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These Mind-Readers Hated Earthmen

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The Angry Espers



LLOYD BIGGLE, JR.



**Complete
Novel**

WALK ON AIR—OR FALL IN FLAMES!

Slowly the fog of unconsciousness thinned and Paul Corban began to remember. The spaceship had crashed, but first he had called the Galactic Federation Space Navy to report that he was lost . . . Wait a minute—yes, he had been lost and he had crashed, and . . .

Now he saw the strange men hovering over him. Doctors? Had they kept him alive? Was he dead? The men vanished; they blinked out of existence! Now, was he dead?

Soon, Paul Corban found that he was indeed alive and in his right mind—and that it would have been better for him and the universe if he had died, if he had gone insane, if he had lost his memory. Because the results of his survival could be infinitely disastrous!

Turn this book over for
second complete novel

LLOYD BIGGLE, JR. determined to be a writer while at the age of nine. By way of preparation he devoted some twenty years to the study of music, and as a result he may be the only science-fiction writer in the known universe who owns a Ph.D degree in musicology. Along the way he worked as a store clerk, dishwasher, waiter, freight-handler, insurance agent, and college teacher, and tasted fire as an infantryman in the European Theatre in World War II. Some three dozen of his published stories are science-fiction, and THE ANGRY ESPERS is his first novel.

THE ANGRY ESPERS

by
LLOYD BIGGLE, JR.

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THE PUZZLE PLANET

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PART ONE

1

HE LAY suspended in a delicious void of no sensation, and his slowly returning consciousness intruded rudely. He resisted it, turning aside the fragile wisps of thought until his mind boldly posed a question: Where am I?

His mind answered: In a hospital.

He had seen enough of the planet as he came crashing down to know that it supported a high civilization. Medical science would be elaborately developed, and it was lavishing attention upon him. If it were not, his awakening would have been a pain-wracked inferno instead of this delightful nothing feeling. Or perhaps there would have been no awakening. The odds had been stacked rather formidably on the side of not awakening when he saw solid ground rocketing towards him.

He opened his eyes.

The room shimmered in a misty blue light. Pale blue smocks bent over him. Two men with solemn faces were studying him gravely, communing with his life force in the mysterious manner of all doctors. There was an aura of sympathy about them, of the power of healing.

He lay with limbs immobilized and looked up at them. His mind floated languorously, a thing apart from his inert body. "I must have done a first-rate job of smashing myself up," he thought.

Suddenly alarm tensed the faces above him. The change was so drastic, so startling, that panic overwhelmed him, and he struggled frantically to raise an arm or move his head. He knew that they could not understand his language, but in his desperation he spoke.

"My name is Paul Corban. I am an Ensign in the Space Navy of the Galactic Federation. My base . . ."

They were gone. There was no more than the flick of an

eyelash between their presence above him and the disheartening emptiness of the shimmering blue ceiling that arched above his head. He screamed wildly.

In response came nothing. There was not even a dull echo to mock him.

He screamed again as his mind grappled with the terror of being utterly alone and utterly helpless. No one came, and after a time he relaxed and drifted off to sleep. The absence of sensation was no longer a pleasure, and his sleep was haunted by the parting glances flung his way by the two doctors—expressions of unspeakable, ruthless loathing.

A new face hovered above his when he awoke. It was a woman, young, not unattractive except for her hair-styling, which left her head trimmed bare about her ears, and piled hair upwards on top of her head to give her face a mournfully elongated appearance. Her smock, he noted, was a dark blue.

She thrust a straw into his mouth. It was attached to something she held beyond his field of vision. He was hungry, and he drank deeply of the thick, flavorsome soup.

The woman's attitude puzzled him. He lay helplessly on his back, able to control only his eyes and his lips. He could hardly have presented a menacing appearance. But there was apprehension in her face, distrust—almost fright.

And loathing. Unmistakable loathing. It was as though she had been condemned to care for a hideous reptile of uncertain origin.

He spoke around the straw. "Why do you hate me?"

She winced, and the taut line of her mouth underscored her silence. He watched her as he drank the soup. Had her face paled suddenly when he spoke, or had he imagined it? She could not understand him. She was alien to him, perhaps more alien than he could imagine, and it was probably foolish of him to attempt to interpret an alien's emotions through facial expressions.

He finished the soup, and released the straw. The woman vanished. She did not move away; she did not move at all. In

the same instant her face was and was not bending over him. He lay blinking at the ceiling.

"Maybe I'm delirious," he said. "Maybe they're delirious. Or maybe they do it with mirrors."

He slept and woke. His bodily needs were attended to. He patiently submitted to the scrutiny of a multiplicity of figures in various shades of blue, who loomed above him suddenly, and just as suddenly disappeared.

In his waking moments he daydreamed. A civilian investigating committee had arrived at Qualo Base just before he left, checking into a rash of accidents involving the 11C, the military courier ship. The committee claimed that the ship was uneconomical and unsafe. It lacked proper navigational instruments. Its one-man crew had to function as pilot, engineer and navigator, which was too big an order for a young officer. The ship had inadequate fuel reserves. The military, of course, denied everything.

Corban breathed a fervent "amen" to the entire bill of indictment. He had gotten himself lost—so thoroughly lost that he had no idea where he had landed. This world might be an undiscovered part of the known galaxy, or it might be somewhere off into the unknown. There was lots of space in the galaxy, a fact which had been uncomfortably brought home to him when his fuel ran low and he was looking for a suitable planet for an emergency landing.

He wondered how long base could cover up his disappearance before the investigating committee dug it out. If his own misfortune were the one factor that led to the scrapping of the 11C, he'd have accomplished something. None of the courier pilots loved the work. It wasn't much fun batting about space by oneself, even though the brass delivered long paeans about the excellent training and experience.

But whatever the investigating committee recommended, it would come too late to help Paul Corban. He'd come down too fast to observe signs of space travel. Perhaps this unknown civilization had it, perhaps not. If it didn't, he was marooned. If it did, perhaps he was marooned anyway. Strange civiliza-

tions were known to be wary about contacting potential enemies, even in an act of mercy.

He wondered how his family would take the news. His mother and father would confidently wait for him to turn up—somewhere, somehow. His brother Bill, who had violated all principles of sound reasoning by joining the army, would go around prating his obsolete nonsense about keeping one foot on the ground—as if the army could ever get to a war by keeping on the ground! As for his sister Sue, who would have set her wedding date by now—he hoped the news of his disappearance wouldn't arrive until afterwards. He wouldn't want anything to spoil Sue's wedding.

He amused himself for a time by imagining little Sue in a wedding gown, and then he slept.

Sensation returned to him slowly. He was able to move his head, and realize that it was heavily bandaged. One side of his face was bandaged. Feeling crept slowly down his right arm. He became conscious of his legs, heavy and unwieldy. The two doctors who flashed into his presence at regular intervals kept examining him with meticulous care, but even in the deft certainty of their movements he sensed a reluctance, a hesitation. Watching them, he knew that they hated to touch him. They spoke no word, either to him or to each other, and they always disappeared simultaneously.

As soon as he could move his head, he turned his attention to the room around him. There was little to see. It was a cell, rather than a room, small, six-sided, without doors or windows. One corner was partitioned off, and strange objects could be seen through a partly-opened sliding door. Strange, but not unmistakable. It was a bathroom. Just below the high ceiling, a grillwork ran completely around the room, and seemed to be the source of light—and also, he thought, ventilation or heat.

His food changed from liquids to solids. The female attendant fed him cautiously, courageously, and uttered no sound. None of his visitors uttered a sound, and the silence became a torment. He lost track of time. He was unable to distinguish between day and night, even if the planet had a day and a

night, because the dim haze of blue light in the room was always the same.

There came that triumphant moment when he was first able to push himself into a sitting position, but the feeling of exultation was quickly lost in the amazement inspired by his bed. As he raised himself up, the bed rose behind him to accommodate his new position. This seemed merely ingenious, until he looked down and found his bandage-swathed body resting upon nothing at all.

There was a box-like object on the floor below him, six feet long, three wide, and a few inches thick. Above that—nothing! Still he rested comfortably three feet above the floor. He tested the bed with his hands, with his body. It adapted itself to the contour of his body, to his movements, firmly soft, completely yielding without yielding at all.

The only other item of furniture in the room was a small table.

"A high civilization," he thought. Marvelous mechanical contrivances, that permitted the optimum use of space because such mundane considerations as light and ventilation were no longer important. There was an advanced medical science. The blue light probably killed germs. Pain had been banished. "Now," he thought, "if I just knew how the hell they get in and out of this room . . ."

The two doctors were standing beside the bed when he turned. They were familiar figures, now—their faces, their mannerisms, even, he thought, their moods, except that he was never quite certain as to what their moods might represent. One doctor was tall, with a long, lean face that seemed perpetually mournful. The other was shorter, with a round face that normally held no expression at all.

Obediently he leaned back, and the bed accommodated his movement. They bent over him, and began to remove the bandages from his chest. As always, they seemed to hold themselves apart from the duty that their hands must perform, and distaste crept into their expressions.

The last of the bandages fell away. They examined his

chest, and then, as he watched them, they disappeared. He straightened up and sat for a long time studying the floor where they had been standing.

"If they would say something," he thought, "it wouldn't be so bad. Perhaps I could pick up a little of their language, and find out what the score is—what it is about me that disgusts them so. I wouldn't even care if they didn't talk to me, if they'd just talk to each other now and then."

If he had to remain in this society, he would be an outcast. That much seemed certain. And he might never know why.

He was sleeping the next time the doctors came. They awakened him, and he sat up quickly. Strength was pulsating back into his body, and he was impatiently awaiting the moment when he could leave his bed. He wished he could ask them how long it would be before he could use his legs.

They removed the bandage from his head, and suddenly there was a third man beside them, a boyish-looking young doctor, and with him was a machine. The thing was slender, as tall as a man, and dazzling in its multitude of colored dials, buttons, and incomprehensible gadgets. The young doctor rolled the machine over to the bed, and placed a gleaming, helmet-like affair on Corban's head.

He tensed with alarm, and then forced himself to relax. They had saved his life. Whatever they might think of him, they had given him excellent care. There was no reason for him to be suspicious.

The machine hummed, and flashed to life. The older doctors retired to the far corner of the room. The young doctor's fingers played expertly with the buttons and dials. Pain throbbed in Corban's head, became a pounding torment, and exploded him into unconsciousness.

The machine was gone when he opened his eyes. The doctors were still there, waiting as if nothing very important had happened. The young doctor placed two black-and-white striped globes on the bed beside him. They looked very much like small balloons, and Corban touched one and decided that

they *were* balloons. "My present for being a good boy?" he wondered.

The young doctor's expression intrigued Corban. It was eager, almost childishly expectant. He frowned as Corban watched him, and shifted the position of the balloons. Corban understood, and watched the balloons.

One of them moved slowly upwards. It hovered in front of Corban's face, and in his perplexity he moved his hand above it and around it. The balloon continued to hover, and finally it moved slowly downwards to the bed.

The doctors were watching Corban. He looked at them, looked at the balloons, and shrugged. He said nothing. He had long since learned that the sound of his voice irritated them.

A balloon rose again, rose slowly, all the way to the ceiling. As it started down, the second balloon rose. Both stopped in front of Corban's face. On an impulse, he reached out and pushed at a balloon. To his amazement it resisted. It seemed solidly fixed in midair. He withdrew his hand and watched. One balloon slid slowly downwards to the bed. The other rose to the ceiling. Up and down they went. They circled the room and returned to the bed.

Corban stretched out his hand, and batted at one. It rose into the air and floated away, to come down slowly. It bounced lightly on the floor. The doctors had edged forward. Clearly they wanted him to do something, but they couldn't tell him what it was, and evidently they wouldn't show him. He sank back onto his bed and stared at the ceiling, wondering just what the devil was going on.

When he looked up again, the young doctor was beside him with the machine.

Corban shoved the helmet aside. He was prepared to do battle, if necessary, to keep that miniature torture chamber away from his head. The young doctor made another attempt, and then stepped back. He extended one hand, light flashed in front of Corban's eyes, and he lost consciousness.

He awoke with pain pounding in his head. The machine

was gone. The balloons rested on the bed beside him, and the doctors stood waiting.

The same nonsensical procedure was repeated three times. The balloons performed fantastic tricks. Corban watched dumbly, and the doctors waited expectantly. Then they would bring back the machine.

Finally they left him, and he lay awake for a long time wondering how soon he could escape, and how he would go about doing it. He knew they would be back—the doctors, and the balloons and the machine—and the thought terrified him.

When they came again, they removed the last of his bandages. He looked his nude body over carefully, searching for some sign of damage, for scars, and he found himself miraculously unblemished. He flexed his legs luxuriously. Considering what he had been through, his physical condition seemed excellent. As the doctors watched, he got hesitantly to his feet and took his first, faltering step.

