She glanced back toward the dark shoreline, down the ever-steeping slope of water. Then she tossed him a nervous smile, threw her feet over the side of the boat and slipped into the lake, moaning with pain as the rush of water tore at her ankle. Ken dived out, caught one of the rings on the opposite side of the boat, and called to her: "You okay, Marsh?"

"Okayer than I've ever been, Kennie," she said weakly, but he couldn't see her head beyond the boat.

He kicked his feet and paddled one hand, maneuvering the boat so that its prow was aimed toward the sphere, still being lifted on the watery mountain. He hoped that the backwash, when it came, would not come as a breaker. But already a first crest was rolling down the slope, while the undercurrents still pressed up from beneath.

THE CREST caught them. The boat swooped up sickeningly, then plunged. The sphere seemed buoyed up higher as the mountain began to sink. Then it sank deeper, much deeper, pressing the water away from it in a roaring, rushing wave.

"K-Kennie—I—I'm slipping."

"Hang on!" he screamed. "Hang on! It'll be over in a minute!"

"And we'll get married again?"

"Yeah! Hell yeah, we will!" Gasping and fighting the swirling tide, he knew that he meant it. It would be a helluva life, but— "*Hang on!*"

The watery monster was upon them. The boat leaped up, then ducked as the torrent broke over it.

"Kennie—it would have been...better this time—"

Her words choked off suddenly. The boat tipped up on end. Ken gripped the ring and rode it half out of the water. The boat crashed over on its face and the ring tore from his grasp. The icy tide closed over his head for a moment, but the swirling currents buoyed him up again, and he was swimming a few feet from the capsized craft.

"Marcia?" He paused, waiting for her answer. "Marcia! ...Marcia!... Answer me! ...MARCIA!"

The moonswept lake was empty— save for the sphere and the overturned boat. The water's surface was concave now; and soon the wave's reflection would sweep back from the shore.

"Marcia!"

Still no answer. Choking with grief, he gasped a lungful of air and plunged beneath the surface, feeling about with his hands, and straining his eyes to penetrate the cold and swirling blackness. The moon made a shimmering mirror of the surface above his head. He dived down deep, as far as his lungs would bear,



then turned over on his back and stared upward, hoping to see her form silhouetted against the silver-bright surface. But he could see nothing but the twisting bubbleclouds left by the roaring wave. And the lake was eighty feet deep in places. He dived deeper, giving no heed to the groaning of his lungs for air.

Suddenly he was being pushed by undercurrents. Glancing up, he saw the dim-bright surface growing darker, receding higher above him. The wave was reflecting back, and he was being pulled in the thrall of its undertow. The craving for air overwhelmed all thoughts of search. He began fighting his way upward.

THE CURRENTS were persistent.

They bore him up momentarily, then with a rolling motion pressed him downward again, swirling him this way and that. Frantically he clawed at the water. Points of light danced in his mind. A dim disk of self-light bloomed into a great orange sun within his brain. Craving for air overwhelmed reason. He breathed—and almost sighed with relief as the cold tide sucked into his throat and clogged his nose.

Suddenly he was on the surface, still fighting at the encompassing fluid, still choking for the breath that could not pass the clogged bronchia. Something wound around his arm, like a tight cable or a tentacle. He fought against it weakly as the orange sun grew to consume his mind. Strangling, and trying to shriek, he felt himself being tugged upward.

Then, with no sensation of time's passage, he found himself lying face down upon an inclined pallet, with his head hung lower than his feet, coughing the water out of his lungs and throat. He coughed until coughing wore away his consciousness—and he slept.

When he awoke, the pallet had been leveled. He lay upon his back, staring at a low and indirectly lighted ceiling. He glanced around weakly and found himself in a small windowless room, empty save for his pallet and a low pedestal in the center of the floor. The walls and ceiling gleamed dully, as if made of metal. Feebly, he pushed himself to a sitting position. The room was deathly silent.

A hospital?

"Hello!" he called.

There was another moment of silence, then a low and throaty voice issued from a loudspeaker on the wall: "Hello, Thinkman."

He frowned, then caught his breath. The voice, though distorted, seemed familiar. "Marcia?" he called hopefully.

There was another pause, then, "No, we are not the thinkwoman."

Ken felt the back of his neck shiver with crawling flesh. The voice was Marcia's, but the words were not.

"Whoever you are, can't you come in here? Do you have to talk through the wall? What is this, anyway?"

Another pause. "Very well, we shall enter. But do not be disturbed by what you see. We remind you again, we are not the thinkwoman."

He heard a click from the loudspeaker, then the muffled sound of a door opening somewhere beyond the wall. It closed again, and a motor whined for several minutes. Suddenly it stopped, the door swung open, and Marcia walked into the room. She stood staring at him calmly, impersonally—with a cool openness he had never seen before. His scalp was crawling again. Something was wrong, bad wrong!

"We remind you for the third time," she said. "We are not the thinkwoman whom you call Marcia. We found it necessary to adopt her image, because she was the only thinkhuman available for detailed biosimulation."

Ken bounded off the cot and retreated across the room. His hands were working nervously. Suddenly he felt certain of his whereabouts—he was within the sphere! "What did you do with her?" he cried. "If you're not..."

THE IMAGE of Marcia answered calmly: "We took her from the lake. Her functions had ceased. We tried to revive her. But certain tissue degenerations had already occurred. So we used her as a pattern for our own rebiosimulation of this planet's life forms. Except for our internal organs which are our

own invention. Her body is intact. Would you like to see it?"

Ken shook his head dumbly. Conflicting emotions—grief, fear, gnawing anger—flooded him, leaving him helpless to act or speak. He sat down on the pedestal. Had they killed Marcia?

The Marcia-like creature answered his thought: "No, *we* did not kill her, Thinkman. Observe! We could have deluded you if we wished. We could have impersonated her with complete accuracy and not informed you of her cessation."

He glanced up frowning, prepared to say that it couldn't be done—not with the strange manner of speech. But suddenly the girl-thing smiled. It was Marcia's sophistic smile—a pert drawing up at the corners of the mouth. She then hopped upon the edge of the pallet, crossed her long brown legs, and exposed the pretty knees beneath Marcia's skirt, which had been dried but not re-pressed. She daintily remoulded the back of her hair with her fingertips, then leaned toward him, wrinkling her nose. "Got a cigaret, Ken?" she asked.

He found himself hurrying across the room. "Marcia..."

"No! We are not the thinkwoman! Watch, please." She gestured toward the wall behind him, and he heard a faint clicking sound.

Nothing happened for a moment. Then a circular patch of wall glowed with dull red heat, faded, and became transparent. He was looking through it into an adjoining room—with a pallet—upon which lay the body of an unhappy child—Marcia, gray in death.

He lowered his head. Maybe it was better. She could never be happy, not with anyone. Well, maybe she'd died in a happy moment—"okay"er than she'd ever been".

The creature seemed to read his thoughts. "In examining her thinking organ, we found she ceased function during a surge of radiant emotion-response."

KEN TURNED quickly, saw the pert face like a ghost, closed his eyes and shuddered. "As long as you have to look like her, I wish you'd talk like her. What are you, anyway?"

She smiled again. "Okay, Ken, if it's more comfortable for you." She paused, summoning a moment of reflection in which to ape Marcia's personality patterns. "I'd better anticipate all your questions, I guess," she murmured thoughtfully. She skipped off the cot, patted his pockets, found a dry and unopened pack of cigarets and lighted one.

"I'm from a star system you never heard of. And I'm a fugitive—the last of my race, so far as I know. We were attacked by a race from our twin planet. They invaded, then began a systematic extermination. They had to; we were so good at mimicry that we could have infiltrated their occupation forces as saboteurs." She paused. "The reason I'm telling you this: I want to live here—on friendly terms."

Ken said nothing. He was still too dazed by her appearance, her mannerisms, the tone of her voice....

"I escaped in this ship, found my way to your sun system and hid on your moon for thirty years."

"Moon?"

"Yes. Observing your race—by radio, mostly. Sometimes by opening up a five-space landing tunnel. You know, the 'black cloud' business. Call it a spacewarp, if you like. Anyway, I could look through it. Or come through it. I've observed your race carefully. And I decided that our basic psychic patterns are similar enough to allow my living here without any real incompatibility—in human form, of course." She hesitated, watching his face. Then, "You're thinking it wouldn't work," she said. "Why?"

Ken paused long enough to wonder why he believed her at all. Surely this was Marcia...some mad gag... some ...but no, he believed her. And the shock of recent events kept him from feeling much surprise.

"It wouldn't work," he said dully, "because you're telling me about it, and I presume you mean to tell others."

She nodded. "And so I wouldn't be accepted. Well, I hadn't meant to reveal my identity. But it's become an unpleasant necessity. You see, I'll have to do so in order to convince people that they must evacuate the area around this lake for a hundred and fifty miles. Immediately."

"What! Evacuate! Why?" He leaned forward to glower at her.

WITH A habit that was irritatingly Marcia's, she held her cigaret's glow close to her lips, and blew off the ashes with a thin jet of smoke between her pretty lips. "That's right," she said calmly. "The enemy's in the solar system now—looking for me. If they find this, find this five-space sphere..." She snapped her fingers ominously. "The surrounding geography will probably collect in an orbit around the earth. You'll have a new ocean." She shrugged. "I'm sorry about it, but I never thought they'd trail me here."

Ken frowned angrily. A hundred and fifty mile radius! That would encompass several large industrial cities. Why hadn't she gone to another planet? Or at least to empty desert country. Actually, she was responsible...

"For Marcia's death." She finished his thought aloud. "That's right. I'll repay according to the code of my race. But first, look at this other business. I already had this five-space course plotted ... from that moon crater to here. I plotted it before I saw the enemy ship come into Sol's field—out by Pluto. After that, there was no time to plot another; it's an intricate business. And I couldn't blast off by rocket; they'd pick up my jets on gamma scanners. I had to wink in right here; or else sit on the moon and wait for them to blast me."

"Which wouldn't have been a bad idea," he said angrily.

She reddened slightly. "Unfortunately, in taking on another creature's form and personality pattern, I'm forced to duplicate that creature's emotions. And, in this form, I'm afraid I agree with you." She lowered her eyes unhappily and stubbed out the cigaret.

Ken softened his voice slightly, feeling as if he were speaking to Marcia's twin. "Well, what're you going to do about it?"

She put her elbows on her knees, her chin on her palms, stared at him, and shook her head thoughtfully. "I don't know, Ken. I've submerged the sphere, and we're below the lake. But they'll find it anyway. And blast it. They're more interested in the sphere than they are in me. Because if they destroy it I'm stuck here. And that's all they want—to make certain I don't go back to my system and infiltrate them."

"Why don't you just leave again?" he muttered.

"I told you. No time to plot a five-space course. They'll be here in a few days—and they'd catch me in a gamma scanner if I used rocket blast off."

"Blast off anyway!" he said stubbornly.

She caught her breath, then frowned. "Suicide? To keep them from blasting this area? No—bluntly, no. Examining your thinkwoman's neural patterns, I don't think she'd have done it either."

"She was atypical," he growled. "Neurotic."

The alter-Marcia nodded. "I agree. Incidentally, she'd have been miserable if she'd lived. Are you interested in knowing why?"

"Some other time," he grunted.

"I'll tell you anyway," she said, winning a frown from Ken, who saw another habit of his ex-wife therein. "She stayed in emotional babyhood. She wanted passivity, to be dominated by parent-images. Subconsciously she knew it, and consciously told herself it wasn't so. And she tried to prove it wasn't so by sophistication, by pseudo-aggression, by dominating others. Then you broke her defense."

"How?" he grunted.

MARCIA'S GHOST watched him peculiarly. "You left her in the face of her threats, you let her divorce you, you invited her here with her husband—which shocked her thoroughly and ruined her pride. You refused her, and you refused to be dominated. You dominated her, you frightened her—although I helped some there—and she still loved you. So—she gave up her defense, and admitted to herself that she wanted to play the submissive child, not the domineering parent."

"But why do you say she'd have been miserable?"

"Because from now on she'd identify you with her parent. She'd expect to be bullied, ordered around, dominated—as proof of the identity. And when you didn't do it, she'd do something to make you

do it—fits of temper, tantrums, unfaithfulness."

"How do you know all this?" he snapped.

She shrugged. "Why shouldn't I? I absorbed the neural patterns, her memory. I remember her experiences as if they happened to me. But I have the advantage of being able to look at them objectively."

Ken shifted uneasily, feeling the heat in his face. "All of her memories?"

She smiled tightly. "All of her memories, Kennie. Would you like me to tell you all about Phil?"

He shuddered and dragged his face through his hands. "No, thanks. Suppose we just talk about what you intend to do about this mess."

"Give me another cigaret, then."

Ken pitched her the pack. "I shouldn't have picked up her habits too," she said as she lit one. Then she eyed him brazenly. "Since you suggest suicidal bravery, suppose I teach you the rocket controls and let you blast the sphere off while I stay here on earth."

Ken spent the next thirty seconds staring at her and cursing softly. She rewarded him only with a quizzical smirk.

"It was your idea," she went on. "After all, it's your race, not mine. I'm sorry and all that, but I've got no intention of sacrificing myself for them. Why don't you do it?"

He cursed her again, feeling the blind rage of impotence. But seeing his thoughts, she was able to hit at his sorest spots.

"Sign of your immaturity," she murmured. "Just like Marcia's. You identify me with a parent and expect me to make sacrifices that you won't make." Then she added quickly. "Uhuh! Psuedo-aggression!"

Helplessly, he checked the urge to kick her teeth out. He sat down again and put his face in his hands, remaining silent for a long time. "What will you do if I agree?" he asked dejectedly.

SHE SHRUGGED, and a note of sadness crept into her voice. "First I'd have to fulfill the code—in regard to Marcia's death. I'd impersonate her, take her place...."

"As Phil's wife?"

She nodded. "It would be rather distasteful, but maybe I could straighten up the mess." She looked up suddenly with an angry frown. "You're thinking I've got an obligation to you! You're crazy!"

He smirked. "She was coming back to me, wasn't she? You've already admitted it!"

She gave him as nasty a grin as he'd ever seen on Marcia's face during one of her nastier moments. "Yes, Kenny boy! She was. Would you like me to take her place for you? After what you know about me?"

Ken, who was conceiving a plan, nodded. "Yes, I would," he said firmly. "And in the precise way you predicted she'd behave in the future. Is that a part of your code? For all I know about it, you could lie about it and shrug it off. Do you live by your code, or just excuse yourself with it? The way we do with ours," he added hastily.

She whitened, seeing the nature of his plan. For a moment her eyes flared angrily. Then she stood up proudly. "My race was an honorable people. And we are so ancient that our ethical code has become a part of our biological nature. It's too bad you can't say the same. I'll honor my obligations. Do you insist that I fulfill her intention to return to you?"

He nodded solemnly, returning her stabbing glances, and knowing that she saw his slightly treacherous plan. If she, on the other hand, were lying about her race's moral stature, then the plan was worthless. Funny moral code, he thought, that would let her sit by while her enemy destroyed a million innocent people, but insisted that she pay for the life of one girl whose death had been more or less accidental.

"I find your ethics equally silly," she snorted. "But now, my husband—if that's what you will—I'm going to show you my natural form! Watch, Kennie, watch! And see if you still want me to fulfill...watch!"

HE TURNED his back quickly and covered his eyes. Cold fingers were dancing along his spine. Had he seen her skin change slightly? He refused to watch, lest the sight destroy his resolve. He gritted his eyes tightly together and tried to close his mind.

But her voice became a croak, "watch watch watch", became a grunt, became an adder's hiss. "*Watch watch watch!*" A wet voice, oozing up out of soft mush. He moaned and closed his ears, but the voice was breathing against the back of his trouser legs, from about the height of his knees. Then he felt the tendril touching his ankle—like the one that had tugged him from the lake—and he cried out in horror as he kicked at it and stumbled away.

"Is this the way you fulfill the obligation?" he shrieked. The tendril was entangled in his feet. He stumbled and fell headlong, still covering his face with his hands.

There was a long silence. Then he heard her footsteps again. A door opened. He glanced around to see the space witch rummaging through a small cabinet in the wall. She found a small phial with a needle attached, drove the needle into her arm, and squeezed the plastic sides of the bottle. Then she closed the cabinet, rested her forehead against it and leaned there breathing heavily, as if awaiting the effect of the drug.

Ken climbed to his feet and sat down on the pedestal, staring at her and shivering. "All right!" he panted. "Come show me the rocket controls."

She looked around slowly, her eyes dull. "You expect me to come with you?"

He nodded. "I don't think the world would appreciate your talents."

"You realize, of course," she murmured, "that I could kill you, leave you here in the lake, and move out into your world without anyone's knowing the difference."

He nodded again. "And leave the sphere to be blasted by the other ship —along with a million people."

"Exactly." They locked calm glances for a moment.

"Well...are you going to show me the controls?"

SHE MOVED to the pallet and sat down again, in passive refusal or delay. He didn't remind her of her self-imposed obligation; yet he tried to trust in it. Trust a being such as this? She saw his thoughts and straightened slightly.

"My race was almost human once." He shrugged, but said nothing. It seemed hard to believe.

"Any race that stays in space a billion years will develop powers of biosimulation—as a way of adapting to different planets, varying gravities, climates, and so forth."

"Let's go to the controls. Get the ship out of here before dawn."

She eyed him nervously. "You know the consequences? They'll see us on the gamma scanurs. Then they'll connect a five-space channel between us and the sun." She gestured around at the walls of the room. "You'll live long enough to see them go white hot, then melt."

"Let's go."

She hesitated briefly, then set her face in hard lines. "No! I've changed my mind. I'm staying here."

He started toward her in anger; then she was holding him off with a small, innocent-looking weapon the size of a fountain pen.

"Ethics," he grunted, staring at it.

She kept it levelled at his chest, saying nothing, eyeing him coldly. He turned away and walked to the door, expecting death from behind. But she let him open it. A tiny cubicle lay beyond. Grill work in the ceiling told him that it was an airlock. He started into it.

"Better not," she said coolly. "The atmosphere in the rest of the ship is that of my home planet. You wouldn't like it, to say the least."

"Could it be changed?"

"Of course. But I don't intend doing it. And you don't know how." She smirked brightly. "I suggest you go on alone and leave me here, on earth."

Irritably, he slammed the door, glared at her. "I don't know which is worse—letting half of New England be blasted off the map, or wishing you on the world. But since it's my only choice..."

She laughed Marcia's laugh. "I assure you I'll behave myself."

"Like you've been doing?" he sneered.

"Not at all. Have you ever been alone?—for forty years?—completely alone? It's not pleasant. I'm gregarious—with any race. I can settle down and adapt to your social forms with no trouble at all. I'll even starve myself of the food-components that make biosimulation possible—a certain 'vitamin' you might call it; my race needs it—but I'll forego it so I can't change. My race is gone, Ken; I've got no home. I'm going to adopt yours. Have children, and—"

"Children!" he roared in horror.

"Why not? They'd be human, if I wanted them to be."

He shuddered, then said grimly, "Okay, let's get it over with."

SHE HOPPED off the pallet and moved to the door. "I'll get you a pressure suit so you can endure the air outside."

Then she was gone through the lock and he paced the floor restlessly. Pressure suit to fit a human? How could she have such a thing?

He stopped before the wall cabinet and stared at it. The hypo—food-components—that make biosimulation possible. He opened it and glanced at the several dozen phials—all identical. Then he began removing their caps and pouring the sticky yellow contents on the floor, expecting her to burst back into the room at any moment. But evidently the telepathic powers were limited to the immediate vicinity; he emptied the last bottle and closed the cabinet again.

He glanced at his watch. There was moisture in the case, but it hadn't stopped yet. Still four hours until dawn. It would be better to get the sphere away before the sun rose—for surely someone would come to investigate the freak storm.

She was a strange creature, he thought—the space witch. A personality half-alien, half-Marcia's. He was certain that her change of attitude, her decision to thwart her code, was due to Marcia's emotional patterns, not her own—if she had any that she could call her own.

Suddenly he heard her enter the lock again. Evidently she was undergoing the biosimulation process, to readapt to the change of atmospheres. The door opened, and she entered, carrying a spray gun, a hose, and a pressure cylinder. She stepped in the puddle of fluid, then glanced down at her feet.

Her face went chalk white. She moaned, and dropped the paraphernalia. Ken took advantage of her shock to slap the weapon from her hand. It belched a streak of blue fire that lanced past him and reddened the metal wall. He picked it up and backed away from her.

But she fell to her knees and began trying to suck some of the liquid up in one of the phials. She was mumbling in fright.

"Get back!" he growled, but she seemed not to hear him. He caught her shoulder roughly, and sent her spinning across the floor. Then he touched the weapon's firing stud, and played the blue lance over the puddle of liquid. It vaporized in a cloudy rush of steam.

"Now, where's the pressure suit?" he demanded of the wailing space witch.

"You've destroyed me!" she shrieked. "I need that compound! Don't you understand? It's a vital food-substance for me!"

"Then you lied," he snapped. "You said you weren't going to use it."

"You fool!" she shrilled. "Now I can't even readapt to my own atmosphere! If I do, it'll deplete my system of the compound, and I can't get back to this form!"

"Good! Where's the pressure suit?"

SHE BACKED into a corner, sat hugging her shins and glaring at him. She set her jaw stubbornly and said nothing.

He glanced at the paraphernalia she brought with her. "You better play it my way, sister!" he snapped. "There's nothing else you can do. What's this stuff for?"

She sat there trembling for a time, hating him with her eyes. Then she climbed weakly to her feet. "Never mind that stuff. It was to spray a membrane suit around you. But you won't need it. I'll have to

change the atmosphere in order to get out of here myself." She crossed the room and entered the pressure lock. "Hold the door open for me," she said dully, "so the pumps won't start."

He jammed the door with his foot, and watched her jab several buttons on a control panel. The sphere began to vibrate, as giant pumps began working at the conditions beyond the airlock. "It'll be a few minutes," she muttered.

Ken waited nervously. Perhaps she was tricking him. Surely she wouldn't give up so easily. She gave him a nervous glance that seemed to confirm his suspicion. "Stay out of my thoughts," he growled at her, but she sniffed derisively.

The pumps stopped. He held his breath as she swung open the door, expecting a choking gust of chlorine or methane, but the air was clean and clear. She led him out into a large central control room, whose walls were a solid array of instrument panels. She moved to the nearest section.

"Here's the five-space drive. You can see for yourself why there's no time to use it. All these settings have to be worked out first."

He stared over her shoulder and counted thirty-two calibrated dials and several sliding verniers. A heavy switch with a safety lock dominated the center of the panel. He touched it thoughtfully.

"No!" she snapped. "That cuts on the drive!"

"How long would it take to work out these settings?"

"Over a week. Too long."

"How about random settings?"

"No! Come on, I'll show you the rocket controls."

He followed her reluctantly, glancing back at the five-space drive. She stopped at another panel and began flicking switches.

"What're you doing?" he growled.

SHE SAID nothing for a time. Then he smelled faint smoke. She turned to grin at him triumphantly, and answered his question: "Burning out control wires, that's all. By the time they're fixed, it'll be too late. Well, Ken, shall we go to your cottage? Or would you rather just sit here. We should be getting the governor to evacuate this area."

He backed away, cursing softly. He went back to the fire-space panel and began twisting dials at random.

"No. You fool!" she screamed. "You'll dump us out of the universe. You'll have us out a billion light-years from nowhere."

"So what?" he grunted.

She started toward him, but he played the flame-lance across the floor just ahead of her. She stopped.

"No, Ken! Our food's limited—fuel, air everything."

"How limited?" He was still playing with the dials.

"Only about fifty years..."

He laughed mockingly. "You shouldn't have said that. That's just about my lifespan."

He jerked the switch. Then his knees sagged as a surge of force came up from beneath. His legs buckled beneath him, and the ship shook with an inner thunder. He sprawled to the floor and caught a glimpse of the space witch lying in a crumpled heap.

As a great weight pressed upon him and he felt consciousness slipping away, he wondered what she'd look like if she slept. The hissing voice, the tendrils?

Ken sat up, and realized he'd been unconscious for a time. The girl was still sprawled on the floor. He climbed to his feet and went to shake her lightly. After a moment she opened her eyes, staring around blankly.

"Kennie..."

For an instant she was Marcia. Then she caught herself and hissed rage at him: "Fool! Do you realize what you've done?"

He shrugged indifferently. She bounded to her feet and darted to a large screen. She twisted at a set

of controls, but the screen remained dark. "We're still driving through five-space!" She turned to face him, green eyes flashing angrily.

"The chances are a million to one that we'll dump in some intergalactic waste. We can't ever get back! And we probably can't even get to another galaxy. The drive requires the presence of a strong gravitic field to start with."

HE GRINNED sourly and looked around the control room. "I take it we're not on earth any more?"

"That's right! You've accomplished your purpose."

He sat down with a tired sigh. "Okay, baby. It's what I wanted. Now do your worst. Change into a jellyfish or something."

She glared at him briefly, then turned her back and marched toward a distant doorway.

"What're you going to do?" he snapped, fumbling for the weapon again.

"The only thing I can do!" she called back.

He shrugged and let her go. Her footsteps faded away in the corridor and he was alone. Alone for the next fifty years, he thought, in the emptiness of space, hopelessly lost. The sphere would have to be a world, a world haunted by a witch. Well, it was better than letting a million people die.

A faint shriek came to his ears. His scalp bristled, and he started toward the corridor, then stopped. The shriek had died, and there was silence. He sat down again. Might as well let her do whatever she wanted to, he thought.

Then he heard her coming back, stumbling along the corridor. He peered at her quickly, half expecting to see her in a nonhuman form. But she was still the dark-haired and slender girl—staggering toward him, white-faced, clutching the wall for support. Then she saw him, pushed herself from the wall, and darted toward him. In a moment she was shivering against his chest.

"Kennie! Kennie! How did we get here? O God! I must be losing my mind! I don't remember ...how did we get here? Where are we?"

Ken swallowed hard. Had the witch destroyed her own personality, her own consciousness? Maybe...

"I...I dragged you in here out of the lake," he told her nervously.

"Lake? Kennie! What lake? We were sitting on the living-room floor ...by the fireplace ...weren't we?" She pushed herself away and stared up at him in horror.

He felt on the verge of losing his grip. On the floor, by the fireplace! That could only be the day three years ago when he told her he was going to Europe.

"Kennie! Tell me what happened!" She was shaking him hard. "Did I faint or something? Did I? Tell me!"

"Tell you later, babe," he muttered. Then he glanced at her doubtfully, and guarded his voice. "Wonder where Phil is?"

NO COMPREHENSION came into her eyes. She shook her head. "Phil? Phil who? What're you talking about?"

He took her face in his hands and stared into her eyes for a long time, then said: "Hi, babe."

She grinned weakly, made an unvoiced "hi" with her lips, then hung her head sheepishly. "Kennie..." "Yeah?"

"I guess I was being a little stubborn about...Europe. If it means that much to you, then go ahead. I'll wait. I didn't mean those awful things I said—honest."

"We'll talk about it later," he muttered nervously. Evidently, he thought, the space witch had done away with some of the flaws in Marcia's character. Suddenly he patted her hand. "You stay right here. I'll be back in a few minutes."

She nodded, and he hurried away. Somewhere in the sphere was Marcia's body. He had to get rid of it before Marcia found it. And he was smiling faintly as he began his search. Life wouldn't be so bad now, maybe. The new world was limited in size, but he'd done enough travelling in his day. And with Marcia in it, the world would be large enough.



The space witch watched him disappear through the doorway. Then she smiled sardonically. It had been easy convincing him. She chuckled to herself. Maybe she should allow herself to resume her normal shape while in his arms.

But the thought sobered her. If she did a thing like that, she'd probably be unable to resume Marcia's form—because he'd destroyed the compound. And in a few weeks, she wouldn't be able to do it. Her bodily supply of the substance would be diminished. "And it would be a dirty trick anyway," said the part of her that was Marcia.

The witch weighed her present position. She had spent forty years of isolation on the moon. It had been a terrible sort of loneliness. Now she at least had company. And with Marcia's memory, she remembered that he could be a very affectionate fellow when treated properly.

"I'll treat him properly," she murmured to herself, and pulled up her skirt to examine the still-unfamiliar human walking devices. She flexed the knee and wiggled the foot. "Not bad, not bad at all."

## THE TIES THAT BIND

Walter M. Miller, Jr.

"Why does your brand sae drop wi' blude,  
Edward, Edward?

"Why does your brand sae drop wi' blude,  
And why sae sad gang ye, O?"

"O I hae my hawk sae gude,  
Mither, mither;

"O I hae kill'd my hawk sae gude,  
And I had nae main but he, O."

## ANONYMOUS

The horde of sleek ships arose in the west at twilight—gleaming slivers that reflected the dying sun as they lanced across the darkling heavens. A majestic fleet of squadrons in double-vees, groups in staggered echelon, they crossed the sky like gleaming geese, and the children of Earth came out of their whispering gardens to gape at the splendor that marched above them.

There was fear, for no vessel out of space had crossed the skies of Earth for countless generations, and the children of the planet had forgotten. The only memories that lingered were in the memnoscripts, and in the unconscious *kulturverlaengerung*, of the people. Because of the latter half-memory, the people knew, without knowing why, that the slivers of light in the sky were ships, but there was not even a word in the language to name them.

The myriad voices of the planet, they cried, or whispered, or chattered in awed voices under the elms  
...

The piping whine of a senile hag: "The ancient gods! The day of the judging! Repent, repent . . ."

The panting gasp of a frightened fat man: "The alien! We're lost, we're lost! We've got to run for the hills!"

The voice of the child: "See the pretty birdlights? See? See?"

And a voice of wisdom in the councils of the clans: "The sons of men—they've come home from the Star Exodus. Our brothers."

The slivers of light, wave upon wave, crept into the eclipse shadow as the twilight deepened and the stars stung through the blackening shell of sky. When the moon rose, the people watched again as the silhouette of a black double-vee of darts slipped across the lunar disk.

Beneath the ground, in response to the return of the ships, ancient mechanisms whirled to life, and the tech guilds hurried to tend them. On Earth, there was a suspenseful night, pregnant with the dissimilar twins of hope and fear, laden with awe, hushed with the expectancy of twenty thousand years. The stargoers—they had come home.

"*Kulturverlaengerung*!" grunted the tense young man in the toga of an Analyst. He stood at one end of the desk, slightly flushed, staring down at the haughty wing leader who watched him icily from a seat at the other end. He said it again, too distinctly, as if the word were a club to hurl at the wingsman. "*Kulturverlaengerung*, that's why!"

"I heard you the first time, Meikl," the officer snapped. "Watch your tongue and your tone!"

A brief hush in the cabin as hostility flowed between them. There was only the hiss of air from the ventilators, and the low whine of the flagship's drive units somewhere below.

The erect and elderly gentleman who sat behind the desk cleared his throat politely. "Have you any further clarifications to make, Meld?" he asked.

"It should be clear enough to all of you," the analyst retorted hotly. He jerked his head toward the misty crescent of Earth on the viewing screen that supplied most of the light in the small cabin. "You can see what they are, what they've become. And you know what we are."

The two wingsmen bristled slightly at the edge of contempt in the analyst's voice. The elderly gentlemen behind the desk remained impassive, expressionless.

The analyst leaned forward with a slow accusing glance that swept the faces of the three officers, then centered on his antagonist at the other end of the desk. "You want to infect them, Thaule?" he demanded.

The wingsman darkened. His fist exploded on the desktop. "Meikl, you're in contempt! Restrict yourself to answering questions!"

"Yes, sir."

"There will be no further breaches of military etiquette during the continuance of this conference," the elderly gentleman announced icily, thus seizing the situation.

After a moment's silence, he turned to the analyst again. "We've got to refuel," he said flatly. "In order to refuel, we must land."

"Yes, sir. But why not on Mars? We can develop our own facilities for producing fuel. Why must it be Earth?"

"Because there will be some existing facilities on Earth, even though they're out of space. The job would take five years on Mars."

The analyst lowered his eyes, shook his head wearily. "I'm thinking of a billion earthlings. Aren't they worth considering, sir?"

"I've got to consider the men in my command, Meikl. They've been through hell. We all have."

"The hell was our own making, baron."

"*Meikl!*"

"Sorry, sir."

Baron ven Klaeden paused ominously, then: "Besides, Meikl, your predictions of disaster rest on certain assumptions not known to be true. You assume that the recessive determinants still linger in the present inhabitants. Twenty thousand years is a long time. Nearly a thousand generations. I don't know a great deal about culturetics, but I've read that *kulturverlaengerung* reaches a threshold of extinction after about a dozen generations, if there's no restimulation."

"Only in laboratory cultures, sir," sighed the analyst. "Under rigid control to make certain there's no restimulant. In practice, in a planet-wide society, there's constant accidental restimulation, unconsciously occurring. A determinant gets restimulated, pops back to original intensity, and gets passed on. In practice, a *kult'laenger* linkage never really dies out—although it can stay recessive and unconscious."

"That's too bad," a wingsman growled sourly. "We'll wake it up, won't we?"

"Let's not be callous," the other wingsman grunted in sarcasm. "Analyst Meikl has sensitivities."

The analyst stared from one to the other of them in growing consternation, then looked pleadingly at the baron. "Sir, I was *summoned* here to offer my opinions about landing on Earth. You asked about possible cultural dangers. I've told you."

"You discussed the danger to earthlings."

"Yes, sir."

"I meant 'danger' to the personnel of this fleet—to their esprit, their indoctrination, their group-efficiency. I take it you see none."

"On the contrary, I see several," said the analyst, coming slowly to his feet, eyes flashing and darting among them. "Where were you born, Wingman?" he asked the officer at the opposite end of the desk.