He did not doubt that they had performed a miracle of healing upon him. Few men survived such a crash as he had taken. His body must have been a battered pulp. He felt a twinge of guilt at having resisted them when they had labored so long and so diligently to restore his health.

Then they brought the machine, and the balloons.

As soon as they left him alone, he climbed from his bed and began to inspect the room. He searched the walls for a sliding panel, similar to that which led into his bathroom. He found nothing at all but a smooth, metallic surface. The grillwork near the ceiling was plainly beyond his reach, even if it did provide a means of escape.

He would have to wait, but while he waited he must make himself strong. He began to trot around the brief circumference of the room. His unused muscles quickly protested, but he was satisfied at having made a start.

He had no clothing, and he dreaded the appearance of a female attendant. He had not minded being looked after while he was bandaged and helpless, but now that he was

able to look after himself he felt needlessly exposed. He was apprehensive as meal time approached, but no attendant came. Instead, a meal tray mysteriously appeared on the table that stood near his bed. He ate, and returned the tray to the table. It disappeared.

His next visitor was the young doctor. He brought two shining disks, which he placed on the floor at opposite sides of the room. They were a full yard in diameter, and perhaps three or four inches thick. When the doctor saw that he had Corban's attention, he stepped onto one of the disks. Corban watched open-mouthed as the doctor rose slowly upwards. He placed his hand against the wall, pushed himself away, and bounded back to the floor.

With gestures, he invited Corban to try it. Corban shrugged, and stepped onto the disk. Immediately he experienced a weird weightlessness. The floor sank slowly away from him. He pushed himself away and dropped lightly to the floor.

The doctor beamed his satisfaction. It was, Corban thought, the closest thing to a smile he had received since he first regained consciousness.

Under the doctor's eager supervision, he repeated the experiment. On the third try he boldly let himself ride up to the ceiling. As he peered curiously at the grillwork, the doctor hurried forward and made an adjustment at the side of the disk. Corban floated slowly downwards.

At least the effort hadn't been wasted. He knew, now, that there was no way of escape there.

"It's a good sport, chum," Corban said. "But aren't we a little old for this sort of thing?"

The spoken words brought a scowl to the doctor's face. Frowning, he stepped onto the disk, floated upwards, and vanished. Corban blinked, whirled, and saw him descending slowly above the second disk. The doctor repeated the process twice. Disk number one, a short ride up, vanish. Appear mysteriously over disk number two, and ride down.

"This science of theirs," Corban thought, "is pretty hot stuff. Now I understand their disappearing acts. They probably wear an atomic power unit in those funny sandals."

In that instant he evolved an escape plan. If the doctor would teach him to transfer himself from one disk to another, perhaps he could find an auspicious moment to transfer himself beyond the hospital. He had nothing to lose in trying.

The doctor pointed to disk number one. Corban pointed to his feet. Eventually the doctor understood, and reluctantly removed his sandals. Corban put them on, and eagerly stepped onto the disk. He held his breath, and waited to be transferred across the room. Nothing happened, except that he floated upwards and gently bumped his head on the ceiling.

The doctor lowered him to the floor, and moved the second disk closer to the first. Corban tried again. He floated upwards, and when nothing happened he reached out to the wall and pushed himself away. He gauged the distance nicely. His thrust carried him over the second disk, which allowed him to sink easily to the floor.

The doctor seemed confused. While Corban waited he stood for a few minutes lost in solemn meditation, and then he claimed his sandals, picked up his disks and vanished.

Corban continued his exercising. He gave himself a stiff course in calisthenics, and wracked his brain to think of muscle-building exercises. He had great sport diving onto his odd, nonexistent bed, which easily absorbed his most reckless dashes. His strength returned rapidly.

The young doctor continued to visit him at regular intervals. He brought his balloons, or the disks, or some other idiotic contrivance. There was a small game which seemed to play itself, with pieces shifting according to some intricate pattern. When Corban took the board, the pieces remained motionless. There was an arrangement of steps, and the doctor moved from one to the other with a dazzling technique which seemed to consist of disappearing from one step and reappearing at the same instant on the next. When Corban's turn came, he casually walked up and down. The doctor was obviously disappointed.

Eventually this doctor and his gadgets began to irritate Corban. He was feeling physically fit, his health was fully

restored, and lingering on in a hospital merely to watch a youthful doctor's parlor tricks made no sense to him. He decided to put a stop to these sessions by ridiculing them, and in time he succeeded.

The doctor was playing with his disks, and he had just transferred himself from one disk to the other and floated smuggly back to the floor. Corban said aloud, "That's not bad, chum, but I can do tricks, too. Look."

He stood on his head. He turned cartwheels. He walked a few steps on his hands. He made a graceful swan dive onto his bed, turned a somersault, and ended up in front of the doctor with a polite bow.

The doctor gathered up his equipment and disappeared. Corban never saw him again.

For what seemed an interminable length of time he was left completely to himself. His meals arrived, and he ate them. The tray vanished when he returned it to the table. He missed the young doctor's visits, and began to regret his rash action.

His next visitors were not doctors. They were husky individuals, dressed in yellow smocks and trousers, and they brought no games to play with him. They grasped him firmly, one on each side, and before he was conscious of change he was no longer in his room.

The place was six-sided, like his own room, but much larger. There was a formidable array of blue-smocked doctors on hand, male and female. There were women dressed in the darker blue he associated with nurses. In the center of the room was one of the queer, invisible beds, identifiable only through the base plate on the floor. The room's lighting focused on the bed with a startling, glareless brightness.

The other equipment was strange, but Corban did not have to be told what it was. In a hospital on Earth, or at the far end of the galaxy, that kind of an arrangement could mean only one thing—surgery.

And the patient was Paul Corban.

He jerked free of his escorts. "What's the big idea? There's nothing wrong with me."

A doctor stepped forward. Corban leaped away, and placed his back to a wall. All faces in the room were fixed on his nudity. The yellow-smocked men moved towards him calmly.

"Keep away!" Corban shouted. "I'm not having any operation. I don't need one."

His words dropped hollowly in the sound-deadened room. The only other sound was his own quick breathing. The faint scent of some kind of drug or medicine turned his fear to panic. He flattened a yellow-smocked man with one punch, and the other slowly backed away.

The doctor walked towards him. Corban watched him warily, hands ready to defend himself. The doctor pointed, light flashed, and Corban lost consciousness.

He awoke in his own room, or in one exactly like it. He felt no pain. He felt almost no sensation at all, though his arms and legs moved freely. He pushed himself erect, and searched his body anxiously. What had they done? Crippled him? Emasculated him?

He moved his hand, and found the bandage. They had operated on his head.

He felt drained of energy, and utterly despondent. His tray of food appeared on the table, remained there, and finally disappeared untouched. He did not want food. He wanted nothing but to get out of this damnable place, to hear human voices, to lie on the grass and watch the sun go down.

After he ignored the third meal, his two doctors came to examine him. They checked his body thoroughly, except for his bandaged head. He pointedly ignored them. A nurse came, and attempted to feed him. He turned his nudity away from her, and when he looked again she was gone. The food continued to arrive on schedule, and eventually hunger forced him to eat.

They came in a delegation to remove his bandages. There were five doctors, all strangers except for one he remembered

from the operating room. They brought all of the paraphernalia with them—the balloons, the disks, the games. The doctors examined his head in turn, and then they stepped back while one of them performed.

Corban watched sullenly. The balloons went up and down. Corban ignored them. The doctor performed the disk trick expertly. Corban refused to play. And so it went, with the doctors watching him intently. Their facial expressions were a puzzle to him. There was interest there, certainly. Eagerness—perhaps. But behind it all was an aversion, a loathing that made him cringe and want to hide. And there was no hiding place.

Silently they watched. Silently they gathered up their equipment. Each doctor in turn moved close to him, and stepped back. Then they turned away, turned their backs to him, and disappeared. The gesture seemed symbolic. They were giving him up. He was a hopeless case.

2

TEN MINUTES LATER he left the hospital. Two male attendants brought clothing, and Corban obediently pulled on black trousers and smock. The attendants took his arms, and the hospital room disappeared.

They were in an enormous, brightly-lighted, circular room. The high dome of the ceiling arched far above them. There was a scattering of people in the room, some disappearing while Corban watched, others appearing before his startled eyes. Those who saw Corban regarded him hatefully, or turned away.

Then the attendants gripped his arms again. They passed through a series of such rooms, all similar, and no two exactly alike. Corban could only speculate idly as to the distance they were covering, and he lost count of the number of stops.

Finally he was led out of a circular room, and into a corridor. The hospital attendants turned him over to a muscular young man wearing a dark blue smock and trousers. No words were exchanged.

They left the building. Corban had a brief glimpse of sunshine and bluish-green grass, and then he was in an enclosed ground car. The ride was a long one—half an hour, he estimated, over an absolutely smooth road. In the windowless interior of the car, he had no idea how fast they were going.

Their destination was a sprawling, single-story building with a gray-metallic exterior. Corban was offered food, which he refused. He was led down a long corridor, and gestured into a room. The door closed behind him. He tried it immediately, and found it locked.

"Anyway," he said to himself, "it's different. And it had windows!"

He looked out on a lovely, wooded park. There were courts, where some kind of a game was being played. Men and women dressed similarly to himself were walking about or sitting. Through the trees, he caught a glimpse of rolling farm land. A small stream traversed the park.

"Must be some kind of a convalescent home," he thought. "It could be worse."

It could have been a hell of a lot worse. He grinned his satisfaction, and turned to examine his room.

He recognized the invisible bed immediately. There was also an invisible chair, and a small table similar to his hospital table. There were even pictures set in the wall—three-dimensional, animated nature scenes, where brooks bubbled, water splashed merrily over waterfalls, and birds flitted about trees that swayed realistically in the wind. There was a bathroom, and a small closet with drawers set in the wall. Corban tried them, and found that they folded out, rather than pulled.

"Real home-like," he said. Someone had given a lot of thought to making the place comfortable. He wondered how long it would be his home.

Suddenly one panel of the gray door glowed softly pink.

Corban tried the door, and it opened. A trio of doctors confronted him gravely. They made no move until he stepped back and invited them in with a gesture. At this place, at least, they seemed to respect his privacy. That pleased him.

With motions they asked him to remove his clothing. They examined him. With motions they told him to dress. They did not speak, and they left with a gesture that seemed half bow and half salute. He tried the door after they closed it, and found it locked.

A young man in the dark blue of a nurse brought extra clothing, all of it the drab black color that he was wearing. His door remained locked. He went to the window again, and looked out on the park. The window resisted his pushing and pulling until he noticed a lever on the wall nearby. A push, and the entire window moved outward some four inches. He sniffed eagerly at the breeze that drifted in to him. From somewhere nearby came clumsy plucking on a musical instrument. Suddenly a voice was lifted in song. He felt strangely moved. It was the first human voice he'd heard since he left Qualo Base, long months before. And it proved that these people had a spoken language—even if they did not choose to speak to strangers.

As the first shadows of dusk touched the park, a meal tray appeared on his table. He ate looking out of the window. The room grew dark, and he did not know or care what the lighting arrangements might be. He remained by the window, straining his ears to catch the sound of passing footsteps, or the faint murmur of an unintelligible conversation.

In the morning he bathed, dressed himself, and ate the food which so conveniently appeared on the table. The continued confinement puzzled him. It was not unreasonable that they should isolate a newcomer for a time, to assure themselves as to his health; but certainly that should not apply to a person just discharged after a lengthy stay in the hospital.

A series of musical notes sounded softly. He looked around

for the source, and found the door panel glowing pink. He leaped for it eagerly.

His caller was a girl. She wore the light-blue smock and trousers of a doctor, which seemed startling because she looked so young. She entered at his gesture of invitation, closed the door after her, and stood smiling at him.

With a sweeping gesture he offered her his chair. She turned, went to the closet, and brought out the base plate for a second chair. She placed it on the floor, made an adjustment, and rested herself on the invisible cushion.

She was decidedly attractive. The above-the-ears hair-styling still seemed odd to him, but the girl would have been attractive anywhere, regardless of fashions. His contacts with other women of this planet had been brief and perfunctory, but he sensed immediately that somehow she was different.

Watching her smile, he understood. She was accepting him casually, as a fellow human. There was a delightful, innocent enthusiasm in her expression. He obediently accepted her unspoken invitation to sit beside her, and he continued to watch her wonderingly.

From a bag, she shook a pile of polished cubes onto the desk in front of him. She spread them out, selected four, and arranged them in a row.

"Alir," she said.

Her voice was soft and musical, and he drank deeply of the sound long after it had faded. The cubes—yes, there were odd symbols engraved on the sides. They would be letters. She was teaching him her language.

"Alir," he repeated.

She pointed to herself. "Alir."

He nodded. So her name was Alir. A beautiful name, until he remembered that there would be some kind of prefix or suffix meaning doctor.

She pointed at him. "Paul," he said. She selected three cubes, arranged them in a row, and repeated, "Paul." And having managed the introduction, she began the first lesson.

She spent several mornings with him, and as soon as he had a small working vocabulary she took him on a tour of the

building. The place seemed enormous, though he wondered if that might not be a natural reaction to his having been confined for so long. He was shown the dining room, a circular indoor pool, and a variety of recreational facilities, most of which he did not understand. He was taken for a walk in the park, and introduced to a number of persons who wore his own shade of black.

Impulsively he tried the door after she left him in his room. It was unlocked. He closed it again, and stretched out on his bed. He had been a prisoner for so long that a measure of freedom made him feel uneasy.

He was apprehensive lest the unlocked door mark the end of his language lessons, but Doctor Alir came as usual the next morning. She went to some pains to instruct him on the daily routine. He could go to one of the dining rooms for his meals, or he could have them sent to his room. He had the freedom of building and grounds, except for those rooms or areas that were plainly marked for authorized personnel. Women were housed in the opposite wings, and if he cared to cultivate the acquaintance of any of them, he was free to do so.

Some of the patients worked at various occupations which interested them. Some had various hobbies, which she called diversions. If he cared to occupy himself with either, he had only to ask. She would come each morning to continue his language instruction until he became sufficiently fluent. His only other obligation was to present himself for a physical examination when asked.

He asked a question, piecing it together as well as he could from his limited vocabulary. How long was he to be there?

Was it his imagination that her smile faltered? "Until you recover," she said, which seemed reasonable enough at the time. It wasn't until afterwards that he balanced this against the apparently perfect state of his health, and wondered.

As soon as she had gone, he left his room and hurried down the long corridor. He left the building at a side door, skirted the park, and walked quickly away across the fields. Grain was ripening in the bright sunshine. It grew in widely-

separated, circular patches, its dusky brown kernels swaying at the top of waist-high stalks. In the distance two black-clothed men operated a low, oblong machine. Corban moved easily across the field, paralleling the road that curved away to his right.

The unrestricted vistas exhilarated him. There were no fences, no barricades. A low mound followed the road, marking, he supposed, the boundary of the estate. Beyond the road was rolling, blue-green countryside and a glimpse of distant buildings.

The ground rose slowly. As he followed the curve of the road, he could look back and see the arched gate that marked the main entrance—only entrance, as far as he knew. There was a sign over the gate, but by the time he achieved an angle which would have allowed him to read it, he was too far away to make out the letters.

To his left was a wooded hill, from which flowed the stream that eventually crossed the park near his living quarters. To his right was the road, its dark surface stretching into the distance as far as his eyes could follow it. There was no traffic.

He turned impulsively, and walked towards the road.

As he reached the mound, he walked without warning into a solid object. He felt cautiously with his hands, and recognized the substance. It was the same invisible spongy firmness that emanated from his bed plate.

He stepped back. He kicked peevishly at the barrier, and then, in a rush of anger, he leaped forward and started to climb. It was surprisingly easy. Feet and hands pushed into the spongy substance and held. He moved upwards, five feet, ten feet—the thing seemed to have no top at all. He paused and looked uneasily at the ground, clinging tightly to the invisible mass.

He looked again at the tempting, unlimited vistas beyond, and to his surprise a man stood on the far side of the road watching him. His clothing was a dusky blue-green, obviously a uniform. He carried some kind of weapon, which he held in a rest position. As Corban hesitated, an entire squad of armed

men suddenly materialized beside the lone guard. Their attitude was alert, but not belligerent. They watched him, and waited.

Corban scrambled back to the ground. When he turned, the squad of men had disappeared. The guard continued to watch him.

Corban retreated hastily, and sought refuge among the trees of the hilltop. It was a lovely, restful place. Water bubbled out of the ground, and flowed merrily over several small waterfalls on its way down the hill. Delightful, exotic-colored birds fluttered among the large leaves overhead.

Hidden among the foliage, Corban studied the ground beyond the road. In time, he was able to pick out the sentries. They were stationed in various positions of concealment, and their uniforms made them hard to see. But they were there, at regular intervals, as far as he could see in either direction.

He shrugged, and banished the matter from his mind. Mystery had been piled upon mystery, for so long that his mental processes refused to contemplate another. He stretched out on the soft grass and watched the birds until he dozed off.

That evening, as strains of music drifted up to Corban's window, he went out and sat down near the musician. It was an elderly man, plucking awkwardly on a crude, three-stringed instrument. He broke off when he saw Corban.

"New, aren't you?" he said.

"Yes," Corban said.

A bystander broke into a torrent of conversation, which Corban followed with difficulty. The gist of it seemed to be that someone working in the office had seen Corban's records. He had been in an accident.

The old man turned to Corban. "What kind of an accident?"

The question placed an undue strain on Corban's vocabulary. He answered lamely, "A bad accident."

The old man seemed satisfied. He returned to plucking.

Corban asked a question. "How long have you been here?"

The old man looked up, surprised. There was an odd silence

among the dozen or so onlookers. "Always," the old man said.

Corban walked away slowly, with another mystery to plague him. Was there no clue to be had anywhere?

There was a sign over the main entrance. Perhaps it would tell him something, perhaps not, but he had to read it.

At his next language lesson he brought up the subject of the little grove on the hill. "The birds are pretty," he said, irritated at the confines of his vocabulary.

Doctor Alir smiled. "Yes. They are very pretty."

"I like to watch them," he said. "I'd like something to help me watch them."

She frowned, adding an unfamiliar dimension to her beauty. "I don't understand."

With fumbling words and gestures he conveyed the idea of binoculars. His efforts brought him a small tube of startling magnification, but his request for some kind of a bird-watching guide went unsatisfied. Doctor Alir told him reluctantly that there was no such thing.

He followed his route of the day before, threading his way through the grain field and paralleling the road. When he had progressed far enough so that the gate was visible, he sat down to rest. He had already spotted a sentry, standing motionless in a clump of bushes across the road. He made his movements as natural as possible. He hid the tiny telescope in his hand, and brushed the hand against his face.

The sign above the gate leaped towards him. Part of it he recognized—he'd seen the words in enough places: AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. Above this, in larger letters, was a single word.

He moved his hand away, stretched carelessly, and looked again. His lips formed the word: "*Raxtinu*." He had never seen it before, or heard it.

He got to his feet, and walked slowly towards the grove on the hill. It was possible, he told himself, that it meant something as innocuous as the name on the Lake View Rest Home on Porina, to which an elderly aunt of his had once

been dispatched. It was possible, but he doubted it. The Lake View Rest Home had not surrounded itself with force fields and armed guards.

He lay on his back in the grass, watching the charming birds and asking himself for an explanation—any explanation at all. The old man who sang, the others he had met—could they be criminals? They did not seem dangerous in any way. He had never seen a member of the staff going about armed, and Doctor Alir came to his room without showing any sign of apprehension. The patients—he could only think of himself as a patient—had every freedom within the grounds, and were treated with every consideration. Were they somehow political prisoners?

If so, then why was he here?

"Always," the old man had said.

"Until you recover," Doctor Alir had said.

Recover from what?

When he tired of bird-watching, he wandered off through the fields. From a low rise he saw a distant village. He studied it through his telescope. It seemed to be a normal village, with women going about their tasks, children playing, men coming home from a day's work.

But all wore black.

There was a library in the building, a small room with a pathetically small collection of books. The books were badly printed and clumsily bound, and had it not been for the durable synthetic fabric of the pages Corban would have considered them imports from some low-technology civilization. They were all simply written, and they concerned such innocent subjects as agriculture, or the simple manufacturing which he found some of the patients participating in, or the various diversions. On his request, Doctor Alir found a slender volume which satisfied his clumsy description of a dictionary.

It confused him immediately, because its organization was not alphabetical. Instead, it seemed to follow some obscure pattern governed, but not entirely governed, by meaning.

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It was like a word list designed to assist an author of book for beginning readers.

Because it was brief, he went through it quickly. The word *Raxtinu* did not appear.

The barrier enclosed an enormous area. Corban started out one morning after his lesson with Doctor Alir, and attempted to follow it around its entire circumference. When he turned back, in late afternoon, he had not yet reached the end of the side that paralleled the road. All along the way he saw sentries, and the last stage of his return trip was lighted by a diffused glow that emanated from the barrier as darkness came on. *Raxtinu* would not be an easy place from which to escape.

He made an evening ritual of sitting out in the park listening to the old man sing. His cracked voice had an appealing sweetness which made up somewhat for his lack of repertory. His songs were childish fables about strange animals, and Corban found them amusing, and compared them with songs he remembered from his own youth. Other patients stopped to listen, grew bored, and drifted on. Corban took little interest in them, but for a time all of them seemed interested in him. His was a new face, and for some reason he could not account for, new faces were evidently a rarity.

The attractive younger women took a special, and very direct, interest in him. He reacted awkwardly. As an officer in the Space Navy, he had been leery of marriage. Months of separation did not seem a proper basis for a happy marriage. His commanding officer, Commander Winslow, had thought otherwise. Somehow he considered Corban a bright young officer with a future, and in his opinion nothing was as helpful to a bright young officer as an understanding wife.

"I'm inviting my sister out to visit for a few months," he told Corban. "She's attractive, and she's a fine girl. She and I have always been close together. She'd make a fine wife for a young officer, and I want you to meet her."

That was Commander Winslow's way; there was no subterfuge in his personal relationships. Corban looked at Sylvia

Winslow's photo, and had to admit that she was very attractive. Obviously the Commander was fanatically devoted to her. Marrying her might help Corban's career in more ways than one, but somehow marriage on that basis did not appeal to him. Of course meeting her would not obligate him in any way, and he could not tell the Commander that he did not choose to become acquainted with his sister.

That was just before he left Qualo Base. He had set off on his last assignment knowing that Sylvia Winslow would be there when he returned, and almost looking forward to knowing her. By this time the Commander had probably found another young officer for her.

But Corban did not feel inclined to take one of these patients as a wife, and settle down in one of the small villages he had seen on the grounds. The old man's remark haunted him. "Always." He did not intend to remain at *Raxtinu* always.

Two male patients wandered out of the dusk and sat down beside him. Corban had not seen them before, and guessed that they were housed in another building. In his wanderings he had seen several spacious dormitories like his own. While the old man sang, they looked at Corban and he studied them.

One of them, dark, middle-aged, had the normal appearance of natives to this planet. The other, younger, almost boyish-looking, possessed flaming red hair, the first that Corban had seen among these people.

The old man finished his song, and indulged in some idle plucking.

"New, aren't you?" the redhead asked.

Corban admitted it. It was a routine question—a fellow patient seeing him for the first time would know very well that he was new, but the question was always asked.

"Name?"

"Paul," Corban said.

The redhead seemed startled. He opened his mouth as though to ask another question, hesitated, and looked at his companion.

The old man broke into the conversation. "He was in an accident. A bad accident."

"I see," the redhead said. "Head injuries?"

"All kinds of injuries," Corban said.

"I understand."

The two men withdrew. They talked guardedly at a distance, and for the rest of the evening they watched him with embarrassing directness. For several days they appeared regularly in the evening, seated themselves near Corban, and watched and listened. Then he saw them no more.

The word was *Raxtinu*, and he had to find out what it meant. He planned his approach carefully. "In some of the books," he told Doctor Alir, "I find words I don't know. And I don't find them in the word list. Is there a bigger word list somewhere?"

"That is strange," she said. "What are the words? Perhaps I can tell you what they mean."

"I didn't copy them," he said. "I'll do that. But I don't want to bother you every time I find a strange word. Isn't there someplace I could look?"

"There's a master machine in the Director's office. It's for the use of the staff, but perhaps I could get permission for you to use it occasionally."

"I would appreciate that," Corban said. "I was thinking that as long as there isn't any book about birds, perhaps I could write one. There are many different kinds to watch, here, and bird-watching might be a diversion some of the others would enjoy."

"That's an excellent idea. I'll speak to the director."

The machine was wheeled out for him, and placed in a corner of the administrative office. He settled himself in front of it, and staff members regarded him curiously as Doctor Alir explained its use. He blew the dust from its controls, and reflected that the machine was not much used.

He manipulated the dials, and spelled the word meaning

bird. The screen lit up. The explanation was encyclopedic, and he began to copy names and descriptions of birds.

Doctor Alir left him. The office staff, after a time, began to ignore him with the exception of one young woman who had obviously been instructed to keep an eye on him. She walked over at intervals to ask him if he was having difficulties. Corban patiently copied down information, and waited his chance.

Finally the young woman left the room. The others seemed to be paying no attention to him. Quickly he dialed the word *Raxtinu*, and the screen flashed to life.

"*Raxtinu*," he read, stumbling over words that were strange to him. "... for the mentally diseased. The word *Raxtinu* is applied to persons suffering from mental illness, and covers disorders ranging from simple mental deficiency to deficiencies of arruclam, cilloclam ..."

He scribbled the strange words, changed the setting back to *birds*, and stared at the screen dumbly.