"Lichter Six, Satellite," the officer grunted after a moment of irritable silence.

"And you?"

"Omega Thrush," said the other wingsman.

All knew without asking that the baron was born in space, his birthplace one of the planetoid city-states of the Michea Dwarf. Meikl looked around at them, then ripped up his own sleeve, unsheathed his rank-dagger, and pricked his forearm with the needle point. A red droplet appeared, and he wiped at it with a forefinger.

"It's common stuff, gentlemen. We've shed a lot of it. And each of us is a walking sackful of it." He paused, then turned to touch the point of his dagger to the viewer, where it left a tiny red trace on the glass, on the bright crescent of Earth, mist-shrouded, chastely wheeling her nights into days.

"It came from there," he hissed. "She's your womb, gentlemen. Are you going back?"

"Are you an analyst or a dramatist, Meikl?" the baron asked sharply, hoping to relieve the sudden chill in the room. "This becomes silly."

"If you land on her," Meikl promised ominously, "you'll go away with a fleet full of hate."

Meikl's arm dropped to his side. He sheathed his dagger. "Is my presence at this meeting still imperative, sir?" he asked the baron.

"Have you anything else to say?"

"Yes—*don't land on Earth.*"

"That's a repetition. No further reasons—in terms of danger to ourselves?"

The analyst paused. "I can think of nothing worse that could happen to us," he said slowly, "than just being what we already are."

He snapped his heels formally, bowed to the baron, and stalked out of the cabin.

"I suggest," said a wingsman, "that we speak to Frewek about tightening up the discipline in the Intelligence section. That man was in open contempt, Baron."

"But he was also probably right," sighed the graying officer and nobleman.

"Sir!"

"Don't worry, Wingsman, there's nothing else to do. We'll have to land. Make preparations, both of you—and try to make contact with surface. I'll dictate the message."

When the wingsmen left, it was settled. The baron arose with a sigh and went to peer morosely at the view of Earth below. Very delicately, he wiped the tiny trace of blood from the glass. She was a beautiful world, this Earth. She had spawned them all, as Meikl said—but for this, the baron could feel only bitterness toward her.

But what of her inhabitants? I'm past feeling anything for them, he thought, past feeling for any of the life-scum that creeps across the surface of a world, any world. We'll go down quickly, and take what we need quickly, and leave quickly. We'll try not to infect them, but they've already got it in them, the dormant disease, and any infection will be only a recurrence.

Nevertheless, he summoned a priest to his quarters. And, before going to the command deck, he bathed sacramentally as if in preparation for battle.

"Your hawk's blude was never sae red,  
Edward, Edward;

Your hawk's blude was never sae red,  
My dear son, I tell thee, O."

"O I hae kill'd my red-roan steed,  
Mither, mither;

"O I hae kill'd my red roan steed,  
That erst was sae fair and free, O."

## ANONYMOUS

False dawn was in the east when the slivers of light appeared once again out of the eclipse shadow to rake majestically across the heavens, and again the children of Earth crowded in teeming numbers from the quiet gardens to chatter their excitement at the wonder in the sky. But this time, a message came. The men of the tech clans who tended the newly activated mechanisms heard it, and the mechanisms memorized it, and played it again and again for the people, while the linguists puzzled over the unidentified language used in the transmission:

PROPAUTH EARTH FROM COMMSTRAFEFLEET THREE, SPACE, KLAEDEN COMM, PRESENTS GREETINGS!

IF YOU HAVE RECORDS, OUR USE OF ANCIENT ANGLO-GERMANIC SHOULD MAKE OUR IDENTITY CLEAR. HAVE YOU FUELING FACILITIES FOR 720 SHIPS OF THOR-NINE CLASS? IF NOT, WE SHALL DEVELOP FACILITIES FROM LOCAL RESOURCES, WITH, WE TRUST, YOUR PEACEFUL COOPERATION. THIS CADRE NOT REIMMIGRATING, BUT EN ROUTE TO URSAN STARS. REQUEST LANDING SUGGESTIONS, IN VIEW OF OUR FUELING NEEDS.

REQUEST INTELLIGENCE CONCERNING PRESENT LEVEL OF TERRESTRIAL CULTURE. OUR ORBITAL OBSERVATIONS INDICATE A STATIC AGRARIAN-TECHNICAL COMPLEX, BUT DETAILS NOT AVAILABLE. WE COME IN ARMS, BUT WITHOUT ENMITY. PLEASE REPLY, IF POSSIBLE.

ERNSTLI BARON VEN KLAEDEN, COMMANDING STRAFEFLEET THREE, SPACESTRIKE COMMAND, IMPERIAL FORCES OF THE SECESSION

So it came, repeated continuously for an hour, followed by an hour of silence, and then by another hour of repetition. The linguists were unable to discern meanings. Thousands of memorizers were consulted, but none knew the words of the harsh voice from the ships. At last, the sages consulted the books and memnoscripts in the ancient vaults, poring over tomes that had been buried for countless centuries. After hours of hurried study ...

"It is found, *it is found*, a tongue of the ancients!" a joyous cry in the glades and the garden pathways.

Happily, the sages recorded the linguistic structure of the forgotten tongue on memnoscript, and gave it to a servo translator. Outmoded mechanisms were being brought out of wraps and prepared for use. The servos supplied a translation of the message, and the sages studied it.

"It is badly understood," was the curious mutter along the garden pathways.

"Many words have no words to match them, nor any thoughts that are similar," was the only explanation the sages could give:

In translation the message seemed meaningless, or unfathomable. Only one thing was clear. The sons of Man meant to descend again upon the world of their ancestors. There was a restless unease in the gardens, and groups of elders gathered in the conference glades to mutter and glance at the sky. "Invite our brothers to land," was the impetuous cry of the young, but there were dissenters.

In the Glade of Sopho, a few thoughtful clansmen of Pedaga had gathered to muse and speak quietly among themselves, although it was not ordinarily the business of tutors to consider problems that confronted society as a whole, particularly problems arising outside society itself. The Pedaga were teachers of the very young, and deliberately kept themselves childlike in outlook in order to make fuller contact with the children in their charge.

"I think we should tell them to go away," said Letha, and looked around at the others for a response.

She got nothing in reply but a flickering glance from Marrita, who sat morosely on a cool rock by the spring, her chin on her bare knees. Evon gave her a brief polite smile, to acknowledge the sound of her voice, but he returned almost at once to absently tearing twigs and glancing up at the bits of sky that

showed through the foliage of the overhanging trees. Iak and Kam were whispering together at the far end of the glade, and had not heard her.

Letha shrugged and leaned back against the tree trunk again, sitting spraddle-legged this time in the hope of catching Evon's eye. She was a graceful girl, and while gracefulness is sometimes feline, Letha's was more nearly kittenish. She was full-bodied and soft, but well-shaped in spite of a trace of plumpness. Thick masses of black hair fell over baby-skin shoulders in a pleasing contrast, and while her face was a bit too round, it radiated a gentle, winning grin, and the sympathetic gaze of gray-blue eyes. Now she seemed ready to pout. Evon remained self-absorbed.

"I think we should tell them to go away," she repeated a little sharply. "They'll all be big and swashbuckling and handsome, and the children will become unmanageable as soon as they see them. All the little girls will swoon, and all the little boys will want to go with them."

Evon glanced at her briefly. "It's up to the elders of the Geoark," he muttered without interest, and prepared to return to his own meditations.

"And all the *big* girls will run away with them," she purred with a tight smile, and stretched a languorous leg out in front of her to waggle her foot.

Evon shot her a quick glance, held it for a moment, then looked skyward again. She pursed her lips in irritation and glared at him. Gradually, she forgave him. Evon was distraught. He *must* be—because she hadn't seen him sit still this long in years. He was *always* doing something, or looking for something to do. It wasn't like Evon just to sit still and think. He was a restless, outgoing fellow, nearly always reacting boisterously, or laughing his staccato laugh. Now he just sat there and looked puzzledly in the direction of the sky-fleet. Looking puzzled didn't fit his face, somehow. It was a bony brown face, slightly oily, with a long narrow jaw that jutted forward like a plowshare under an elastic smirk. It was a rubbery kind of a face, the kind that could twist into horrid masks for the amusement of the young. Now it just drooped.

She stirred restlessly, driven to seek sympathetic understanding.

"You wonder what it's like, Evon?" she asked. He grunted at her quizzically and shook his head.

"To be one of the children of the Exodus, I mean," she added.

"*Me*? What are you thinking of, Letha?"

"Of your face. It looks suddenly like a nomad's face. You remind me of an old schnorrer who used to wander through our gardenboro every year to play his fiddle, and sing us songs, and steal our chickens."

"I don't fiddle."

"But your eyes are on the sky-fleet."

Evon paused, hovering between irritation and desire to express. "It's strange," he murmured at last. "It's as if I know them—the starbirds, I mean. Last night, when I saw them first, it was like looking at something I expected to happen—or—or . . ."

"Something familiar?"

"Yes."

"You think he has the genemnemon, Marrita?" she asked the blonde girl who sat on the cool rock by the spring.

Marrita looked up from dabbling her toes in the icy trickle. "I don't believe in the genemnemon. My great-grandfather was a thief."

"How silly! What's that to do with it?"

"He buried a fortune, they say. If there was a genemnemon, I'd remember where he buried it, wouldn't I?" She pouted, and went back to dabbling a club toe in the spring.

Evon snorted irritably and arose to stretch. "We lie around here like sleepy pigs!" he grumbled. "Have the Pedaga nothing to do but wait on the Geoark to make up its mind?"

"What do you think they'll do?"

"The Geoark? Invite the strangers to land. What else could they do?"

"Tell them to go away."

"And suppose they chose not to go?"

The girl looked bewildered. "I can't imagine anyone refusing the Geoark."

"Maybe they've got their own Geoark. Why should they cooperate with ours?"

"Two Geoarks? What a strange idea."

"Is it strange that you and I should have two brains? Or were you aware that I have one too?"

"Evon! What a *strange* idea."

He seized her by the ankles and dragged her squealing to the spring, then set her down in the icy trickle. Marrita moved away, grumbling complaints, and Letha snatched up a switch and chased him around the glade, shrieking threats of mayhem, while Evon's laughter broke the gloomy air of the small gathering, and caused a few other Pedaga to wander into the clearing from the pathways.

"I think we should prepare a petition for the Geoark," someone suggested.

"About the sky-fleet? And who knows what to say?"

"I'm afraid," said a girl. "Somehow I'm suddenly afraid of them."

"Our brothers from the Exodus? But they're *people*—such as you and I."

So went the voices. After an hour, a crier came running through the glade to read another message received from the sky-fleet:

PROPAUTH EARTH FROM COMMSTRAFEFLEET THREE, SPACE, KLAEDEN COMM,  
PRESENTS GREETINGS!

HAVING RECEIVED NO ANSWER TO OUR PREVIOUS COMMUNICATION, WE HAVE  
NO CHOICE BUT TO LAND AT ONCE. I AM IMPOSING AN INFORMATIONAL  
QUARANTINE TO AVOID RESTIMULATING POSSIBLE RECESSIVE  
KULTUR'VERLAENGERUNG, BUT SUGGEST YOU GUARD YOURSELVES. OUR  
CULTURES HAD A COMMON ORIGIN. WE COME IN ARMS, WITHOUT ENMITY.

ERNSTLI BARON VEN KLAEDEN, COMMANDING STRAFEFLEET THREE,  
SPACESTRIKE COMMAND IMPERIAL FORCES OF THE SECESSION

This was even more mystifying than the previous one, even less meaningful in translation. One thing was clear, however: the fleet was going to land, without invitation.

Embarrassed, the elders of the Geoark immediately called the tech clans. "Can you revive the devices that speak across space?" they asked.

"They are revived," answered the tech clans.

"Then let us speak to our brothers from space."

And so it was that the people of the garden of Earth sang out:

BRETHREN TO BRETHREN, PRESENT LOVE LOVE LOVE  
WE WELCOME YOU TO OUR GLADES AND TO OUR PLACES OF FEEDING AND OUR  
PLACES OF SLEEPING. WE WELCOME YOU TO THE BOSOM OF THE WORLD OF  
BEGINNING. AFTER TWENTY THOUSAND YEARS, EARTH HAS NOT FORGOTTEN.  
COME AMID REJOICING.

THE ELDERS OF THE GEOARK

"I'm afraid Earth will remember more than it wants to," growled Ernstli Baron yen Klaeden, as he issued the command to blast into an atmospheric-braking orbit.

And there was thunder in a cloudless sky.

"O your steed was auld and ye hae mair,  
Edward, Edward.

"O your steed was auld and ye hae mair,  
And some other dule ye dree, O."

"O I hae kill'd my ain father dear,

Mither, mither;  
"O I hae kill'd my ain father dear,  
Alas and woe is me, O."

## ANONYMOUS

In accordance with the rules of invasion strategy for semi-civilized planets, the fleet separated itself into three groups. The first group fell into atmospheric braking; the second group split apart and established an "orbital shell" of crisscrossing orbits, timed and interlocking, at eight hundred miles, to guard the descent of the first wave of ships, while the third wave remained in battle formation at three thousand miles as a rear guard against possible space attack. When the first wave had finished braking, it fell into formation again and flew as aircraft in the high stratosphere, while the second wave braked itself, and the third wave dropped into the orbital shell.

From the first wave, a single ship went down to land, and its telecameras broadcast a view of a forest garden, slightly charred for a hundred yards around the ship, with fires blazing along its edges.

"No signs of the natives yet," came the report. "No signs of technology. No evidence of hostility."

A second ship descended to land a mile from the first. Its telecamera caught a fleeting glimpse of a man waving from a hilltop, but nothing more.

One at a time the ships came, with weapon locks open and bristling with steel snouts. The ships came down at one-mile intervals, the first wave forming a circle that enclosed an area of forty-six hundred square miles. The second wave came down to land in a central circle of fifteen miles diameter. The third wave remained in its orbital shell, where it would stand guard as long as the fleet was on the ground.

In accordance with the rules of officer's conduct, Baron yen Klaeden, who had ordered the landing, was the first to expose himself to the enveloping conditions outside the flagship. He stood in an open lock, sniffing the autumn air of Earth in late afternoon. It was full of jet-fire smoke, and smelled of burning brush. The automatic extinguishers had quenched the flames, but the blackened trees and brush still roasted and sparked and leaked smoke across the land. Somewhere a bird was singing through the sunlit haze. Baron ven Klaeden recognized the sound as made by a living thing, and wondered if the recognition was born into his bones.

Three hundred and fifty yards to the north, a wingship towered in the sun, its guns trained outward from the inner circle, and to the south, another wingship. The baron glanced down at the earth beneath the flagship. The jets had reduced to ashes something that might have been a low wooden structure. He shrugged, and glanced across the blackened area toward the orderly forest. Trees and shrubs, and a carpet of green turf below, broken here and there by rain-worn rocks and clusters of smaller fragile leafy stuff that might be food plants. Vivid splashes of color blossomed in the shady forest, scarlets and blues and flashes of brilliant lemon that lived in profusion in the foliage of the shrubbery. Some of the trees were living masses of tiny flowers, and when the wind stirred them, petals showered to the ground in fragrant gusts. The wind changed, and the air that breathed about the commander's face was full of perfume.

I feel nothing, he thought. Here is beauty and warmth, here is the home of Man, and almost an Eden, but I feel nothing. It is just another mote that circles a minor sun, and to me it is only an exploitable supply dump of Nature, a place to accomplish Procedure 76-A, "Refueling Method for Terrestroid Planets Without Facilities, Native Labor Exploitable."

It was only a way-station on the long long road from Scorpius to Ursa, and it meant nothing, nothing at all. It had changed too much. Millennia ago, when the Star Exodus had burst forth to carry Man halfway across the galaxy, things had been different. A few colonies had kept accurate histories of Earth intact, and when the Transpace Empire had gathered itself into social integration, nearly five thousand years ago, the histories had been made universally available. The baron had studied them, but from the viewpoint of the spacer, the history of Humanity had ceased in any way to be associated with Earth after the Star Exodus. Man was a space creature, a denizen of the interstellum—or had been, before the War of Secession—and when history moved into space, Earth was a half-remembered hamlet. Van Klaeden had seen the Earth-vistas that the historians had reconstructed for the museums—vistas of roaring

industrial cities, flaming battlegrounds, teeming harbors and spaceports. The cities were gone, and Earth had become a carefully tended Japanese garden.

As he stared around, he felt a lessening of the anxiety that had gnawed at him since the analyst Meikl had predicted dire consequences after the landing. The cultural blood of Man had diverged into two streams so vastly different that no intermingling seemed possible to him. It would be easy, he decided, to keep the informational quarantine. The order had already been issued. "All personnel are forbidden to attempt the learning of the current Earth-tongue, or to teach any Empire-culture language to the natives, or to attempt any written communication with them. Staff officers may communicate only under the provisions of Memorandum J-43-C. The possession of any written or recorded material in the native tongue, and the giving of written material to the natives, shall be taken as violations of this order. No sign language or other form of symbolic communication shall be used. This order shall be in force until Semantics section constructs a visual code for limited purposes in dealing with the natives. Staff officers are hereby authorized to impose any penalty ranging to death upon offenders, and to try any such cases by summary courts martial. Junior officers authorized to summarily arrest offenders. Effective immediately. Van Klaeden, Comm."

It would keep any interchange to an absolute minimum, he thought. And Semantics had been ordered to attempt construction of a visual language in which only the most vital and simple things could be said. Meanwhile, the staff could attempt to utilize the ancient Anglo-Germanic tongue in which the messages had been exchanged.

The baron had started to turn back into the lock when his eye caught a flash of motion near the edge of the forest. Reflexively, he whirled and crouched, gun flickering into his hand. His eyes probed the shrubs. Then he saw her, half-hidden behind a tree trunk—a young girl, obviously frightened, yet curious to watch the ships. While he stared at her, she darted from one trunk to the next closer one. She was already approaching the edge of the blackened area. The baron shot a quick glance at the radiation indicators on the inner wall of the airlock. The instantaneous meter registered in the red. The induced radioactivity in the ground about the base of the ship's jets was still too high. The rate-of-decrease meter registered a decrement of point ten units per unit. That meant it wouldn't be safe for the crew to leave ship for twenty-three minutes, and that the girl had better stay back.

"*Keep clear!*" he bellowed from the airlock, hoping to frighten her.

She saw him for the first time then. Instead of being frightened, she seemed suddenly relieved. She came out into the open and began walking toward the ship, wearing a smile and gazing up at the lock.

"*Go back, you little idiot!*"

Her answer was a brief sing-song chant and another smile. She kept coming—into the charred area.

The gun exploded in his fist, and the bullet ricocheted from the ground near her feet. She stopped, startled, but not sensing hostility. The gun barked again. The bullet shattered a pebble, and it peppered her legs. She yelped and fled back into the green garden.

He stood there staring after her for a moment, his face working slowly. She had been unable to understand his anger. She saw the ships, and was frightened but curious. She saw a human, and was reassured. Any human. But was what she saw really human any longer, the baron asked himself absently. He grunted scornfully, and went back through the lock.

It was easier, even on the ground, to communicate with the elders of the Geoark by radio, since both parties had set up automatic translators to translate their own tongues into the old Anglo-German which was a mutually recorded dead language.

"We have neutralized a circle of land of thirty-one mile radius," ven Klaeden reported to the elders. "If our selection of this region is unfortunate, we are open to discussion of alternatives. However, our measurements indicated that the resources of this area make it best for *our* purposes." "Your landing caused only minor damage, brethren," replied the gentle voice of the Geoark. "You are welcome to remain as you are."

"Thank you. We consider the occupied area to be under our military jurisdiction, and subject to property seizures. It will be a restricted area, closed to civilian population." "But brethren, thousands of



people live in the gardens you have surrounded!"

"Evacuate them."

"I don't understand."

"*Evacuate* them. Make them get out."

"My translator is working badly."

The baron turned away from the mike for a moment and grunted to the colonel in command of ground operations. "Start clearing the occupied zone. Get the population out unless they'll work for us."

"How much notice?"

The baron paused briefly. "Fifty hours to pack up, plus one additional hour for each mile the fellow has to stump it to the outer radius."

"My translator is working badly," the voice of the elder was parroting.

"Look," the baron grunted at the mike. "All we want is to accomplish what we came here for, and then get out—as quickly as possible. We don't have much time to be polite. I invite the elders of the Geoark to confer in my flagship. We'll try to make everything clear to you. Is this agreed?"

"My translator is working badly."

"Aren't you getting anything?"

A pause, then: "I understand that you wish to come to the place where the sky-fleet rests."

"Correct."

"But what of the welcome we have made for our brethren in the feast-glades?"

"I shall dispatch flyers to pick you up immediately. Unless you have aircraft of your own."

"We have no machinery but the self-sustaining mechanisms in the Earth."

"Any of your population understand the mechanisms?"

"Certainly, brother."

"Then bring technicians. They'll be best able to understand what we want, and maybe they can make it clear to you."

"As you wish, brother."

The baron terminated the contact and turned to his staff with a satisfied smile. "I think we shall have what we need and be gone quickly," he said.

"The elder took it well. They must be afraid of us."

"Respectful awe is more like it," the baron grunted.

"I suggest the answer is in the word 'brethren,' " came a voice from the back of the room.

"Meikl! What are you doing in here?" ven Klaeden barked irritably.

"You called my department for a man. My department sent me. Shall I go back?"

"It's up to you, Analyst. If you can keep your ideals corked and be useful."

Meikl bowed stiffly. "Thank you, sir."

"Having it in mind that our only objective is to go through the tooling-mining-fueling cycle with a minimum of trouble and time—have you got any suggestions?"

"About how to deal with the natives?"

"Certainly—but with the accent on our problems."

Meikl paused to snap the tip from an olophial and sniffed appreciatively at the mildly alkaloid vapor before replying. "From what we've gathered through limited observation, I think we'd better gather some more, and do our suggesting later."

"That constitutes your entire opinion?"

"Not quite. About the question of recessive *kulturverlaengerung* . . ."

"*Our* problems, I said!" the commander snapped.

"It's likely to be our problem, sir."

"How?"

"In Earth-culture at the time of the Exodus, there were some patterns we'd regard as undesirable. We can't know whether we're still carrying the recessive patterns or not. And we don't know whether the patterns are still dominant in the natives. Suppose we get restimulated."

"What patterns do you mean?"

"The Exodus was a mass-desertion, in one sense, Baron."

A moment of hush in the room. "I see what you mean," the commander grunted. "But `desertion' is a pattern of action, not a transmittable determinant."

Meikl shook his head. "We don't know what is a transmittable determinant until after it's happened." He paused. "Suppose there's some very simple psychic mechanism behind the 'pioneer' impulse. We don't feel it, but our ancestors did, and we might have recessive traces of it in our *kulturverlaengerung* lines."

A wingsman couched raucously. "To be blunt with you, Meikl—I think this is a lot of nonsense. The whole concept is farfetched."

"What, the *kult'laenger* lines?"

"Exactly." The wingsman snorted. "How could things like that get passed along from father to son? If you people'd stop the mystical gibberish, and deal in facts . . ."

"Do you regard parent-child rapport as a fact?" Meikl turned to stare absently out a viewing port at the trees.

"You mean the telepathic experiments with infants? I don't know much about it."

"Seventy years ago. On Michsa Three. A hundred parents were given intensive lessons and intensive practice in playing a very difficult game—before they became parents. They did nothing but play the game for three years. Then their babies were taken away from them at the age of one year. Brought up institutionally. There was a control group—another hundred whose parents never heard of the skill game."

"Go on."

"So, when the children were ten years old, they did learning-speed tests on all two hundred."

"Learning the game, you mean?"

"Right. The children whose parents had learned it came out way ahead. So far ahead that it was conclusive. Sometime during pregnancy and the first year, the kids had picked up a predisposition to learn the patterns of the game easily."

"So?"

"So—during infancy, a child is beginning to mirror the patterns of the parental mind—probably telepathically, or something related. He doesn't 'inherit it' in the genes, but there's an unconscious cultural mechanism of transmittal—and it's an analogue of heredity. The *kulturverlaengerung*—and it can linger in a family line without becoming conscious for many generations."

"How? If they hadn't taught the children to play the game . . ."

"If they hadn't, it'd still be passed on—as a predisposition-talent—to the third and fourth and Nth generation. Like a mirror-image of a mirror-image of a mirror-image—or a memory of a memory of a memory . . ."

"This grows pedantic, and irrelevant," the baron growled. "What are the chances of utilizing native labor?"

"And whatten penance will ye dree for that,

Edward, Edward?

Whatten penance will ye dree for that?

My dear son, now tell me, O."

"I'll set my feet in yonder boat,

Mither, mither;

I'll set my feet in yonder boat, And I'll fare over the sea, O."

ANONYMOUS

Phase-A had been accomplished, after six months of toil. Baltun Meikl, Analyst Culturetic of Intelligence Section stood on the sunswept hill, once forested, but now barren except for the stumps of trees, and watched the slow file of humanity that coursed along the valley, bearing the hand-hewn ties that

were being laid from the opening of the mine shaft to the ore dump. Glittering ribbons of steel snaked along the valley, and ended just below him, where a crew of workmen hammered spikes under the watchful eye of a uniformed foreman. In the distance, the central ring of grounded ships dominated the land. Spacers and natives labored together, to lend an impression of egalitarian cooperation under the autocracy of the officer class.

"How good it is for brethren to be reunited," Meikl's native interpreter murmured, in the facile tongue devised by Semantics Section for use by staff officers and Intelligence men in communicating with the natives.

He stared at her profile for a moment, as she watched the men in the valley. Was she really that blind? Were all of them? Had they no resistance at all to exploitation, or any concept for it?

Meikl had learned as much as he could of the socio-economic matrix of the static civilization of the present Earthlings. He had gone into their glades and gardens and seen the patterns of their life, and he wondered. Life was easy, life was gay, life was full of idle play. Somehow, they seemed completely unaware of what they had done to the planet in twenty thousand years. One of the elders had summed up, without meaning to, the entire meaning of twenty millennia, with the casual statement: "*In our gardens, there are no weeds,*" and it applied to the garden of human culture almost as well as it applied to the fauna and flora of the planet.

This "weedlessness" had not been the goal of any planned project, but rather, the inevitable result of age-old struggles between Man and Nature on a small plot of land. When Man despoiled Nature, and slaughtered her children, Nature could respond in two ways: she could raise up organisms to survive in spite of Man, and she could raise up organisms to survive in the service and custody of Man. She had done both, but the gardener with his weed hoe and his insect spray and his vermin exterminators had proved that he could invent new weapons faster than Nature could evolve tenacious pests, and eventually the life forms of Earth had been emasculated of the tendency to mutate into disobedient species. Nature had won many bloody battles; but Man had won the war. Now he lived in a green world that seemed to offer up its fruits to him with only a minimum of attention from Man. Nature had learned to survive in the presence of Man. Yet the natives seemed unaware of the wonder of their Eden. There was peace, there was plenty.

*This*, he thought, could be the answer to their lack of resistance in the face of what seemed to Meikl to be sheer seizure and arrogant exploitation by Baron von Klaeden and his high command. In a bounteous world, there were no concepts of "exploitation" or "property seizure" or "authoritarianism". The behaviour of the starmen appeared as strange, or fascinating, or laughable, or shocking to such as the girl who stood beside him on the hill—but not as aggressive nor imperious. When a foreman issued an order, the workman accepted it as a polite request for a favor, and did it as if for a friend. Fortunately, von Klaeden had possessed at least the good sense to see to it that the individual natives were well treated by the individual officers in charge of tasks. There had been few cases of interpersonal hostility between natives and starmen. The careful semantics of the invented sign language accomplished much in the way of avoiding conflicts, and the natives enthusiastically strived to please.

He glanced at the girl again, her dark hair whipping in the breeze. Lovely, he thought, and glanced around to see that no one was near.

"You belong to another, Letha?" he asked.

She tossed him a quick look with pale eyes, hesitated. "There is a boy named Evon . . ."

He nodded, lips tightening. Stop it, you fool, he told himself. You can't make love to her. You've got to leave with the rest of them.

"But I don't really belong to him," she said, and reddened. "Letha, I . . ."

"Yes, Meikl."

"Nothing. I'm lonely, I guess."

Her eyes wandered thoughtfully toward the ships. "Meikl, why will you tell us nothing of space—how you've lived since the Exodus?"

"We are an evil people."

"Not so."

She touched his arm, and looked up at him searchingly. "What is it you wish to know?"

"Why will you never return to your home?"

"To space—but we shall."

"To the worlds of your birth, I mean."

He stiffened slightly, stared at her. "What makes you think we won't?" he asked, a little sharply.

"Will you?"

So there were leaks after all, he thought. After six months, many things would be communicated to the natives, even under strictest security.

"No," he admitted, "we can't go back to the worlds of our birth."

"But why? Where are your women and children?"

He wanted to tell her, to see her turn and flee from him, to see the natives desert the project and keep to their forests until the ships departed. There had been a translator set up between the Anglo-Germanic and the present native tongue, and he had fed it the word "war". The single word had brought five minutes of incomprehensible gibberish from the native tongue's output. There was no concept to equate it to.

"There is blood on our hands," he grunted, and knew immediately he had said too much.

She continued to stare at the ships. "What are the metal tubes that point from the front and the sides of the ships, Meikl?"

There was no word for "guns" or "weapons".

"They hurl death, Letha."

"How can 'death' be hurled?"

Meikl shook himself. He was saying too much. These are the children of the past, he reminded himself, the same past that had begotten the children of space. The same traces of the ancient *kulturverlaengerung* would live in their neural patterns, however recessive and subliminal. One thing he knew: sometime during the twenty millennia since the Exodus, they had carefully rooted out the vestigial traces of strife in their culture. The records had been systematically censored and rewritten. They were unaware of war and pogroms and persecution. History had forgotten. He decided to explain to her in terms of the substitute concepts of her understanding.

"There were twelve worlds, Letha, with the same Geoark. Five of them wished to break away and establish their separate Geoark. There was a contention for property."

"Was it settled?" she asked innocently.

He nodded slowly.

It was settled, he thought. We razed them and diseased them and intersted them and wrecked their civilizations, and revolutions reduced the remains to barbarism. If a ship landed on a former planet of the empire, the crew would be lynched and murdered. Under ven Klaeden, the ships of the Third Fleet were going to seek out an alleged colony in Ursa, to sell ships, tools, and services to a minor technology that was approaching its own space-going day, in return for immigration and nationalization rights—a young civilization full of chaotic expansion.

"There is much you could not understand, Letha," he told her. "Our cultures are different. All societies go through three phases, and yours has passed through them all—perhaps into a fourth and final."

"And yours, Meld?"

"I don't know. First there is the struggle to integrate in a hostile environment. Then, after integration, comes an explosive expansion of the culture—*conquest*, a word unknown to you. Then a withering of the mother-culture, and the rebellious rise of young cultures."

"We were the mother-culture, Meikl?"

He nodded. "And the Exodus was your birth-giving."

"Now we are old and withered, Meikl?"

He looked around at the garden-forests in the distance. A second childhood? he wondered. Was there a fourth phase? —a final perpetual youth that would never reach another puberty? He wondered. The coming of the sky-fleet might be a cultural coitus, but could there be conception?

A pair of junior officers came wandering along the ridge, speaking in low tones and gazing down

toward the valley. There was a casual exchange of salutes as they approached the girl and the analyst. The officers wore police armbands, and they asked for Meikl's fraternization permit, using the spacer's tongue.

"Deserter troubles?" he asked, as they returned his papers. "Nineteen last week," said one of the officers. "We've lost about three hundred men since we landed."

"Found any of them?"

"Justice Section got sixty-three. The rest are probably hopeless."

Another exchange of salutes. The officers left.

"What did they want, Meikl?" she asked.

"Just idle conversation. It's nearly time for the meeting with the elders. Let's go."

They began walking along the ridge together in the late sunlight. The meeting was to attempt to explain to the elders of the Geoark that the men of the fleet were not free to depart from the occupied zone. The attempt would be fruitless, but ven Klaeden had ordered it.

From the viewpoint of the high command, three hundred desertions out of nineteen thousand men over a period of six months was not an important loss of personnel. What was important: the slow decay of discipline under the "no force" interdict. A policy of "no arrest" had been established for the ausland. If a man escaped from the occupied zone, Justice Section could send a detail to demand his return, but if he refused, no force would be used, because of the horrified reaction of the natives. If he were located, a killer was dispatched, armed with a tiny phial, a hollow needle, and a CO<sub>2</sub> gun that could be concealed in the palm of the hand. The killer stalked the deserter until he caught him alone, fired from cover, and stole quietly away while the deserter plucked the needle out of his hide to stare at it in horror. He had a week in which to get back to the occupied zone to beg for immunization; if he did not, the spot would become alive with fungus, and the fungus would spread, and within months, he would die rather grimly.

The real danger, Meikl knew, was not to the fleet but to the natives. The spacers were cultural poison, and each deserter was a source of infection moving into the native society, a focal point of restimulation for any recessive *kult'laenger* lines that still existed in a peaceful people after twenty thousand years.

"I think Evon will be here," the girl said too casually as they entered the forest and turned into a path that led to the glade where the elders had assembled.

He took her arm suddenly, and stopped in the pathway. "Letha—you have worked for me many months." "Yes . . ."

"I love you, Letha."

She smiled very slowly, and lifted her hands to his face. He kissed her quietly, hating himself.

"You'll take me with you," she said.

"No." It was impossible.

"Then you'll stay."

"It is—*forbidden*—*verboden*." There was no word in the tongue.

"I can't understand ... If you love . . ."

He swallowed hard. For the girl, "love" automatically settled everything, and consummation must follow. How could he explain.