He was in an asylum. They thought he was insane.

3

ON A WARM, sunny afternoon that followed a week of rain, Corban realized that he was in love with Doctor Alir. He had decided that some kind of a showdown was necessary on his status, but instead of coming directly to the point, he invited her to watch birds with him. To his intense surprise, she accepted.

Now, sitting in the grove and listening to her talk about the birds, he knew that he loved her. He longed to tumble her towering hair down over her ears and bury his face in its glistening softness, to touch her exquisitely formed nose with his lips, to see her dressed in appropriately feminine garments instead of the shapeless blue smock and trousers.

Not that her beauty was dimmed by a lack of feminine clothing, or by a strange hair-styling. She would have been beautiful no matter what outrage was committed upon her hair, and her sure, graceful movements imparted a life to the doctor's smock that its designer had probably not intended.

Corban could not have imagined himself the victim of more hopeless love. Even in his own world he was less than a first-rate matrimonial prospect, but at least he had some status there. In her world he was less than nothing. He was a ghastly deficit. He was insane.

He looked up glumly as she named the birds and described their habits in her low, musical voice. She knew them all. She knew everything about them. And there was no book on the subject!

"Is something the matter?" she asked.

Everything was the matter. But this seemed as good a time as any to try to do something about it. "What does *arruclam* mean?"

She lowered the telescope and stared at him. "You don't know?"

"No," he said.

"You really don't know?"

"No. And *cilloclam*. What does that mean?"

She got up abruptly and walked away as far as the edge of the grove, where she stood with her back to him, looking out across the fields. He watched her uneasily.

Finally she turned. "I think we'd better go back."

"All right," he said.

They walked side by side down the slope and across the grain field. Several times he glanced sideways at her. His gaze was fixed solemnly upon the far horizon, and lines of perplexity furrowed her brow.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's just that I don't understand."

She shook her head, and did not reply.

When they reached the building, they went directly to the administrative offices. "Wait here," she said, and disappeared into the inner reaches that were forbidden to all but

authorized personnel. Corban settled himself heavily upon an invisible chair.

On the wall opposite, a clock measured off the passing time with its concentric dials. Office personnel lost interest in him, and went silently about their tasks. He buried his face in his hands, and waited.

Suddenly she was back. "Come in, please," she said.

He followed her. A narrow corridor, a turn, another corridor, a doorway. She opened the door for him, and followed him into the private office.

The Director rose from his place at a long table, and smiled. He was one of the doctors who had examined Corban on his arrival—a tall, slender, pleasant-looking man with shrewd, penetrating blue eyes. Corban had seen him several times since then, without actually knowing who he was.

"You've met Director Wiln before, haven't you?" Doctor Alir said.

"I believe so," Corban said.

The Director nodded. "Sit down, please."

Corban sat down, and watched the Director thumb through a stack of papers.

"Your record is very complete," the Director said, "except where it matters. According to the hospital records, you were given the complete series of Buror Tests, and extensive therapy. Is that correct?"

Corban shook his head. "I just don't understand."

"The Buror Tests," the Director said. "Ah, of course the name would not be familiar to you. But certainly . . ."

He paused, and exchanged glances with Doctor Alir. She left the room, and returned a moment later with a striped balloon.

"Oh, that," Corban said, grimacing at the dismal recollection of lonely days in the hospital.

"Is it familiar to you?"

"Yes. There were two of them."

"And what was your reaction to that phase of the testing?"

"I don't know that I had any reaction. It just didn't make sense to me."

"Yes. Doctor Alir feels that your case has been grossly mishandled, and I'm inclined to agree with her. Certainly the Buror Tests are valueless if the patient is totally unaware of their purpose. Yes."

He thumbed through the papers again. Corban stole a glance at Doctor Alir, who stood waiting expectantly—for what, he could not imagine.

"Medical science continues to make dramatic advances," the Director said, "but the human brain remains to a certain extent a mystery. You suffered severe head injuries. As a matter of fact, it is something of a miracle that you survived, and it seems that the hospital staff failed to properly assess the possible damage to your memory. We must not be too severe with them. Your case is a rarity in a field where even now our knowledge is largely theoretical, and then—they were not equipped to establish proper communication with you. And we are not entirely blameless, because we accepted their report at face value. Well, then, Doctor Alir recommends that we resume therapy, and I heartily concur. Now that the communication barrier has been eliminated, the results may be entirely different. I promise you that my entire staff will work diligently for your recovery. I trust that we may count on your complete co-operation?"

Corban shook his head bewilderedly, then nodded. "Why, yes . . ."

"Very good. Your therapy will be under the direction of Doctor Alir. As you know, she is extremely capable. That is all."

Corban murmured his thanks, and Doctor Alir escorted him out. She was smiling brightly. "We'll begin in the morning," she said.

They sat on opposite sides of Corban's room, and on the floor between them lay a striped balloon. "Watch it," Doctor Alir said. "Concentrate on it."

The balloon rose slowly to the ceiling, and sank slowly downwards.

Corban shrugged. "I've seen that before, except that they

used two balloons. And I still don't understand. What's the purpose?"

"Watch!" she commanded.

The balloon rose again, moved towards him, moved away, returned to the floor.

"Now," she said, "you do it."

"Do what?"

"Move it upwards."

Corban stared at her blankly.

"Move it upwards," she said again. "*Will* it upwards."

"You mean—my God!"

Understanding staggered him. A vague something he dimly recalled from forgotten reference and idle conversation of those with time to waste. The wild theories of crackpots. Strange, impossible powers of the mind. Telekinesis!

He found himself on his feet, with no memory of having left his chair. He sat down limply. "You do it with your—with your minds?"

"Of course. I will it to rise."

The balloon rose and fell.

"Try," she said.

He shrugged despairingly, and focused upon the balloon. Six inches in diameter. Black and white stripes. Resting smugly on the floor in front of him. Up . . . up . . . up. The effort became painful.

"Concentrate!" she commanded.

He said lamely, "Nothing happens."

"Try again."

He tried. He thrust his entire tortured being at the damning inertness of the balloon. His nails gouged his palms as he clenched his fists, clenched his teeth, tensed his muscles. He relaxed, finally, and mopped the perspiration from his forehead. She was still smiling encouragement.

"You musn't become discouraged. We can hardly expect results the first time you try. After all, you were in a very severe accident."

"Was I?" he said bitterly.

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"Of course. But you might not even recall that. Your memory . . ."

"What else is there?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Those other things—the tests they tried at the hospital. What was I supposed to do?"

"Arruclam is quite enough to start with. Now supposing we try . . ."

"I'd like to know."

"All right. A few experiments, then . . ."

She gazed at him steadily, until he blushed and shifted his feet uneasily. "Did you hear anything?" she said finally.

"Hear anything?"

"I was talking to you."

"I didn't—you were talking?"

"Yes. I was talking about the birds."

"With your mind?"

"Certainly. That is the normal way to talk. The spoken language is only for those who have some impairment, or . . ."

"Or who aren't normal?"

She got to her feet. "Shall we look at the birds again? Come here."

Wonderingly, he stood beside her.

"Think now," she said. "The small clearing beside the stream. Do you remember it?"

He nodded.

"All right. Think about it. Concentrate on it. Now—let's go!"

She was gone.

He backed away slowly, and slumped onto his chair. A moment later she stood before him, looking at him inquiringly.

"You do *that* with your mind?" he said.

"Yes."

"You went out there, just now, where we were yesterday?"

"Yes."

Telekinesis, telepathy, teleportation.

"Is there anything else?"

"Those are the most important things," she said. "We'll work

on them. When they come back to you, the others shouldn't be any problem."

When they come back.

"I see," he said. "I'm beginning to understand, now. A lot of things."

She picked up the balloon. "Are you ready to try again?"

"If you don't mind, I'd just like to think about it for awhile."

She was instantly sympathetic. "Certainly. I'll come again in the morning. Shall I leave this here?"

"What? Oh, yes. Leave it here."

She went out, closing the door quietly.

From some dimmed recess of long ago—for it seemed that he had been on this planet for long, bitter years—came the memory of a face. It was an elderly doctor's face, kindly, sympathetic, filled with compassion for the weak and the suffering, and it bent over the young patient in whose behalf the doctor had fought a long and valiant battle with death. And the Gods—whatever Gods this planet might claim—be praised and venerated, for the young man lived, and stirred restlessly in the living death of a prolonged coma, and suddenly he opened his eyes.

The doctor leaned forward eagerly, and said with the jovial gruffness that is the doctor's special trademark at such moments. "Well, there, young fellow, you're coming along nicely." The next moment his face hardened, and he recoiled in horror. For this fine young man over whom he had labored so arduously, this good-looking, clean-cut, well-built young man, was an idiot.

That was the way it must have hapened, with the two doctors, when Corban regained consciousness, joyously offering congratulations of some kind—telepathic congratulations—and finding that Corban's wondering stare covered total blankness of mind. But they were patient. They conducted tests, they gave him therapy, and as a last extremity they turned to surgery, all in a vain effort to restore the powers he never had.

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Then they sadly sent him away to an asylum, to spend the remainder of his life among the idiots of his own kind.

"Always," the old man had said.

It was not surprising that there were cases of mental deficiency even among a people with astonishing mental powers, and as befitted a highly civilized people a place was made for these cases, the incurable cases, where they could live out their lives protected from the tension of existence among their mental superiors. Most of them would be abnormal from birth, and confined to the asylum from an early age, to grow up, marry, spend their lives under confinement. Children? No, they would not be permitted to have children, but there would be children from outside, the mentally deficient children, to be given to the couples who wanted a family.

Accidents that totally destroyed the super-mental powers would be rare among these people, and the adult suddenly thrust into an asylum would be a case to wonder at and talk about.

As his fellow patients had wondered at Corban.

What could he do to avoid that lifetime of confinement? As Doctor Alir had said, he could recover. It was as easy as that. He could develop powers of telekinesis, and telepathy, and teleportation, and whatever else might be expected of a normal person on this world, and obtain his release from the asylum, and perhaps make a career for himself and marry Doctor Alir and live happily ever after.

They might as well ask him to transmute base metals into gold by breathing on them, or to change his sex and marry the Director—neither of which could be any more difficult than mastering telekinesis, telepathy or teleportation.

The balloon, the damned, mocking balloon, lay on the floor in front of him. He kicked at it savagely, and walked out to the tranquility of the grove to watch the birds.

Doctor Alir appeared the next morning, supremely beautiful, smiling, confident. "Have you been practicing?" she asked.

"No," Corban said.

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"Come, you must not give up so quickly. We may have to work on this for a long time."

"It's better that I should tell you," Corban said. "I've never been able to do any of those things. So of course I never will be able to do them. You would be wasting your time."

She stood before him, frowning, intensely serious. She had never been lovelier, or more hopelessly unattainable. He had paced the floor for hours, trying to decide what he should do. And he had decided upon a full confession.

"Of course you were able to do those things," she said. "Every normal person can do them. Your memory . . ."

"There's nothing wrong with my memory. I can't tell you precisely where I come from, because I don't know. I got lost. But somewhere out among the stars are my people, and among them I'm perfectly normal because none of them can do those things, either."

"The report said you crashed in a space ship," she murmured.

"A military ship. I'm an officer in the Space Navy. I got lost, and my fuel was running low, and this was the nearest habitable planet."

"The report said," she continued softly, "that the ship was of a strange design, but it was so badly damaged that the experts could not learn much about it. It was thought that it might be some kind of an experimental model, and the government is still trying to trace it."

"There was nothing exceptional about it," Corban said. "I've been flying ships like that for years."

She seemed amazed, rather than skeptical. "Your people move about among the stars, and still they can't—they aren't able to . . ."

"My people inhabit hundreds of worlds. They're a powerful, advanced people, and they have a wonderful civilization, but if you went among them you'd be as much a freak, as abnormal, as I am here."

Would she believe him? He watched her anxiously, and she frowned again, and shook her head. "Your memory . . . But you are certain, aren't you? There hasn't been any indica-

tion . . . I mean, you wouldn't invent a thing like that, and think that you remembered it. An interplanetary civilization?"

He answered her questions flatly. Telekinesis and teleportation were subjects for theoretical speculation among his people, unknown in practice. Telepathy had been a matter for experimentation for perhaps a thousand years or perhaps much longer, and while the evidence indicated that some people possessed telepathic tendencies, no one was telepathic to the extent that telepathy could be used for communication.

"This is terrible!" she said finally.

"Isn't it?"

"I mean, if you remain with us you will have to be confined here. There is a dreadful lack of understanding among the general population. People are so prejudiced against anyone who is mentally handicapped. Life wouldn't be tolerable for you on the outside, and besides, it would be against the law to release you. But if you are quite normal among your own people, why didn't you tell me about this before?"

"I was afraid to tell anyone. I thought it might make things worse for me. Perhaps I shouldn't have told you. What difference can it make?"

"It can make all the difference. My people may have their prejudices, but they're not inhospitable to strangers. If the authorities believe you, I'm certain they will make every effort to return you to your own people."

He looked at her doubtfully.

"Isn't that what you want?" she said.

To leave the one woman he had ever loved, never to see her again? But they were already separated by a distance that could not be measured in light-years. "Yes," he said. "That's what I want."

"Then I'll speak to the Director."

Corban was called in for another conference. The Director was frankly incredulous. Just where was this interplanetary civilization? Corban could not say. He had spent hours studying the stars, attempting to establish the position of this planet,

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but the night sky looked totally strange to him. Now if they had a star chart of the galaxy . . .

"Our astronomy is not exactly in its infancy," the Director said dryly.

But star charts were not in common usage in an asylum for the insane. The Director had to send for one. He called Corban back later in the day, and Corban, exclaiming with delight, spread the enormous chart out on the office floor. The Director and Doctor Alir looked on in astonishment as he traced and described the Galactic Federation: the frontiers, where worlds were being discovered and explored and settled by hardy pioneers; the glamorous, heavily populated regional capitals; the venerable old planet Earth, where the Federation had its seat of government.

The Director said weakly, "These billions of people—you say they're all abnormal?"

Corban smiled icily. "From your point of view, I suppose they are. But don't underestimate them. They're doing pretty well for an abnormal people."

"It would seem so," the Director admitted.

"Where is this world located?" Corban asked.

The Director showed him, pointing out the location of perhaps a hundred planets that formed the Donirian Civilization, far beyond the Federation frontier. Corban was appalled at the extent to which he had been lost, but he was also amused at the limited reaches of space occupied by these superior people.

"Your civilization can't be very ambitious," he said with a grin.

The Director shrugged. "Growth is not a measure of greatness," he said. "It only indicates a lack of restraint."

Properly chastised, Corban settled back to answer questions about his Galactic Federation. The director propounded searching questions, shook his head over the answers, and took notes. Would he be sent back to his people, Corban wanted to know when the session was finished. The Director could make no promises. He could only pass the information along to higher authorities, along with Corban's request. But

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he thought the request entirely reasonable, and he was certain it would receive proper consideration.

"I'm sure they will take action very soon," Doctor Alir said. "We'll miss you."

In his first excitement at the possibility of going home, he attempted to tell some of his fellow patients of his origin. They heard him out silently, shrugged, and turned away. What happened beyond the barrier that surrounded the asylum did not concern them.

The days were tedious, now. There were no more mysteries to ponder. There were no more lessons from Doctor Alir. He saw her frequently. He had learned enough of her daily routine to make certain that their paths crossed often. But her duties were many, and he no longer had a special claim upon her time. Often he regretted that he had spoken of his origin. He could have waited, and pretended to be working hard with her therapy, and received her personal attention perhaps indefinitely. His confession could have been postponed until his case was officially hopeless again.

But that would have been deceitful, and an honorable man, he told himself, is not deceitful with a woman he loves.

The days passed. He spent much of his time in the grove on the hill, and he was lying there near a small waterfall, dreamily listening to the rushing stream, when he saw two patients walking across the field towards him.

As they came nearer he caught the flash of red hair, and recognized them. They were patients he had seen in the park several times, shortly after his arrival. They stopped when they saw him, talked briefly, and then came forward. He got to his feet and waited for them.

They came up slowly. He gave them the Donirian greeting, but they did not reply. The redhead's face was pale and contorted, as if he were violently ill. The older man avoided Corban's eyes, fingered one sleeve nervously, and stood rocking from one foot to the other.

"Were you looking for something?" Corban asked.

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The redhead leaped forward. "You!" he screamed. "You traitor!"

His fist smashed into Corban's face, sending him reeling backwards. He tripped over a root, and sprawled on the ground. He lay there dazed, not from the blow, but from the words.

The words were spoken in Galactic, the official language of the Galactic Federation.

Choking with rage, the redhead sprang after him. He kicked viciously at Corban, and would have flung himself down on him if his companion had not caught him and hauled him backwards.

The redhead buried his face in his hands, and wept. "We should kill him," he sobbed. "We should kill him."

"It wouldn't help anything," the other said wearily. "It wasn't his fault."

Corban got up slowly. "You're from the Federation?" he asked.

The older man nodded sadly. "If we had known, if we had only known, this wouldn't have happened. The name Paul—that should have told us. But that business about an accident seemed so plausible that it threw us off. It's our fault, really. We should have taken a chance. A few words in Galactic wouldn't have hurt anything. If you didn't understand, that would have been that. We should have tried it. Now it's too late."

"I'm afraid I don't understand. Would you mind telling me . . ."

"Sure," the redhead said bitterly. "We'll tell you. You're a traitor."

"That won't help," the other murmured. "What's your last name, Paul?"

"Corban."

"Paul Corban. This is Miles Fletcher, and I'm Roger Froin. I've been in this asylum for about twenty-four years, Galactic time. Fletcher has been here for about two. There are ten of us, altogether. Ten from the Federation, who got out this far for one reason or another, and were classified as idiots, and

confined here. Most of the patients are committed when they're children, so it's rare that an adult is brought in. It only happens once a year, or so, and that makes it about fifty-fifty that the adult is from the Federation. I've been contacting all the new adults for years, and if they're from the Federation we work them into our group. In your case, we should have tried. But that accident . . ."

"I rather wish you had," Corban said. "This is a lonely place, you know. But I can't see that it matters much now."

"Why did you do it?" the redhead demanded.

"Do what?"

"Tell the hospital staff where you were from?"

"Surely there's no harm in that," Corban said. "Doctor Alir and the Director think the government will make arrangements to send me back. That means all of us can go back. Don't you want to go home?"

"You don't understand these people," Froin said. "Your only experience of them was in a hospital, where they probably tried to cure you, and here at the asylum, where the staff has a special interest in idiots, and is wonderfully humane and sympathetic. Those on the staff don't flout their superiority, you know. You never catch them using *psi* powers, though they probably talk telepathically all the time.

"But the general population despises us. We don't have the E.S.P. they have—we're not Espers. We're something unclean. Something rotten. I was beaten up three times before I got into the hands of someone kind enough to send me here, and one of those times nearly killed me. Haven't you stopped to wonder why people who are perfectly normal mentally except for the absence of *psi* powers are confined here with an army to guard them? It's because they are considered criminally unfit to associate with the rest of the population. To the Donirians, a mind that doesn't respond telepathically is a terrifying thing. It is a raving mad mind, a dangerous mind, something impossible to comprehend. The same goes for the other *psi* powers. That's why we've guarded our origin so carefully, and accepted this imprisonment without protest."

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"They seemed kind enough," Corban said. "The doctors

...
"You'd expect the doctors to possess at least an iota of enlightenment on the subject of mental disease, wouldn't you? But you haven't met the general population. You were fortunate in that respect. We know of several of our people who never got as far as this asylum. They were killed—lynched is the word, isn't it?—by the first Donirians they met. That's how humane these people are."

"You told them all about the Federation?" the redhead asked.

"Yes," Corban admitted.

"You told them where it was?"

"I . . . yes."

"Don't you see what you've done? If the authorities believe you, they'll be appalled. They'll be utterly horrified, because you've described an entire interplanetary civilization populated exclusively by the criminally insane. They won't be able to tolerate a threat like that. They'll take their superior science, and go to war. And they won't quit until they've exterminated the Federation. It means the end of the human race."

Corban stepped back, and leaned against a tree. "Is it as bad as that?"

"I'm afraid it is," Froin said. "They'll put our people in cages like this one, and prevent their reproducing, or else they'll kill them. But one way or another, they'll purge the galaxy of ordinary men."

"I didn't realize."

"It wasn't your fault. We should have contacted you. It was bound to happen sooner or later anyway, the way the Federation is expanding, but we wanted to prevent it as long as we could. The more time we could give the Federation, the more chance there was that it would develop new weapons, and God knows it's going to need everything it can get."

"I suppose there's nothing we can do now."

"I don't know," Froin said. "Do you think you could convince them you were lying? An interplanetary civilization

made up of idiots might sound pretty fantastic to them. Maybe they'd believe you if you said you made it up."

"I'll try."

Froin gripped Corban's shoulder. "Do your best. It's tough being a hero, or a martyr, when no one will ever know about it. Believe me, I know, because I've been working at it for a long time. But this may be the last chance you'll ever have to do something for your fellow men. And remember this, no matter what they believe, they won't send you back. They won't go near our demented civilization unless they mean to destroy it."

They separated at the foot of the slope, and Corban hurried back to his own building. He went directly to the administrative offices. The Director was not available. Doctor Alir was not available. He left word that he would like to see Doctor Alir, and went to his room.

He was lying on his bed, staring despondently at the ceiling, when she appeared before him. As he got to his feet she threw herself into his arms and wept brokenly with her head on his shoulder.

For a moment he forgot the hopelessness of his love for her, forgot everything except her presence in his arms. But his mind refused to accept a miracle unchallenged, even a miracle that bridged the distance between them.

"What is it?" he whispered. "What's the matter?"

She sobbed out her story. Corban's request had reached the highest government authorities. They had considered it carefully, they had tested its authenticity, and retested it, and convinced themselves that it was true. Now they were determined to act upon it.

And the action would be war.

PART TWO

1

THE *Silver Flash* was an 11C courier ship on a routine mission. It carried a crew of two, the extra man being a concession to a recently concluded and violently damning investigation. It also reflected the military's own concern over a rash of unexplained disappearances of the tiny ships.

The *Silver Flash* was on course parallel to, and well inside, the Dropoff, which was the name the navy men gave to the boundry of officially surveyed and charted space. Ensign Carter, on the controls, listened morosely to the resounding snores sent up by Ensign Devine from the ship's one bunk, and muttered to himself.

"The navy," he thought, "must be run by idiots. The brass hats sat on their hands until enough men had been lost, and then conceded that a one-man courier ship wasn't safe. So what did they do, build a two-man ship? No. They put two men in a one-man ship. One man, operating at peak efficiency, couldn't handle the thing. So naturally two men, operating at maybe half efficiency, should get along fine."

He struck the instrument panel a jolting blow, and then looked anxiously at Devine. Devine continued to snore.

"I should have joined the postal service," Carter muttered. "The postal service would never dare pull a gaffe like this one. Even if it cares no more for its men than the navy does, at least it has to take good care of the mail."

So intense, so bitter was his reverie, that it took a warning shout from Devine to rouse him to the fact that his control panel was urgently clamoring for his attention.

"What is it?" Devine asked.

Carter stared at his instruments, rotated the scanner, and swore violently. "Was there anything in the drip pan about the fleet being on maneuvers out this way?"

"Nothing I heard about."

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"Well, it is."

"Nonsense! The 1105th Squadron is still at Qualo Base. The 1392nd is headed down Gurnoy way. They wouldn't hold maneuvers around here without cutting those two squadrons in on it."

"They are," Carter said. "At least . . ."

Devine scrambled down from the bunk, kicked Carter's head in the process, and banged his own head on the chart rack when he tried to twist aside. "At least what?" he demanded.

Carter spoke awesomely. "At least it's *somebody's* fleet."

"So it is," Devine murmured, staring at the scanner. "It's somebody's, but it isn't ours. Those ships are flattish, see, and the big ones are humpbacked. Look, they're turning to cut us off! Turn this crate. Turn it! Fan those jets, brother, while I get off a message."

The perspiring Carter worked frantically over his controls while Devine snapped out a message. "*Silver Flash* 11C-964B46 calling Qualo Base and all listening stations to record and relay. *Silver Flash* 11C-964B46 calling Qualo Base and all listening stations to record and relay. Urgent. Unknown battle fleet sighted position . . . on course . . . Estimated fifty ships battle cruiser size and larger, with auxiliaries. Ships have flattish shape, larger ships have weapons or observation turret topside. We are now being pursued. Repeat. We are now being pursued. Them big ships are *really* big. Out."

He glanced at Carter. "How are we doing?"

"If you know a potent prayer, start praying."

"We're in range. Hell, we were in range when we first sighted them. Wonder why they don't shoot."

"We don't know what range their weapons have."

"That's a thought," Devine said. "Might be important. I'll pass it along. Anything else?"

"Maybe they don't want to shoot. Maybe they want to capture us."

"If this means war," Devine said, "and it sure as hell does with an alien battle fleet cruising in Federation territory, they'll want prisoners. But right now surprise should be more

important. They should want to shut us up before we talk. If I was them, I'd have fired on initial contact. Are they still gaining?"

"They are."

"They've waited too long. Someone will pick us up. But just in case—*Silver Flash* 11C-964B46 calling Qualo Base and all listening stations to record and relay . . ."

Green fire bubbled in front of them. Carter yelped and changed course. Devine grimly worked a description of the effect into his message, and signed off.

"That was a warning," Carter said. "They want us to surrender. What do you think?"