"Letha—in your culture, 'life' is the highest value."

"How could it be otherwise? Love me, Meikl."

He took a deep breath and straightened. "You understand 'drama', Letha. I have watched your people. Their lives are continuous conscious play-acting. Your lives are a dance, but you know you are dancing, and you dance as you will. Have you watched our people?"

She nodded slowly. "You dance a different dance—act a different play."

"It's not a play, Letha. We act an *unconscious* drama, and thus the drama becomes more important than living. And death takes precedence over life."

She shuddered slightly and stared into his eyes, unbelieving.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Can you understand?—that I love you, and yet my—my—" he groped for a word for "duty." "My

death-alliance to the ship-people takes precedence? I can neither take you nor remain with you."

Something went dead in her eyes. "Let us go to the glade," she said in a monotone. "It's growing late."

"And what will ye leave to your ain mithers dear,

Edward, Edward?

And what will ye leave to your ain mithers dear,

My dear son, now tell me, O?"

"The curse of hell frae me sail ye bear,

Mithers, mithers;

"The curse of hell frae me sall ye bear;

Sic counsels ye gave to me, O!"

## ANONYMOUS

The trouble had begun on the eighteenth day of the ninth month. A party of unidentified men had stolen into the occupied zone during the night. Without warning, they killed three guards, seized control of the dispensary, raided the pharmacy, taking the entire supply of fungus immunization serum, together with a supply of the deadly phials and needles. They stole a flyer and departed to the south, skimming low over the forest to avoid fire from the grounded fleet. The following day, a leaflet appeared, circulating among the fleet personnel;

NOTICE OF SANCTUARY

TO: ALL PERSONNEL

FROM: AUSLAND COMMITTEE

SUBJECT: FREEDOM

1. ANY OFFICER OR MAN WHO WISHES TO RESIGN FROM THE SERVICES OF THE IMPERIAL FORCES OF THE SECESSION MAY DO SO OF THIS DATE.

2. THE PROCEDURE FOR RESIGNATION INVOLVES NO FORMAL STATEMENT. A MAN MAY TERMINATE HIS PERIOD OF SERVICE BY DEPARTING FROM THE OCCUPIED ZONE.

3. ANY OFFICER OR MAN WHO ATTEMPTS TO INTERFERE WITH THE RESIGNATION OF ANOTHER SHALL BE TRIED IN ABSENTIA BY THIS COMMITTEE, AND IF FOUND GUILTY, SHALL INCUR THE DEATH PENALTY.

AUSLAND COMMITTEE

"An outrageous and preposterous bit of devilry!" ven Klaeden had hissed. "Get them. Make an example of them."

In reversal of previous policy, a police party was sent to search for the self-styled *ausland* committee, with orders to capture or kill on sight. The police party hunted down and killed six deserters, dragged eleven more back to the occupied zone, under the very eyes of the native population. But the immunizing serum was not recovered.

A few days later, three staff officers and a dozen officers in Justice Section awoke with yelps in the night to pluck stinging needles from their skins and scream for the guard to pursue the silent shadows that had invaded their quarters.

Five men were captured. Three of them were natives. Interrogation failed to disclose the location of the immunizing serum.

Muttering natives began to desert the project. The five culprits were brought before the baron.

"Execute them in public, with full dress military ceremony. Then close the border of the occupied zone. No native may leave, if he has signed a work contract."

On the day of the execution, the natives attempted to leave en masse. The police activity along the

border approached the proportions of a massacre.

"We were nearly finished," raged the baron, pacing like an angry predator in the glade. "Another two weeks, and the first ore would come out of the crushers. They can't stop us now. They can't quit."

Three elders of the Geoark sat like frozen statues on a mossy boulder, tight-lipped, not understanding the colonel's tongue, disdaining to speak in the intermediate language.

"Explain it to them, Meikl. Make it clear."

Pale, trembling with suppressed disapproval, the analyst bowed curtly and turned to the girl. "Tell them," he said in the Intermedia, "that death will come to any native who deserts, and that ten *auslanders* will die for every man murdered by the renegade committee. Tell them that the Geoark is—" he paused. There was no word for "hostage."

He was explaining the hostage-concept lengthily, while the girl's face drained of color. Suddenly she turned away to retch. Meikl stood stricken for a moment, turned helplessly toward the baron.

"*They* understood you, damn them!" ven Klaeden snapped. "They know the Intermedia."

The elders continued to sit stonily on the boulder without acknowledging that they had heard. One of them sighed deeply and spoke a few words to the others. They nodded sadly, answered with polite monosyllables.

"*No!*" Letha yelped, suddenly whirling, looking at the elders.

One of them smiled and murmured a few words to her. Then the three of them slid down from the boulder. The guard who stood at port arms a few feet away stirred restlessly.

The elders walked casually toward a path leading away from the glade. The guard looked questioningly at the officers.

"Where are they going?" ven Klaeden demanded.

"Well, Letha?" Meikl muttered.

"I—I don't know . . ."

"You're lying, girl," the baron grunted, then to the guards: "Tell them to halt."

"Party, *halt!*" snapped the guard.

The three elderly gentlemen continued toward the path, loose robes gathered up from spindly shins.

"Party, *halt!*"

The elders murmured conversationally among themselves as they continued.

"HALT, I SAID."

"Take the one in the middle," ordered ven Klaeden.

The guard lifted the snub-nosed shoulder weapon. There was a brief rattling hiss. The back of the elder's robe went crimson, and he crumpled at the entrance of the pathway.

The other two continued on their way, their stride unbroken.

"Shoot for the legs, you fool!" barked the baron.

The rattling hiss came again. They fell in the shrubs, whimpering softly.

Meikl turned away with a choking spasm in his throat, looked around for Letha. She had vanished from the glade.

"Haul them to the dispensary, keep them prisoner," the baron was growling.

Meikl turned on him. "Now it's come to this, has it?" he snapped. "From the beginning, they were willing—even eager, to give what we wanted. Why did they *stop* being willing?"

"That's enough, Meikl!"

"I've hardly started. You came here like a tyrant, and they served you like a friend. You couldn't bear it. 'Brethren', they said. But there's nothing about 'brethren' in the tactical handbooks, is there, Baron?"

"Shut up."

Ven Klaeden said it quietly, as if bored. He crossed slowly to stand before the analyst and stare at him icily.

"You speak of the unconscious inheritance of culture, Analyst—the *kulturverlaengerung*. And you have accused me for being a carrier of the war plague, eh?"

Meikl paused. The baron's eyes were narrowed, stabbing as if in judgment or triumph.

"Well, Meikl? Is that what we've done? Inflicted them with conflict? Brought back the old seeds of

hate?"

The analyst drew himself up slightly. "You just killed a man, a man of dignity," he snarled, "and you cut two others down like weeds."

"Innocent old men." The baron's mouth twisted into a snarl.

"They wanted nothing but to help us."

"Yes, Meikl? And we are the barbarians, eh?"

The analyst spoke disdain with his eyes.

The baron straightened in sudden hauteur. "*Look down at the ground, Analyst,*" he hissed.

Ven Klaeden's sudden change of tone impelled him to obey. His eyes fell to the turf at his feet—moss-covered sod, rich and dark beneath the green.

The baron kicked a hole in the moss with the toe of his boot. "Tell me where the infection came from, Analyst," he growled. He scraped at the hole with his heel. "And why is the dirt so *red* right here?"

Meikl glanced up slowly. Two men were coming through the shrubs, walking warily along the path toward the clearing. Ven Klaeden seemed unaware. He leaned forward to speak through his teeth.

"I give them nothing but what they gave our fathers—their own inner hell, Meikl—the curse they so carefully forgot. In their Eden."

The man was mad—perhaps. Meikl's eyes followed the men who approached through the shrubs. One of them carried a burden—the limp body of a girl, occasionally visible through the low foliage as they drew nearer. One of the men was a junior officer, the other a native. After a moment, he recognized the native ...

"Evon!"

As he called out, the baron whirled, hand slipping to the hilt of the ceremonial sword he wore in the presence of the Geoark. The men stopped. Meikl stared at the limp figure in the arms of the native.

"*Letha!*"

"Dead," Evon hissed. "They killed her for running . . ." They emerged from the shrubs into full view. The officer was holding a gun.

"Put that away!" ven Klaeden snapped.

The young officer laughed sourly. "Sorry, baron, I'm from the committee."

"*Guard!*"

"There's no one in earshot, Baron."

"Fool!" Ven Klaeden arrogantly whipped out the sword. "Drop that gun, or I'll blade-whip you!"

"Easy, Baron, easy. I'm your executioner."

The baron straightened haughtily and began a slow advance, a towering figure of icy dignity in the sun that filtered through the foliage.

". . . but I want to take care of this one first." The renegade waved the gun toward Meikl. "You, Baron, you can have it slower—a needle in your official rump."

Ven Klaeden, a figure of utter contempt, continued the slow advance with the sword. The officer's lips tightened. He squeezed the trigger. Ven Klaeden hesitated, jerking slightly, then continued, his hand pressing against his abdomen, doubling forward slightly. The officer fired again—a sharp snap of sound in the glade. The baron stopped, wrestling with pain ten feet from the pale renegade.

Suddenly he flung the sword. It looped in mid-air and slashed the man's face from chin to cheekbone. He tripped and tumbled backward as ven Klaeden slipped to his knees on the moss.

Meikl dived for the gun. By the time he wrestled it away from the officer with the bloody face, ven Klaeden was sitting like a gaunt Buddha on the moss, and the body of Letha lay nearby, while a confused Evon clutched his hands to his face and rocked slowly. Meikl came slowly to his feet. The renegade officer wiped his face of blood and shrank back into shrubs.

"Get him," croaked ven Klaeden,

Scarcely knowing why, the analyst jerked the trigger, felt the gun explode in his fist, saw the renegade topple.

There was a moment of stillness in the glade, broken only by ven Klaeden's wheezing breath. The baron looked up with an effort, his eyes traveling over the girl, then up to the figure of the child of Earth.



"Your woman, Earthling?"

Evon lowered his hands, stood dazed and blinking for a moment. He glanced at Meikl, then at the girl. He knelt beside her, staring, not touching, and his knee encountered the blade of the sword.

"You have brought us death, you have brought us hate," he said slowly, his eyes clinging to the sword.

"Pick it up," hissed the baron.

"You will never leave. A party of men is wrecking what you have done. Then we shall wreck your ships. Then we . . ."

"Pick it up."

The native hesitated. Slowly, his brown hand reached for the hilt, and fascination was in his eyes.

"You know what it is for?" the analyst asked.

The native shook his head slowly.

Then it was in his hand, fingers shaping themselves around the hilt—as the fingers of his fathers had done in the ages before the Star Exodus. His jaw fell slightly, and he looked up, clutching it.

"Now do you know?" the baron gasped.

"My—my hand—*it* knows," the native whispered.

Ven Klaeden glanced sourly at Meikl, losing his balance slightly, eyes glazed with pain. "He'll need it now, won't he, Analyst?" he breathed, then fell to the moss.

Evon stood up slowly, moistening his lips, feeling the grip of the sword and touching the red-stained steel. He peered quickly up at Meikl. Meikl brandished the gun slightly.

The low rumble of a dynamite blast sounded from the direction of the mines.

"You loved her too," Evon said.

He nodded.

The native held the sword out questioningly, as if offering it.

"Keep it," the analyst grunted. "You remembered its feel after twenty thousand years. That's why you'll need it."

Some deeds, he thought, would haunt the soul of Man until his end, and there was no erasing them—for they were the soul, self-made, lasting in the ghost-gray fabric of mind as long as the lips of a child greedily sought the breast of its mother, as long as the child mirrored the mind of the man and the woman. *Kulturverlaengerung*.

The analyst left the native with the sword and went to seek the next in line of command. The purpose of the fleet must be kept intact, he thought, laughing bitterly. Yet still he went.

## You Triflin' Skunk!

THE RAIN SANG light in the sodden palmettos and the wind moaned through the pines about the unpainted shack, whipping the sea of grass that billowed about the islands of scrub. The land lay bathed in rain-haze beneath the pines. Rain trickled from the roof of the shack and made a rattling spray in the rivulets under the eaves. Rain blew from the roof in foggy cloudlets. Rain played marimba-sounds on the wooden steps. A droopy chicken huddled in the drenched grass, too sick to stir or seek a shelter.

No road led across the scrublands to the distant highway, but only a sandy footpath that was now a gushing torrent that ran down to an overflowing creek of brackish water. A possum hurried across the inundated footpath at the edge of the clearing, drenched and miserable, seek-ing higher ground.

The cabin was without a chimney, but a length of stovepipe projected from a side window, and bent skyward at a clumsy angle. A thin trail of brown smoke leaked from beneath the rain-hood, and wound away on the gusty breeze. In the cabin, there was life, and an aura of song lingered about the rain-washed walls, song as mournful as the sodden land, low as the wail of a distant train.

*Whose hands was drivin' the nails O Lord?*

*Whose hands was drivin' the nails?*

*Lord O Lord!*  
*My hands was drivin' the nails O Lord!*  
*My hands was drivin' the nails*  
*And I did crucify my God!*

The song was low and vibrant in the cabin, and Lucey rocked to it, rolling her head as she sang over the stove, where a smoked 'possum simmered in pot-likker with sweet-taters, while corn bread toasted in the oven. The cabin was full of food-smells and sweat-smells, and smoky light through dusty panes.

From a rickety iron bed near the window came a sud-den choking sob, an animal sound of almost unendur-able torment and despair. Lucey stopped singing, and turned to blink toward the cry, sudden concern melting her pudgy face into a mountain woman cherub's face, full of compassion.

"Awwwwwww . . ." The sound welled unbidden from her throat, a rich low outpouring of love and sympathy for the sallow twitching youth who lay on the yellowish sheets, his eyes wild, his hands tensing into claws.

"Awwwww, Doodie—you ain't gonna have another spell?" she said.

*Only a small hurt this time, my son. It can't be helped. It's like tuning a guitar. You can't do it without sounding the strings, or pulsing the neural fibers. But only a small hurt this time... .*

The youth writhed and shuddered, stiffening into a puppet strained by steel springs. His back arched, and his muscles quivered. He flung himself suddenly into re-flexive gymnastics, sobbing in small shrieks.

Lucey murmured softly. An immense mass of love, she waddled toward the bed in bounces of rubbery flesh. She bent over him to purr low in her throat.

"Poor Doodie . . . poor li'l Doodie. Mama's lamb."

The boy sobbed and thrashed. The paroxysm brought froth to his lips and jerked his limbs into cramped spasms. He jerked and writhed and tumbled on the bed.

"You jus' try to lay calm, Doodie. You jus' try. You gonna be all right. It ain't gonna last long, Doodie. It's gonna go away."

"No!" he whimpered. "No! Don't touch me, Mama! *Don't!*"

"Now, Doodie . . ."

She sat on the edge of the bed to gather him up in her massive arms. The spasms grew more frantic, less reflex-ive. He fought her, shrieking terror. She lay beside him, moaning low with pity. She enveloped him with her arms, enfolding him so that he could no longer kick. She pulled his face into the hollow of her huge bosom and squeezed him. With his tense body pressed tightly against the bulky mass of her, she melted again with love, and began chant-ing a rhythmic lullaby while he twitched and slavered against her, fighting away, pretending to suffocate.

Gradually, as exhaustion overcame him, the spasm passed. He lay wheezing quietly in her arms.

*The strings are tuned, my son, and it was only a small hurt. Has the hurt stopped, my son?*

*Yes, father, if only this monstress would let me be. Accept my knowledge, and be content. The time will come.*

"Who you whisperin' to, Doodie? Why are you mum-biin' so?" She looked down at his tousled head, pressed tightly between her breasts.

His muttering ceased, and he lay quietly as if in a trance. It was always so. The boy had fits, and when the paroxysm had passed, he went into a rigid sleep. But it was more like a frozen moment of awareness, and old Ma Kutter said the boy was "witched." Lucey had never be-lieved in "witchin'."

When he was tensely quiet, she tenderly disengaged herself and slid off the bed. He lay on his side, face toward the window, eyes slitted and mouth agape. Hum-ming softly, Lucey returned to the stove and took a stick of oak out of the bucket. She paused to glance back at him—and he seemed to be rigidly listening to something. The rain?

"Doodle . . . ?"

"When are you coming for us, father?" came in a ghost whisper from the bed. "When, *when?*"

"What are you talking about, Doodie?" The cast-iron stove-lid clattered on the hot metal as she lifted it nerv-ously aside. She glanced down briefly at the red coals in the stove, then back at Doodie.

"Very soon . . . very soon!" he whispered.

Lucey chucked the stick of wood in atop the coals, then stood staring at the bed until the flames licked up about the lid-hole to glisten orange on her sweat-glazed face.

"Who are you talkin' to, Doodie?"

She expected no answer, but after several seconds, his breathing grew deeper. Then it came: "*My father.*"

Lucey's plump mouth went slowly shut and her hand quivered as she fumbled for the stove lid.

"Your pa is dead, Doodle. You know that."

The emaciated youth stirred on the bed, picked himself up slowly on one arm, and turned to look at her, his eyes blazing. "You lie!" he cried. "Mama, you lie!"

"Doodie!"

"I hate you, Mama. I hate all of you, and I'll make you pay. I'll be like *him.*"

The stove lid clattered back in place. She wiped her hands nervously on her dress. "You're sick, Doodie! You're not right in the mind. You never even *seed* your pa."

"I talk to him," the boy said. "He tells me things. He told me why you're my mother. He told me how. And he told me who I am."

"You're my son!" Lucey's voice had gone up an octave, and she edged defensively away.

"Only half of me, Mama." The boy said, then laughed defiantly. "Only half of me is even human. You knew that when he came here, and paid you to have his baby."

"*Doodie!*"

"You can't lie to me, Mama. *He* tells me. *He* knows."

"He was just a man, Doodie. Now he's gone. He never came back, do you hear?"

The boy stared out the window at the rain-shroud. When he spoke again, it was in a small slow voice of contempt.

"It doesn't matter. He doesn't want you to believe—any of you." He paused to snicker. "He doesn't want to warn you what we're going to do."

Lucey shook her head slowly. "Lord, have mercy on me," she breathed. "I know I done wrong. But please, punish old Lucey and not my boy."

"I ain't crazy, Mama."

"If you ain't crazy, you're `witched,' and talkin' to the dead."

"He ain't dead. He's Outside."

Lucey's eyes flickered quickly to the door.

"And he's comin' back—soon." The boy chuckled. "Then he'll make me like him, and it won't hurt to listen."

"You talk like he wasn't a man. I seed him, and you didn't. Your pa was just a man, Doodie."

"No, Mama. He showed you a man because he wanted you to see a man. Next time, he'll come the way he *really* is."

"Why would your pa come back," she snorted, sum-moning courage to stir the pot. "What would he want here? If you was right in the head, you wouldn't get fits, and you'd know you never seed him. What's his name? You don't even know his name."

"His name is a purple bitter with black velvet, Mama. Only there isn't any word."

"Fits," she moaned. "A child with fits."

"The crawlers, you mean? That's when be talks to me. It hurts at first."

She advanced on him with a big tin spoon, and shook it at him. "You're sick, Doodie. And don't you carry on so. A doctor's what you need . . . if only Mama had some money."

"I won't fuss with you, Mama."

"Huh!" She stood there for a moment, shaking her head. Then she went back to stir the pot. Odorous steam arose to perfume the shack.

The boy turned his head to watch her with luminous eyes. "The fits are when be talks, Mama. Honest they are. It's like electricity inside me. I wish I could tell you how."

"Sick!" She shook her head vigorously. "Sick, that's all."

"If I was all like him, it wouldn't hurt. It only hurts because I'm half like you."

"Doodie, you're gonna drive your old mother to her grave. Why do you torment me so?"

He turned back to the window and fell silent . . . deter-minedly, hostilely silent. The silence grew like an angry thing in the cabin, and Lucey's noises at the stove only served to punctuate it.

"Where does your father stay, Doodie?" she asked at last, in cautious desperation.

"Outside ..."

"Gitalong! Wheah outside, in a palmetto scrub? In the cypress swamp?"

"Way Outside. Outside the world."

"Who taught you such silliness? Spirits an' such! I ought to tan you good, Doodie!"

"From another world," the boy went on.

"An' he talks to you from the other world?" Doodie nodded solemnly.

Lucey stirred vigorously at the pot, her face creased in a dark frown. Lots of folks believed in spirits, and lots of folks believed in mediums. But Lucey had got herself straight with the Lord.

"I'm gonna call the parson," she grunted flatly.

"Why?"

"Christian folks don't truck with spirits."

"He's no spirit, Mama. He's like a man, only he's not. He comes from a star."

She set her jaw and fell grimly silent. She didn't like to remember Doodie's father. He'd come seeking shelter from a storm, and he was big and taciturn, and he made love like a machine. Lucey had been younger then—younger and wilder, and not afraid of shame. He'd van-ished as quickly as he'd come.

When he had gone, it almost felt like he'd been there to accomplish an errand, some piece of business that had to be handled hastily and efficiently.

"Why'd he want a son?" she scoffed. "If what you say is true—which it ain't."

The boy stirred restlessly. "Maybe I shouldn't tell."

"You tell Mama."

"You won't believe it anyway," he said listlessly. "He fixed it so I'd *look* human. He fixed it so he could talk to me. I tell him things. Things he could find out himself if he wanted to."

"What does he want to know?"

"How humans work inside."

"Livers and lungs and such? Ssssst! Silliest I ever—"

"And brains. Now they know."

"*They?*"

"Pa's people. *You'll see*. Now they know, and they're coming to run things. Things will be different, lots dif-ferent."

"When?"

"Soon. Only pa's coming sooner. He's their . . . their . . ." The boy groped for a word. "He's like a detective."

Lucey took the corn bread out of the oven and sank despairingly into a chair. "Doodie, Doodie ..."

"What, Mama?"

"Oh, Sweet Jesus! What did I do, what did I do? He's a child of the devil. Fits an' lies and puny ways. Lord, have mercy on me."

With an effort, the boy sat up to stare at her weakly. "He's no devil, Mama. He's no man, but he's better than a man. You'll see."

"You're not right in the mind, Doodie."

"It's all right. He wouldn't want you to believe. Then you'd be warned. They'd be warned too."

"They?"

"Humans—white and black and yellow. He picked poor people to have his sons, so nobody would believe."

"Sons? You mean you ain't the only one?"

Doodie shook his head. "I got brothers, Mama—half- brothers. I talk to them sometimes too."

She was silent a long time. "Doodie, you better go to sleep," she said wearily at last.

"Nobody'll believe . . . until he comes, and the rest of them come after him."

"He ain't comin', Doodie. You ain't seed him—never."

"Not with my eyes," he said.

She shook her head slowly, peering at him with brim-ming eyes. "Poor little boy. Cain't I do somethin' to make you see?"

Doodie sighed. He was tired, and didn't answer. He fell back on the pillow and lay motionless. The water that crawled down the pane rippled the rain-light over his sallow face. He might have been a pretty child, if it had not been for the tightness in his face, and the tumor-shape on his forehead.

He said it was the tumor-shape that let him talk to his father. After a few moments, Lucey arose, and took their supper off the stove. Doodie sat propped up on pillows, but he only nibbled at his food.

"Take it away," he told her suddenly. "I can feel it starting again."

There was nothing she could do. While he shrieked and tossed again on the bed, she went out on the rain-swept porch to pray. She prayed softly that her sin be upon herself, not upon her boy. She prayed for understanding, and when she was done she cried until Doodie was silent again inside.

When she went back into the house, he was watching her with cold, hard eyes.

"It's tonight," he said. "He's coming *tonight*, Mama."

The rain ceased at twilight, but the wind stiffened, hurl-ing drops of water from the pines and scattering them like shot across the sagging roof. Running water gurgled in the ditch, and a rabbit ran toward higher ground. In the west, the clouds lifted a dark bandage from a bloody slash of sky, and somewhere a dog howled in the dusk. Rain-pelted, the sick hen lay dying in the yard.

Lucey stood in the doorway, nervously peering out into the pines and the scrub, while she listened to the croak of the tree frogs at sunset, and the conch-shell sounds of wind in the pines.

"Ain't no night for strangers to be out wanderin'," she said. "There won't be no moon till nearly midnight."

"He'll come," promised the small voice behind her. "He's coming from the Outside."

"Shush, child. He's nothing of the sort."

"He'll come, all right."

"What if I won't let him in the door?"

Doodie laughed. "You can't stop him, Mama. I'm only *half* like you, and it hurts when he talks-inside."

"Yes, child?"

"If he talks-inside to a human, the human dies. He told me."

"Sounds like witch-woman talk," Lucey said scornfully and stared back at him from the doorway. "I don't want no more of it. There's nobody can kill somebody by just a-talkin'."

"*He* can. And it ain't just talking. It's talking *inside*."

"Ain't nobody can talk inside your mother but your mother."

"That's what I been saying." Doodle laughed. "If he did, you'd die. That's why he needed *me*."

Lucey's eyes kept flickering toward the rain-soaked scrub, and she hugged her huge arms, and shivered. "Sil-liest I ever!" she snorted. "He was just a man, and you never even seed him."

She went inside and got the shotgun, and sat down at the table to clean it, after lighting a smoky oil lamp on the wall.

"Why are you cleaning that gun, Mama?"

"Wildcat around the chicken yard last night!" she mut-tered. "Tonight I'm gonna watch."

Doodie stared at her with narrowed eyes, and the look on his face started her shivering again. Sometimes he did seem not-quite-human, a shape witched or haunted wherein a silent cat prowled by itself and watched, through human eyes.

How could she believe the wild words of a child sub-ject to fits, a child whose story was like those told by witching women and herb healers? A thing that came from the stars, a thing that could come in the guise of a man and talk, make love, eat, and laugh, a thing that wanted a half-human son to which it could speak from afar.

How could she believe in a thing that was like a spy sent into the city before the army came, a thing

that could make her conceive when it wasn't even human? It was wilder than any of the stories they told in the deep swamps, and Lucey was a good Christian now.

Still, when Doodie fell asleep, she took the gun and went out to wait for the wildcat that had been disturbing the chickens. It wasn't unchristian to believe in wildcats, not even tonight.

Doodie's father had been just a man, a trifiin' man. True, she couldn't remember him very clearly, because she had been drinking corn squeezin's with Jacob Fleeter before the stranger came. She had been all giggly, and he had been all shimmery, and she couldn't remember a word he'd said.

"Lord forgive me," she breathed as she left the house.

The wet grass dragged about her legs as she crossed the yard and traversed a clearing toward an island of palmetto scrub from which she could cover both the house and the chickenyard.

The clouds had broken, and stars shone brightly, but there was no moon. Lucey moved by instinct, knowing each inch of land for half a mile around the shack.

She sat on a wet and rotting log in the edge of the palmetto thicket, laid the shotgun across her lap, stuffed a corncob pipe with tobacco from Deevey's field, and sat smoking in the blackness while whippoorwills mourned over the land, and an occasional owl hooted from the swamp. The air was cool and clean after the rain, and only a few night birds flitted in the brush while crickets chirped in the distance and tree frogs spoke mysteriously.

"AAAaaaAAaaarrrwww ... Na!"

The cry was low and piercing. Was it Doodie, having another spasm—or only a dream? She half-rose, then paused, listening. There were a few more whimpers, then silence. A dream, she decided, and settled back to wait. There was nothing she could do for Doodle, not until the State Healthmobile came through again, and examined him for "catchin' " ailments. If they found he wasn't right in the mind, they might take him away.

The glowing ember in the pipe was hypnotic—the only thing to be clearly seen except the stars. She stared at the stars, wondering about their names, until they began to crawl before her eyes. Then she looked at the ember in the pipe again, brightening and dimming with each breath, acquiring a lacy crust of ashes, growing sleepy in the bowl and sinking deeper, deeper, while the whippoor-wills pierced the night with melancholy.

... Na na naaaAAAhhhaaa

When the cries woke her, she knew she had slept for some time. Faint moonlight seeped through the pine branches from the east, and there was a light mist over the land. The air had chilled, and she shivered as she arose to stretch, propping the gun across the rotten log. She waited for Doodie's cries to cease.

The cries continued, unabated.

Stiffening with sudden apprehension, she started hack toward the shack. Then she saw it—a faint violet glow through the trees to the north, just past the corner of the hen house! She stopped again, tense with fright. Doodie's cries were becoming meaningful.

"Pa! I can't stand it any closer! Naa, naaa! I can't think, I can't think at all. No, *please*...."

Reflexively, Lucey started to bolt for the house, but checked herself in time. No lamp burned in the window. She picked up the shotgun and a pebble. After a nervous pause, she tossed the pebble at the porch.

It bounced from the wall with a loud crack, and she slunk low into shadows. Doodie's cries continued without pause. A minute passed, and no one emerged from the house.

A sudden metallic sound, like the opening of a metal door, came from the direction of the violet light. Quickly she stepped over the log and pressed back into the scrub thicket. Shaking with fear, she waited in the palmettos, crouching in the moonlight among the spiny fronds, and lifting her head occasionally to peer toward the violet light.

She saw nothing for a time, and then, gradually the moonlight seemed to dim. She glanced upward. A tenuous shadow, like smoke, had begun to obscure the face of the moon, a translucent blur like the thinnest cloud.

At first, she dismissed it as a cloud. But it writhed within itself, curled and crawled, not dispersing, but

seeming to swim. Smoke from the violet light? She watched it with wide, upturned eyes.

Despite its volatile shape, it clung together as a single entity as smoke would never have done. She could still see it faintly after it had cleared the lunar disk, scintillat-ing in the moon-glow.

It swam like an airborne jellyfish. A cluster of silver threads it seemed, tangled in a cloud of filaments—or a giant mass of dandelion fluff. It leaked out misty pseudo-pods, then drew them back as it pulled itself through the air. Weightless as chick-down, huge as a barn, it flew—and drifted from the direction of the sphere in a semi-circle, as if inspecting the land, at times moving against the wind.

It was coming closer to the house.

It moved with purpose, and therefore was alive. This Lucey knew. It moved with its millions of spun threads, finer than a spider's web, the patterns as ordered as a neural array.

It contracted suddenly and began to settle toward the house. Glittering opaquely, blotting out half the cabin, it kept contracting and drawing itself in, becoming denser until it fell in the yard with a blinding flash of incandes-cent light.

Lucey's flesh crawled. Her hands trembled on the gun, her breath came in shallow gasps.

Before her eyes it was changing into a manlike thing. Frozen, she waited, thinking swiftly. Could it be that Doodie was right?

Could it be?—

Doodle was still whimpering in the house, weary now, as he always was when the spasm had spent itself. But the words still came, words addressed to his father.

The thing in the yard was assuming the shape of a man—and Lucey knew who the man would be.

She reared up quickly in the palmettos, like an enraged, hulking river animal breaking to the surface. She came up shotgun-in-hand and bellowed across the clear-ing. "Hey theah! You triflin' skunk! *Look at me!*"

Still groping for human shape, the creature froze.

"Run off an' leave me with child!" Lucey shouted. "And no way to pay his keep!"

The creature kept coming toward her, and the pulsing grew stronger.

"Don't come any nearer, you hear?"

When it kept coming, Lucey grunted in a gathering rage and charged out of the palmettos to meet it, shotgun raised, screaming insults. The thing wobbled to a stop, its face a shapeless blob with black shadows for eyes.

She brought the gun to her shoulder and fired both barrels at once.

The thing tumbled to the ground. Crackling arcs danced about it, and a smell of ozone came on the breeze. For one hideous moment it was lighted by a glow from within. Then the glow died, and it began to expand. It grew erratically, and the moonlight danced in silvery fila-ments about it. A blob of its substance broke loose from the rest, and windborne, sailed across the clearing and dashed itself to dust in the palmettos.

A sudden gust took the rest of it, rolling it away in the grass, gauzy shreds tearing loose from the mass. The gust blew it against the trunk of a pine. It lodged there briefly, quivering in the breeze and shimmering palely under the moon. Then it broke into dust that scattered eastward across the land.

"Praised be the Lord," breathed Lucey, beginning to cry.

A high whining sound pierced the night, from the di-rection of the violet light. She whirled to stare. The light grew brighter. Then the whine abruptly ceased. A lumi-nescent sphere, glowing with violet haze, moved upward from the pines. It paused, then in stately majesty con-tinued the ascent, gathering speed until it became a ghostly chariot that dwindled. Up, up, up toward thegleaming stars. She watched it until it vanished from sight.

Then she straightened her shoulders, and glowered toward the dust traces that blew eastward over the scrub.

"Ain't nothing worse than a triflin' man," she philos-ophized. "If he's human, or if he's not."

Wearily she returned to the cabin. Doodle was sleeping peacefully. Smiling, she tucked him in, and went to bed. There was corn to hoe, come dawn.

*Report: Servopilot recon six, to fleet. Missionman caught in transition phase by native organism, and dev-astated, thus destroying liaison with native analog. Sug-gest delay of invasion plans. Unpredictability factors associated with mothers of genetic analogs. Withdraw con-tacts. Servo Six.*

*No one knows the heart of a rebel until his own search for the reason of right or wrong is made. Lieutenant Laskell found the answer to his own personal rebellion deep beneath a turbulent Atlantic, and somehow, when the time came, his decision wasn't too difficult ...*

## Way of a Rebel

By Walter Miller, Jr.

Illustrated by Rudolph Patois

LIEUTENANT LASKELL surfaced his one-man submarine fifty miles off the Florida coast where he had been patrolling in search of enemy subs. Darkness had fallen. He tuned his short wave set to the Miami station just in time to hear the eight o'clock news. The grim announcement that he had expected was quick to come:

"In accordance with the provisions of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment, Congress today approved the Manlin Bill, declaring a state of total emergency for the nation. President Williston signed it immediately and tendered his resignation to the Congress and the people. The executive, legislative, and judiciary are now in the hands of the Department of Defense. Secretary Carson has issued two decrees, one reminding all citizens that they are no longer free to shirk their duties to the nation, the other calling upon the leaders of the Eurasian Soviet to cease air attacks on the American continent or suffer the consequences.