"I can't say I'm enthused about it. God knows how many years a war will last, and maybe even God doesn't know what sort of creatures these aliens might be. Years of slavery in their prison camp wouldn't appeal to me."

"Too bad the navy didn't see fit to arm these flitters."

"Right," Devine said. "I wouldn't mind going down fighting, if there was something to fight with."

"There is?"

"What?"

"The *Silver Flash*."

"Mmm, not bad. If we banged one of those big ships in the vicinity of its drive we'd be sure to put it out of action. If we were lucky, we might even . . ."

The green fire bubbled again. "Turn back?" Carter said. "Right. It wouldn't be a bad trade. The two of us and an 11C for one of those bloated battle cruisers and crew. Not to mention possible damage to nearby ships. Not bad at all."

Devine was getting off another message. He described the ships and the composition of the fleet in detail, and estimated maximum speed shown in pursuit. "Last message," he said calmly. "Capture certain. Will attempt collision course with largest battleship, which we hope will be command ship. Give our best to our next of kin. Out."

"What was that for?" Carter said.

"So my old mother'll receive a medal," Devine said soberly.

"Now, we'd better lay this out carefully. We won't get more than one chance."

A few minutes later, as the *Silver Flash* apparently slowed to receive boarders, it suddenly spurted, veered crazily, and darted off through the enemy formation to plummet into the largest battleship. The searing, consuming flash that followed rocked the nearby ships and holed their hulls with death-dealing debris.

From a ship far to the rear the fleet's vice-commander flashed an urgent thought at his superior officer, and got no response. His next thought notified the various unit commanders of his assumption of the command. "We were informed," he remarked stoically, "that these creatures are mentally degenerate. In the future such maniacal acts must be anticipated."

2

THERE MAY have been a more beautiful place somewhere—the Fire Islands of Wrannis, for example, or the Fern-Lake area on one of the small planets of the Hinlin Group—but when the sunlight lay full upon the giant planet Orn, and its swirling, tumbling gasses tossed off a riotous kaleidoscope of vividly blended colors, visitors to the small satellite called Rainbow's End watched with bated breath, and remarked, without daring to look away, that there never had been beauty like this.

Stockholders of Rainbow's End, Incorporated, told themselves confidently that someday the little moon would be the most prosperous resort in the galaxy. Now it was a modest priced stop at the end of a long space excursion. But honeymooners and retired couples were discovering it, and the future looked bright.

For Sue Corban Lyle, comfortable with her husband's arm

about her and the wonders of Orn performing for her just beyond the plastic observation dome of their honeymoon suite, the future looked very bright indeed. The present would have been perfect, too, except . . .

"Do you think we could?" she asked.

Jim Lyle patted her shoulder, and announced himself willing to conquer all for the happiness of his bride. "It'll take a bit of doing, but if you want to go, we'll go."

"I do want to. We were very close, Paul and I. I knew he wouldn't be able to come to the wedding, but it's so strange that he wouldn't at least write, or send congratulations, or something. I thought maybe he'd surprise us and see us here, because it really isn't so terribly far from Qualo Base, and of course I told him we were coming here."

"We've got lots of time," Jim Lyle said. "Why don't we wait another week? And then if you haven't heard anything we can decide what to do. A navy man can't always get away just when he wants to."

"Thank you, darling," she whispered, and met his lips tremulously.

Jim Lyle caressed his bride soothingly, and managed to conceal the disturbing turmoil his own emotions were undergoing. For he had been personally convinced that this new brother-in-law of his was behaving very much like a cad towards his favorite sister, so he had gotten off a message early in their stay on Rainbow's End, and when it went unanswered he'd sent another message to the Qualo Base commanding officer.

That morning he had the reply. Paul Corban was missing. He had been missing for months, and while the galaxy was a large place and missing men not infrequently turned up safe after long absences, he could only be presumed dead, and his family had been so informed.

Lyle understood, then, that Sue's parents had kept that sad news from her so that her wedding could be free from tragedy. He also knew that she would have to be told about it before they left Rainbow's End; otherwise she would insist

on stopping off at Qualo Base on their way home. But he would postpone it as long as he could.

"Jim!" Sue exclaimed. "Look!"

Lyle looked. The sky was filled with ships.

3

GENERAL THADEUS O'CONNER was worried. All hell had broken loose along the frontier and seemed headed directly at him. A three-pronged attack was due to converge on this planet of Willar within the next few days. The invaders were gobbling up planets with incredible ease; all resistance on Zernik was overcome, the reports said, in less than ten hours.

All resistance. Ridiculous! There should have been valiant pockets of resistance fighting hard and severely embarrassing the enemy for weeks after a planet capitulated. But there wasn't. Not on Zernik, and not anywhere else the invaders touched down.

And now they had carved out a neat chunk of Federation territory and were due to converge on Willar. O'Conner's 392nd Corps had been reinforced. Somewhere out yonder the 1105th Naval Squadron was waiting, either to intercept or to catch the enemy in an embarrassing position as its fleet moved in. But O'Conner was not deceived.

You do not match one corps, however reinforced, and one squadron of the fleet, against three converging enemy fleets transporting an army of untold power and numbers. That is, you do not if you expect to win. O'Conner's corps, and the 1105th Squadron, were expendable. They were expected to give the invaders a severe battle test, to amass information on enemy weapons and tactics, and to exact a horrifying cost for this unfortunately important planet. In the meantime, somewhere to the rear, the fleet was massing, the army was erecting fortifications, and the high command was laying its plans for a war of survival.

O'Conner's corps had been hand-picked for the job, and he supposed it was an honor, if a death sentence could be considered an honor. And now—how to do the job?

"Captain William Corban is here," his communicator announced.

"Send him in," O'Conner said.

The captain entered, and saluted smartly. His young face had a look of crushing weariness; his left arm was in a sling. O'Conner gestured towards a chair, and Corban slumped into it, and then brought his shoulders erect.

"Relax, Captain," O'Conner said. "You've earned a rest, but unfortunately we've got work to do. I've been waiting for you. I suppose you have some understanding of our mission here."

"I've drawn my own conclusions, sir," Corban said.

"In that case, it was brave of you to volunteer," O'Conner said dryly. "How many of you got away from Zernik?"

"About forty, sir. One ship. There may have been others, but I didn't hear of any."

"Neither did I," O'Conner said. "But headquarters should have been able to spare us more than one. I suppose they are diligently picking the brains of the others. Corban, what the devil are we fighting?"

"Zombis," Corban said promptly. "We had a defense line on Zernik. We were supposed to contain their landing area. As soon as the fighting began we were being attacked front and rear."

"Then it's true that they're something more than human. Or less."

"It's true. They use no radios, but their communications are obviously very good. Telepathy. They pop at you from out of nowhere. Blink your eyes, and there's a damned company charging in where you were unopposed a second before. Teleportation. They snatched one of our field pieces right out of the hands of the crew, and moved it forty yards, without touching it or being anywhere near it. And then they started using it on us. Telekinesis. There may be more, but those were the most obvious things."

"What about their weapons?"

"Strictly mediocre, sir. But with soldiers like that they don't need superior weapons."

"If our stuff is better," O'Conner mused, "they'll probably be using it. They've captured enough. Well, how do we fight them?"

"I know how I'd fight them, sir." Corban looked levelly at the general. "I'd blanket this whole damned planet with small defensive perimeters. You can't set up a line of defense against them. One minute after the battle starts you're defending from both directions. But a small perimeter, with men arranged in concentric circles, should hold out as long as its supplies last. The outer circle would be the defense line. The inner circles would only deal with the Zombis that popped up inside the perimeter. The artillery would be placed in the center, where the Zombis would be less likely to steal it. They don't seem to be able to snatch field guns until a crowd of them gets within fifty yards or so."

O'Conner raised his hands helplessly. "I have ten divisions. Its' a small planet, but ten divisions won't blanket it."

"You don't need a lot of men in each position, sir. Even a battalion might be too large. If the position takes in too much area, your inner defense would be too scattered and the Zombis would get inside. A couple of companies would be best. The positions could be sited so the ranges of their guns would overlap."

O'Conner tilted back, and pawed fretfully at what was left of his hair. "It's an idea. Matter of fact, it's the only idea we have, so far. My staff is meeting now. Let's go throw it at them. What we'll probably have to do is set up these perimeters as far as we can, and concede the rest of the planet."

"If I may ask a personal question, sir—is there any news from Qualo Base?"

"Not that I know of. It was a bit off the Zombis' main line of advance. The last I heard it hadn't even been attacked. These Zombis may have supernatural powers, but they fight a very conservative kind of war. Why do you ask?"

"My kid brother is stationed at Qualo. An ensign. With Qualo right out on the Dropoff, I've been worried about him."

"Things have been quiet there, so far. But I'd be glad to inquire. Name?"

"Ensign Paul Corban. But don't bother, sir. If Qualo hasn't been attacked, he's probably all right."

4

SUE CORBAN LYLE leaned on her hoe, and brushed her hair back carelessly. Her face and arms were tanned and peeling, her hands rough and dirty. Her feet were bare. She wore a thin, sacklike dress; nothing else.

The patch of vegetables to which she had been assigned dipped down into a small valley, and she stood there now, beside a tiny stream. She tried to plan her work so that she could be in the valley during the heat of midday. It was cooler there, and she welcomed the seclusion as much as the coolness. It took her away from the idle chatter of the women working nearby, and also out of sight of the strange, inhuman soldiers who kept springing out of nowhere and pausing to stare lewdly at the body her thin dress revealed only too plainly. So she could be alone with her thoughts, and rest a little, too.

Jim. She wondered where Jim was now; what he was doing. She was sure he must be all right, wherever he was. He had to be all right! And none of the women had been harmed. The soldiers had torn her from Jim's arms, and he had been herded into one ship and she into another, and that was the last she had seen of him.

Sue's ship had brought the women to this planet, which was not an unpleasant place, but the soldiers had made it brutally clear that they had not been brought here to enjoy it. They were assigned beds in large dormitories, and put to work in the fields. And as the days passed, an unending procession of ships arrived, always loaded with women.

They had to work hard, but they were treated kindly enough and they had plenty to eat, and if she only knew how Jim was . . .

She turned quickly. One of the strange soldiers stood nearby, leering at her. She backed away in terror. She'd never seen one here before, and he had found her not working, and now maybe she'd have to go a day without food, like some of the woman had when they hadn't worked hard enough.

He walked slowly after her.

"What do you want?" she gasped, though she knew it was no use talking to him, because they never talked at all.

He looked about cautiously, and suddenly he lunged at her. She screamed and fought wildly, but he hurled her to the ground and ripped away her dress. Then, as suddenly as he had come, he was gone.

She raised herself to a sitting position. Her assailant stood a short distance away, cringing in evident terror. There was another soldier there, an officer, and as Sue watched the officer calmly drew a weapon and shot the soldier dead. He disappeared without a glance at Sue.

"Don't think about it, dearie," an older woman said later, as Sue sobbed out her story. "He didn't hurt you any, and it's just as well for you he didn't. Otherwise, you might have been shot, too."

"But why?" Sue gasped.

"Don't you understand? Plain as the nose on your face. Besides, my girl Dot works over there at their headquarters, and they're teaching her their language, and she knows all about it. It's death for any soldier that touches one of us, and it might be death for the woman. They think they're pretty all-fired superior creatures, and they don't want their blood mixed with ours. Soon as they can, they're going to get women here to guard us, so there won't be any risk.

"And," the women went on, "it ain't no coincidence that they're bringing all their women prisoners here, and putting all the men over on Frains. Woe to the man that's found

here, and woe to the women that's found over there. You see, they ain't going to have us mixing our own bloods, either."

5

"THE MAJOR," Private Maneski said, "is a queer one."

"Maybe it's because he hasn't been a major long," Private Cushman said.

Private Maneski sighted along his rifle. The ground sloped gently away from the trench. A small stream meandered across the stubby pasture below him. The landscape was hot and barren enough in daylight, but the artificial moonlight gave it a dim touch of calm beauty. Somehow it reminded him of home. He sighed, and sighted again along his rifle. He had all of the boulders in his field of fire memorized. There was nothing else to see, and certainly nothing to fire at.

"Wish those goats would come back," Cushman said. "We could have fresh meat."

"You have fresh meat twice a day."

"But it won't last. It never does. And I have a degrading hunch that this is going to be a long war."

"The major is queer," Maneski said, "because he got away from Zernik after what must have been one rousing hell of a slaughter, and the first thing he did was volunteer to come here and get put through it again."

"That doesn't make him queer," Cushman said. "That makes him batty. No sane man..."

He broke off because striding along the trench came Major William Corban on his nightly inspection jaunt. He paused to speak a few words to each team, and Maneski and Cushman waited stiffly for his sharp attention to fall upon them.

In Maneski's estimation, the major was all right. He was fair, and he seemed to know what he was doing. According

to the drip pan, the queer defense pattern that had been set up over as much of the planet as there were men to cover was Corban's idea, and General O'Conner had offered him a soft staff assignment, which he had declined. It was a comfort to be under the command of the one man on Willar who knew anything about these weird invaders. On the other hand, Maneski was becoming a bit tired of the major's nightly lecture. After hearing it repeated a couple of dozen times, he felt that he could quite competently deliver it himself.

"Remember, men—" Maneski shuddered. How could he forget? "—the enemy will strike without warning. There will be nothing at all out in front of you, and suddenly they will be attacking. The first time they hit a position they seem a bit confused about its location, and they are widely scattered. In later attacks they show a sharp improvement.

"If you are alert and watching your assigned territory carefully, you will see a slight blur, like heat waves refracting the light. When you see that blur, don't hesitate. Aim and fire. By the time you pull the trigger the enemy will be there. Don't worry about the enemy that pops out behind you. The defensive position is laid out to take care of that. The men behind you will keep the circle clear, and there will never be many of the enemy inside the circle unless you are slow on the trigger. If you give the Zombis in front of you a chance to get set, they'll disappear and make another jump and on a short jump they're pretty accurate. We'll have more of them inside the circle than we can handle, and we'll be in trouble."

After the first time the major had given his little speech, blurs had been sighted all over the landscape, and duly fired at. None of them, however, had materialized into Zombis. Now there was an air of skeptical tension along the trench.

Major Corban halted beside Maneski, climbed the firing step, and stood looking out over the peaceful countryside. "Quiet tonight," he said.

"Yes, sir," Maneski said, steeling himself for the lecture.

"Keep alert. They've been attacking all around us."

"Yes, sir," Maneski said dutifully.

The major jerked suddenly, snatched at his belt. Before the startled Maneski could quite comprehend what was happening he had aimed—aimed at nothing—and fired. And as he fired, a figure materialized on the edge of the trench, clawed futilely at the air, and fell choking onto the damp sand at the bottom.

"Here they come!" the major shouted. "Get to work, men."

Maneski raised his rifle bewilderedly. A figure snapped into view, roughly in line with his sights but at an absurd range. As it crouched and threw up an odd, glittering weapon, Maneski pulled the trigger. The figure pitched forward, and he gave a yelp of excitement. The surprise had passed, and men were leaning forward grimly, getting off aimed shots. A series of *whumps* sounded behind them as the mortars laid down an atomic barrage, then desisted because no concentration of the enemy remained in place long enough for high-trajectory fire to be effective. The Zombis were shot as soon as they appeared, or they were gone.

Maneski fired at another, saw him fall. "Ten," he muttered, slapping his rifle with satisfaction. There seemed to be a momentary lull. He chanced to look behind him, and stared full into the yawning end of a Zombi rifle. He leaped aside frantically, the charge snapped over his head, and the Zombi fell dead at his feet. Maneski took in the scattering of dead bodies within the circle, and grinned his satisfaction.

Incredibly, the fight was over. Rifle fire slackened and died out. One of Maneski's buddies climbed out on the edge of the trench, with a tall black hat perched on top of his helmet. ("Now where did he get that?" Maneski wondered. "Probably stole it out of a museum.") He went through a series of ludicrous gymnastics. Men laughed, and slapped each other's backs.

Maneski took off his helmet, and mopped his face. "Wasn't so bad, was it?" he asked.

Cushman did not answer.

Maneski turned, took in the crumpled form slumped back against the soft earth, and gasped, turned violently ill. Cushman's shocked eyes stared at him over a mask of frothy red.

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Blood bubbled richly from a horrid, gaping wound that had swallowed up the lower half of his face. His jaw was gone, and his upper teeth and part of his nose. His blood-clotted hands tore futilely at the opening and as Maneski screamed, "Medic!" he pitched forward.

Major Corban's sharp voice carried along the trench. "A good fight, men. But remember, this is only the beginning. They'll be back."

6

GENERAL O'CONNER leaned back in his chair, picked up a stack of reports and planted his feet on his desk with deliberate precision. "If I were the enemy," he announced, "I'd forget about this lousy planet, and look for something easier."

"Yes, sir," the adjutant said.

The General slammed down the papers, and swore. "I should never have allowed a psychologist on my staff. What's eating you now?"

"They're supermen, sir. Superior beings. They know that, and we know that. There's just no getting away from it."

"The way things are going, they can have their superiority. We've been at this for over a month, and they've suffered five hundred casualties to our one, and that's just counting their dead. We don't know about their wounded, because as soon as they're hit they disappear. Probably they plop themselves back to an aid station or whatever the enemy has, and get patched up. But five hundred dead, they've had, for each one of our dead or wounded. Our supply ships are getting through, and we're really in better shape now than we were when this thing started. You think they're going to fight us to the finish at a cost of five hundred to one?"

"I don't know what they're going to do, but they can't give up. Their superiority won't let them. They don't dare

have a failure at this stage of the war. It'd be a terrible let-down for them, and a big boost for us. It's like their weapons. Ours are better, and they've captured plenty of them, but they don't use them. They must order their men not to use them, because only rarely in battle will one of their men pick up a weapon of ours and fire it. They haven't got anything that passes for land artillery, and they really need some, but they won't use captured pieces. They must have some kind of complex. They don't want to think anything of ours is better than theirs, and they don't want us to think it."

O'Conner chuckled, and picked up the papers again. "Right now they'll have a tough time keeping me from thinking it. Five hundred to one—it's unbelievable. Sector Command thinks I'm joking."

There was a mild disturbance outside the door, culminating in a scorching outburst of profanity. The door opened, and a colonel came in, grinning broadly.

"What is it, Leblanc?" O'Conner said.

"Intelligence is having a rough time."

"This is something new?"

"Ever since this started they've been yelping about getting a prisoner to interrogate. Well, they finally got one."

"They *did!* How?"

"Colonel Corban sent one over. Intelligence appealed to him, and he said he'd see to it personally, and he did."

O'Conner grinned. "Corban would. How did he do it?"

"One of the Zombis popped out near his command spot, and Corban tackled him and knocked him cold. They souped him up with sedatives, and shipped him over."

"That should make intelligence real happy. What was the fuss?"

"Why, as soon as the Zombi came to he took one look around the room and disappeared. He popped up outside, right in front of a sentry, as luck would have it, and the sentry happened to be an infantry veteran who'd seen a lot of Zombis. He bashed him over the head with a rifle butt, and delivered him back to intelligence. They didn't take any chance with him, after that. They took him down to a maxi-

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mum security cell, and strapped him down, and put irons on him, and had three guards sitting there with their hands on him. And as soon as he opened his eyes he disappeared again."

O'Conner exploded. "Damnation! You mean I've got a Zombi loose in my headquarters?"

"Nope. Sentry spotted him outside when he popped out. Too far away for any bashing, so he let him have it. Scratch one Zombi. But Intelligence is having a hemorrhage."

"Yeah. Can't see that it matters, though."

"It would be nice to know who we're fighting," the colonel said wistfully. "Where they come from, and how many there are of them, and that sort of thing."

"I'll tell you one thing. There are a lot fewer of them than there were a month ago."

"It'll take a long time for us to even things up. They got a lot of our men when they first hit. Civilians, too."

O'Conner patted his reports affectionately. "At this rate, it won't take so long."

The general finished his desk work, and went off to visit field troops. His staff always argued against it. Certainly it seemed unsafe to be whisking about in small planes in a situation where the enemy was everywhere, and every one of his small defensive positions was, at frequent intervals, under seige. But no planes had been lost, as yet, not even any of the hard-worked supply planes. And O'Conner was a realist. He was fighting a brilliantly successful delaying action, but his command was still expendable, and his men were not fools. They knew it, and they would fight better if they knew that their commanding officer was expendable, too.

Today it was Corban's circle, and O'Conner arrived just in time to see the end of a minor flurry of action. His plane slid down safely into the landing pit, and he climbed up to Corban's observation post.

"Nothing much," the young colonel said. "We got about fifty. I don't think there were any survivors."

"Have you noticed any change in tactics of late?"

"Oh, they keep changing tactics all the time. This time they massed the entire attack on one point. It's the first time

they've done that, and it's the first time we've been able to use automatic weapons with any real effect. We just mowed 'em down. They probably won't try that again."

O'Conner swept the horizon with his binoculars, and turned with a frown. "Where are they?"

"Who? Oh, you mean—well, it got awfully uncomfortable around here, with all those dead bodies piled up. The smell, you know. It's been rather warm. So I'm having a fatigue detail carry the bodies down south of here. There's a deep draw down there that's pretty well protected. None of our guns can touch it except mortars. So we're filling it up with dead Zombis."

"Everybody's having the same problem," O'Conner said. "Someone in Supply got some goop mixed up that burns dead bodies efficiently without much smoke. If you'd like to try it . . ."

"Why, thanks, sir. But we'd rather just dump them in the draw."

"Kind of risky for your fatigue detail, isn't it?"

Corban grinned. "We have a few tricks worked out. I'll admit it's still a little unpleasant when the wind is just right, but that draw is kind of important to us. The Zombis were quick to spot the fact that they wouldn't be under observation there, so they've taken to using it as an assembly area. They mass there, and then they all come at us at once. They hit us out of there with the best part of a division, once and it was rough while it lasted. It was then that we figured out what they were doing. So we've been carting their dead over there, and we figure it won't help their morale any to start an attack from an assembly area filled with their own dead. We've tossed some other gimmicks at them, too. Like some mikes buried over there, and wired in here."

"Zombis don't talk," the general said.

"No, but when they walk around they make about as much noise as anyone else. And if they don't, we have some boobie traps set to help them out. Then, when we know they're there, we have the mortars lay down a nice atomic

barrage. The more we kill over in that draw, the fewer bodies we have to carry back. Dirty, isn't it?"

"War generally is," O'Conner growled. "Let's go see your men."

The position had changed drastically since the early days. Trenches were roofed over, and protected by a mound of dirt from fire from the circles to the rear. Underground tunnels connected the circles. The Zombis had yet to make an appearance in a trench or tunnel, but Corban had controls set up, just in case. The men had carved comfortable living quarters out of the ground, and scrounged furnishings from abandoned houses in the area. O'Conner surprised one private lounging in an overstuffed chair, reading by artificial light. As the general gaped at the draperies and pictures covering the wall, the private explained, "We figured it's going to be a long war, sir."

O'Conner left Corban's command in a happy frame of mind. He'd have to do something about Corban, he thought. The man was just too good to leave in charge of a couple of companies of infantry. Sector Command might be irked about his making a general out of anyone so young, but he doubted that there would be any squawks. Not when the credit for the Willar success belonged to Corban.

On his return to headquarters, he found Captain Dormeyer, his alert young naval aid, waiting for him. "Could you come down to communications, sir?" Dormeyer said.

O'Conner nodded. He had almost been expecting this. He'd been worried about the war in space. It was none of his responsibility, but Admiral Rucker's attitude . . .

He was handed a message from the commander of the 1105th Squadron: "Outnumbered, proceeding with strategic withdrawal."

"So, O'Conner said. "We're expendable, but the navy isn't."

Dormeyer had tears in his eyes. "It's stupidity—criminal stupidity. He could have screened us indefinitely. He didn't have enough ships to keep out their small transport and supply units, but he could have held off the main fleet. Our guns outrange theirs, and no matter how much he was outnum-

bered, there's a limit to how many ships can be used effectively in a given hunk of space."

O'Conner patted him on the back consolingly. "It's done, now. He can't come back. The Zombis can stand him off as easily as he could have stood them off. More easily, because they have five times as many ships. We'll get off a stiff complaint to Sector Command, and forget about it. Probably we've seen our last supply ship. How's the ground-to-space arsenal?"

"Not so hot."

"We didn't think we'd need much. Well, we'll do what we can, and hold out as long as we can, which should be quite a while."

O'Conner was hauled out of bed that night by a trembling aide, as frightened as he was apologetic. "Look, sir," he whispered.

O'Conner looked into the brooding blackness of a gathering storm, and saw a long line of green fire split the sky.

"At first we thought it was lightning," the aid said. "And then when the reports started to come in . . ."

"The Zombi fleet, firing in support of ground troops. It figures. We've been offering daily prayers of thanks because they had no ground artillery support, and it has finally dawned on them that they need some. So they're using the main batteries of the space fleet. It's about as efficient as trying to hit a pin at ten miles, but if they keep at it they'll have some lucky hits."

"They already have, sir."

"Where?"

"Section 282D."

O'Conner sat down heavily. "That's . . ."

"Yes, sir. Colonel Corban's position."

"Any survivors?"

"There must be, sir. The Zombi infantry moved in to mop up, and there's a fight going on."

"We'll have to get some help to them."

"Colonel Leblanc is working on it, sir."

"All right. I want to put through an immediate promo-

tion to Major General for Colonel Corban—posthumously if need be. See that it's taken care of."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell Dormeyer to get operating with the ground-to-space stuff, and make it go as far as possible. We'll have to make some quick changes in our defensive plans. Each position will need a deep shelter to protect the men from space artillery, with communication tunnels so they can get out quickly to defend against ground attack. Telepathy gives the Zombis perfect communication, and they've probably worked out a fast way to adjust their fire. It's the beginning of the end, I suppose, but we're going to make it a long and bloody end."