"In Secretary Garson's ultimatum to the enemy, he stated: 'Heretofore we have refrained from employing certain weapons of warfare in the vain hope that you would recognize the futility of further aggression and desist from it. You have not done so. You have persisted in your blood-thirsty folly, despite this nation's efforts to reach an agreement for armistice. Therefore I am forced to command you, in the Name of Almighty God, to surrender immediately or be destroyed. I shall allow you one day in which to give evidence of submission. If such evidence is not forthcoming, I shall implement this directive by a total attack. . .'"

Mitch Laskell switched off the short wave set and muttered an oath. He squeezed his way up through the narrow conning tower and sat on the small deck, leaning back against the rocket-launcher and dangling his feet in the calm ocean. The night was windless and warm, with the summer stars eyeing the earth benignly. But despite the warmth, he felt clammy; his hands were shaking a little as he lit a cigarette.

The newscast—it came as no surprise. The world had known for weeks that the Manlin Bill would be passed, and that Garson would be given absolute powers to lead the nation through the war. And his ultimatum to the enemy was no surprise. Garson had long favored an all-out radiological attack, employing every nuclear weapon the country could muster. Heretofore both sides had limited themselves to non-rigged atomic explosives, and had refrained from using bacterial weapons. Garson wanted to take off the boxing-gloves in favor of steel gauntlets. And now it would happen—the all-out attack, the masterpiece of homicidal engineering, the final word in destruction.

MITCH, reclining in loneliness against the rocket-launcher, blew a thoughtful cloud of cigarette



smoke toward the bright yellow eye of Arcturus, almost directly overhead, and wondered why the Constellation Bootes suddenly looked like a big club ready to fall on the earth, when it had always reminded him of a fly-swatter about to slap the Corona Borealis. He searched himself for horror, but found only a gloomy uneasiness. It was funny, he thought; five years ago men would have been outraged at the notion of an American absolutism, with one man ruling by decree. But now that it had happened, it was not too hard to accept. He wondered at it.

And he soon decided that almost any fact could be accepted calmly after it had already happened. Men would be just as calm after their cities had been reduced to rubble. The human capacity for calmness was almost unlimited, *ex post facto*, because the routine of daily living had to go on, despite the big business of governments whose leaders invoked the Deity in the cause of slaughter.

A voice, echoing up out of the conning tower, made him jump. The command set was barking his call letters.

"Unit Sugar William Niner Zero, Mother wants you. I say again: Mother wants you. Acknowledge please. Over."

The message meant: return to base immediately. And it implied an urgency in the use of the code-word Mother. He frowned and started up, then fell back with a low grunt.

All of his resentment against the world's political jackasses suddenly boiled up inside him as a personal resentment. There was something about the metallic rasp of the radio's voice that sparked him to sudden rebelliousness.

"Unit Sugar William Niner Zero, Mother wants you, Mother wants you. Acknowledge immediately. Over."

He had a good idea what it was all about. All subs were probably being called in for rearmament with cobalt-rigged atomic warheads for their guided missiles. The submarine force would probably be used to implement Carson's ultimatum. They would deliver radiological death to Eurasian coastal cities, and cause the Soviets to retaliate.

Why must I participate in the wrecking of mechanical civilization? he thought grimly.

But a counter-thought came to trouble him: I have a duty to obey; The country gave me birth and brought me up, and now it's got a war to fight.

He arose and let himself down through the conning tower. He reached for the microphone, but the receiver croaked again.

"Sugar William Niner Zero, you are ordered to answer immediately. Mother's fixing shortening bread. Mother wants you. Over."

Shortening bread—big plans, something special, a radiological death-dish for the world. He hated the voice quietly. His hand touched the microphone but did not lift it.

He stood poised there in the light of a single glow-lamp, feeling his small sub rocking gently in the calm sea, listening to the quiet purr of the atomics beneath him. He had come to love the little sub, despite the loneliness of long weeks at sea.

His only companion was the sub's small computer which was used for navigation and for calculations pertaining to the firing of the rocket-missiles. It also handled the probability mathematics of random search, and automatically radioed periodic position reports to the home-base computer.

He glanced suddenly at his watch. It was nearly time for a report. Abruptly he reached out and jerked open the knife-switch in the computer's antenna circuit. Immediately the machine began clicking and clattering and chomping. A bit of paper tape suddenly licked out of its answer-slot. He tore it off and read the neatly printed words: MALFUNCTION, OPEN CIRCUIT, COMMUNICATIONS OUTPUT; INSERT DATA.

Mitch "inserted data" by punching a button labelled NO REPAIR and another labelled RADIO OUT. One bank of tubes immediately lost its filament-glow, and the computer shot out another bit of tape inscribed DATA ROGERED. He patted it affectionately and grinned. The computer was just a machine, but he found it easy to personalize the thing. . .

The command-set was crackling again. "Sugar William Niner Zero, this is Commsubron Killer. Two messages. Mother wants you. Daddy has a razor strap. Get on the ball out there, boy! Acknowledge.

Over."

Mitch whitened and picked up the microphone. He keyed the transmitter's carrier and spoke in a quiet hiss. "Commsubron Killer from Sugar William Niner Zero.

Message for Daddy. Sonnyboy just resigned from the Navy. Go to hell, all of you! Over and out!"

He shut off the receiver just as it started to stutter a shocked reply. He dropped the mike and let it dangle. He stood touching his fingertips to his temples and breathing in shallow gasps. Had he gone completely insane?

He sat down on the floor of the tiny compartment and tried to think. But he could only feel a bitter resentment welling up out of nowhere. Why? He had always gotten along in the Navy. He was the under-sea equivalent of a fighter pilot, and he had always liked his job. They had even said that "he had the killer instinct"—or whatever it was that made him grin maliciously when he spotted an enemy sub and streaked in for the kill.

NOW SUDDENLY he didn't want to go back. He wanted to quit the whole damn war and run away. Because of Garson maybe? But no, hadn't he anticipated that before it happened? Why should he kick now, when he hadn't kicked before? And who was he to decide whether Garson was right or wrong?

Go back, he thought. There's the microphone. Pick it up and tell Commsubron that you went stir-crazy for a little while. Tell him wilco on his message. They won't do anything to you except send you to a nut doctor. Maybe you need one. Go on back like a sane man.

But he drew his hand back from the microphone. He wiped his face nervously. Mitch had never spent much time worrying about ethics and creeds and political philosophies. He'd had a job to do, and he did it, and he sometimes sneered at people who could wax starry-eyed about patriotism and such. It didn't make sense. The old school spirit was okay for football games, and even for small-time wars, but he had never felt much of it. He hadn't needed it in order to be a good fighter. He fought because it was considered the "thing to do," because he liked the people he had to it with, and because those people who didn't have a good opinion of him didn't fight. People never needed much of a philosophic motive to make them do the socially approved things.

He moistened his lips nervously and stared at the microphone. He was scared. Scared to run away. He had never been afraid of a fight, frightened maybe, but not afraid. Why now? It takes a lot of courage to be a coward, he thought, but the word coward made him wince. He groped blindly for a reasonable explanation of his desire to desert. He wanted to talk to somebody about it, because he was the kind of man who could think best in an argument. But there was no one to talk to except the radio.

The computer's keyboard was almost at his elbow. He stared at it for a moment, then slowly typed:

DATA: WIND OUT OF THE NORTH, WAVE FACTOR 0.50 ROUGHNESS SCALE.

INSTRUCTIONS : SUGGEST ACTION.

The machine chewed on the entry noisily for a few seconds, then answered: INSUFFICIENT DATA.

He nodded thoughtfully. That was his predicament too: insufficient data about his own motives. How could a man trust himself to judge wisely, when his judgement went completely against that of his society? He typed again.

DATA FOR HYPOTHETICAL PROBLEM: YOU HAVE JUST SOLVED A NAVIGATIONAL PROBLEM WHOSE SOLUTION REQUIRES COURSE DUE WEST. THREE OTHER COMPUTERS SOLVE SAME PROBLEM AND GET COURSE DUE SOUTH. MALFUNCTION NOT EVIDENT IN ANY OF FOUR COMPUTERS.

INSTRUCTIONS: FURNISH A COURSE.

The computer clattered for awhile, then typed: SUGGESTION: MALFUCTION INDICATORS ARE POSSIBLY MALFUCTIONING. IS DATA AVAILABLE?

He stared at it, then laughed grimly. His own malfunction-indicator wasn't telling him much either. With masochistic fatalism he touched the keyboard again.

DATA NOT AVAILABLE. FURNISH A COURSE.

The computer replied almost immediately this time: COURSE: DUE WEST.

Mitch stared at it and bit his lip. The machine would follow its own solution, even if the other three contradicted it. Naturally — it would have to follow its own solution, if there was no indication of malfunction. But could a human being make such a decision? Could a man decide, "I am right, and everyone else is wrong?"

No evidence of malfunction, he thought. I am not a coward. Neither am I insane.

His heart cried: "I am disgusted with this purposeless war. I shall quit fighting it."

He sighed deeply, then arose. There was nothing else to do. The atomic engines could go six months without refueling. There were enough undersea rations to last nearly that long.

He switched on the radio again, goosed the engines to full speed, and after a moment's thought, swung around on a northeasterly heading. His first impulse had been to head south, aiming for Yucatan or the Guianas—but that impulse would also be the first to strike his pursuers who were sure to come.

A new voice was growling on the radio, and he recognized it as Captain Barkley, his usually jovial, slightly cynical commanding officer. "Listen, Mitch—if you can hear me, better answer. What's wrong with you anyhow? I can't hold off much longer. If you don't reply, I'll have to hunt you down. You're ordered to proceed immediately to the nearest base. Over."

Mitch wanted to answer, wanted to argue and fume and curse, hoping that he could explain his behaviour to his own satisfaction. But they might not be certain of his exact location, and if he used the radio, half-a-dozen direction-finders would swing around to aim along his signal, and Barkley would plot the half-a-dozen lines on the map in his office before speaking crisply into his telephone: all right, boys—get him! 29° 10' North, 79° 50' West. Use a P-charge if you can't spot him by radar or sonar.

Mitch left the controls in the hands of the computer and went up to stand in the conning tower with the churning spray washing his face. Surfaced, the sub could make sixty knots, and he meant to stay surfaced until there were hints of pursuit.

A THREE-QUARTER moon was rising in gloomy orange majesty out of the quiet sea. It made a river of syrupy light across the water to the east, and it heightened his sense of unreality, his feeling of detachment from danger.

Is it always like this, he wondered? Can a man toss aside his society so easily, become a traitor with so little logical reason? A day ago, he would not have dreamed it possible. A day ago, he would have proclaimed with the cynical Barkley, "A sailor's got no politics. What the hell's it to me if Garson is Big Boss? I'm just a little tooth in a big gear. Uncle pays my keep. I ask no questions."

And now he was running like hell and stealing several million bucks worth of Uncle's Navy, all because Garson's pomposity and a radio operator's voice got under his skin. How could a man be so crazy?

But no, that couldn't be it, he thought. Jeezil! He must have some better reason. Sort of a last straw, maybe. But he had been conscious of no great resentment against the war or the Navy or the government. Historically speaking, wars had never done a great deal of harm—no more harm than industrial or traffic accidents.

Why was this war any different? It promised to be more destructive than the others, but that was drawing a rather narrow line. Who was he to draw his bayonet across the road and say, "Stop here. This is the limit."

Mitch turned his back toward the whipping spray and stared aft along the phosphorescent, moon-swept wake of his mechanical shark. The radio was still barking at him with Barkley's clipped tones.

"Last warning, Laskell! Get on that microphone or suffer the consequences! We know where you are. I'll give you fifteen minutes, then we'll come get you. Over and out."

Thanks for the warning, Mitch thought. In a few minutes, he would have to submerge. His eyes swept the moon-washed heavens for signs of aircraft, and he watched the dark horizon for hints of pursuit.

He meant to keep the northeasterly course for perhaps ten hours, then turn off and cruise southeast, passing below Bermuda and on out into the central Atlantic. Then south—perhaps to Africa or Brazil. A

fugitive for the rest of his days.

"Sugar William Niner Zero," barked the radio. "This is Commsubfleet Jaybird. Over."

Mitch moistened his lips nervously. The voice was no longer Barkley's. Commsubfleet Jaybird was Admiral Harrinore. He chuckled bitterly then, realizing that he was still automatically startled by rank. He remained in the conning tower, listening.

"Sugar William Niner Zero, this is Commsubfleet Jaybird. If you will obey orders immediately, I guarantee that you will be allowed to accept summary discipline. No court martial if you comply. You are to return to base at once. Otherwise, we shall be forced to blast you out of the ocean as a deserter to the enemy. Over."

So that was it, he thought. They were worried about the sub falling into Soviet paws. Some of its equipment was still classified "secret", although the Reds probably already had it.

No, he wasn't deserting to the enemy. Neither side was right in the struggle, although he preferred the West's brand of wrongness to the bloodier wrongness of the Reds. But a man in choosing the lesser of two evils must first decide whether the choice really has to be made, and if there is not a third and more desirable way. Before picking a weapon for self-destruction, it might help to reason whether or not suicide is really necessary.

He smiled sardonically into the gray gloom, knowing that his thinking was running backwards, that he had acted before reasoning why, that he was rationalizing in an attempt to soothe himself and absolve himself. But a lot of human thinking occurred beneath the level of consciousness, down in the darker regions of the mind where it was not allowed to become conscious lest it bring shame to the thinker. And perhaps he had reasoned it all out in that mental half-world where thoughts are inner ghosts, haunting the possessed man with vague stirrings of uneasiness, leading him into inexplicable behaviour.

I am free now, he told himself. I have given them my declaration of independence, and I am an animal struggling to survive. Living in society, a man must submit to its will, but now I am divorced from it, and I shall live apart from it if I live at all, and I shall owe it nothing. The "governed" no longer gives his consent. How many times have men said, "If you don't like the system here, why don't you get out?" Well, he was getting out, and as a freeborn human animal, born as a savage into the world, he had that right, if he had any right at all.

He grunted moodily and lowered himself down into the belly of the sub. They would be starting the search soon. He sealed the hatches and opened the water intakes after slowing to a crawl. The sub shivered and settled. The indicator crept to ten feet, twenty, thirty. At fifty feet, he jabbed a button on the computer, and the engines growled a harder thrust. He kept the northeasterly heading at maximum underwater speed.

AN HOUR crept by. He listened for code on the sonar equipment, but heard only the weird and nameless sea-sounds. He allowed himself a reading light in the cramped compartment, folded the map-table up from the wall, and studied the coastline of Africa.

He began to feel a frightening loneliness, although scarcely two hours had passed since his rebellious decision, and he was accustomed to long weeks alone at sea. He scoffed at himself. He would get along okay; the sub would take him any place he wanted to go, if he could escape pursuit. Surely there must be some part of the world where men were not concerned with the senseless struggle of the titans. But all such places were primitive, savage, almost unendurable to a man born and tuned to the violin-string pitch of technological culture.

Mitch realized dismally that he loved technological civilization, its giant tools, its roar of mighty engines, its proud structures of concrete and steel. He could sacrifice his love for particular people, for particular places and governments—but it was going to be harder to relinquish mechanical civilization for some stone-age culture lingering in an out-of-the-way place. Changing tribes was easy, for all tribes belonged to Man, but renouncing machinery for jungle tools would be more difficult. A man could change his politics, his friends, his religion, his country, but Man's tools were a part of his body. Having used a high-powered rifle, the man subsumed the weapon, made it a part of himself. Trading it for a stone axe would be like cutting off his arm. Man was a user of tools, a shaper of environments.

That was it, he thought. The reason for his sudden rebellion, the narrow dividing line between tolerable and insufferable wars. A war that killed human beings might be tolerable, if it left most of civilizations' industry intact, or at least restorable, for although men might die, Man lived on, still possessing his precious tools, still capable of producing greater ones. But a war that wrecked industry, left it a tangled jumble of radioactive concrete and steel—that kind of war was insufferable, as this one threatened to be.

The idea shocked him. Kill a few men, and you scratch the hide of Historical Man. But wreck the industry, drive men out of the cities, leave the factories hissing with beta and gamma radiation, and you amputate the hands of Historical Man the Builder. The machinery of civilization was a living body, with organismic Man as its brain. And the brain had not yet learned to use the body for a constructive purpose. It lacked coordination, and the ability to reason its actions analytically.

Was he basing action on analytic reason?

Another hour had passed. And then he heard it. The sound of faint sonar communication. Quickly he nosed upward to twenty feet, throttled back to half speed, and raised the periscope. With his face pressed against the eyepiece, he scanned the moonlit ocean in a slow circle. No lights, no silhouettes against the reflections on the waves.

He started the pumps and prepared to surface. Then the conning tower was snorting through the water like a rolling porpoise. He shut off the engines, leaving the sub in utter silence except for the soft wash of the sea. He adjusted the sonar pickups, turned the amplifier to maximum, and listened intently. Nothing. Had he imagined it?

He jabbed a button, and a motor purred, rolling out the retractible radar antenna. Carefully he scanned the sky and sea, watching the green-mottled screen for blips. Nothing—no ships or aircraft visible. But he was certain: for a moment he had heard the twitter of undersea communicators.

HE SAT WAITING and listening. Perhaps they had heard his engines, although his own equipment had caught none of their drive-noise.

The computer was able to supervise several tasks at once, and he set it to continue sweeping the horizon with the radar, to listen for sonar code and engine purr while he attended to other matters. He readied two torpedos and raised a rocket into position for launching. He opened the hatch and climbed to stand in the conning tower again, peering grimly around the horizon.

Minutes later, a buzzer sounded beneath him. The computer had something now. He glanced at the parabolic radar antenna, rearing its head a dozen feet above him. It had stopped its aimless scanning and was quivering steadily on the southeast horizon. Southeast?

He lowered himself quickly into the ship and stared at the luminous screen. Blips—three blips—barely visible. While he watched, a fourth appeared.

He clamped on his headsets. There it was! The faint engine-noise of ships. His trained senses told him they were subs. Subs out of the southeast? He had expected interception from the west—first aircraft, then light surface vessels.

There was but one possible answer: the enemy.

He dived for the radio and waited impatiently for the tubes to warm again. He found himself shouting into the mic.

"Commsubron Killer, this is Sugar William Niner Zero. Urgent message. Over."

He was a long way from the station. He repeated the call three times. At last a faintly audible voice came from the set.

"... this is Commsubron Killer. You are ordered to return immediately. . ."

The voice faded again. "Listen!" Mitch bellowed. "Four, no—five enemy submarine—position 31°50' North, 73°10' West, proceeding northwest—roughly, toward Washington. Probably carrying an answer to Garson's ultimatum. Get help out here. Over."

He heard only a brief mutter this time. ". . . ordered not to proceed toward Washington. Return immediately to—"

"Not me! You fool! Listen! Five —enemy—submarines—" He repeated the message as slowly as he

could, repeated it four times.

". . . reading you S-1," came the fading answer. "Are you in distress? I say again. Are you in distress? Over."

Angrily Mitch keyed the carrier wave, screwed the button tightly down, and kicked on the four-hundred cycle modulator. Maybe they could get a directional fix on his signal and home on it.

The blips were gone from the radar scope. The subs had spotted him and submerged. In a moment he would be catching a torpedo, unless he moved. He started the engines quickly, and the surfaced sub lurched ahead. He nosed her toward the enemy craft and opened the throttle. She knifed through the water like a low-running PT boat, throwing a V-shaped fan of spray. When he reached the halfway point between his own former position and the place where the enemy submerged, he began jabbing a release at three second intervals, laying a trail of deadly eggs. He could hear the crash of the exploding depth-charges behind him. He swung around to make another pass.

Then he saw it—the wet metal hulk rearing up like a massive whale dead ahead. They had discovered the insignificance of their lone and pint-sized attacker. They were coming up to take him with deck guns.

Mitch reversed the engines and swung quickly away. The range was too close for a torpedo. The blast would catch them both. He began submerging quickly. A sickening blast shivered his tiny craft, and then another. He dropped to sixty feet, then knifed ahead.

God! Why was he doing this? There was no sense in it, if he meant to run away. But then the thought came: they're returning Old Man Garson's big-winded threat. They're bringing a snootful of radiological hell, and that's the damned bayonet-line across the road.

DEPTH CHARGES were crashing around him as he wove a zig-zag course. The computer was buzzing frantically. Then he saw why. The rocket launcher hadn't retracted; there was still a rocket in it—with a snootful of Uranium 235. The thing was dragging at the water, slowing him down, causing the sub to shudder and lurch.

Apparently all the subs had surfaced, for the charges were falling on all sides. With the launcher dragging at him, they would get him sooner or later. He tried to nose upward, but the controls refused.

He knew what would happen if he tried to fire the rocket. Hell, he didn't have to fire it. All he had to do was fuse it. It had a water-pressure fuse, and he was beneath exploding depth.

Don't think about it! Do it!

No, you've got to think. That's what's wrong. Too much do, not enough think. They're going to wreck mechanical civilization if they keep it up. They're going to wreck Man's tools, cut off his hands, and make him an ape again!

But what's it to you? What can you do?

Dammit! You can destroy five wrong tools that were built to wreck the right tools.

Mitch, who wanted to quit an all-out war, reached for the fusing switch. This part was his war; destroy the destroyers, but not the producers. Even if it didn't make good military sense—

A close explosion sent him lurching aside. He grabbed at the wall and pushed himself back. The switch—the damn double-toggle red switch! He screamed a curse and struck at it with both fists.

There came a beautiful, blinding light.

THE END

## The Will

THE WILL OF a child. A child who played in the sun and ran over the meadow to chase with his dog among the trees beyond the hedge, and knew the fierce passions of childhood. A child whose logic cut corners and sought shortest distances, and found them. A child who made shining life in my house.

*Red blood count low, wildly fluctuating . . . Chronic fatigue, loss of weight, general lethargy of*

*function . Noticeable pallor and muscular atrophy . . . the first symptoms.*

That was eight months ago.

Last summer, the specialists conferred over him. When they had finished, I went to Doc Jules' office-alone, because I was afraid it was going to be bad, and Cleo couldn't take it. He gave it to me straight.

"We can't cure him, Rod. We can only treat symptoms—and hope the research labs come through. I'm sorry."

"He'll die?"

"Unless the labs get an answer."

"How long?"

"Months." He gave it to me bluntly—maybe because he thought I was hard enough to take it, and maybe because he knew I was only Kenny's foster father, as if blood-kinship would have made it any worse.

"Thanks for letting me know," I said, and got my hat. I would have to tell Cleo, somehow. It was going to be tough. I left the building and went out to buy a paper.

A magazine on the science rack caught my eye. It had an article entitled *Carcinogenesis and Carbon-14* and there was a mention of leukemia in the blurb. I bought it along with the paper, and went over to the park to read. Anything to keep from carrying the news to Cleo.

The research article made things worse. They were still doing things to rats and cosmic rays, and the word "cure" wasn't mentioned once. I dropped the magazine on the grass and glanced at the front page. A small headline toward the bottom of the page said: COMMUNITY PRAYS THREE DAYS FOR DYING CHILD. Same old sob-stuff—publicity causes country to focus on some luckless incurable, and deluge the family with sympathy, advice, money, and sincere and ardent pleas for divine intervention.

I wondered if it would be like that for Kenny—and instinctively I shuddered.

I took a train out to the suburbs, picked up the car, and drove home before twilight. I parked in front, because Cleo was out in back, taking down clothes from the line. The blinds were down in the living room, and the lantern-jawed visage of Captain Chronos looked out sternly from the television screen. The Captain carried an LTR (local--time-reversal) gun at the ready, and peered warily from side to side through an oval hole in the title film. Kenny's usual early-evening fodder.

*"Travel through the centuries with the master of the clock!"* the announcer was chanting.

"Hi, kid," I said to the hunched-up figure who sat before the set, worshipping his hero.

"Sssshhhhhhhh!" He glanced at me irritably, then trans-ferred his individual attention back to the title film.

"Sorry," I muttered. "Didn't know you listened to the opening spiel. It's always the same."

He squirmed, indicating that he wanted me to scram—to leave him to his own devices.

I scrambled to the library, but the excited chant of the audio was still with me. ". . . *Captain Chronos, Custodian of Time, Defender of the Temporal Passes, Champion of the Temporal Guard. Fly with Captain Chronos in his time-ship Century as he battles against those evil forces who would—*"

I shut the door for a little quiet, then went to the ency-clopedia shelf and took down "LAC-MOE." An envelope fell out of the heavy volume, and I picked it up. Kenny's.

He had scrawled "Lebanon, do not open until 1964; value in 1954: 38¢," on the face. I knew what was inside without holding it up to the light: stamps. Kenny's idea of buried treasure; when he had more than one stamp of an issue in his collection, he'd stash the duplicate away somewhere to let it age, having heard that age increases their value.

When I finished reading the brief article, I went out to the kitchen. Cleo was bringing in a basket of clothes. She paused in the doorway, the basket cocked on her hip, hair disheveled, looking pretty but anxious.

"Did you see him?" she asked.

I nodded, unable to look at her, poured myself a drink. She waited a few seconds for me to say

something. When I couldn't say anything, she dropped the basket of clothes, scattering underwear and linens across the kitchen floor, and darted across the room to seize my arms and stare up at me wildly.

"Rod! It *isn't*—"

But it was. Without stopping to think, she rushed to the living room, seized Kenny in her arms, began sobbing, then fled upstairs when she realized what she was doing.

Kenny knew he was sick. He knew several specialists had studied his case. He knew that I had gone down to talk with Doc Jules this afternoon. After Cleo's reaction, there was no keeping the truth from him. He was only fourteen, but within two weeks, he knew he had less than a year to live, unless they found a cure. He pieced it together for himself from conversational fragments, and chance remarks, and medical encyclopedias, and by deftly questioning a playmate's older brother who was a medical student.

Maybe it was easier on Kenny to know he was dying, easier than seeing our anxiety and being frightened by it without knowing the cause. But a child is blunt in his questioning, and tactless in matters that concern himself, and that made it hell on Cleo.

"If they don't find a cure, when will I die?"

"Will it hurt?"

"What will you do with my things?"

"Will I see my real father afterwards?"

Cleo stood so much of it, and then one night she broke down and we had to call a doctor to give her a sedative and quiet her down. When she was settled, I took Kenny out behind the house. We walked across the narrow strip of pasture and sat on the old stone fence to talk by the light of the moon. I told him not to talk about it again to Cleo, unless she brought it up, and that he was to bring his questions to me. I put my arm around him, and I knew he was crying inside.

"I don't want to die."

There is a difference between tragedy and blind brutal calamity. Tragedy has meaning, and there is dignity in it. Tragedy stands with its shoulders stiff and proud. But there is no meaning, no dignity, no fulfillment, in the death of a child.

"Kenny, I want you to try to have faith. The research institutes are working hard. I want you to try to have faith that they'll find a cure."

"Mack says it won't be for years and years."

Mack was the medical student. I resolved to call him tomorrow. But his mistake was innocent; he didn't know what was the matter with Kenny.

"Mack doesn't know. He's just a kid himself. Nobody knows—except that they'll find it sometime. Nobody knows when. It might be next week."

"I wish I had a time-ship like Captain Chronos."

"Why?"

He looked at me earnestly in the moonlight. "Because then I could go to some year when they knew how to cure me."

"I wish it were possible."

"I'll bet it is. I'll bet someday they can do that too. Maybe the government's working on it now."

I told him I'd heard nothing of such a project.

"Then they ought to be. Think of the advantages. If you wanted to know something that nobody knew, you could just go to some year when it had already been discovered."

I told him that it wouldn't work, because then everybody would try it, and nobody would work on new discoveries, and none would be made.

"Besides, Kenny, nobody can even prove time-travel is possible."

"Scientists can do anything."

"Only things that are possible, Kenny. And only with money, and time, and work—and a reason."

"Would it cost a lot to research for a time-ship, Dad?"

"Quite a lot, I imagine, if you could find somebody to do it."

"As much as the atom-bomb?"



"Maybe."

"I bet you could borrow it from banks . . . if somebody could prove it's possible."

"You'd need a lot of money of your own, kid, before the banks would help."

"I bet my stamp collection will be worth a lot of money someday. And my autograph book." The conversation had wandered off into fantasy.

"In time, maybe in time. A century maybe. But banks won't wait that long."

He stared at me peculiarly. "But Dad, don't you see? *What difference does time make*, if you're working on a time-machine?"

That one stopped me. "Try to have faith in the medi-cal labs, Kenny," was all I could find to say.

Kenny built a time-ship in the fork of a big maple. He made it from a packing crate, reinforced with plywood, decorated with mysterious coils of copper wire. He filled it with battered clocks and junkyard instruments. He mounted two seats in it, and dual controls. He made a fish-bowl canopy over a hole in the top, and nailed a galvanized bucket on the nose. Broomstick guns protruded from its narrow weapon ports. He painted it silvery gray, and decorated the bucket-nose with the insignia of Cap-tain Chronos and the Guardsmen of Time. He nailed steps on the trunk of the maple; and when he wasn't in the house, he could usually be found in the maple, pilot-ing the time-ship through imaginary centuries. He took a picture of it with a box camera, and sent a print of it to Captain Chronos with a fan letter.

Then one day he fainted on the ladder, and fell out of the tree.

He wasn't badly hurt, only bruised, but it ended his career as a time-ship pilot. Kenny was losing color and weight, and the lethargy was coming steadily over him. His fingertips were covered with tiny stab-marks from the constant blood counts, and the hollow of his arm was marked with transfusion needles. Mostly, he stayed inside.

We haunted the research institutes, and the daily mail was full of answers to our flood of pleading inquiries—all kinds of answers.

"We regret to inform you that recent studies have been ..."

"Investigations concerning the psychogenic factors show only ..."

"Prepare to meet God . . ."

"For seventy-five dollars, Guru Tahaj Reshvi guaran-tees . . ."

"Sickness is only an illusion. Have faith and . . ."

"We cannot promise anything in the near future, but the Institute is rapidly finding new directions for . . ."

"Allow us to extend sympathy . . ."

"The powers of hydromagnetic massage therapy have been established by ..."

And so it went. We talked to crackpots, confidence men, respectable scientists, fanatics, lunatics, and a few honest fools. Occasionally we tried some harmless tech-nique, with Jules' approval, mostly because it felt like we were doing *something*. But the techniques did more good for Cleo than they did for Kenny, and Kenny's very grad-ual change for the worse made it apparent that nothing short of the miraculous could save him.

And then Kenny started working on it himself.

The idea, whatever it was, must have hit him suddenly, and it was strange—because it came at a time when both Cleo and I thought that he had completely and fatalisti-cally accepted the coming of the end.

"The labs aren't going to find it in time," he said. "I've been reading what they say. I know it's no good, Dad." He cried some then; it was good that he had relearned to cry.

But the next day, his spirits soared mysteriously to a new high, and he went around the house singing to himself. He was busy with his stamp collection most of the time, but he also wandered about the house and garage searching for odds and ends, his actions seeming purpose-ful and determined. He moved slowly, and stopped to rest frequently, but he displayed more energy than we had seen for weeks, and even Jules commented on how bright he was looking, when he came for Kenny's daily blood sample. Cleo decided that complete resignation had brought cheerfulness with it, and that acceptance of illfate

obviated the need to worry or hope. But I wasn't so sure.

"What've you been up to, Kenny?" I asked.

He looked innocent and shook his head.

"Come on, now. You don't go wandering around mut-tering to yourself unless you're cooking something up. What is it, another time-ship? I heard you hammering in the garage before dinner."

"I was just knocking the lid off an old breadbox."

I couldn't get any answer but evasions, innocent glances, and mysterious smirks. I let him keep his secret, thinking that his enthusiasm for whatever it was he was doing would soon wear off.

Then the photographers came.

"We want to take a picture of Kenny's treehouse," they explained.

"Why?—and how did you know he had one?" I de-manded.

It developed that somebody was doing a feature-article on the effects of science-fantasy television shows on chil-dren. It developed that the "somebody" was being hired by a publicity agency which was being hired by the advertisers who presented Captain Chronos and the Guardsmen of Time. It developed that Kenny's fan letter, with the snapshot of his treehouse time-ship, had been forwarded to the publicity department by the producer of the show. They wanted a picture of the time-ship with Kenny inside, looking out through the fish bowl canopy.

"It's impossible," I told them.

They showed me a dozen pictures of moppets with LTR-guns, moppets in time-warp suits, moppets wearing Captain Chronos costumes, moppets falling free in space, and moppets playing Time-Pirate in the park.

"I'm sorry, but it's impossible," I insisted.

"We'll be glad to pay something for it, if . . ."

"The kid's sick, if you must know," I snapped. "He can't do it, and that's that, so forget about it."

"Maybe when he's feeling better . . .?"

"He *won't* be feeling better," Cleo interrupted, voice tense, with a catch in it. "Now please *leave!*"

They left, with Cleo herding them out onto the porch. I heard them apologizing, and Cleo softened, and began to explain. That was a mistake.

A week later, while we were still drinking our coffee at the dinner table, the doorbell rang. Cleo, expecting an answer to her recent wire to some South American clinic, left the table, went to answer it, and promptly screamed.

I dropped my cup with a crash and ran to the living room with a butcher knife, then stopped dead still.

It stood there in the doorway with a stunned expression on its face, gaping at Cleo who had collapsed in a chair. It wore a silver uniform with jack-boots, black-and-red cape, and a weird helmet with antenna protruding from it. It had a lantern jaw and a big, meaty, benign contenance.

"I'm awfully sorry," it boomed in a gentle deep-rich voice. "We just drove over from the studio, and I didn't take time to change ..."

"Ulk!" said Cleo.

I heard footsteps at the head of the stairs behind me, then a howl from Kenny who had been getting ready for bed, after being helped upstairs.

"*Captain Chronos!*"

Bare feet machine-gunned down the stairs and came to a stop at a respectful distance from the idol.

"*GgaaaaAAWWSSSShhhh!*" Kenny timidly walked half-way around him, looking him up and down. "Geee ... Gaaawwssshh!"

Cleo fanned herself with a newspaper and recovered slowly. I tossed the butcher-knife on a magazine stand and mumbled something apologetic. There were two of them: Chronos and the producer, a small suave man in a busi-ness suit. The latter drew me aside to explain. It developed that the photographers had explained to the boss, who had explained to the client, who had mentioned it to the agency, who had returned the fan letter to the producer with a note. It would appear that Captain Chronos, for the sake of nutritious and delicious Fluffy Crunkles, made it his habit to comfort the afflicted, the crippled, and the

dying, if it were convenient and seemed somehow advantageous. He also visited the children's wards of hospitals, it seemed.

"This on the level, or for publicity?"

"On the level."

"Where's the photographer?"

The producer reddened and muttered noncommittally. I went to the door and looked out through the screen. There was another man in their car. When I pushed the screen open, it hit something hard—a tape recorder. I turned:

"Get out."

"But Mr. Westmore...."

"Get *out*."

They left quickly. Kenny was furious, and he kept on being furious all through the following day. At me. Cleo began agreeing with him to some extent, and I felt like a heel.

"You want Kenny to get the full treatment?" I grumbled. "You want him to wind up a sob-story child?"

"Certainly not, but it was cruel, Rod. The boy never had a happier moment until you . . ."

"All right, so I'm a bastard. I'm sorry."

That night Abe Sanders (Captain Chronos) came back alone, in slacks and a sport shirt, and muttering apologies. It developed that the Wednesday evening shows always had a children's panel (Junior Guardsmen) program, and that while they understood that Kenny couldn't come, they had wanted to have him with the panel, in absentia, by telephone.

"Please, Dad, can't I?"

The answer had to be no . . . but Kenny had been glaring at me furiously all day, and it was a way to make him stop hating me . . . still, the answer had to be no ... the publicity . . . but he'd be delighted, and he could stop hating my guts for kicking them out.

"I guess so, if the offer's still open."

"Dad!"

The offer was still open. Kenny was to be on the show. They rehearsed him a little, and let him practice with the tape recorder until he got used to his voice.

On Wednesday evening, Kenny sat in the hall doorway to the living room, telephone in his lap, and stared across at Sanders' face on the television screen. Sanders held another phone, and we heard both their voices from the set. Occasionally the camera dollied in to a close shot of Sanders' chuckle, or panned along the table to show the juvenile panel members, kids between eight and sixteen. There was an empty chair on Sanders' right, and it bore a placard. The placard said "KENNY WESTMORE."

It lasted maybe a minute. Sanders promised not to mention Kenny's address, nor to mention the nature of his illness. He did neither, but the tone of conversation made it clear that Kenny was in bad shape and probably not long for this world. Kenny had stage fright, his voice trembled, and he blurted something about the search for a cure. Cleo stared at the boy instead of the set, and my own glance darted back and forth. The cameraman panned to the empty chair and dollied in slowly so that the placard came to fill the screen while Kenny spoke. Kenny talked about stamp collections and time machines and autographs, while an invisible audience gaped at pathos.

"If anybody's got stamps to trade, just let me know," he said. "And autographs ..."

I winced, but Sanders cut in. "Well, Kenny—we're not supposed to mention your address, but if any of you Guardsmen out there want to help Kenny out with his stamp collection, you can write to me, and I'll definitely see that he gets the letters."

"And autographs too," Kenny added.

When it was over, Kenny had lived . . . but *lived*.

And then the mail came in a deluge, forwarded from the network's studio. Bushels of stamps, dozens of autograph books, Bibles, money, advice, crank letters, and maudlin gushes of sugary sympathy . . . and a few sensi-ble and friendly letters. Kenny was delighted.

"Gee, Dad, I'll never get all the stamps sorted out. And look!—an autograph of Calvin Coolidge! . . ."

But it never turned him aside from his path of confident but mysterious purpose. He spent even more

time in his room, in the garage, and—when he could muster the energy—back in the maple woods, doing mysterious things alone.

"Have they found a cure yet, Dad?" he asked me pleasantly when an expected letter came.

"They're ... making progress," I answered lamely.

He shrugged. "They will . . . eventually." Unconcerned.

It occurred to me that some sort of psychic change, unfathomable, might have happened within him—some sudden sense of timelessness, of identity with the race. Something that would let him die calmly as long as he knew there'd be a cure *someday*. It seemed too much to expect of a child, but I mentioned the notion to Jules when I saw him again.

"Could be," he admitted. "It might fit in with this se-crecy business."

"How's that?"

"People who know they're dying often behave that way. Little secret activities that don't become apparent until after they're gone. Set up causes that won't have effects until afterwards. Immortality cravings. You want to have posthumous influence, to live after you. A suicide note is one perversion of it. The suicide figures the world will posthumously feel guilty, if he tells it off."

"And Kenny ... !"

"I don't know, Rod. The craving for immortality is basically procreative, I think. You have children, and train them, and see your own mirrored patterns live on in them, and feel satisfied, when your time comes. Or else you sublimate it, and do the same thing for all humanity—through art, or science. I've seen a lot of death, Rod, and I believe there's more than just-plain-selfishness to people's immortality-wishes; it's associated with the human reproductive syndrome—which includes the passing on of culture to the young. But Kenny's just a kid. I don't know."

Despite Kenny's increasing helplessness and weakness, he began spending more time wandering out in the woods. Cleo chided him for it, and tried to limit his excursions. She drove him to town on alternate days for a transfusion and shots, and she tried to keep him in the house most of the time, but he needed sun and air and exercise; and it was impossible to keep him on the lawn. Whatever he was doing, it was a shadowy secretive business. It involved spades and garden tools and packages, with late excursions into the maples toward the creek.

"You'll know in four or five months," he told me, in answer to a question. "Don't ask me now. You'd laugh."

But it became apparent that he wouldn't last that long. The rate of transfusions doubled, and on his bad days, he was unable to get out of bed. He fainted down by the creek, and had to be carried back to the house. Cleo forbade him to go outside alone without Jules' day-to-day approval, and Jules was beginning to be doubtful about the boy's activities.

When restricted, Kenny became frantic. "I've got to go outside, Dad, *please!* I can't finish it if I don't. I've got to! How else can I make contact with them?"

"Contact? With whom?"

But he clammed up and refused to discuss anything about the matter. That night I awoke at two a.m. Something had made a sound. I stole out of bed without disturbing Cleo and went to prowl about the house. A glance down the stairway told me that no lights burned on the first floor. I went to Kenny's room and gingerly opened the door. Blackness.

"Kenny—?"

No sound of breathing in the room. Quietly I struck a match.

The bed was empty.

"*Kenny!*" I bellowed it down the hall, and then I heard sounds—Cleo stirring to wakefulness and groping for clothes in our bedroom. I trotted downstairs and turned on lights as I charged from room to room.

He was not in the house. I found the back screen unlatched and went out to play a flashlight slowly over the backyard. There . . . by the hedge . . . caught in the cone of light ... Kenny, crumpled over a

garden spade.

Upstairs, Cleo screamed through the back window. I ran out to gather him up in my arms. Skin clammy, breathing shallow, pulse irregular—he muttered peculiarly as I carried him back to the house.

"Glad you found it ... knew you'd find it . . . got me to the right time . . . when are we . . . ?"

I got him inside and up to his room. When I laid him on the bed, a crudely drawn map, like a treasure map with an "X" and a set of bearings, fell from his pocket. I paused a moment to study it. The "X" was down by the fork in the creek. What had been buried there?

I heard Cleo coming up the stairs with a glass of hot milk, and I returned the map to Kenny's pocket and went to call the doctor.

When Kenny awoke, he looked around the room very carefully—and seemed disappointed by what he saw. "Expecting to wake up somewhere else?" I asked.

"I guess it was a dream," he mumbled. "I thought they came early."

"Who came early?"

But he clammed up again. "You'll find out in about four months," was all he'd say.

He wouldn't last that long. The next day, Doc Jules ordered him to stay inside, preferably sitting or lying down most of the time. We were to carry him outside once a day for a little sun, but he had to sit in a lawn chair and not run around. Transfusions became more frequent, and finally there was talk of moving him to the hospital.

"I won't go to the hospital."

"You'll have to, Kenny. I'm sorry."

That night, Kenny slipped outside again. He had been lying quietly all day, sleeping most of the time, as if saving up energy for a last spurt.

Shortly after midnight, I awoke to hear him tiptoe down the hall. I let him get downstairs and into the kitchen before I stole out of bed and went to the head of the stairs. "Kenny!" I shouted. "Come back up here! Right now!" There was a brief silence. Then he bolted. The screen door slammed, and bare feet trotted down the back steps. "*Kenny!*"

I darted to the rear window, overlooking the backyard. "*Kenny!*"

Brush whipped as he dove through the hedge. Cleo came to the window beside me, and began calling after him.

Swearing softly, I tugged my trousers over my pajamas, slipped into shoes, and hurried downstairs to give chase. But he had taken my flashlight.

Outside, beneath a dim, cloud-threatened moon, I stood at the hedge, staring out across the meadow toward the woods. The night was full of crickets and rustlings in the grass. I saw no sign of him.

"*Kenny!*"

He answered me faintly from the distance. "Don't try to follow me, Dad. I'm going where they can cure me."

I vaulted the fence and trotted across the meadow toward the woods. At the stone fence, I paused to listen—but there were only crickets. Maybe he'd seen me coming in the moonlight, and had headed back toward the creek.

The brush was thick in places, and without a light, it was hard to find the paths. I tried watching for the gleam of the flashlight through the trees, but saw nothing. He was keeping its use to a minimum. After ten minutes of wandering, I found myself back at the fence, having taken a wrong turning somewhere. I heard Cleo calling me from the house.

"Go call the police! They'll help find him!" I shouted to her.

Then I went to resume the search. Remembering the snap, and the "X" by the fork in the creek, I trotted along the edge of the pasture next to the woods until I came to a dry wash that I knew led back to the creek. It was the long way around, but it was easy to follow the wash; and after a few minutes I stumbled onto the bank of the narrow stream. Then I waded upstream toward the fork. After twenty yards, I saw the flashlight's gleam—and heard the crunch of the shovel in moist ground. I moved as quietly as I could. The crunching stopped.

Then I saw him. He had dropped the shovel and was tugging something out of the hole. I let him get it

out be-tore I called ...

"Kenny ..."

He froze, then came up very slowly to a crouch, ready to flee. He turned out the flashlight.

"Kenny, don't run away from me again. Stay there. I'm not angry."

No answer.

"Kenny!"

He called back then, with a quaver in his voice. "Stay where you are, Dad—and let me finish. Then I'll go with you. If you come any closer, I'll run." He flashed the light toward me, saw that I was a good twenty yards away. "Stay there now ..."

"Then will you come back to the house?"

"I won't run, if you stay right there."

"Okay," I agreed, "but don't take long. Cleo's frantic."

He set the light on a rock, kept it aimed at me, and worked by its aura. The light blinded me, and I could only guess what he might be doing. He pried something open, and then there was the sound of writing on tin. Then he hammered something closed, replaced it in the hole, and began shoveling dirt over it. Five minutes later, he was finished.

The light went out.

"Kenny ... ?"

"I'm sorry, Dad. I didn't *want* to lie . . . I *had* to."

I heard him slipping quickly away through the brush—back toward the pasture. I hurried to the fork and climbed up out of the knee-deep water, pausing to strike a match.

Something gleamed in the grass; I picked it up. Cleo's kitchen clock, always a few minutes slow. What had he wanted with the clock?

By the time I tore through the brush and found the path, there was no sound to indicate which way he had gone. I walked gloomily back toward the house, half-heartedly calling to Kenny . . . then ... a flash of light in the trees!

BRRUUMMKP!

A sharp report, like a close crash of thunder! It came from the direction of the meadow, or the house. I trotted ahead, ignoring the sharp whipping of the brush.

"Kenny Westmore? . . . Kenny ..."

A strange voice, a foreign voice—calling to Kenny up ahead in the distance. The police, I thought.

Then I came to the stone fence . . . and froze, staring at the think or perhaps at the nothing—in the meadow.

It was black. It was bigger than a double garage, and round. I stared at it, and realized that it was not an ob-ject but an opening.

And someone else was calling to Kenny. A rich, pleasant voice—somehow it reminded me of Doctor Jules, but it had a strong accent, perhaps Austrian or German.

"Come on along here, liddle boy. Ve fix you op."

Then I saw Kenny, crawling on toward it through the grass.

"Kenny, *don't!*"

He got to his feet and stumbled on into the distorted space. It seemed to squeeze him into a grotesque house--of-mirrors shape; then it spun him inward. Gone.

I was still running toward the black thing when it be-gan to shrink.

"Come along, liddle fellow, come mit oss. Ve fix."

And then the black thing belched away into nothing-ness with an explosive blast that knocked me spinning. I must have been out cold for awhile. The sheriff woke me.

Kenny was gone. We never saw him again. Cleo confirmed what I had seen on the meadow, but without a body, Kenny remains listed as missing.

Missing from this century.

I went back to the fork in the creek and dug up the breadbox he had buried. It contained his stamp

collection and a packet of famous autographs. There was a letter from Kenny, too, addressed to the future, and it was his will.

*"Whoever finds this, please sell these things and use the money to pay for a time machine, so you can come and get me, because I'm going to die if you don't ..."*

I paused to remember ... *I don't think the bank'd wait a hundred years.*

*But Dad, don't you see? What difference does time make, if you're working on a time machine?*

There was more to the note, but the gist of it was that Kenny had made an act of faith, faith in tomorrow. He had buried it, and then he had gone back to dig it up and change the rendezvous time from four months away to the night of his disappearance. He knew that he wouldn't have lived that long.

I put it all back in the box, and sealed the box with solder and set it in concrete at the foot of a sixfoot hole. With this manuscript.

(To a reader, yet unborn, who finds this account in a dusty and ancient magazine stack: *dig*. Dig at a point 987 feet southeasterly on a heading of 149° from the northwest corner of the Hayes and Higgins Tract, as recorded in Map Book 6, p. 78, Cleve County records. But not unless the world is ready to buy a time machine and come for Kenny, who financed it; come, if you can cure him. He had faith in you.)

Kenny is gone, and today there is a feeling of death in my house. But after a century of tomorrows? He invested in them, and he called out to them, pleading with the voice of a child. And tomorrow answered:

"Come, liddle boy. Ve fix."

## **WOLF PACK**

**By WALTER M. MILLER, JR.**

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*Although all the mail isn't in yet—as this is being written—apparently the most popular story in the January Fantastic was Walter Miller's "Six and Ten Are Johnny," that un-forgettable chiller about the alien jungle trying to get to Earth. Now, in an entirely different vein—but with the same beautiful feel for narrative—we offer you "Wolf Pack," another superb story by the Hugo-winning author of A Canticle for Leibowitz. This time it's World War Two—and Lieutenant Mark Kessel (U.S. Air Force), on his forty-sixth mission over Italy, and La—dark, intense, passionate La, the girl of his haunted dreams—who made it his last!*

HE GASPED and sat up, spilling blankets from sleep-hot shoulders. He shivered a moment in darkness, shaking his head in his hands. Bixby snored faintly on the other cot. Engines were coughing to life on the flight-line as the ground crews pre-flighted the waiting ships. The breath of morning came icy through the tent-flaps to shock him into full wakefulness.

He glanced at the luminous flare of his watch dial. It was nearly killing time.

He swung his legs out of bed, felt the gritty earth under his bare feet, groped under the cot for fleece-lined boots. He lit a cigaret, then a candle, stared at Bixby for a moment. Bixby's mouth was working and a sliver of drool lay over his chin.

Mark Kessel hauled his lanky frame to its feet, and stepped over to Bixby's bunk. He lifted one end of the cot two feet from the floor and dropped it hard. Then he went outside to finish dressing in the olive grove while Bixby spluttered and fought the bed clothes.

Dew was in the olive trees, and it glistened faintly in the dim light from other tents in the grove where men grumbled before the dawn and crawled into coveralls and flight jackets, stuffed candy bars and

bail-out kits in their knee-pockets, buckled low-slung forty-fives about their waists, tucked a scented letter inside their shirts, and stalked away with a lazy slouch to fly and kill in the dawn.

"I've got a feeling," came Bix-by's muffled voice from the tent.

"Yeah?" Mark grunted, not wanting to talk. He dumped frigid water from a jerry-can into a steel helmet and began sloshing his face and head.

"This one'll be a bitch," said Bixby.

"Maybe."

"This your forty-sixth, Mark, or seventh?"

Mark Kessel glowered for a moment into darkness. "Dry up, will you Bix? I don't feel like gab."

"Hung over?"

"Uh-uh."

"Dreams again, huh? About the dame."

"Just dry up."

"Okay, Skipper. Sorry."

A stupid mistake, he decided, telling Bix about the dreams and about La. A drunkenly stupid mistake. Bix made noises like a green flight surgeon with delusions of psychiatry, and, having memorized the symptoms of flight fatigue, was always ready to gig a fellow fly-boy with a diagnosis, prognosis, or post mortem. And he couldn't understand about La.

An orderly room corporal came prowling through the grove, splash-ing a flashlight's beam among the trees and bellowing. "All bombardier-navigators, report immediately to briefing. All bombard-tors, early briefing."

A tent flap parted, revealing a slit of light with a head in it. "Hey, Corp!" It called. "What's the target?"

"Not sure, Lieutenant. Heard it's Perugia."

Listening, Mark Kessel froze, his face dripping into a towel. "Hell, we just hit Prujie last week," growled the head.

"Zat so?" answered the corporal indifferently. "All bombard-tors, report immediately to briefing! All bombard-tors . . ." The corporal wandered on.

Mark stood rocking slightly, towel halfway to his face, remembering Perugia. He heard Bix coming outside, and began drying himself.

"He say Perugia?" Bix grunted.

"Yeah."

"Told you this one'll be a bitch."

"Yeah."

"Well, Pappy, he was yelling at me. See you later."

"Yeah. Take it easy."

Bix shuffled away toward the orderly room, unzipped boots making cocky flapping sounds about his ankles. Mark sighed and went back into the tent to stretch out on his cot and think. A preliminary bombardier's briefing meant that he had a half hour or so before pilots and enlisted crews were called. The group had done a lousy job on Perugia last week, and the colonel probably meant to rumble about it to the men who manned the bomb sights. It was decreed that the city should die.

Mark lay blowing slow smoke at the candle-flame and wondered what the hell had happened to him in eight months of war. Once he was sick when he saw the long hungry strip of bomb-bursts trace a belt of billowing death across a small Italian village. Once he howled in the cockpit when a flitting Focke-Wulf slashed in--and-down from five o'clock high, leaving the plexiglass turret of his wing-ship coated crimson from in-side. The turret was partially shattered, and the slipstream dried the crimson to ugly brown and flaked it away before wheels touched home ground.

Now he felt nothing. I am a machine, he thought. Or a part of a machine. A machine with five human parts geared in with the aluminum, glass, and steel. They screw us into our places and we function like pistons, or cogs, or vacuum tubes. We, who were five, become one, and that beats hell out of the Trinity.

Listen, Kessel, he told himself, you're getting to be a sad sack of cemented *merde*. You got four



missions to go and they send you home. Why bitch about it now?

But he closed his eyes and watched a mental bomb-pattern trace a mental stripe of hell across a small mental village, and it all looked quietly familiar and un-frightening to him. He dived down through billowing dust to peer at crushed things lying in the rubble, and still he felt nothing.

Mark Kessel stubbed out his cigaret in the dirt floor of the tent and asked himself almost indifferently what had happened to his soul? Or whatever it was.

He stared at the candlelight flickering on the canvas canopy above him and struggled to feel something besides emptiness.

He thought of La. She brought a faint tickling to his scalp and a pleasant pulsing of the temples. For a long time he lay basking in the warmth of La. She was sleeping. She lay curled in a feather-bed, dark hair tangled across an oversized pillow, lips parted, an arm under her head. He scented the faint musky warmth about her, watched her lazy breathing, noted the paleness of a shaven armpit. She stirred in her sleep and smiled faintly. She was dreaming—of him. He slipped quietly into her dream, and they wandered along a sunny lake shore, watching the ducks skimming low over water that scintillated in the breeze.

"Will they read the banns to-morrow?" she whispered.

"Tomorrow at every Mass."

Mark shook his head and sat up. There was paper in his val-pack at the end of the cot. He dragged it out and lay on his side to write with the stationery box on the edge of the cot. He usually wrote her a letter before a mission, if there were time enough.

He told her about his crew, and about Lecce and San Pancrazio and the way the old Italian women came to catch lizards and snails in the vineyard and cooked them over charcoal fires along rubbed streets in the village. He told her about the olive grove and the vineyards and the donkey carts painted in carnival colors, and about how he had tasted a donkey steak in a San Pancrazio cafe. He told her about the little girl with the festering shrapnel wound, and the bullet-pocked walls of once fascist buildings whose megalomaniac inscriptions in praise of *Italia* and *Giovannezza* had been daubed over with red paint and obscenity. And ...

*Listen, Babe, this one's got me down. I haven't talked about such stuff before, but this time's different. I'm scared as hell. This mission gives me the shakes. Maybe it's only because I'm nearly finished with my tour. Maybe it's because I'm about ready to go back. But it's more like being scared for you, baby, not for myself. I felt like this the last time we hit this target.*

The words surprised him. He had felt no conscious fear, but as words poured forth, he knew that fear was there.

*I love you, La.*

He stared at the letter for a time, then held it toward the candle-flame, watched soot collect on its underside, watched a charred spot appear, crack, and catch fire.

The last ashes were fluttering to the floor when the tent-flaps slapped apart and a bulldog face thrust itself inside.

"Whattthehell, Kessel, you think we oughta hold the goddam war up for you? Get your lazy butt out to the truck!"

"Sorry, Major. I didn't hear the call."

Major Gladin's hammy face put on a fanged smirk. "Well you got my personal invitation now, Lieu-tenant. Shall I send a staff car for you, Lieutenant, or can you walk."

Kessel reddened and rolled off the bunk. Major Gladin stalked away, mumbling about the "fifty-mission heebies" and temperamental goddam airplane jockeys who needed wet nurses.

He scraped the ashes of the letter into the dirt with his foot. Maybe you'll know I wrote it anyhow, Babe. Maybe you'll get it somehow, even if I don't know just where to mail it.

A brisk dawn wind had risen, and clouds gathered in a gory dawn. A pair of Limey trucks hauled the

flight-crews of the 489th Squadron from the tent area along the winding bumpy road to the old barracks that served as a briefing room. Nar-rowed eyes watered in the wind, and men sandwiched their chapped faces between the fleece-skin la-pels of their jackets. Men huddled behind the cabs of the trucks, trad-ing occasional insults, or smoking in silence while hair whipped about their eyes and foreheads.

Mark Kessel listened to the briefing officer with half an ear. Much was routine, and much was of interest chiefly to the squadron leaders and lead-bombardiers. Wing-men hugged the formation and followed the lead ship. Wing bombardiers toggled off the five hundred pounders upon signal from the goose at the head of the vee. He listened with interest to weather data, flak and fighter reports, and information on the target.

Perugia was a bulge in an artery that fed the Wehrmacht fist. They wanted the arteries burst and bled. They wanted a tourniquet around Italy, a tourni-quet to numb the South and en-feeble it. They wanted an ampu-tation.

"The marshalling yards are the principal target," the colonel called curtly, "but stretch the pattern over the town. Give Jerry some-thing to do, shovelling rubble. Any questions? "

You take five hundred pounds of TNT, thought Kessel, and you dump it on a plain stone house with gypsum floors and charcoal footwarmers and coral virgins looking down from wall niches, a house with photographs of Babe Ruth and Primo Carnera flanking an eighteenth century crucifix, a house that had seen ten generations of human birth and growth and love and death, a house with antipasto furnishings and oil-and--vinegar atmosphere and girl-at--the-piano warmth about the living room. A house rich with the odor of blood-red wine and moon-pale cheese, with the savor of garlic and anisette, with the aroma of healthy perspiring women, and on Holy Days, the smell of candle-flames, mingled with baking cakes. You bombed it, you clobbered it, you reduced it, you shattered and wrecked and crumbled it into a rubble-heap where a bit of cloth caught between the stones flut-tered' in a dusty breeze. You took the house and kicked it apart into the street so that Jerry would have to spend his time and his bulldozers clearing it out of the way. You never see the house, or the dozers of others like it. You only know it's there somewhere in the ugly belt of dust and belching hell ten thousand feet beneath you, but not seeing it, you feel only a puzzled concern.

There were no questions.

Men in fleece-skins and para-chute harnesses slouched out of the briefing room and milled to-ward the squadron trucks. There was no laughter. Quietly, around the corner of the building, a gun-ner knelt for a chaplain's blessing, and quickly strode away. Trucks grumbled away, nosed onto a taxi-strip, headed for the aircraft dispersal area.

Mark Kessel stared at the eagles crouched in the olive grove and thought about La. The eagles' wing racks were loaded with bombs and their bellies were full of thunder. La was combing her hair and smiling softly at her thoughts. She was thinking of a dream. She crossed her legs, and the satin robe fell from her thighs as she sat before the vanity. Brown and slender, and a muscle twitched as she absently swung afoot and laughed softly to herself.

He caught her shoulders gently, and she came up to him with a low purr of pleasure. Her bosom snug-gled close and her shoulders hunched forward against him.

*"O Marco! Che bello questo momento!"* she murmured.

Mark chuckled at his own in-ventions. He had not seen an English-speaking woman in so long that even the image of La spoke Italian.

The dun-colored eagles looked hungry on their concrete emplace-ments. There is something anxious and eager in the three-legged stance of a B-25, with its blunt and squarish features and the gull-like set of its wings. They're more alive than most aircraft, he thought, and full of a childlike enthusiasm. They performed their tasks with innocence.

There were certain advantages to being a machine, he thought. Certain comforts in mindlessness and guiltlessness. The light of dawn was red on their wings and flaring on their plexiglass blisters.

"Hell, Kessel!" barked a voice. "Wake up! Shake it, will ya?"

He came out of a daze, glanced around, saw the rest of his crew already out of the parked truck and walking toward the ship. Bixby grinned back at him over his shoulder.

"Come on Pappy! We need a driver."

He growled something sour at the men remaining in the truck, vaulted over the tail-gate, and sauntered after his crew. The truck lumbered on, delivering parcels of men at each parking station. He checked over the crew chief's report, signed the slip, listened to the crew chief's usual straight faced remark:

"Perugia, huh? Milk-run again, eh, Pappy?"

"Sure. Care to come along for the ride?"

"Guess not. Think I'll go to town for a little excitement." "Take off."

They parted still wearing straight faces.

The turret gunner and the radio op were already crawling into the rear hatch. Mark turned for a moment to glance over the ship with its "Prince Albert" sign on the nose. It had acquired its name when a North African ground crew had used a tobacco can to patch a bullet hole in the fuselage. The ship was scarred and decrepit, but he knew every inch of it, and he suspected that it would fall to pieces in other hands than the knowing ones of its present ground and flight crews. He loved the old rattling wreck. Almost the way he loved La.

"Damn it to hell, Pappy!" called Surges, his copilot. "Do we fly today, or don't we?"

"Keep your war-drawers on, Junior Birdman. Pappy's comin'."

He hiked toward the forward hatch, and moments later inverters whined in the cockpit. Engines coughed to life.

"Interphone check. Bixby?"

"Loud and clear, Pappy;" answered the voice in his headsets.

"Radio?"

"Burnes, loud and clear."

"Turret?"

"Sparlev, ditto, Pappy."

"Tail?"

"Winters, okay, sir."

"The class is now in session. Be seated, gentlemen."

Preliminary patter brought a sense of oneness somehow, like a man prodding himself to make sure he was still in one piece. Mark lost his black mood as he taxied the Prince from the revetment and into line on the strip. There was thunder of engines in the morning, and the trees whipped in the prop-wash at every turning. The eagles lumbered single-file to the end of the runway. The eagles took off in pairs, wheels folding gracefully, almost daintily, as they roared aloft and circled for assembly in the sky. Twenty-seven ships gleamed golden in the early sun. A flying wolf pack that rallied by twos and formed in flights of three, three flights in echelon, three squadrons in a staggered vee.

The wolf pack turned east toward the open sea, and the Adriatic fluttered with blinding gold in the direction of a blazing sun.

Mark Kessel felt Surges watching him, occasionally, gave him a questioning glance. Surges was a dark little man with a sour smirk and a quick nervousness that made Mark wonder sometimes why they'd packed him in a twenty-five instead of a Mustang or a Thunderbolt.

"Feeling better, Pappy?" Surges asked over the interphone.

"Better than what?" grunted the pilot.

"Don't hand me that horse-manure, Skipper. I can read you like a tech order."

"Then read and shut up. There's a war on, you know."

"And if I may echo the immortal words of Sherman, war is a crock of crap."

The formation thundered north-westward along the broad blue tongue of the Adriatic. Kessel's crew fell silent, each of them aware of the other's presence and functions, each filling his place in the total Mechanthrope. War, thought Mark, was paradoxical proof that men by nature are co-operative social

beings, function-ing best as teams. Unfortunately, teams were not necessarily co-operative with other teams.

Hearken to the wisdom of a washed out flak dodger, he mused sourly. Once, when he was a sophomore math and philosophy student, he could tolerate his own solemn intellectualizings. Now, when they happened accidentally, he felt the need to boil himself in sarcasm and forget it. Nothing seemed sillier than searching for subtle meanings when the only meaning left in life was how to stay alive. He needed no rational-izations about his reasons for being where he was and what he was. Idealism was for the crumbs who never got there. He liked to fly, and he liked to play the game, and if the rules were dirty, then it would be more embarrassing to re-fuse to fight than it was to play the rotten game. People were proud of him for playing it, and he was glad they were proud, for no reason other than that it felt good.

He grinned acidly at Surges. "Hey, Surgie. I just realized that we are the 'Mothers'-Sons-Who--Fought-and-Bled' that they talk about on the Fourth."

"Jeez, whatta y'know!" Surges mused for a moment. "Say, you thinking about doing another tour?"

Mark spat an obscenity.

"I know," said Surges. "You're feeling guilty about not bleeding."

"True, possibly true."

"A small scar would probably help."

"Help what?"

"Life, liberty, and the pursuit of women. You could always show her your scar as a way of breaking the ice."

"Not necessary. No ice . . ."

Around La, he finished under his breath, and fell silent again. Gloomily silent. Maybe I'm really getting psycho, he considered, realizing how much he believed in La. How could he explain about La to somebody like Bixby or Surges? *There was this dame, see, and her name was Ruth, and she came from Seattle, and she was blonde, pale-eyed, and creamy, see? And she's waiting for me, but it's no damn good any more, because I can't see her. I see only La, and La is a ghost, a figment, a myth made by a haunted spirit.*

She had grown like a strange moth in the chrysalis of his mind, born of a slow metamorphosis that began with a memory image of Ruth. The metamorphosis had changed a pleasant, comfortable, homey sort of a girl into a sleek, intense, moody creature of tender passion, whom he called "La" or "La Femme" because he knew she was no longer Ruth. But who was this wraith who came to him across the frozen tundra of his psyche?

Don't kid yourself, fly-boy, it's happened to other guys. Idealization, they call it. You revise Ruth because you're not quite satisfied with the way she is. You substi-tute the thing you want for the thing that's true, and if you didn't have a pocketful of pictures for reference, you'd think your La was Ruth, you stupid ape. Guys have thought it before, and it's a helluva shock, they say, to bump buck teeth with the girl you remembered as a delectable siren instead of a toothy frump. La is an idealized Ruth, and a part of you damn well knows it.

But he couldn't sell himself. It hurt. There was a La somewhere, and he had to believe in her. He groped for ways to support the belief: telepathy — or a chance meeting that lingered in unconscious memory without details of time and place. She came to him in dreams with such clarity that he was frequently certain that somewhere he had seen her. Per-haps one of those brief meetings at some moronic party where two people meet and chat and sense some strong attraction between them, but never manage to get beyond the usual polite inanities because of surging friends with cocktail glasses and the restrained sub-note of hysteria that pervades a roomful of yammering humanity which is having a lousy time but pretending to enjoy itself. So maybe he met La that way, and she haunted him.

She was a physical touch in the night, a whispered voice in lonely moments. He knew her moods, her weaknesses, her strengths. They fitted his own, and the two halves dovetailed into one flesh, one spirit. There was a lock, and a key to fit it — a sword, and a sheath to match. There were two clocks, running

back to back, keeping the same time by heart-beat pendulums. But she was lone-some and frightened, and he knew not why.

The fighters came sidling in out of the hot blue sky, friendly killers that met the wolf pack off the coast near Bari to escort it north-ward for the strike. A Lockheed Lightning slipped in close to Kessel's flight, throttled back, waggled its wings. Kessel exchanged a thumbs-up with the fighter jockey, then watched the haughty killer flip away and climb to fly far out at nine-o'clock-high, guarding the pack against steel-beaked falcons of the Luftwaffe.

The sun poured into the cock-pit and warmed it. The sun washed the coastline far off to the left below. The sun baked the dun-colored ships and made the formation a thing of beauty against the Mediterranean blue. Sky and sea were full of turquoise peace that made the waiting violence seem unreal, a battle-game played under the auspices of a jovial Wotan who saw that killing was not for keeps.

Kessel gave the controls to Surges while he lit a cigaret and settled back to relax for awhile. He stared down at the lace-fringed sea where triremes had sailed and Caesar's ships had sped toward other wars. It was the same. Add wings and replace the slaves with 1750 horsepower radial engines, and the catapults with demolition bombs. It was always the same. It was destructive, but because it was patterned and planned, because it was systematized and rhythmic, because it was dynamic and flowing toward a goal, it was somehow creative through its functioning. Through crucifixion came redemption; through war, new pattern and synthesis.

"Pilot to crew," he called over the interphone. *"We're coming onto posted property. Better test your guns."*

La would not like what he was feeling now, he thought. She hated the whole bloody mess, and would be unable to understand his own mixed feelings and ambivalences. Look through my eyes, my La. See what I am seeing and feel my feelings while I am a part of this Mechanthrope. For here we fail to fit, and though here be difference between us, so must there be understanding. Look with my eyes! See the sleek wolf pack running across cold sky, feel the icy air that leaks in around my feet, and the warm sun on the slippery leather of my jacket. Look north to the clear horizon where death will soon meet death and a city shall be consumed. Know that we in the pack must move and live as brothers, even though we must kill our brothers down below, whom we will never see — never know.

Do you feel me, La? For I know that you are sitting on a stone bench beneath a trellis with a book in your lap, gazing dreamily out toward the lake where we walk in the breeze by night. A small child plays at your feet, and he is your cousin.

But it was no good. He could never seem to drag her to him while he flew. It was as if she resisted knowing what he was and what he did.

The ship's guns burped above the thunder of the engines as Burnes, Bixby, Sparley, and Winters each rattled off a few rounds from the fifty calibre guns in their respective positions. Mark nosed the ship down slightly and squeezed the firing stud for the fixed nose-guns. A belch shuddered up through the cockpit, and a momentary haze flickered up across the plexiglass, and four streaks of tracers squirted out ahead to vanish toward the ocean. Other ships were doing the same. A flexing of the muscles before the brawl.

If only the target were not Perugia! Perhaps it was the length of the mission and the time over enemy territory that made him uneasy, but Sofia and Ploeste were even farther and they gave him no such discomfort. He had a quick knotting of his belly with the bombing of Perugia, and there was no logic in it. Maybe it was something about the countryside that stirred some old memory of home, but it was as if the reprov-ing eyes of monks and urchins and old women were upon him, as if hatred were a palpable thing, radiating up from the land below. As if the Christ that was suffused in the flesh of Italian masses called softly in rebuke to the wolf pack.

*O my people, what have I done to thee?*

*In what have I grieved thee?*

*Answer me,*

*For I gave thee a royal sceptre,  
And thou hast given to me a scourge.*

"Hey, Pappy, this is Bix," croaked his headsets.

"Yeah?"

"Look at the coastline — up about eleven o'clock low. See those specks?"

Mark leaned close to the win-dow and stared down for a few seconds. Three gnats were flitting out across the water, close to the drink. "Fighters," he answered absently.

"Maybe our own, boss."

" Maybe. . . . Pilot to crew, you get that?"

They answered in turn that they got it.

"Burnes, you keep your eyes on them. The rest of you keep look-ing around."

He switched his jackbox to command radio and called the escort craft. "Hello Jackknife, this is Eggbeater. Sharks at cur-few time below. Over."

"Roger, Eggbeater. Out," came the reply.

But the fighters remained close to the formation, except for two that broke away and began climb-ing instead of diving. Mark watched them for a moment, then called the crew again.

"Everybody but Burnes—keep an eye out above. Those may be decoys down below. Don't get caught with your pants down if a bunch of pigeons come out of the sun."

"Say, Pappy," Burnes called five minutes later. "I think those are P-47s. They're heading on south."

"Roger, but watch it. Jerry knows we're coming."

The wolf pack came to Fermo and turned inland, feinting toward Terni. Over the coast, hell broke. The first black blossom of flak opened suddenly inside the forma-tion, blotting Mark's view of the 487th Squadron for an instant, then dropping behind. The wolf pack spread quickly apart, the ships weaving and swaying evasively while they kept the general shape of the formation. The inky flak-bursts followed the pack, and Mark felt an occasional *thud* shiver the ship from a close burst. The death-blossoms trailed behind as they drove inland, and a few miles from the coast the blossoms were gone.

Ahead lay the snow-blanketed slopes of the Apennines with villages like eagles' nests on their sides. Mark stared down at the land. "Enemy," he told himself. If you had to bail out, these hill-billies would gut you and flay you and hang you by the heels in the market place. But you couldn't hate them for that. You could only figure that maybe you deserved it. Cut the horse manure, fly-boy. This is business, and it's during office hours. That's the turning point up there, and there's hell beyond the mountains.

"BANDITS AT SEVEN O'CLOCK HIGH!" howled a sudden voice in the intercomm. And an instant later, Sparley loosed a three second burst from the upper turret. Burnes got a burst from the waist, and then Mark saw the Focke-Wulf zipping down and turning sharply into a dive at about eight hundred yards, while two P-38s stabbed toward it. Another Focke-Wulf crossed like a flash in a pursuit curve aimed at the squadron just ahead and above. Bixby slashed at it with the flexible nose-gun, as it cut back and under, out of sight. The interphone was yammering as Mark's crew stabbed out at the flitting falcons. He saw a plume of smoke trailing earthward about two miles away, but the range was too great to recognize it as friend or foe. One ship in the lead flight had a slightly chewed up tail, but no ships dropped out of the pack.

Flak began bursting around the ship when they were still five minutes from target, and six Messerschmitts whipped out of the sun, screaming in slashing arcs across the rear of the formation. One went down, but a twenty-five began trailing smoke, fell from formation, one wing blazing. White silk puffs flowered beneath it. It fell into the blazing wing and spun earthward. The black death-flow-ers rocked the ship with their blooming, and Mark Kessel's nostrils quivered at the scent of cordite as the Prince ploughed through the smoke-balls of a steady barrage. The wolf pack waved and dodged. The wolf pack tumbled across the sky in seeming consternation, but the pattern lin-gered as in a frightened flock of geese. Ahead lay the city, and beyond it the marshalling yards, the arterial bulge in the long flow to the south. It was wide and hard to miss. And beyond the marshal-ing yards — the broad blue wa-ters of Lake Trasimeno.

The lake, it reminded him of La. His scalp crawled, and his hands were fists on the controls. Surges sat smiling sourly at the flak bursts, chin propped on one elbow, smoking a lazy cigaret. Mark glared at him and cursed under his breath. Voices were tense on the interphone.

"Bandit, four o'clock low —no, it's a Spitfire. One of ours."

"Hey! Flak beavy at one o'clock low, Pappy."

"Get a burst on this Focke-Wulf, Burnes."

"Goddam it, bomb bays open! The stupid bastard, he'll make this a long one!"

*"Rake him! Rake hell out of him!"*

"Bomb bays open, Pappy."

"Straight and level."

"Lead man's bucking for a Purple Heart."

"Shut up and watch your busi-ness!"

"Blow it, Pappy."

"Damn! Surges! Take it!"

"What's wrong, Pappy?"

"Just take it and shut up!"

Surges gave him a look and grabbed the controls. The wolf pack had plunged from fifteen to nine-thousand feet, and whipped toward the target with the instruments hugging the red-line. The crack, of a bull-whip snapped through the ship as a shard of shrapnel stung the fuselage.

"That one bite anybody?" Surges called.

"Nope, nope. Goddam, get it over with!"

Mark Kessel sat panting, fists clenched and pressed together. She was with him now, for the first time she was with him, and her meanings, if not her voice came to him like a savage song:

*"Che brutto! . . . How hateful you are. I hate you hate you hate you hate you! You goddam mur-derer, you killed my mother! You wrecked my church, and you shat-tered my City, and now you come again! They'll get you, they'll rake you and rip you and slash you to ribbons. You gutless apes! Che brutto!"*

She stood under the trellis with her fists clenched, her hair in the wind, ignoring the black hell in the sky that rained spent shrapnel over the city. Her breasts were sharp and proud and heaving. Her face was flushed with fury. Nearby, a frightened child was wailing.

He saw her, and she was with him like a scourge, and she knew that it was he. He swallowed a sick place in his throat and grabbed for his throat mic switch.

"Bixby! Close the bomb bays!"

"What's that, Pappy."

"Close 'em, goddam you!" "Pappy, you're out of your head."

Mark cursed and grabbed for the salvo lever. Surges knocked his arm aside and slapped him hard across the mouth.

"Pappy! Get the hell out of here. You're blowing your top!"

Mark doubled his fist and drove it hard against the copilot's cheek-bone. The ship fell out of formation as Surges dropped both hands from the controls and shook his head dizzily. Mark swung again, but Surges caught it on his shoulder.

Suddenly the muzzle of a forty-five jammed his ribs, and Surges hissed, "Damn you, Pappy, I'll blow your guts halfway to Naples. Sit still, or I'll kill you. We've got six men aboard."

He swung again. Surges let, the ship go, jammed a foot against Mark's side, pistol-whipped him until the pilot fell bleeding against the side of his seat.

*La, La!* his mind whimpered. The only answer was a tempest of hatred that engulfed him. *La*, I couldn't know!

But he could have known. He had flown this mission before. He knew about the lake, and it was the same lake. He knew about her language and her mannerisms. He knew down deep — who she was, and where she was, and what she was.

Then he heard Bixby howl "Finally!" as the lead ship began toggling its bombs. One . . . two . . . three . . . and the Prince lost weight in gulps of five hundred pounds. He felt them leave the ship, and he wanted to dive after them. Looking back, he saw that the radio op had crawled atop the bomb bays for a sneak look through the hatch at the plummet-ting projectiles. The man was grinning. "*Bombs away!*" and the formation banked sharply.

I'll beat Burnes till his face is pulp, he thought. But La called out, *It's you, it's you, Marco, you foul coward.*

I'm not after your city, La! It's Jerry we're trying to kill! I can't help it, none of us can help it! For God's sake, La. For God's sake!

Yes, Marco, for God's sake.

He kept staring back at the city, waiting for the hell to break. Twenty four seconds after bombs-away, it broke. Thunder walked across the city and over the marshalling yards. Hell plumed up from a festering wound of five and belching dust.

La — La with your wind tossed hair and slender moon-blessed face, with your grace and your love and your laughter. La — La, in your plain stone house with gypsum floors and charcoal foot-warmers and coral virgins that look down from wall niches, a house of human birth and growth and death. La — La — it was us. I'm sorry. If I'd known. . . . He choked off, feeling the grinding pain.

*If you had known, came a feeble whisper, would all be spared for the sake of one?*

It stabbed him in a clenched belly, and it was mockery. He spat a shard of broken tooth from Surges' pistol-work, and he was sick. Because her question was demanded of a god.

*No, Marco, only of men.*

And the flak trailed away behind them, as did the last whisper of her consciousness.

He crawled out of the cockpit and lay on the floor just forward of the bomb bays. He lay choking and panting and spitting blood. There was a black fog, full of fractured steel and bright red death that throbbed within it. There was fear, and the face of a woman. He was priest at a screaming ritual, and the dull blade bit a blue-fringed wound.

There was a rubble-heap where a bit of cloth was caught between broken stones, and a shattered wall where once had been a garden and a trellis. It was finished now, all finished.

"You can relax, Pappy, you're okay now."

"Man you're lucky, Pappy! They'll send you home right away. Hell, no need to finish those last four missions."

"Combat fatigue? Hell, Pappy, it could happen to anybody."

He was in the hospital. He sat up and looked around. There was Burnes, and Surges — hanging back — and Winters, and Bix, and Sparley. He shook his head and tried to remember.

La was gone. And her absence was sufficient proof that she had been there.

"It was a good strike, Pappy. We clobbered half the town."

He wanted to order them out. He got them out as quick as he could, but loneliness was no better. Why did it have to be La? And something answered: "Would you spare them all for the one?"

## THE YOKEL

By WALTER M. MILLER, JR.

*The time: 1987. The place: Florida. America is struggling back from the effects of World War III. It is a divided country now, with the big cities held by scientists and technicians, and with all rural sections overrun by ruthless gangs seeking plunder and the eventual conquest of the cities themselves.*

*Into this maelstrom comes Sam Wuncie, cynical, hard-bitten and with but one ambition: to stay alive. Circumstance puts him deep in the hands of the deadly Colonel MacMahon and the*



*unfathomable Zella Richmond. It is from this strange pair that Sam eventually learns there is far more to life than keeping death at a distance.*

*No good science-fiction magazine should go to press without at least one exciting novelette crammed with action. Here's a pip!*

HE STOOD in front of the dimly lighted saloon idly rolling a half dollar across the back of his knuckles, a dark young man in dirty overalls, unshaven and unkempt. He gazed with dull eyes at the gloomy street, debris-littered, with clogged sewers and rusting, flat-tired automobiles, with shabby loiterers and tallow lamps burning atop the electric streetlight standards. The small city, once of 15,000 population, had only recently gotten the tallow lamps. Progress, real progress.

A dame wandered past and he glanced at her indifferently—a frowsy tomato with glint-eyes and rag-hair. She saw the half dollar dancing across his skilled knuckles. She stopped.

"Got a light, Mister?" Her purring tone offered a proposition.

"Climb a light-pole, Sister. It's on the city."

She eyed the coin. "I've got change."

"Then use it to call a taxi. Scram."

She laughed; evidently it was a good joke. She gazed hungrily into the saloon and moistened her lips.

"Buy me a glass of swill, huh?"

"I wouldn't blow you the foam off my beer. Beat it, Gertie. Your time's used up. I'm a busy man."

She hissed an insult, spat at him, and darted away. He grumbled irritably and wiped the spittle out of his eyes. He dropped the half dollar in his pocket and shuffled into the bar. Customers were scarce. A rag-bag with a gray head was asleep on the floor; nobody bothered to pick it up. A gaunt young man with a festered neck and a blind eye was talking to himself at the bar. The sleazy wheezer who committed the drinks shuffled to meet the newcomer.

"Hi, Wuncie. Got dough?"

"Yeah, gimme a —"

"Show me."

Sam Wuncie cursed and jingled his pocket. "Wanna bite one to make sure?"

"Nah, I trust ya. Who'd you roll for it?"

"Picked beans for Gardland, Nosey. Gimme a drink."

"What'll you have?"

Wuncie glowered at him. "Frozen Daiquiri!" he snapped.

The bartender shrugged. "Just thought I'd ask. Wait'll I get the siphon."

There was a galvanized washtub set up on a box on the bar. Nosey dropped one end of a rubber hose in it and sucked on the other end. Then he pinched it off and stuck it in a glass. The glass filled slowly with a murky brown liquid.

"What's in this batch, Nosey? Bird nests?"

Nosey grinned reflectively. "Can't remember. Old Lady keeps six tubs working. Whatever she can get goes in."

Wuncie took the glass with a shudder and tossed Nosey a dime. He peered at the murky fluid distastefully. "You suck the hose and still live. Guess I'll chance it." He gulped the drink and made a face.

"Prunes. Damn rotten prunes."

"Don't like it, don't drink it," Nosey muttered irritably.

"I like it. It's a club."

"Have another?"

"Yeah."

"You're a real patriot, Wuncie," the bartender said as he came back with the glass. "A smart boy like you could cross over and be drinking good liquor, eating good food, wearing decent clothes."

"Yeah, everybody's a real patriot," he answered sourly. "Everybody that can't pass the test and be a traitor."

"Nuts, you could pass, Wuncie. What'd you used to do before the war?"

"Dropped earthworms down little girls' backs."

"Just a kid, huh? Well — you could pass."

"The only place left to pass is *out*. Gimme another."

A man slipped quietly in the-door, looked around quickly, then sidled onto a seat at the end of the bar. He was panting slightly, and his eyes were nervous. One cheek was covered with a patch bandage. Nosey approached him with a deepening frown. The customer showed him a handful of coins. Nosey shook his head.

"Lemme see under that patch first," he grunted. "It's on a bad spot, Joe."

The man looked stricken. "I — it's only a cut. Cut myself shaving."

"Take it off. Let me look."

The man licked his lips. "You got me wrong, Mister."

"Show me."

"Doc said not to lift it."

"Doc? For a shaving cut?"

The man slipped off the stool. Nosey reached for a butcher knife. The man backed toward the door.

"You got me wrong. I'm no crosser."

Nosey grasped the blade of the knife as if to throw it. The man yelped and fled. Nosey came back cursing.

"Cheek was branded, bigawd! The sneaky bastard!"

Wuncie's laugh was icy. "What were you saying about being tested?"

"I said you could pass. I didn't say you should."

"If I got tested and failed, would you run me off with a butcher knife?"

"Yer damned right I'd get after you!"

"That's what I meant. Everybody's a real patriot. Nobody wants to be tested. Patriotic reasons, of course."

"If you're going to tell me what's wrong with the world," Nosey growled, "it'll cost you a dime a minute."

"It'll only take a second. *Brains* — that's what's wrong with the world."

"Huh? Whose — the committee's?" Nosey frowned and scratched his uncombed thatch.

"Nope, ours. We're freak animals, Nosey. We're like the goldfish with butterfly fins, or a saber-tooth tiger with fangs so long he can't open his mouth wide enough, or a deer with antlers so long they tangle in the brush. Nature overdid us, Nosey. A brain is a tool for survival, but she overdid it and we got all bogged down in our own gray matter."

"You're getting tight, Wuncie."

"Yeah. And that's why. I've got about as much use for an active cortex as a baboon has for a blue behind." He shoved his glass across the bar. "Here, gimme the deactivator."

The bartender shrugged and reached for the siphon hose. He paused suddenly and glanced toward the door. There was a brief silence.

"Come in," he offered gruffly.

Three men stepped inside and stood peering around suspiciously in the dim lamplight. One of them carried a length of rope at his belt, and the rope was knotted into a noose. Another wore a long sheath-knife. The third carried a short joint of iron pipe.

One man went to look behind the bar. A second made a slow circuit of the saloon, opening every door for a glance inside. The third rolled the rag-bag over with his foot for a glance at his face. The rag-bag groaned.

"Go back to sleep, Pop."

The inspection was finished in silence. The man with the rope approached Nosey. "You seen a man with a bandage on his cheek lately?"

Nosey moistened his lips and glanced at Wuncie. Wuncie's smile was bitter, but cynically indifferent. The man with the rope frowned impatiently and glanced at his aides.

"Reckon we should allow a blind barkeep to stay in business?"

They grinned and shook their heads.

"I think I saw him," Nosey sputtered hastily.

"You *think*? The hustler that works this street saw him come in here."

"Yeah, I saw him. I think it's the guy. Bandage on his cheek."

"Clever lad!" the ropeman said sarcastically. "What did he say? What did he do?"

"Tried to buy a drink. I saw the bandage and ran him off."

The ropeman nodded at his colleagues. "Doesn't know we've spotted him yet," he muttered.

They started outside, but the ropeman paused to look back at Wuncie. "Care to join us, Citizen?"

Wuncie gave the man a fishy stare, then turned to inspecting his nails.

"Citizen, I spoke to you."

"Yeah? Damn polite of you, bud. Noblesse oblige, I guess."

The ropeman hooked his thumbs in his belt and took two slow steps forward. "You sure are a smart boy! Maybe you're from the other side."

"Go buy your brain back, Mister!" Wuncie snarled. "If your butt's for sale, you'll need it."

The ropeman darkened. He glanced over his shoulder. "Hold it a minute, boys. I got a live one."

The other men wandered back inside. They stood with hands on hips, watching with cold eyes. The ropeman leaned on the bar, staring hostilely at Sam. "What's your name, fellow?"

"Thaddeus Twench!" Sam snapped.

"Where you born?"

"I wasn't born. The judge gave me this sentence."

"You talk like an urban."

"What if I am?"

"Lots of urbans turn tech, go across."

"You see a brand on my cheek?"

"You might have passed the test and got in. You might be a double-crosser."

"There's no such thing. Anybody bright enough to pass stays in."

"Maybe you'd like to be bright enough."

"Maybe."

The man had been fiddling with the rope. His hand lashed out viciously, and the heavy knot clubbed Sam across the temple. The stool toppled and Wuncie crashed to the floor.

"Teach him."

Heavy boots stamped across the floor. Then they stamped on Wuncie. He howled until a hard heel jammed against his windpipe. Then his skull exploded. A moment later, he was being slapped awake; he roared and struck out blindly. He grabbed a handful of shirtfront.

"Down, Rover! It's me!" barked Nosey's voice.

He peered around at a foggy room. It was empty.

"Where —?"

"You been asleep awhile."

"How long?"

"Long enough to draw flies. Go home."

Wuncie picked himself up weakly and staggered to lean on the bar. "Need a drink," he hissed, shaking his groggy head and exploring his bruises.

"Show me your dough?"

"Hell, you know — you saw . . ." He paused and felt in his pockets. He looked glum.

"I told you — you been asleep."

Wuncie called him an obscenity.

"I didn't roll you."

He stood waking up slowly.

"Go home," said Nosey. "I want to close. And don't come back for a while. You picked that fight."

"*What* fight?" Wuncie groaned, nursing his skull. "You call it a fight?"

"You had it coming. I don't want my customers picking trouble with Border Guards. Just beat it."

"Where'd those thugs go?"

"Wherever the crosser went. Now, get out of here."

As Wuncie's vision cleared, his rage returned. He reached across the bar, grabbed a fistful of Nosey, and battered it with his other hand. Nosey flailed back, cursing and screaming for his wife. Wuncie hauled him across the bar and dumped him on the floor.

"I'm mad, Nosey. You gonna tell me where they went, or do I take my mad out on you?"

"West End," muttered the cowed bartender. "Said they'd look for Bandage-face out there."

"Thanks, friend." Wuncie let him up.

"If I was your friend I wouldn't have told you," Nosey snapped. "Thanks anyway."

Nosey laughed harshly. "Now they won't have to tie the rope to the tree. You're both about the same size."

"Who?"

"You and the crosser. Tie one on each end and throw it over a limb. You'll balance."

"Pray for me," Wuncie snarled, and went out into the street.

It was late, and the lamplighter had extinguished all but one tallow flame in each block. The street was empty; even the girl had gone home or found a customer. Black shadows fluttered, and stars were dimly visible through a mist-shroud. He stood listening to the wind for a moment, then walked west.

The city was nearly depopulated. Cities, even small ones, were phenomena of technology or commerce, and with industry gone people sought a plot of land and a few chickens. This had been a railroad town, but the rails were rusty on top, and men were ripping them up to get iron for plows.

A poster was nailed to a wall opposite a streetlamp, and he paused briefly to gaze at it: a sketch of Colonel MacMahon's grandly stern visage, with the inscription: "Men of Ruralland! Rally to me! The arrogant foes of mankind who call themselves the 'Restoration Committee' have excluded our people from the heritage that is rightfully ours. Their heresy is as old as Man, and the false classes they create on the pretense of testing aptitudes are devices of growing tyranny. Join my legions, and I shall sweep them from their usurper's throne, that all men may once again enjoy the fruits of decent civilization."

Sam Wuncie spat thoughtfully on the poster and walked on. The three men who pursued the crosser were members in a division of MacMahon's legions — the Border Guard — who made certain that people in the rural areas stayed away from the testing booths that were set up at the barbed-wire enclosures around the industrial and urban sectors of the country.

He wandered among the dark alleyways, pausing occasionally to listen. There was only the wind in the live oaks, and the rattle of loose tin on a garage roof. He moved on.

Why bother? he wondered briefly. He didn't particularly care what they did to the crosser. He would live longer if he just forgot about it.

But he had a red mad burning deep in his belly. The boys had kicked him around. In a world like this it was boot for boot, and double damages. When nobody could enforce the peace, each man had to enforce his own—but there weren't any sixguns to make all men equal. There were wits and lead pipes and the fast-burning fuse of hate. If you broke the legs of the man who kicked you, you accomplished social justice. If you failed to do so, you neglected your duty to the next man he might decide to kick. A hard code, but it worked — and workability was the yardstick of rightness.

He prowled through garages as he moved along, searching for a suitable weapon. Most of them had been cleaned out, but he found an archery target in the third place he searched. The house was deserted. He broke in through the back door and came out a few minutes later with a fifty-pound bow, a dozen target arrows, and a small meat cleaver.

A muttering cry came to his ears from the north. It was brief and feeble. He paused to peer along the streets and saw the faint aura of a bonfire several blocks away. He turned toward it and broke into a quiet trot. Men were talking and laughing in low tones. Another feeble scream, then a brief snatch of song:

*"He floats through the air with the greatest of ease,  
O the daring young man on the flying trapeze."*

*His movements are graceful,  
all the girls he does please,  
And my love he has stolen away."*

Another low scream.

Sam stole to the end of the block and peered around the corner of the house. A huge oak tree overhung the street. They had built a bonfire on the pavement. The crosser's feet were caught in the noose, and he hung head down from a high limb. The men were singing and laughing while one of them swung him back and forth across the flames. He was naked to the waist, and his scrawny back was criss-crossed by red stripes.

One of the men was silhouetted. Eyes glittering in the firelight, Wuncie quietly fitted an arrow to the bow. He was no expert archer, but the man was only ten yards away and standing still.

Their singing drowned the twang of the bow. The man screamed and clawed at the feathered shaft protruding from his back. He staggered and fell across the flames. Not realizing what had happened, the others darted to drag him out. The bow sang again. A man howled and fell across the curb. He rolled in the weeds and jerked a bloody arrow out of his rump. He stood up, but his hip gave way and he fell again.

The third man scurried for the shadows. Sam unleashed two shafts after him, but he was gone.

Wuncie advanced cautiously. The crosser was whimpering and trying to keep himself swinging. His hair caught fire.

The man who had fallen in the weeds was the ropeman, and he tried to crawl away. Sam got in front of him.

"Look up at me, Bub."

The man looked up.

Sam kicked his teeth out. He rested quietly.

"Help . . . help . . ." It was the man with the arrow in his back.

Sam went to the bonfire and caught the swinger's arms. The fellow was only half conscious.

"Grab me around the neck. I'll get you down."

The crosser seized him frantically, and Wuncie loosened the noose. He fell to his hands and knees.

"Your back's in bad shape."

The crosser looked unspoken gratitude at Sam, then glanced at the wounded man trying to drag himself out of the street. The crosser growled in his throat and crawled after him. Sam let them settle it between themselves. It was about an even match until the crosser jerked the arrow out and used it again. The Border Guard lay in the gutter, and the crosser sat panting on the curb.

"Thanks, fellow," he grunted.

"I didn't do you any favor, crossy. You're better off dead."

"Then why — ?"

"Thank your little playmates. They made an error. They tried to change my attitude."

The crosser swayed dizzily and moaned. His hair was burned away, and his face was blackened.

"Maybe you'll be better off now."

"Why?"

"If you're burned bad enough, you can't tell the brand from the scars."

"Ugh —"

Sam pitched the cleaver in the weeds beside him. "Go hack yourself off some oak bark. Boil it, let it cool, soak your head in it. Tannic acid."

"Thanks."

Sam started away, then paused. "Tell me something, Bud."

"Huh?"

"What made you try to cross? You're old enough to remember the war. You know what happened to one industrial age. You want to make another?"

The crosser shook his head mournfully. "Three of us wanted to get inside. Sabotage. Let the rurals in."

"But you flunked the tests?"

"We figured we could pass. We were engineers before the war. Passed the I.Q.s and aptitudes okay. They gave us a Rorschach though. And they put us under pentothal hypnosis. Questioning. They figured what we wanted."

"That was dumb of you. You should have known."

"It might have worked. Zella had it planned."

"Who's Zella?"

"Psychologist. A tech. They gave her a bum deal in Jacksonville, and she double-crossed. She worked us over first before we tried it. Thought post-hypnotic suggestion might get us through. It didn't work. Now she knows how to do it. But they've got us spotted."

Sam hesitated frowning "Where is this Zella?"

The crosser shook his head. "The fire's still burning," Sam muttered darkly. "And the rope's still up."

The crosser shuddered. "I can't squeal on her —"

"Look, Bud. I did you a favor. Now do me one."

"Why do you want to know?"

"Maybe I'm interested in trying it myself."

"Maybe you'd sic the B.G.s on her."

"Your brain's scorched. There's your answer in the gutter. Try another maybe."

The man paused. "South Jacksonville," he grunted. "About a mile south of the barrier. Find an old telephone directory and look up Zella Richmond."

"Her own place, huh? Good hideout. I'll buy that. Take care of your head."

He left the crosser sitting on the curb and went to find an empty bed. Up to now, life was picking beans and hoeing corn for a buck a day and a meal. An ambitious man could do better than that, he thought, and if he could get inside one of the industrial areas for awhile, he could collect enough stuff to buy a dozen MacMahons and half of Ruralland.

It was a five-day northward hike to Jacksonville along the deserted, vine-covered highway. The roads and towns were unmarked by war, for the northern city was the only Florida town that had been neutralized by the enemy fleets, and the only one that had been seized by the Restoration Committee.

Small farms along the way offered the hospitality of their tables by daylight, but no sane man would accommodate a stranger after dark. He slept on beaches and in deserted buildings of small towns. He had become a skilled nomad, for Sam Wuncie could never confine himself to a few acres of land and a plow.

He had been fifteen when the Hemispheric Conflict began, and he had graduated from high school into the arms of selective service. He was sent to the air force, rushed through flight training, routed to jet-pilot school, then grounded for high susceptibility to aeroembolism. They made him a yes-man to a colonel, but he said "no." So they made him a mess officer. But another colonel was chiseling on the mess fund, and Lieutenant Wuncie tried to dull the chisel. He spent the rest of the war in an Arctic weather station, sending up balloons and watching the guided missiles thunder both ways across the polar regions. When the guided missiles stopped coming, there was no way to get home except to walk, for the technology that supported transportation lay quiet in radioactive loneliness. The long trek south from Alaska had taken him a year and a half, and it satisfied him that he was fit to survive. That was six years ago.

He might have tried to enter one of the Committee-controlled regions, but he resented the system that excluded the "technologically unfit" — judged according to the committee's standards. Before the committee allowed a yokel to take the tests, it made him agree to submit to the small "R" brand on his right cheek in the event that he failed — to make him recognizable as a "basically rural" personality if he tried to crash the gate again. Sam saw the branding as brutal irresponsibility, for the committee was surely

aware of what the excluded population was likely to do to a man who had plainly tried to surpass them.

The wind stiffened during the days of his journey, and low flying scud darted inland beneath dark overcast. The gulls followed the scud, and he noticed legions of ants migrating to higher ground. It was September, and the air smelled of hurricane. Somewhere in the Atlantic was a storm, but there was no weather bureau to predict its course.

On the morning of the fifth day he heard aircraft engines droning from somewhere above the clouds — the first such sound he had heard since the end of the war. He stood frozen on the empty highway, listening until the plane was out of earshot. The Committee was making progress. But he was angry because of the nostalgic knot the sound tied in his stomach.

When he came within grapevine distance of Jacksonville, he noticed that the farmers were boarding up their house windows. Evidently the city had a weather station, and the plane had been a hurricane reconnaissance ship. The farmers had probably seen the techs preparing for a storm, and had passed the word along the line. The daylight was gloomy-gray as he entered the south suburbs of the city.

He chose side streets and alleyways, for he was nearing the barbed-wire barriers set up by the Committee, and getting closer to the half-mile quarantine zone declared by MacMahon and patrolled by his vicious Border Guard.

He found an ancient telephone directory after searching through several old commercial buildings, and he looked for Zella Richmond. The name was listed, and the address was only a dozen blocks away. He was surprised that the crosser had been telling the truth.

The wind was reaching gale force. He leaned against it as he moved along, watching the house numbers in passing.

"Hey, you!"

Sam stopped. A few steps away a man in a leather jacket stood in the entrance of an old drugstore. He carried what appeared to be a home-made crossbow, loaded with a sharp-tipped length of welding rod. Sam frowned bewilderment and started away.

"I meant *you*, Curly."

"Me?" He stopped again.

The man came forward, holding his weapon casually aimed at Sam. "Where you think you're going?"

"Down the street about two blocks."

"*This* street."

"Yeah. G'bye."

"*Hold it!*"

Sam held it. The man's eyes were narrowed suspiciously.

"What address?" he grunted.

"I should give you dames' addresses?"

The interrogator cranked the crossbow a notch tighter. "Yeah. You should. Believe me. What house number you looking for?"

"Thirty-six twenty-six."

The crossbow took better aim. The man jerked his head. "That's the wrong answer. Back where you came from, boy."

"Look! I'm goddam tired of being shoved around. I'm going to—"

"Beat it!" the guard bawled. "G'wan back, or you'll get tired of being dead."

"You mind telling me why?"

"Yeah. There ain't no such address. Who you looking for?"

"Zella Richmond."

"Turn around," the man snapped coldly.

"I thought you said to —"

"I changed my mind. Walk straight ahead. I'm taking you in."

"In where?" Sam began walking in the direction he had wanted to go, and the guard came behind him.

"In trouble, Curly, in big trouble."

"You Border Guard?"

"Shut up."

They walked for two blocks. "Turn in here," his captor ordered.

Sam glanced at the address on the big, two-story, white-frame house set among live oaks. It was 3626.

Sam paused on the porch to glance back at the man who herded him. The man wore a twisted grin.

"Take a good look around before you go in," he grunted.

"Why?"

"You might not come out again."

A man's footsteps were thudding down the hall toward the door. "Sergeant Quinn, is that you?" growled a deep voice.

"Yes sir. I caught somebody looking for this address. He wanted to see Zella Richmond."

A big man in uniform appeared in the doorway. Sam stared at his stern, proud face — and recognized it.

"Inside," grunted Colonel MacMahon.

"I guess I had the wrong place," Sam muttered, backing away.

Something hit him a sharp blow in the small of the back. He arched and groaned.

"Inside," the colonel repeated, then called over his shoulder: "Lieutenant Greeves, Corporal Sweltin — front hall!"

Two other men appeared, glanced at the captive, looked questioningly at the colonel.

"Put him in the basement."

Sam's arms were wrenched behind his back. Handcuffs snapped around his wrists. They led him toward a stairway.

"What is this?" he snarled. "I didn't do anything to you!"

The corporal shoved him hard. "Nah, we're doing it to you. Downstairs!"

The basement was gloomy and damp. One of the men looped a chain around a drainpipe, slipped it through the circle of Wuncie's fettered arms, and snapped a padlock on it.

"Fix him up with what he'll need," ordered the lieutenant. He climbed the stairs and disappeared.

The corporal rummaged through the basement, brought a gallon jug of water, a dirty blanket, a loaf of moldy bread, and a bucketful of withered root-vegetables from a bin.

"Make yerself t'home, Chum. Just be quiet and don't bother anybody. If yuh need to go, don't use the floor. Dump the stuff out of the bucket and use it"

"I want to see the colonel."

"You saw him."

The corporal trudged up the stairs and slammed the door, leaving him alone. The wind was howling about the house. Occasionally, quiet footsteps padded overhead. A rat scurried across the floor and scrambled into the potato bin. Sam tested the drainpipe. It was secure. He sat down on the blanket to think.

The crosser had either lied to him, or Zella Richmond was teamed up with Colonel MacMahon, or perhaps something had occurred since the crosser had been here. Obviously, if Zella and MacMahon had been working together in trying to get the crosser into the city, MacMahon's boys wouldn't have been after the crosser when he failed.

His irritation grew, but it was mostly directed against himself. He had hoped to worm his way into the city, steal as much as he could, and sell it outside to the yokels. But he had stupidly walked into the open jaws of somebody's trap. What did they want with him? Apparently the man with the crossbow had been willing to let him go until he mentioned the name Zella Richmond. Was there a Zella Richmond? Or had MacMahon merely adopted the former tenant's monicker as a code name?

There was nothing to do but wait and see. After a time, he began to drowse. But quick footsteps on the stairway brought his head up with a jerk.

It was a girl — a frowning girl with close-cropped black hair, olive skin, and hard green eyes that studied him like a specimen. She had nice calves, but they moved in a businesslike way, and she carried a



sheaf of papers.

"Hello!" he said.

She dragged up an empty keg and sat on it — just beyond the radius of his chain. She plucked a pencil out of her hair and aimed it at a note-pad.

"Name?"

"Thaddeus Twench."

The pencil hung motionless. She looked up slowly. "You want to get out of here alive?"

"Sam Wuncie — W-U-N-C-I-E." This time the pencil moved.

"What are you good for?"

"Huh?"

"What are you good for? What do you do best?"

"Get in trouble."

"You're proving it. Which do you want to be, cute or alive?"

"Fly an airplane."

Red rage colored her face. She turned to call for a thug.

"I told you, damn it!" he bellowed. "I was a pilot!"

She paused, peering at him. Her eyebrows lifted slowly. She got up and climbed the stairs. "He was a pilot, Mac!" she called into the house.

"Then get the dope on him," came the faint answer.

She came back down. "You're lucky, Wuncie. The colonel needs a pilot."

He laughed. There wasn't a usable aircraft outside the tech sectors. "You Zella Richmond?" he asked.

She nodded. "Who sent you here?"

"A guy."

"It's not important." She shuffled through her papers and brought out a handful. "I'm going to show you a series of cards. They'll have irregular blots of ink on them. Look at the card closely and try to find objects in them. Take your time, tell me what objects you see. Some people see one thing, some people see another. Use your imagination. See as many things as you can in each picture."

"Rorschach?" he grunted, frowning. "Why in the name of —?"

"First plate."

He looked at it, saw nothing. "I see a team of mules, a fried banana, six little girls, and my grandmother's glass eyeball."

She laid it aside calmly and turned toward the stairs. "Corporal Sweltin! Come and get me some cooperation!" she yelled.

Corporal Sweltin came and kicked Sam in the belly twice. Thereafter, Sam cooperated. They freed his right hand from the cuffs at her request.

The girl finished the Rorschach and turned to association tests. Then came affective choice, aptitude, and I.Q. When she had finished, she left him alone and went upstairs to evaluate results.

The rat sat on the edge of the vegetable bin and stared at him as if wondering about his protein content. He kicked an apple core at it and the rat darted away.

The wind drove rain against the basement window and the water leaked down the wall to collect in a widening puddle. He stuffed the blanket in the bucket and sat on it. He counted his pulse to measure time. He had counted to three thousand when the door opened and two men creaked down the stairs. One was Colonel MacMahon. The other was a short, sleazy, chubby fellow with narrow eyes and unkempt hair. He wore an unpressed blue suit and a dirty white shirt.

The colonel smiled at his prisoner magnanimously.

"I understand you are a pilot, Wuncie."

"So?"

"Can you fly a very ancient four-engine transport?"

"I can fly anything I want to fly. But I don't want to fly anything. Get your goddam flunkies to unlock

this chain."

"Tell me, Wuncie — how do you feel about my cause?"

"I don't feel about it. I just feel about my own."

"Which is?"

"Sam Wuncie."

"Your answers don't coincide with Miss Richmond's estimate of you."

"That's easy," the girl called from the head of the stairs. "He just likes to play tough boy. It's only a defense."

The colonel frowned. "Wuncie, I need you."

"Then buy me."

"What's your price?"

"That depends on the deal. What do you want of me?"

The colonel hesitated, then sat down on the keg and put on a confidential manner. "We're going to get a pilot inside the tech zone. He's going to steal a cargo plane and fly it out."

"You're nuts."

The colonel glowered. "It's all planned, Wuncie. And you're our man. Furthermore, now's the time to do it, while this storm has them off guard. The ships will be in the hangars. You'll slip inside, and stay aboard a ship until after the storm. When the ground crew comes to taxi the plane back to the flight line, you'll let them get the engines started, then force them out and take off. You'll fly the ship to the old Orlando Air Base."

"What do you want with it?"

"I have forty men waiting at Orlando. We've dug up forty parachutes and several cases of dynamite. You'll drop them over Jacksonville at night. That's all. Their tasks are already assigned."

"Let's see," Sam grunted. "One man dynamites the main transformers at the power station. Half a dozen blow a breach in the barrier to let a pack of your boys in. Another batch grabs control of an arsenal. What else?"

The colonel paused, then smiled. "I have no objection to telling you the plan. As soon as we secure weapons, a detail will go to intercept and kill the committee members as they leave their homes. There are a number of police boats in the harbor: Some of my men will seize them and put out to sea. The boats have machine-guns and ammunition aboard. They will be put in at Daytona."

Sam thought about it a moment. "To be used for other raids on other coastal cities? What about fuel?"

"There are several tankers in the harbor. We're going to try to get one of them out."

"What about the coastal guns?"

"We'll try to silence them beforehand, but we'll have to chance it. Our only real weapon is surprise."

"The theft of the aircraft will disarm you, then. They'll be on guard."

"I don't think so. I think the techs will expect a bombing raid rather than an air-commando attack. They underestimate us."

"Tell me something, MacMahon."

"Ask me," the colonel grunted.

"Why don't you let well enough alone?"

"What do you mean?" The officer's frown was demanding.

"Why don't you let the committee have what they've got, and forget about it? There aren't any governments any more, except for local ones — and the committee. Everything's peaceful except on a local level. The committee's managing to keep industry alive. Anybody who wants to join them can — if he's qualified. Their system'll break down in a few years — from the inside. If you tear it down, you'll probably tear the technology down as well."

The colonel straightened and a fierce anger came into his eyes. "They have excluded the common man! They have said, 'We shall decide who is fit and who unfit.' They have made themselves God. They

have taken what rightfully belongs to all men."

"Did all men build it?"

"They have created an artificial aristocracy; an amoral, godless, cynical pack of engineers. They call us yokels. And they exclude us from their house like dogs. Already they are instituting a program of selective breeding among themselves. Do you know what they did to Miss Richmond?"

Sam glanced up irritably at the girl standing at the head of the stairs. She looked away.

"Unlocked her chastity belt?" he asked.

She stepped through the door and slammed it.

"They insisted she marry at once. They gave her a choice of six men, three of whom were negroes!"

Sam chuckled sourly. Evidently the colonel had some ideas of his own about what constituted a second-class citizen.

"It's not funny, Wuncie!"

"My mistake."

"Will you assist us?"

"What do I get out of it?"

"If you do an efficient job, you may have whatever administrative position in my forces you desire. Within a few months we should have control of the Jacksonville sector. It's isolated, completely surrounded by rural areas, and supplied only by shipping from the northern sectors and by air. You may have command of the air installations if you wish. You are the only pilot I've been able to find. All others have crossed."

Sam hesitated. The colonel's plan seemed to him a grandiose delusion. Nevertheless, they might be able to get him into the city. Once in the city, he would be out of their control. Then he could steal a truck, break into a commissary, load up with farm tools, weapons, or whatever was saleable, and crash out on a north highway. If the techs caught a yokel in the city, they did nothing more than throw him out after a good beating. It was worth a try.

"I'll go along," he grunted.

The colonel smiled tightly. "I can't trust you, of course. We'll have to find a way to insure your cooperation." He glanced at the chubby man who had been standing to one side, saying nothing, and watching Sam Wuncie with cold narrow eyes.

"Well, Doctor Harlich, have you thought of a way to make him cooperate?"

The doctor nodded slowly. "I believe so. Do you recall the dog we captured last week?"

"The one that bit Manter? Of course, but . . ." The colonel paused. A puzzled expression changed slowly into a dry smile. "I see!" he purred. "Very clever, Doctor."

"Shall I attend to it, sir?"

"At once, please."

Colonel MacMahon stood up, gave Wuncie an amused nod, and left the basement. Doctor Harlich followed close on his heels. From the top of the stairway he looked down at the captive and laughed a soundless, pink-gummed laugh. Wuncie shivered. There was something about the chubby man that suggested sadism. What was this talk about a dog?

When the door closed, the rat scurried from under the stairs and returned to the vegetable bin. After a time, Wuncie heard sounds of argument from upstairs. The girl and the colonel debated angrily, but Sam couldn't make sense of it for the muffling sound of the rain and the wind.

Darkness was beginning to fall. He ate a little of the bread and raw vegetables, and wrapped himself in the blanket against the damp chill of the cellar.

A little later the door opened, and Doctor Harlich came down followed by four guards, one of whom carried an oil lantern. He hung the lantern on a nail, and the doctor approached Wuncie with a little smile. Something glittered in his hand — a hypodermic. His voice was soft with bedside solicitation.

"Roll up your sleeve, please, Wuncie."

"I don't need a shot right now, fat boy. Thanks just the same."

"I ask you to cooperate, Wuncie. Colonel MacMahon's orders."

"Get away from me with that thing or I'll shove it up your obscenity." He arose with a growl and

backed against the wall.

"Ask Wuncie to cooperate, men."

The four guards approached him cautiously. Sam kicked at one. Another man caught the foot and spilled him with it. They sat on him.

"Cooperate, Wuncie," another said sourly as he bared the captive's arm.

"Glad to oblige," he mumbled.

Harlich bent down chuckling. "It won't hurt much, Wuncie," he purred. "Just a mosquito bite. Hold still now."

He squirmed. The needle bit his shoulder muscle. The plunger went home.

"What's in it?" he muttered.

"Just the saliva of a rabid dog," Harlich said as he jerked out the needle.

He roared and fought, but it was too late. They released him and darted out of reach. Harlich's face was gleeful as he grinned at the victim.

"Don't curse so, Wuncie," he said. "I have the serum."

They went away and left him cursing in darkness. But hardly had they gone when the girl came back with the lantern. He turned the curses at her.

"I brought you some light," she said calmly. "It'll keep the rats away."

"I don't see *you* running from it."

She hung the lantern on a nail and stood staring at him for a moment with the ice-green eyes. "I'm sorry for you, Yokel."

"Said the schizo when he stabbed his mother. Break it off, Sister, and ram it!"

She nodded. "I tried to talk them out of it, believe me. It destroys your usefulness later on. You'll work for them only until they finish giving you the Pasteur treatment."

"What makes you think I'll stick around that long?"

"You'll have to — if you want the treatment. Unless you think you can find another doctor with serum. I'm sure you can't."

"In Jacksonville —"

She shook her head. "No, they wouldn't have it, because they don't have the problem. No animals in the city except livestock. They're short of food, so they don't allow pets."

Sam sat glaring at her in helpless defeat.

"Tell me something," he grunted. "Does a yokel get worse treatment than this at the hands of the committee?"

She flushed slowly. "I'm sorry, Wuncie, I don't always agree with MacMahon's methods. But if he'll break down the barrier, I'm with him."

"You joined him recently, huh?"

She nodded. "He convinced me that we should coordinate our efforts."

"Why do *you* want the barrier down?"

She reddened slowly, and among other things he sensed a woman jilted.

"I don't believe in the committee's authoritarian methods," she said.

"You prefer the colonel's brand, huh?"

"I don't have time to argue with you, Wuncie," she said. "We're leaving in about an hour."

"We?"

"You and I."

"Why you?"

"I know where to go and how to get there. You'd fall into a nest of guards alone."

When she was gone, he sat dejectedly trying to figure a way out. But he had seen a child die of rabies once; the convulsive spasms had torn muscle and fractured bone before death came. He shuddered. There was nothing to do but play along with the colonel and hope the sadistic Harlich really had the serum and would start the treatments in time. He promised himself a satisfying revenge, whether they gave him treatments or not. If they didn't, he resolved to bite all three of them.

A lieutenant came downstairs with a small black bag and gave the prisoner a friendly smile. "The

colonel tells me you're going to cooperate with us, Wuncie," he said.

Sam nodded, deciding that the junior officer didn't know about the rabies shot. He stepped forward and produced a key.

"Let me have your wrist. I'll unlock that chain."

When he was free, Sam grunted his thanks and started for the stairs.

"Just a minute. I brought my kit down here."

Wuncie glanced at the black bag and waited.

"What kit?"

"Sit down. I've got to change your right thumbprint."

"Change my what? Okay, this I'll see."

The lieutenant handed him a bit of fine sandpaper. "Work your thumb over with it good. Get it fairly smooth. Don't sand till it bleeds, though. Stop when it hurts."

Sam dragged his thumb across the paper until the whorls grew fainter and the thumb felt tender. The officer then painted it with a colorless solution, rolled it across a piece of ground glass, then waited for it to dry.

"What's that stuff?"

"It's a plastic filler. Seals up the remaining grooves. If they took your print now, it'd be a blank."

He dipped into the bag again and brought out another bottle and a flat piece of metal wrapped in chamois. He held it up for Sam's inspection, and there was a dark spot on it.

"Engraving of a different print," he said. "Ex-counterfeiter made it for us."

"Fictitious? Or did it belong to somebody?"

"It belonged to a tech. About a month ago two techs sneaked out of Jacksonville. They went up the St. John's River in a canoe. Wanted to make a deal with some farmers to ship food into the city. They're living out of hydroponic tanks, you know — plus some seafood. Anyway, these two techs got past MacMahon's guards okay, but the farmers caught them and turned them in. We got their identity plates and had a pair of engravings made from their prints."

He painted the engraving carefully with the second solution. It crept out across the metal like oil, filling the impression with pinkish fluid. He flicked off the excess with a flat rubber blade, then took Wuncie's thumb and gingerly rolled it across the plate.

"Don't blow it, just let it dry. Careful!"

Sam stared at the new set of lines on his thumb. "Where'd you get this stuff?"

"I was with Intelligence during the war. They used it quite a bit. Far as I know, this is the only bottle left. You'll have to be careful of that thumb. The plastic is tough, but you can scratch it off if you rub something rough."

"Now that I got it, what do I do with it?"

The lieutenant handed him a transparent disk with a dark thumbprint engraved in the plastic. A name was printed on it: Robert J. Klonish. There were two bubbles in the plastic, and they seemed to be filled with a dark powder.

"You're Klonish now."

"Why didn't you just change the thumbprint on this thing?"

"Wouldn't work. They've got a system. A duplicate of this thing is filed in a central vault under the date of issue. See those two pockets of powder? They're slightly radioactive, with a known half-life. The techs stick this disk in a counter to get the date of issue. The central analyzer picks the duplicate out of the files for that name and date. It televises the print to the checking station together with the date. The dates have to check. The prints have to check. And your thumb has to check with them both."

Sam stared at him curiously. "You a renegade tech?"

The lieutenant shook his head. "We got the dope from the captives."

"That's not what I meant. You just talk like a tech."

The officer shrugged. "You could be one too, from the way Zella Richmond talks. Why didn't *you* cross?"

"I don't like rigid systems."

"Theirs isn't so rigid."

"Why didn't *you* cross?"

The lieutenant hesitated. He packed the things in the bag. "My son," he said. "I've got a little boy. He's feeble-minded. Naturally, there's no use trying to get him in. A man can't leave his family."

He turned away stiffly and marched up the stairs, leaving Sam to follow. Colonel MacMahon and Zella Richmond were waiting in the flickering lamplight when he entered the front room. The colonel pitched him a bundle of clothes.

"Put these on," he grunted. "Techs don't wear overalls."

Sam stepped into the next room to change.

"You understand our terms, don't you, Wuncie?" MacMahon called.

"I steal you an airplane," he said dully, "you give me the Pasteur treatment."

"Right."

"Just one thing. You try welshing, I can be a pretty mean little boy."

"Your threat doesn't bother me, Wuncie. But don't worry, I have no reason to let you die if you do your job properly."

"That's no good. What reason would you have to let me live?"

"Why — you'd continue to be useful to me."

Sam said nothing further. The colonel was lying. Zella Richmond had already told MacMahon her opinion of his future usefulness. He finished dressing and returned to the front room.

"What's next?" he grunted. "Just follow Miss Richmond's very valuable instructions." "Okay, Miss Turncoat — where do we go from here?"

The girl flushed angrily. "My name's Faye Alfer from now on. Don't forget it. What's yours? Remember?"

"Bob Klonish."

"Check. Let's go."

"Good luck," said MacMahon. He made the mistake of extending his hand. Sam glanced at it coldly and walked away from it.

The rain had stopped except for an occasional drop whipped along by the gale. The streets were in blackness, but they could see the bright lights of northern Jacksonville glowing on the underside of the clouds and silhouetting the buildings along the street ahead of them.

"The checking station is in the center of the bridge across the St. John's River," she called. "Now, get this straight. We picked tonight because of the storm — made it easier for two techs to sneak through the rural guard lines. But they won't ask many questions if your identification is okay."

Sam was carefully guarding the altered thumb. "Suppose the guys at the station happen to know Robert Klonish?"

"There are over a million people in that tech sector. There are five men at the station. If each man has two thousand acquaintances, the odds are a hundred to one against their knowing Klonish, without even allowing for overlapping."

"Yah, but let's don't do it a hundred times."

"You'll do it a dozen times before we get outside again, so take care of that thumb. Don't wear it out."

A few minutes later they stood at the river looking along the span of roadway that stood on concrete stilts above it.

"Electric lights," he breathed. "Lord — I'd forgotten. . . ."

The girl too was staring at the myriad glittering of the choppy water, at the flood of light along the opposite shore. The gale was whipping toward the city, but faintly they could hear the growl of traffic.

She hardened suddenly. "Let's go," she snapped. "Run as if you had just gotten past the guard."

They broke into a trot.

"Not so fast!" barked a voice from the shadows.

They stopped. A man with a crossbow advanced slowly out of darkness.

"You *fool!*" the girl raged at him. "This is Klonish and Alfer. Get back before the techs see you. I'll

get you court-martialed. I'll —"

The guard retreated hastily.

"Now run!"

They ran toward the guard shack in the center of the span. After a hundred yards, a search light picked them up from the shack, then fell to make a pathway of glare on the bridge. The wind was worse over the open river, and a sudden gust sent the girl sprawling.

"How's your thumb?" he grunted as he helped her up.

"Okay, but watch your own." They ran ahead. A man in a khaki uniform came out of the shack, carrying a shotgun at port-arms. "What do you want, Yokels? Stop right there."

They came to a halt. The spotlight again played over them. Zella laughed. "We look that crummy?" she called. "It's Klonish and Alfer, checking in after recon. Look at your check-sheet."

The man called something to an aide in the shack. A few moments later another man emerged.

"You're listed," he called. "But you're a week late, and Commissioner Jenkins wants you immediately."

"Uh-oh," grunted Sam.

"Is that on the check-sheet, or did you just call him?" she asked.

"It's on the day-list. Okay, come on forward. Hands locked behind your heads. Walk straight and stop right here." He drew an imaginary line across the pavement with his boot, then stepped back.

Hands aloft, they moved forward until they stood in the glare of the floodlights around the shack. The man with the shotgun stood warily aside while the other frisked them from behind.

"Okay, drop your hands. Let's step in the shack."

Three guards were lounging in the building, and Sam held his breath lest one of them know Klonish or Alfer. But the men glanced up incuriously and returned to their card game.

"Let's have the duckets, please," said their interrogator. "And leave your thumbprints on the scanner."

After he had taken the plastic disks, Zella stepped to a metal table, rolled her phony thumb across an ink pad, and transferred the impression to a transparent slide that slid out of a vertically mounted scope that spilled bright slivers of light on the wall.

"Hurry up, Klonish," grunted the interrogator. "You take the other one."

Sam stepped to the table and imitated her procedure on a duplicate instrument.

"You must be tired, brother," the man growled, reaching over his shoulder to turn the instrument on.

"Oh — sorry."

The guard inserted the identification disks in another rig, then jabbed a pair of studs. A boxful of electronic flickers came to life, and relays chattered.

"Have any trouble with the yokel vigilantes?" the interrogator asked conversationally.

"Got chased a couple of blocks. Lost them in the dark," Sam told him.

"How was the mission? You went after a food contract, I understand."

"No good. Farmers don't like us."

The man grunted disgustedly. "They want manufactured products; we want farm products. Why don't they wise up?"

"They don't like being locked out."

"If they think they're qualified to fit in tech culture, let them come in here." He jerked his head toward a doorway marked *Testing*.

"They don't like being branded if they fail."

"Well, there's a damn good reason for that."

Sam didn't ask what it was. He figured he was supposed to know.

"Anything new happen while we're gone?" Zella asked.

"Commission converted two more downtown buildings to hydropons. If the yokels keep being stubborn, we won't even need to buy their groceries. City's getting to look like a greenhouse. Vines dangling off from everything. Next thing they'll be stringing boxes of dirt on cables between the buildings. Tomatoes dropping on your head when you cross a street."

A light flickered on the panel. The interrogator stiffened suspiciously and backed away from them. He unsnapped his holster and brought out a .45.

The light winked orange. It said *Delay*. Sam swallowed uneasily and glanced at Zella. Her face was frozen watching the light.

An inflectionless mechanical voice droned from a small loudspeaker. "Delay while Central accomplishes special instructions. Wait."

"Oh," grunted the interrogator and put his gun away, grinning sheepishly. "I forgot that you're to see Jenkins. Central's probably trying to find him."

He noticed that Zella was biting her lip nervously and staring at the light. Evidently an interview with Jenkins would sink them. A minute passed. The machine spoke again.

"Message from Commissioner Jenkins to Klonish and Alfer. Quote: busy as hell at the weather office now. See me tomorrow at eight sharp. Unquote. Acknowledge, please."

"Acknowledged."

The light switched to green, and it said *Identified*.

"What's wrong?" grunted the interrogator. "You look sick." He chuckled. "Jenkins isn't so tough." He moved to another panel and pressed a button, calling, "This is Slessinger. Cab to South Bridge guard shack. Klonish and Alfer, identified, going to quarters. Off."

A musical chime sounded the deep-toned acknowledgement.

He turned back grinning. "Guess you're pretty glad to be home. I'd hate to spend more than a day in that jungle. How'd you get on with the yokels?"

Sam bristled, but made himself subside. An idea formed slowly.

"Listen," he said. "I wonder if there's any hope of getting the Pasteur treatment at the dispensary. You heard of any rabies cases recently?"

The girl nudged him viciously. Slessinger's eyebrows lifted slowly. "You were bitten?"

"Yeah. Not sure the dog was mad, of course."

The guard frowned. "Bad bite? Lemme see."

"Damned if I'll take off my —"

"Oh, sorry. Listen, lemme call Doc Terrell for you. He'll know. It'll be a minute before the cab gets here."

"Sure, thanks. I'd appreciate it."

He grinned at Zella while the man dialed. She stood quietly waiting for the results of his attempt, but the green eyes threatened mayhem.

"He wants to talk to you," said the guard, handing him the phone.

Sam grunted a nervous hello.

"Bobbie boy !" shouted a jovial voice at the other end of the line. "When'd you get back from the sticks?"

He swallowed a lump. The man knew Klonish. "Uh — just now," he muttered, touching his brow. There was a pause. "You sound funny, Bob."

"Sore throat."

"Uh-uh! Sless said you got dog-bit. When?"

"Today."

"Oh — well, that gives us plenty of time to dig up some serum — if there's any to be had."

"None in town?"

"No, but we'll contact other sectors."

"How's chances?"

There was a long silence, then: "Well, I won't kid you, Bob. Not good. But we've got at least four weeks to look. And you don't know that the dog was mad."

He couldn't say what he knew, not unless he were certain the serum was available. "Well, do your best, will you?"

"Certainly. Stop by tomorrow, Bob. I want to see the bite. And listen: don't worry. Even if the dog was rabid, lots of people are immune."



"Thanks. See you tomorrow." He hung up.

"Well?" asked the girl.

"Tell you later."

She smirked, realizing he had failed.

"There's your cab," said the guard. "Good luck with Jenkins."

The vehicle that waited outside was driverless, but the engine was purring quietly, and the door was open to admit them. Sam looked around. There was no one outside the shack except the interrogator. Then he saw the car had no place for a driver. A radar antenna was mounted on top. Bewildered, he slipped in beside Zella.

She slipped her identity disk in a slot on the panel, and muttered for Sam to do the same. The machine clattered over them for a moment, then ejected them.

"Destination, please," croaked a speaker.

The girl whispered to him. "Klonish's quarters," he said, his bewilderment growing.

The cab glided ahead, rocking slightly in the gale, and gathered speed.

"MacMahon won't like it when I tell him how you tried to cross us," she told him.

But Sam had eyes only for the cab which was, in the literal sense of the word, automotive. "How does this contraption work?" he grunted.

"Look at the road. See that narrow strip of steel imbedded in the concrete? There are two magnetic pick-ups under the car. One 'looks' at one side of the strip, one looks at the other side. The steering mechanism just keeps them balanced."

The cab left the bridge. Something clucked three times behind the panel. The cab slowed down, then turned right at an intersection.

"How did it know to turn?" he grunted.

"Three steel buttons back there in the street. That meant an intersection was coming up. So it slowed down, and followed the band that curved off to the right. It knows the way to your place, because when we inserted the disks it called Central for all data on you. It just counts intersection markers, then turns when the time comes."

"Suppose another car had been stalled in the lane?"

"The radar would have caught it. The car would stop. The cop would come from the corner to guide it around the obstacle."

They swished through another intersection, and Sam got a glimpse of the "cop" — an automatic traffic-regulating device, mounted on tripods with wheels, like a desk-chair. It was barrel-shaped, with long mechanical arms for directing traffic, a head cast in the visage of an Irish policeman — for authoritative effect perhaps — and a radar antenna growing from the top of the head. Its eyes glowed red or green.

He fell into silent awe at the sight of the city. The last years of the war he had spent in Alaska. He had, of course, heard of the changes that had taken place in urban life — of the application of electronic analyzers to routine tasks, of the coordination of the analyzers into complex net integrated computer networks under the name of "Central," and the marvelous advances in servomechanisms but he had never witnessed the change. The cities had been radiologically unsafe after his return, and then the Restoration Committee had seized them. He had heard stories about how the complex electronic networks, powered by atomic generators, had kept the cities running smoothly even after their populations had fled — but he had not believed.

Traffic was thin on the streets, because of the gale, and only an occasional pedestrian scurried along the sidewalk, clutching his hat and bending against the wind. Nostalgia came over him, and longing as he looked around at signs of a healthy technology. Would this have come to pass if the committees had not acted, if the anarchical mobs had been allowed to mill back after the voice of the geigers had waned to a sleepy tick? Or would the leaderless mobs, in innocent but moronic vandalism, have torn the intricacies asunder for their own purposes? It was rumored that the burglary-prevention systems were still working when the committees came back. Suppose one of the mechanical cops had stood between a yokel and a grocery warehouse full of canned goods?

Perhaps the committees had been justified in their original seizure of the cities, and in their restoration of order. But now the order was achieved and adequately policed. Why then did the committee still discriminate? Why not open the cities to anyone who wanted in? Employers operated their own systems of economic natural selection. If a man wasn't fit to hold a job, he got fired. The committee's haughty attitude seemed not only tyrannical, but pointless.

Seeing the city, he was suddenly torn by doubts. What would MacMahon do if he eventually managed to seize control? There was much bitterness among the rural population. If the city were suddenly opened to them they might enter as a pack of vengeful wolves, bent only on getting what was "rightfully theirs" and punishing those who had excluded them.

Maybe he should refuse to cooperate. But the itch in his shoulder muscle was a gun in his back. Sam Wuncie had always been primarily for Sam Wuncie — mostly because he had never found another goal that seemed worth the trouble. Now he felt restless in his pursuit of survival, sensing a vague guilt. But it was hard to decide which goal was more right: the committee's or the colonel's. Neither was a perfect answer, but there were never any perfect answers.

"Why Klonish's quarters?" he suddenly asked the girl.

"Closer to the airport."

"Why don't we just have Lizzy here run us to the airport?"

"It files our destination with Central, so that if someone wants to call us, Central knows where we are. I don't want her to know."

Sam shot a sudden glance at the panel. "Can it hear us?"

"It can, but it doesn't listen except when it asks destinations or relays calls."

He watched her for a moment as they rode through the business district. Her face was strained and white. She stared straight ahead, not looking at the urban grandeur about them. Her eyes seemed to be glistening wetly, but her mouth was hard. He grinned wryly.

"Just a country gal at heart."

"Shut up!"

"Why did you really double-cross?"

She gave him a hard stare. "Listen, Wuncie. Keep your thumb out of my pie. I did you a favor once. But I can damn sure undo it."

He recalled no favors, and told her so. She said nothing.

"I could quote the old saw," he said, "about hell hath no fury —"

Her hand arched in a vicious circle, popped him painfully across the mouth.

"That answered my question," he muttered, blotting away a streak of blood from his lip.

"It's not what you think," she snapped. "I worked as clinical psychologist in the eugenics section. The commissioner of eugenics is a woman. She hated my guts because I rated her brother class D. I was engaged to a guy in production. We applied for marriage permits. The files are secret, and you never know what class you fall into. But when you apply for a permit, you get a list of all permissible mates in the city. If your partner's name is on the list, you're okay. The lists include about a hundred thousand names for each class, and the classes are very broad. It's only very seldom somebody gets rejected."

"You did, huh?"

"No," she snapped. "We were okay. But the commissioner pulled a fast one. She marked the list 'no children' before she sent it to him. Accidentally, of course. He called her anonymously, asked for information on birth restrictions. She explained that the classes were divided according to basic genetic mental patterns, but some marriages had to remain childless on account of hereditary physical weaknesses. Herb got himself transferred to another industrial sector up north without even calling me. The commissioner's secretary told me about it later."

Sam laughed gleefully, and slapped his thigh.

"Funny as hell, isn't it!" she snapped, her eyes glinting fire

"The horse laugh is for the system, Babe."

She glared moodily out the window.

The Restoration Committee hadn't found any utopian formulae, he thought. A commissioner misusing

authority — a vengeful, catty female getting her underhanded blow below the belt. An egotistical young man fleeing from an entanglement that suddenly seemed beneath him. A jilted, angry woman running away to plan a mean revenge. Man remained a wolf, banding into packs to attain his limited goals, snarling jealously at his fellow, stealing away to prowl alone in sulky wrath when his fellow snarled back. Man the ambivalent — half social animal, half lonely predator — with the conflicting emotions of both. There were some things that technological planning would never solve.

But he had to remain part predator in order to find any goal outside his own society. Otherwise, he would be like a herd of cattle clustered in a circle, all facing inward, seeing only one another, denying that there was a universe beyond the social microcosm, refusing to hear the howls of coyotes in the hills. No, there was no perfect social solution — nor should there be one! He wondered vaguely if the committee imagined itself as saviour, leading man toward perfection. The Zuni had achieved perfection — within the social microcosm — and the Kwakiutl, and the tribes of Dobu. But the microcosm had become an end in itself whereas technological society had tried, half-heartedly perhaps, to see culture as only a tool, revisable, correctable, discardable.

The cab stopped suddenly at the curb.

"Klonish's destination," croaked the speaker.

He glanced outside. They were parked in front of an apartment building on a side street.

"Alfer will get out here too," she told the auto-pilot.

"Acknowledged. Watch your step please. Cab will depart when door is closed."

They climbed out on the sidewalk, and she slammed the door. The car glided quietly away. The street was empty of pedestrians, and the wind was stiff out of the south. The pavement was littered with torn vines and leaves that the gale had tugged from the window-box gardens that covered the sides of the buildings. Here and there, a box itself had torn loose — a heap of black dirt and a crumbled sheet metal trough on the sidewalk.

"Where now?" he asked.

"Airport. The storm seems to be dying down. Worst part of it must have passed us by."

They began walking along the dimly lighted side streets. As they approached an all-night cafe, a man emerged and stood on the steps, idly chewing a toothpick and looking up at the stormy sky. Zella clutched Sam's arm.

"That man!" she hissed. "I know him, and he'll know me — as Zella Richmond. If he sees me, I'll have to pretend I came back. Play along."

"Who am I?"

"Pick a phony name. He might know Klonish too."

"Sam Weston."

They walked casually past the cafe. The man gathered a slow frown, then broke into a grin.

"Zella — Zella Richmond!" He bounded off the steps, reaching for her.

"Yes?" She turned, grinned, and caught his hand. "Ben Dorchett! You old dog!"

"When'd you get back? This calls for celebration!"

Sam stood dumbly aside, watching the mutual back-patting. He wondered if the safest course wouldn't be to get the guy in an alley and clobber him. But then, he would probably wake up howling for the cops before their plan was accomplished. Maybe it was best to play along and hope he wouldn't spread the word to the wrong ears that Zella was back.

"I'd rather stay obscure for awhile," Ben," she was saying. "I've got a new job, and new friends. I'd rather you didn't tell the old gang I came back yet. Wait'll I get used to things again, huh?"

"Oh, yeah, sure!" He glanced at Sam for the first time and stuck out his hand. "Ben Dorchett."

"Sam Weston."

"Nice knowin' ya."

"Yeah."

Ben looked back at Zella and replaced his grin. He caught her arm possessively. "You gotta have a drink with us both of you."

"I don't know, Ben I'm tired. We —"

"Awww!" He glanced over his shoulder. A couple was just approaching the doorway. "Hey Dan, Janie!" he called. "Look what just walked up!"

The man and the girl peered through the screen at the three on the sidewalk. They broke out their best grins. They came outside. There was much auld tang syne while Sam stood glowering with pocketed hands. Moments later they were being herded inside the cafe. Zella hung back in the doorway to look around inside. He saw her sway slightly and touch one hand to her face. But the enthusiastic greeters led her firmly ahead. Sam, bringing up the rear, noticed that she kept her face abnormally averted to one side.

The cafe was half full. He heard Zella suggest a booth in the rear, but the others claimed there wouldn't be room. They started shuffling chairs, then dragged two tables together and pressed her down in a place of honor. A party had evidently been in the process of breaking up, for two girls rejoined the group. One of them spotted Sam as a lone frowner; she assigned herself the charitable task of cheering him up.

"Isn't it just wonderful that Zella's back?" she gushed, grinning.

"Just wonderful," he agreed.

"Where do you work, Sam — I mean, if I'm not too inquisitive? I'm on the tower myself."

"I'm . . . uh . . . engineer," he grunted, then paused. "Tower, you said? Control tower? Airport?"

She laughed a musical breath of gin at him. "Of course! Where else?"

She began yammering about the niceties of her job while Sam stole cautious glances at Zella. She looked white and drawn, and she still kept her face averted from a certain sector of the room. Sam peered in the direction of aversion. Two tables were occupied, one by an elderly couple, the other by three men drinking beer. None were looking toward the party group.

"You're not listening, Sam," pouted the control-tower operator, whose name seemed to be Loretta.

"Of course I am. I think you're clever. It's a pleasure to meet a clever woman for a change."

That should be good for a fifteen-minute lecture on female cleverness, he decided. It usually was.

Zella excused herself for a moment and hurried toward a rest-room. She jostled him in passing, and he knew there was some kind of trouble. He waited, listening to Loretta with half an ear, and occasionally glancing toward the dangerous part of the room. The male half of the elderly couple seemed to be looking curiously in the direction of Zella's exit.

When she came back, she jostled Sam's chair again. He felt something lodged in his collar and plucked it out: a tightly folded bit of paper, which he crammed in his pocket without looking at it.

" . . . don't you think so, Sam?" Loretta challenged.

"Yeah. I sure do. You're exactly right."

She flushed slightly and looked at him admiringly. "I expected you to be bull-headed about it. I'm surprised."

"You're dead right, Honey," he repeated. "Excuse me a minute, please?"

He drifted to the men's room and unfolded the wadded note. *Sam, it said, you'll have to go on alone. The commissioner is sure to spot me before I get out of here. He's sitting at the corner table. You're on your own. Stay away from servo-guards, don't go through an airport gate. Sneak in the best you can. I'll have to play repentant prodigal. Luck.*

He flushed the note and went back to the table. The commissioner was staring at her now, apparently trying to link a memory to a seeming impossibility. How to get out without making the others curious?

Loretta was smiling at him affectionately, patted his hand as he resumed his seat, and opened her mouth to begin again.

"Why don't we play some music?" he said quickly, looking around for a juke box.

"Silly, they don't have any here!"

He put on a desperate grin. "You like to dance?"

"Love it."

He leaned forward. "Let's go find a dance floor."

"Well . . ."

"I want to hear more about what you were saying. It's so noisy here."

She giggled. "Won't Zella be mad?"

"Oh no! We weren't really together."

She giggled again. "It'll look awful, just walking out."

"I'll show you how," he promised. "Come on." He took her arm and, blushing, she arose. "Excuse us, everybody," he said bluntly. "We'll be back in a few minutes."

There was a snicker, and a low catcall, and a testing "Hurry back!"

"I feel awful," she said as they went out into the wind. But she caught his hand, leaned against him, and looked up.

"Let's walk out past the airport," he suggested.

"Okay, there's a dance hall about six blocks down."

He let her select the direction without seeming to lag. He meant to wait until she led him to the vicinity of the field, then become increasingly insulting until she stalked off and left him flat.

"I bet Zella's glad her old boss got impeached. I bet that's why she decided to come back. Was that the reason?"

"Huh? Her boss?"

"Sure, Commissioner Ethel Robbins of Eugenics — didn't you know Zella used to work there? I thought you two were old friends."

"Uh — not old. Robbins, you said, huh?"

She jabbed him with her elbow. "Don't be dumb. You heard about the impeachment. Sam, I don't think you half-listen to me."

"Sure I do, Sugar."

So Zella's boss had been fired, he thought. That made things different. Maybe she'd change her mind about playing the colonel's game now. Maybe she'd even turn the coat twice and tell the colonel's plans to the committee. But that was of no concern to Sam Wuncie. He had to go on alone, take a chance that the colonel would keep his promise if he delivered the goods. Gloomily he thought of himself as king's pawn being offered for a gambit.

Two blocks away he could see the high wire fence that surrounded the air-field. It was about time to get rid of the gushing, slightly tipsy Loretta. He took her arm firmly, but she leaned against him and purred. He pressed her into a dark entrance-way and kissed her rudely. Instead of belting him, she snuggled, hooked her arms around his neck, and kissed him back. For a moment, he was at a loss.

"I like you, Sam," she whispered, giggling in his ear.

Desperately, he tried a very blunt tactic. But she insisted on cooperating.

"Not here," she whispered. "You have a roommate?"

"Yeah."

"Me too — darn it."

He had a sudden hunch. "Let's take a walk on the airport. You can get inside."

"You can't though, can you? —I mean —" She snickered again. "I know a way. Come on."

There was a gate at the end of the street, and he could see a turnstile with an identity unit. The 'stile offered a continuous barrier from head to toe, and it was closed at the top.

"I don't see —"

"Just watch," she snickered as they approached it. She produced her identity disk and dropped it in the slot. The unit mused over it for a time, then croaked, "Pass Iggleby." The turnstile lock clicked, and a motor purred.

"Bend over," she said to Sam. "What?"

"Bend over. I'll ride you piggy back."

Mystified, he obeyed. "Waiting," said the unit.

"Now step on the platform."

With Loretta clinging to his back, he stepped into the 'stile, and the platform was covered with metal studs that seemed to depress when he stepped on them. The platform began to revolve.

"These gate-units are dumb, aren't they," she said in his ear. "All they can do is count feet."

The turnstile stopped and they walked onto the airport. Across a narrow strip of grass was a

concrete ramp, immersed in darkness. They crossed to it, and he kissed her again to keep her going. It was beginning to be fun, and he regretted the fact. He had more to do than make love to a plump and affable blonde.

Floodlights spilled in front of several hangars, but they kept to the shadows in the rear.

"Know where we're going?" she asked.

"Uh . . ." He indicated a nearby hangar. "What's in there?"

"Engine-changes, repairs."

"How about the next one?" She paused. "I remember, because I was on duty this morning when they towed it in."

"Well?"

"Let me think. Uh . . . an old C-54."

"In for repairs?"

"No, just to get it out of the gale. Why?"

"No reason. Come on."

"In there? But that's restricted."

"It's not guarded, is it?"

"No, but —"

"Then come on."

"Sam, I'm scared!" She hung back, and her voice had a "what-am-I-doing-here?" note, as if her supply of gin was wearing thin.

"Come here." He pulled her close.

The rear entrance to the hangar was locked, but a window wasn't. He pried it open and they slipped into darkness. But a sliver of light from the floods in front of the building gradually made the gloom less impenetrable, and he peered at the dark shadow-shape of the old transport plane from two years ago. He paused, wondering if he should knock the girl senseless now, or wait awhile. But he would have to haul her aboard the plane, and he might as well lead the lamb to a convenient spot.

She giggled as he opened the hatch. "This is awful, Sammm!" He gave her a little pat to help her in, then climbed up behind her and closed the hatch softly. Cool arms slipped around his neck. He unfurled his fist and decided to wait awhile.

"Saaaam!"

The wind died slowly. The vibration of the great building ceased. Loretta yawned sleepily and stretched on the heap of kapok cushions.

"We've gotta . . . leave before . . . daylight . . . Sam," she purred drowsily.

"After a while — it's a long night."

He remained motionless for a time, listening to her breathing. Soon she slept. He touched her face lightly. She remained asleep. He stole away quietly, trying to remember where a C-54 stowed its first-aid kits. He found one in the radio compartment, and two more on the flight deck. He extracted the morphine and the adhesive tape, then crept back to Loretta.

She whimpered when the needle stung her thigh, scratched at it sleepily, tried to push it away. Then she woke up, still whimpering.

"Sam! What are you doing?" She pawed at his hand.

"Stop it!" he said evenly. "You rolled on a little piece of wire. I'll get it out."

He fed her the entire contents of the tube, then jerked the needle free.

"Sam! What did you do? What *was* that thing?"

"A sharp bit of wire, I told you!"

"It wasn't. It felt like a needle." He chuckled. "You woke up dreaming, Sugar."

"Sam?"

"Huh?"

"Come here."

He came. Moments later she was asleep. He waited for the drug to take effect, then trussed her securely with the tape and gagged her. Occasionally she moaned, half-awakening, then falling into a

drowse again. He covered her with a tarp, then went up to the flight deck. He inspected the controls briefly and checked the service report. The ship was fully serviced. He paused, thinking. With Zella along, it would be safer to wait for morning. But Zella was probably being interrogated right now, and she might decide to pull another switch. That would end the game then and there.

He climbed out of the pilot's compartment and lowered himself from the hatch. The hangar doors were motor-driven, folding upward. There would be a long delay between the time he opened the doors and the time he got the engines started. An even longer delay for taxiing to the end of the runway. If armed guards policed the field, there would be ample time for them to have a shot at him. Or more likely, they would simply block off the runway and try to make takeoff impossible. He needed a legitimate excuse for taxiing the ship out of the hangar. He went looking for one, prowling along the walls of the hangar, browsing through equipment and tools. He found two acetylene welders and dragged them to the locked door of a small tool room that appeared to have no windows to the outside. The door had a small glass window; he pressed a kapok cushion against it, then struck the cushion with his fist. The breaking was almost soundless. He shut off one pair of cylinders tightly, then chopped the torch-mounting from the hoses and fed them through the shattered window, tossing their severed ends toward the far side of the tool room.

Pulling up the second rig, he cracked the acetylene line and lit a long yellow flame. He fed it just enough oxygen to take the brightness out of it, then hung the nozzle through the window, just inside the room. For the moment, he left the severed lines off, and went to find a box of waste, which he scattered in front of the door and soaked with oil. He cracked the valves on the severed lines then, and briefly watched the slight pressure drop. There might be very little time.

He darted toward the front of the hangar, threw the switch to hoist the doors, started the alarm bell, and caught up the phone to scream a hasty call to the automatic switchboard: "Fire in hangar three! Fire in hangar three!" He left the phone dangling and sprinted for the ship. The hangar doors were rolling up as he clambered through the hatch, and the building was being searchlighted from the control tower.

A loudspeaker was blaring across the field : " *What's the trouble over there? Hangar three! Guard units, investigate —*"

The speaker stopped suddenly. Evidently the switchboard had relayed the fire-call.

Scrambling into the cockpit, Sam kicked on the battery switches and started the inverter. Then he growled a low curse; he had forgotten to pull the props through. Unwilling to risk a locked cylinder, he nudged the starters on the outside engines, not firing them, but turning them through a few times. A siren was blaring from across the ramp.

One engine coughed, then kicked to life. Then he tried the second. It coughed, but refused. He tried again.

A sudden flare of light came from behind, and the blast of the explosion shuddered through the ship. The second engine started. If he still had a tail-assembly, he was all right. Releasing the brakes, he eased the ship ahead. Two men in mechanics' uniforms were racing across the ramp. One came front and center to signal him out. Sam grinned. The 54's ground crew probably, figuring some neighboring grease-monkey was rescuing their boat. A fire truck screeched to a halt on the ramp, and helmeted figures darted toward the inferno.

Sam taxied a hundred yards ahead and looked back. Nobody was even watching the aircraft, although the tower occasionally threw a searchlight on him, evidently trying to tell him to cut on the command set for taxi instructions. A follow-me jeep was darting toward him, but he looked around for a runway, spotted the center of one, and headed for it across rough ground. The searchlight behaved frantically. The follow-me jeep skidded to a stop and took off after the ship. Out of curiosity, Sam switched on the command set.

"... the damn ship back on the strip! What's the damn crazy idea of —"

He shut it off. The ship got on the runway after much rough maneuvering. He glanced at the windsock's outline of tiny glistening reflectors, then turned right, started the other engines, lowered the flaps, set the brakes, and eased the throttles forward. The follow-me jeep whirled up in a cloud of mud-particles, started in front of the poised aircraft, thought better of the idea, and backed up quickly.

Far up ahead, a car's headlights were racing for the strip.

He released the brakes and gave it full throttle. He had only half a runway, but a fairly strong headwind. The ship gathered speed. A truck roared onto the runway. A man leaped out and waved his arms wildly. Sam gritted his teeth and kept going. The man was waving a pistol. Guards with rifles scrambled out of the truck.

Then they scrambled off the runway in a last-minute dive. The truck roared frantically for safety. Sam hit the ailerons, trying to bounce a wingtip over the fleeing vehicle. He narrowly missed a ground-loop and thundered on. Sharp ringing sounds told him rifle bullets were punching through the fuselage.

Then he was airborne, with wheels and flaps folding beneath him, and he breathed quiet relief as he leveled off at low altitude and headed south along the coastline. A hint of dawn was graying in the east.

Fearing fighter interception, he flew just below the overcast, ready at any moment to dart upward into the vapor shroud. But evidently the city's small airforce had been caught unprepared.

After forty minutes, the sunrise revealed Merritt Island just ahead, and the cluster of buildings that was Titusville. He banked right and flew a heading of 270° until, nestled in the Florida lake country, Orlando lay beneath him. He circled the airport, wagging his wings until a group of men appeared near the runway and began waving. Then he came in for a landing.

He could not of course expect the colonel, for the trip that had taken him less than an hour would involve several days on horseback. A man in paratrooper's boots, wearing no insignia, approached him as he climbed out of the ship, and introduced himself as Captain Parrin. He seemed to accept Wuncie with a certain amount of respect, which seemed to suggest that he had not yet heard that the pilot was a prisoner of circumstances, rather than a willing volunteer.

"There's a girl tied up in the back of the ship," he told Parrin. "She's to be well treated, and not regarded as a prisoner."

The captain assured him that she would be taken care of, and sent two men to get her out of the ship.

"I had no word from Colonel Mac that you were coming, Wuncie. Unless you brought orders, we'll have to wait for a courier."

Sam frowned at the northern sky. "They'll send out search planes to look for a ship. They'll find it, and strafe it on the ground. You want to wait?"

"The colonel wouldn't like —"

"Apparently the colonel isn't much of a strategist."

The captain reddened slightly and coughed. "He was, I understand, a public relations officer during the war."

Sam grinned sourly. "Yeah —well, we don't have to wait a week. Get your boys loaded up. I understand you've already got the plan of action. All you need is a time to start it, right?"

"Yes, but —"

"There are a few extra chutes in the plane. Carry an extra man. We'll drop him with a flare-pistol and a message for MacMahon over South Jacksonville. We'll set the time ourselves. If it's okay with the colonel, your boy can shoot a green flare while we're circling."

Parrin hesitated. "Well, we're supposed to wait until dark."

"Okay, we'll wait till tonight. But we've got to hide the ship."

"That's no trouble. Just taxi it into the hangar."

During the day Sam had a chance to observe the men that formed the small task-force. They were a rough-looking bunch, surly and grim — typical, he thought, of free-lance fighters of all generations. They were too restless and impatient to fit into a technological civilization or, rather, their restlessness took an overt physical form; but neither were they pastoral types that wanted security. He had a vague notion that if MacMahon's grandiose plan ever worked, it would not be the placid rural folk who triumphed. For the true rurals were not fighting their own battle. They tended their cabbage patches and grumbled about the system, but they adapted to it admirably.

Several times during the day, aircraft droned overhead. One ship, a twin-engine bomber, made three



passes over the field, evidently taking pictures. And the skid marks of Wuncie's landing were still black on the white concrete runway.

Twilight came. The men were loaded aboard the ship. Half of them were carrying rifles; evidently they had scoured the peninsula for a few remaining rounds of ammunition. Several had grenades, and Sam knew that they had some dynamite.

Parrin sat in the co-pilot's seat after they were airborne, and he went over the plan with Wuncie as they winged northward.

"We're to drop three men as close as we can get them to the north end of St. John's bridge. They're to capture the bridge guard-shack while the colonel's ground forces keep the guards occupied from the south. All the men we could muster will drive across the bridge and disperse throughout the city. They're to steal weapons and assemble later at the water front. But their real purpose is their nuisance value. They'll keep the techs busy rounding them up until we can make a drop near the power station and another near the Central Coordinator vaults. Once we get them knocked out, the city's ripe for plucking."

*What then?* Sam wondered, but nodded agreeably.

"Better call your messenger, Parrin. South Jax is just ahead."

The captain nodded and left the cockpit. A moment later he returned with a small heavy-set man who glanced questioningly at Wuncie. Sam handed him the ship's flare-pistol.

"You know where to find Colonel Mac?" he called.

The man nodded.

"When I blink the warming light, hit the silk. We'll circle until you make contact." He glanced at Parrin. "You give him the message?"

"He's got it written. I suggested eleven o'clock."

Sam glanced at his watch. "It's nine now. That doesn't give him much time to get ready. We've got just about six hours' fuel."

"Want to make it later?"

He thought about it for a moment. Then he got a message from the courier and added a notation: *Flare code as follows: Red-red, return to base; green-green, eleven o'clock; green-yellow, midnight; yellow-yellow, one o'clock; red-yellow, two o'clock; red-green, land at South fax for contact.*

He gave the courier a double handful of assorted flare-cartridges and showed the note to Parrin. The captain nodded.

"That should keep Colonel Mac from blowing his top."

"Time's right!" Sam called to the courier. "Get the hatch off and get ready."

The man nodded and left the cockpit. Moments later, a dull roar announced that the hatch was open to the slip-stream.

The bright lights of the tech city glowed across the river, but South Jax remained in blackness, and he could locate it only by estimating distance from the lighted river-bridge. He flew southwest at three thousand feet. When the bridge was on his right at a declination of about 45°, he hit a switch to blink the warning light. Parrin darted from the cockpit. Moments later, he returned with word that the courier had bailed out at the proper time.

"Now to wait," Sam grunted.

The captain was watching the lights of the city with hungry eyes. "Wonder if they've spotted us yet?" he muttered on the interphone.

"Probably. I don't expect this crazy scheme to succeed."

Parrin glanced at him sharply. "Then why are you in, on it?"

He smiled bitterly. "MacMahon bought me."

The captain nodded and returned, his gaze to the city. He neglected to ask Sam's purchase price; a

man's price, after all, was his own business.

The pilot went down to five-hundred feet, circling low to the southeast of the bridge, and hoping that he would escape detection by aircraft locator devices. But if they had bothered to re-rig the wartime radar, they had probably been tracking him for some time.

Fifteen minutes passed. Still no bright signal appeared from the darkness below. They circled and waited. Parrin seemed to be growing restless.

A yellow flash appeared suddenly at ten-o'clock-low, and then another.

"There it is!" Parrin shouted. "Double-yellow flare."

Sam cursed abruptly and banked hard right, jerking the ship into a tight spiraling climb.

"What's wrong? There was the flare!"

"Yeah! Hundred and fifty millimeter flares!"

"What?"

"Flak, Junior. You're too young to remember. Hold your hat. They might start throwing something worse."

"What'll we do?"

"Play clay pigeon!" he snapped, nosing her down again. "Wait for Caesar to make up his little mind."

More bright bursts were blossoming about them. Parrin tugged his steel helmet down and slunk low in his seat. Sam went down to a hundred and fifty feet and hoped for no high buildings.

Evidently the sound of the heavy guns spurred the colonel to decision. A pair of green fireballs appeared to their left and drifted earthward.

"Eleven o'clock!" he shouted, and swung quickly around to a southeasterly heading.

The barrage ceased as they left the vicinity of the city. Sam switched on the command set and listened to Jacksonville tower.

"Leadnightflight from Control, stay in the vicinity of the city. Circle at your assigned altitudes. Do not pursue. I say again: do not pursue. Over."

Sam swallowed hard. He could hear no answer to the message, for the aircraft transmitted on a different frequency from Control. But "Leadnightflight" meant "flight-leader, night-fighter flight." They had been in somebody's gunsights while circling over South Jax, and evidently the flak had only been a warning. He glanced at Parrin. The captain's jackbox was still on interphone; he had not heard the message.

The tower spoke again. "Wuncie in C-54, this is Jacksonville Control, this is Jacksonville Control. We have been calling you. Are you listening yet? Over."

Sam stiffened. They knew his name. That meant Zella had switched sides again. The techs knew MacMahon's plans, and the plot was ruined. He turned to Parrin, then paused. *Wait awhile*, he decided.

He switched to interphone and spoke calmly. "They might have night-fighters after us, Parrin. Go back to the navigation blister, will you? Watch high and to the rear."

Parrin started up, then paused. "There's no moon. How'll I see?"

"You can see a twenty-millimeter cannon when it shoots at you. You can see a rocket burst, can't you? Keep your jackbox on interphone. Call me if you see anything."

"Check." He slipped out and closed the compartment door.

When he was gone, Sam switched to command again. The voice was fainter.

". . . if you hear me, answer please. Wuncie from Jax Control, answer please. Over."

He keyed the transmitter and spoke slowly. "Hello, Jax, this is Wuncie. I read you. Speak your piece. Over."

The voice came back excited. "Listen, Wuncie — this is Commissioner Jenkins. We know the whole plan and your part in it. Believe me, you haven't a chance. We have the colonel's headquarters pinpointed, and we could drop a plutonium bomb down there if we wanted to. We still have a small stockpile. But we don't want trouble with the rurals. We never have wanted it. We need to cooperate. But if you try to make your drops over the city, we'll cut you down. We could have done so already. Pause for acknowledgement. Over."

"Acknowledge your message. Are you aware of my situation? Over."

"Wuncie from Jenkins. Understand your position. However, it seems possible that you were deluded. Zella Richmond claims that she pleaded with MacMahon to use distilled water, with only a pretense of rabid saliva. Whether or not this was done, she does not know. She believes Harlich actually wanted to infect you. On the other hand, she says that the dog in question had not definitely been proved rabid. They were holding it for observation. You may or may not be infected. On the other hand, if you attempt to make your drops, you will most certainly be shot down. Acknowledge, please..Over."

"Wait," he said, and switched to interphone. "Parrin, you still there?"

"Check," the captain called. "Nothing yet."

"Okay. But stay there."

He switched back to command, having assured himself that Parrin wasn't eavesdropping.

"Okay, Jenkins, got your message. You have any suggestions?"

There was a brief pause. "Are you under duress at the moment?"

"Not at the moment. But I will be, if I try anything."

"It's your problem. Just stay away from the city."

Sam thought about it for a moment. He needed Jenkins' help to save his own skin, but the commissioner wasn't interested in charity.

"Jenkins from Wuncie. How about the ship? Wouldn't you like to get it back? Over."

Another pause. "Maybe, but that's not too important. Go on. What do you have in mind?"

"Let me make my drops. You be ready for them. You know the schedule."

Jenkins hesitated. "I don't know. I'll talk it over with the others. I don't think I trust you, Wuncie. You might change the schedule."

"If I did, you could have a night-fighter on my tail, couldn't you?"

"I'll call you back."

"Roger and out."

Sam kept the ship out to sea, gradually gaining altitude, and keeping within command-set range of Jacksonville. He switched to interphone and called Parrin. The captain reported that he had seen nothing.

"I might as well sit down," he said. "If they were after us, we'd have seen them by now."

"Not necessarily. I wish you'd stick there for awhile. Otherwise, we wouldn't know until we got hit."

Parrin grumbled, but agreed. Sam switched back to command and settled down to wait. He felt around on the floor of the compartment, hoping to find a used cigaret butt. His hand brushed something rubbery. He picked it up. An oxygen mask. Idly curious, he plugged it in and opened the valve, holding it against his cheek. It was working. He glanced at the oxygen pressure indicator and saw that it was well up.

"Wuncie, this 'is Jenkins. Are you reading me? Over."

"Read you loud and clear. Go ahead."

"We can't do it. You'll have to worm out of it the best you can. We'd like to have the ship back, but we can't allow you over the city. If you make the drops, people would get killed—some of our people. We're going to make damn sure that if anybody gets killed, it'll be the occupants of that aircraft. That's all. I presume the others don't know your situation. Better tell them. They'll realize they have to call it off."

"And I'll be their prisoner, and won't get the damn serum anyway."

"That's your worry. You got yourself into it. I'm sorry."

A woman's voice broke in, and he recognized it as Zella. "Do what he says, Sam. I don't believe Larwich really infected you. Of course — I know what you must think about me, but be sensible. You can't make the drops."

"So I can't. Stick around the tower, will you? I may want to call back. Over."

"Wilco. We'll wait half an hour."

He cut off the set. He set the autopilot and stepped back to lock the compartment door. He found a second oxygen tank and cut the hose to make it useless. Then he returned to the cockpit and put the ship

in a climb. At nine thousand feet, Parrin called him.

"Why so high, Wuncie? What's the idea?"

"I want to get up high enough to see the city's lights. We're pretty far out. Don't want to get lost. There aren't any beams, you know."

Parrin grumbled and fell silent. At twelve thousand feet, Sam put on the oxygen mask. Ten minutes later, the altimeter read seventeen thousand.

"Listen, Wuncie," said the interphone. "I'm getting dizzy. How high are we? I've got to sit down."

"Fifteen thousand. What's the matter. You got a weak heart?"

"Hell, no!" Parrin growled irritably. "But I don't see any reason for it. You can see Jacksonville now."

"I'll level off in a minute."

"Well, I'm sitting down."

"Okay."

He reduced his rate of climb, but continued upward to twenty-one thousand. He stayed there for a few minutes.

"Listen, Wuncie," the interphone gasped suddenly. "Two of my boys passed out. Come down!"

"I can take it," he jeered. "Why can't you?"

"You come down — or I'm coming up there — and —"

Sam nosed the ship sharply down until he felt weightless. Then he dragged back hard on the wheel. He judged two-and-a-half gees by the sag of his jaw — maybe enough jolt to knock Parrin down.

"We went down a little, Parrin. How's that?"

There was no immediate answer. Then a bullet crashed through the compartment door and punctured the fuselage over his head. He sank low in the seat and climbed as rapidly as possible.

Someone began beating on the compartment door. He could hear faint shouting. At twenty-six thousand the sounds stopped. He leveled off and set the autopilot. He climbed out of the cockpit and opened the compartment door. A light was on in the back of the ship. One man was crawling slowly toward him, gasping for air. Most of them were out.

Sam grabbed a walk-around bottle, plugged his mask into it, and started back through the ship, stepping over bodies in the aisle. The crawler collapsed. Parrin lay in a heap under the observation blister. Sam collected weapons and heaved all but one rifle out through the open hatch. He took the rifle and hurried back to the cockpit, lest he descend finally with forty dead men.

He dove rapidly to ten thousand feet and set the autopilot again. He got the compartment door open as Parrin was staggering toward it. The captain saw the rifle and stopped, cursing fluently. Others were awake, and crowding angrily into the aisle. He suddenly doubted whether one rifle could cow forty men. Fortunately, only half were awake.

"Start bailing out!" he bellowed. "In thirty seconds, I start shooting."

Five men were gone before Parrin shouted, "Stay where you are, men! He won't shoot."

They hesitated. Sam's finger tightened on the trigger. There was nothing else to do. The rifle crashed. Parrin went down screaming on a broken leg.

"Get going!" Sam bawled. "We're over land."

They crowded toward the hatch and went through it in rapid sequence. Others were coming awake to stare dumbly at the proceedings. One man woke up and evidently thought he was over Jacksonville. He blinked stupidly.

"Hey, Corporal!" he shouted, "I'm on your team! Wait!"

The corporal didn't wait. The man dove after him.

A few minutes later, only the sleeping and the bewildered remained.

"Get those guys awake!" he demanded.

Still uncomprehending, they worked over their partners until only three sleepers remained.

"I think this guy's dead, Wuncie."

"Then let him alone. He might be hard to wake."

But when he got the rest of them out, he stepped over the moaning, cursing Parrin and went back to

check the allegedly dead. Two faces were tinted with Paris green, but everybody lived. He unsnapped their chute packs and took them with him, to insure that they stayed aboard. Then he went back to call Jacksonville Tower. Jenkins was still waiting.

"Jenkins, I'm coming in to land at the airport."

"Come over the city, we shoot you down," was the stern reply.

He explained the situation, then asked: "Have you got my blip on the radar scope?"

"Yes, we've been watching it."

"I'm coming to the edge of the city and circle. You don't trust me, okay. Get one of your night-fighters on my tail. Have him ride me in at whatever range he shoots best. If a parachute pops out, he clobbers me. Is that fair?"

The commissioner thought about it. "Maybe. How would you come in?"

"Straight approach. No base leg. The hell with the wind. I'll pick a strip that won't carry me over the city. My God, Jenkins. What more do you want?"

"A reason."

"Didn't get you. Say again."

"A reason why you want to land here. I think if I were in your boots, Wuncie, I'd run for some little airport in the sticks."

"Why?"

"We're a little irritated with you, to put it mildly."

Sam chuckled. "Did you ever watch the colonel's men hang a guy feet down over a bonfire? I doubt if you're that irritated."

"Well, come on in. We're glad to get the ship back. But we don't want you — unless, of course, you want to take our entrance tests and can pass them."

He swung the ship northeast toward the pool of light. He thought about it a moment.

"I want some information, Jenkins."

"Shoot."

"What are you testing for, anyway? And why? Just like to play king of the heap?"

"We test for just two things, Wuncie. The basic, genetically fundamental attitude of the organism to his environment, and his general ability to analyze. We only screen out the extremes: the blindly aggressive and the completely passive. MacMahon is one extreme; a farmer who's completely happy hoeing corn is the other. We don't want the former. And the latter doesn't want in anyway. As far as analyzing ability is concerned, we don't want morons — but that's about all."

"What about this branding business, man? That's ridiculous. You know what happens to those people, don't you?"

"Yes, and we're sorry about it. You must remember, Wuncie, they agree to the condition before they take the test. The rural persecution of them will have to stop, because there are getting to be a lot of them. They're banding together. Eventually they'll run MacMahon's kind out. That's why we do it. We're giving him a minority group to bully, but we help the minority group. We dropped several cases of arms to a bunch over in Gainesville."

"Aren't you afraid they'll use the arms on you?"

"We're not worried about it. After all, Wuncie, if it weren't for fanatics like MacMahon, we could work out a cooperative solution. We're perfectly willing to trade industrial goods for foodstuffs and raw materials that the rurals raise. Some of the northern sectors have done it. Really, Wuncie—some men just aren't cut out for industrial civilization. The fact that they were in one, tried desperately to adjust to it, and failed — that's what caused wars and full asylums and such. They really don't want technology, but they try to want it, because it exists. We want to create two societies, mutually dependent, one pastoral, one technological — and let men go where their abilities send them. Then we won't have a potential engineer chopping cotton, or a yokel repairing a servo-mechanism with a sledge-hammer, or a paranoiac running for governor."

"Sounds lovely," Sam grunted. "But it doesn't seem right."

"Right? Who said it was? We think it's *workable*."

"You've got all the answers?"

"Uh-uh, Wuncie. We're lucky to have a few hints. What is an answer, anyway?"

"Something that works, I guess."

"The city's working, isn't it?" He stared at the glare of the lights as the ship dropped toward it. He nodded to his unseen host, eyed the night-fighter that buzzed low over him as a signal, then racked back to get on his tail.

"Yeah, it's working," he grunted. "But where is it going?"

"Look up, Wuncie."

Jenkins probably meant to call his attention to the night-fighter. But he glanced upward anyway—and the stars glittered brightly, despite the city's glare.