7

QUALO BASE lay drenched in the searing sunlight of midday. The vast landing field was deserted. The fleet was in space, screening the base and maneuvering to contain the vicious thrust of the enemy. At the far end of the field, near the repair sheds, lay three battered ships that had miraculously limped back to base and landed. The harvest of war.

Commander Walter Forge descended wearily from his crawler, and limped towards the officers' mess. He had just completed a jarring inspection of the batteries covering the field, finding their attendants all awake and reasonably attentive. He hated bouncing over the dusty terrain in a bucking crawler. He would almost have preferred to walk—but woe to the officer caught making that circuit on foot, wasting time when there was a war to be fought.

The mess was sparsely populated. Most of the officers were eating at their desks. Forge had no desk, so he eased himself into a chair beside Captain Pinky Durren, the base ordinance officer, and poured himself a cup of coffee in good conscience.

"Enjoy it while it lasts," Durren said. "Another week, and we'll be on substitutes."

"Are things that bad?" Forge asked. "I thought the supply fleet was getting through all right."

"Sure. It's getting through. But some bright boy back yonder figured it out that we wouldn't be killing many of the enemy with coffee, and redlined the requisition. Ammunition, fuel, spare parts, sure. Coffee, no. Inside of a month we'll be on emergency rations, even if there's no emergency. They're compact and easy to ship."

"And inside of two months," Forge said, "we'll be toasting Qualo hoppers for breakfast, if we're still around to do any eating."

Durren shuddered.

The door at the end of the room opened. Admiral Winslow looked in, nodded, and strode quickly across to his private table. Durren leaned close to Forge, and whispered, "What's eating the Old Man? He's been jumpier than a hopper, and he never used to eat alone like that. He ought to be pleased with himself, being boosted all the way to admiral and put in charge of this dump."

"It's his sister," Forge whispered back. "She was on Zernik."

"Huh? Didn't know he had one."

"Sylvia Winslow. The apple of the old man's eye. She visited Qualo a while back. Left just before you were assigned here. She was a wonderful girl—beautiful, too. She could have had her pick of any of the single men on base, and most any of the married men."

"Beautiful, but the cold, distant type, eh?"

Forge shook his head. "I wouldn't say that. It was a funny deal all around. The old man sent her some pictures of this fascinating life we lead in the navy. Naturally a lot of the base personnel turned up in the pictures, and she fell in love with one guy. Fell in love with his picture. An ensign named Paul Corban."

"Never heard of him."

"No. That was the tragic part of it. She fell in love with his picture, and nothing would do but she had to come here and meet him. So finally the Old Man had her sent over. But Corban was a flitter pilot, and he left on a routine mission just be-

fore she arrived. We never heard from him again. One message was picked up, but it was pretty badly jumbled, and Communications couldn't make anything of it. Well, we lost a pile of IIC's about that time, and we're pretty sure now that the Zombis were picking them off. That's no comfort to Corban, of course, and it left the girl pretty well broken up. A couple of thousand guys would have jumped at the chance of making her forget him, but she wouldn't have any second choice. She moped around here for awhile, and then she went back to Zernik. She was there when the Zombis hit. God only knows where she is now."

"I see," Durren said. "No wonder the Old Man is shook up."

"He worshipped the girl. And from what I saw of her, I can't blame him."

"War is like that. But maybe it'll have a bright side. Maybe she'll meet her dream man in the great beyond. Or in a Zombi prison camp—that would be a laugh, wouldn't it?"

The admiral pushed his plate aside, and started for the door. He paused by their table, and said sourly, "Haven't you two got work to do?"

"Yes, sir," Durren said, and followed him out as Forge hurried to finish his lunch.

A moment later the alert sounded, its piercing shrieks rattling the dishes on the table. Forge overturned a chair in his dash for the door. He leaped into his crawler, overtook the Admiral Winslow and Durren, and stopped while they scrambled in. At headquarters building the three of them rushed to the operations room. A crowd of officers was watching anxiously while a young ensign plotted the progress of a single ship.

"Oh," the admiral said. "Is that all?"

"Broke through the screen, sir. Trouble is, we haven't got anything to send up after it."

"We'll give him a warm welcome if he comes close." Admiral Winslow turned away indifferently.

Forge looked at Durren. "I don't like it. We're sitting ducks here."

"It wasn't the Old Man's idea," Durren said. "He just commands the base, not the fleet. He wanted them to leave him something, but they said everything was needed elsewhere." Durren looked reproachfully out of the window and across the parklike expanse of green to the enormous building that housed fleet headquarters. "It'd be a very funny joke if they were to lose their headquarters. That is, it would if they could lose it without ours going, too."

"Not much danger from one ship. Still, you never know. These Zombis have all the advantage of surprise. They haven't really been tested, yet, and we don't know what the devil they've got."

"They got a pretty good test on Willar," Durren said. "General O'Conner practically paved that planet with the bodies of Zombis. He'd be there yet, if Rucker's squadron hadn't gotten maneuvered out of position. The army didn't have anything to fight space ships with. But we live and learn. Or some of us live. Wonder if they got anyone off Willar."

"Probably very few, if any. Trouble is, the Zombis are learning, too. What worked on Willar might not work anywhere else. What have we got here? Destroyer-sized ship, coming like the devil. Do we have any missiles up?"

"Already launched," the ensign said promptly.

"Nothing to do but sit it out, then."

They waited. The ensign sifted through reports, continued to plot, and became less cheerful. "Collision course," he announced.

"Looks like it," Forge said. "Do you suppose they have something that would melt this planet? It's theoretically possible, I've heard. Turn it into a sun. Maybe the Zombis don't want any more Willars. One ship, and—blooey. Very inexpensive."

The ensign's face assumed a slightly strained expression. "It's still coming," he announced.

"Nonsense!" a voice behind them snapped. Admiral Winslow stood staring moodily at the chart. "Nonsense," he said again. "That's just a recon mission."

"Should we put a barrage up, sir?" Forge asked. "At the

rate he's coming, he'll either crash untouched, or loop past us, if we wait until he's in range."

Winslow nodded gravely. "Do so."

Forge picked up a telephone. A moment later the *whumps* of smaller rockets sounded above the hum of the communications center.

"He's changing course," the ensign said hopefully.

The officers watched, puzzled, and the ensign continued his plotting. Minutes later the tension had passed. The enemy ship had rushed at the planet, circled in a tight, looping orbit which broke atmosphere on the far side, and zoomed away towards the Dropoff. The fleet was moving to intercept.

Admiral Winslow shrugged. "Recon mission," he said. "We can now assume that we're well photographed."

The ensign held up a message. "That wasn't all, sir. When he broke atmosphere he dropped something."

Winslow snatched at it. "Interesting," he said, and reached for a telephone. He talked briefly, and hung up, looking thoughtful. "Some kind of a landing capsule was launched," he said. He moved over to the wall map. "This general area."

"There's certainly nothing there for them to damage," Forge said. He laughed hollowly. The officers looked nervously at Winslow.

"Sir?" Durren said.

"Yes."

"These Zombis are telepaths."

"I know. I wasn't aware that it was a secret."

"I don't have any idea what their range is," Durren went on apologetically. "I suppose nobody does. But we just can't have a telepathic enemy agent on this planet. Not with a base as important as this one. The Zombis will know more about what we're doing than we do ourselves."

"Why did they drop him way out in the wilderness?" Forge asked. "It'll take him weeks to get over where he can observe anything."

"Not weeks," Admiral Winslow said. "He will simply pick out a suitable hiding place, and teleport himself over here when he wants to observe. The Zombis have a capable in-

telligence service. Obviously. They have plenty of prisoners, and they've been able to interrogate them. They knew this planet, and they knew their agent would be most vulnerable during and immediately after his landing, so they landed him where he'd be certain to get down and get organized without any interference. Forge, Lieutenant Brown already has some atmosphere planes on the way there. They might be able to pick out the landing site. I want you to round up every man that can be spared from anywhere, and get that Zombi. Or Zombis; there may be more than one. You're in complete charge."

Forge sprang to his feet. "Yes, sir."

"And Forge—" Winslow smiled. "—special orders from Supreme Headquarters. Intelligence wants a prisoner to interrogate, and so far no Zombi has been taken alive. You will make every effort to take him, or them, alive."

"May I use the dogs, sir?"

"Alive," Winslow said stiffly. "The small chunks of meat the dogs might leave would be of slight use to Intelligence. Any other questions?"

"Yes, sir. How do you go about catching a teleport?"

"For that matter," Durren broke in, "how the devil would the dogs track down a teleport?"

Admiral Winslow shrugged. He was still smiling when he left the room. Forge ordered a plane made ready for him, and hurried away.

Miraculously, Brown's planes had spotted the landing capsule by the time Forge arrived on the scene. He stepped out of his plane into the dismal night that covered the Qualo wilderness with smothering blackness. The capsule had come to rest on one of the multitude of stubby knolls that thrust their rocky outlines above the lush vegetation of the lower ground. They were honeycombed with caves and hollows. The low ground was spongy now, and would be a roaring swamp when the rainy season arrived, which, Forge thought thankfully, would not be for several months.

Forge got an artificial moon hung, and organized the search. As the troops arrived he pushed them out in a widen-

ing circle and watched them disappear down into the fog-streaked jungle.

Lieutenant Brown was examining the capsule. "If it's any help," he said, "there's only one. This thing wouldn't hold more than one, unless the Zombis have midgets."

"One will be plenty," Forge said, kicking at the weathered rock. "Isn't this a hell of a place? He could hide right under our feet, here, with a fifty-fifty chance of being overlooked."

"My money says he's five hundred miles away," Brown said.

Forge mopped his brow nervously. There was a cluster of officers around the capsule, and contrary to all of his prior military experience, neither superiors nor subordinates had any words of advice.

"Anyone here from Intelligence?" Forge asked suddenly.

A startled young ensign stepped forward blushing.

"What's the range of these teleports?" Forge demanded.

"Do you mean how far in a given period of time, or how far in one jump?"

"Either way."

"Well, we don't know, exactly," the ensign said. "There are several schools of thought on that, but on the basis of what our ground troops have observed, the range seems to be less when the Zombis are in unfamiliar country. It's like they have to be cautious when they don't know where they're going. But once they know where they're headed, they can take bigger jumps. That's mostly theory, of course."

"How long does it take a Zombi to get ready to jump?"

"Why, if he knows where he's going, he goes—like that." The ensign snapped his fingers. "He just thinks it, and he's there."

"Suppose he doesn't know where he's going?"

"He still goes like that, only he doesn't go far. But that's mostly . . ."

"I know," Forge said disgustedly. "Theory. Does anyone have any facts?"

"Only the Zombis, sir. And we haven't taken one yet."

"That's great. That's real helpful."

"As a matter of fact, sir, we have taken some. But we haven't been able to keep them. The only way we can get them is when they're unconscious, and when they come to, they go—like that."

Forge stalked away.

A hot sun came up to burn away the fog. More men were flown in to fill in the gaps as the circle of searchers widened. Forge paced back and forth receiving a long series of negative reports as the morning waned. Admiral Winslow arrived at noon—it then being night over at Qualo Base. The two of them were flown out to the perimeter of the slowly expanding circle. They stood on another rocky knoll with the ensign who was in charge of the men floundering about in the jungle below them.

"It's like this, sir," the ensign said. "It takes a hundred men a good hour just to search one of these rock piles, and then it's a superficial search. Some of these holes go down a long way, and sometimes they turn corners, which isn't easy to spot without going in and looking. And down there in the jungle it would be possible to walk right past a person without seeing him."

The admiral grunted.

"As I see it," Forge said, "the only hope is extensive air patrols between this place and base. If we're lucky, a pilot might spot this Zombi and get a shot at him before he makes himself disappear. This kind of search is useless. Even a normal person could elude us indefinitely in this terrain."

The admiral said nothing. He lowered his binoculars, and walked down the slope to a thorn bush on the edge of the jungle. There he leaned over to finger a small fragment of dark green cloth.

"This isn't from one of our uniforms," he said.

They stared at the cloth, the ensign profanely promising a week of extra duty for the squad that walked past without seeing it.

"Never mind," Admiral Winslow said. "I happened to put the binoculars right on it, and the light was right."

Forge called to his pilot. "How far are we from the place the capsule came down?"

"About ten miles," the pilot said.

"I suppose this represents his first jump, then. Or maybe he's made several jumps, from hill to hill, and when he got here he decided to pick out a safe place down in the jungle."

"Then if he's still there . . ." The ensign began.

"Oh, he won't be there now. But he'll have some safe places—memorized, I guess you'd say—and as we get close to him he'll jump around from place to place. I understand that's the way Zombis operate."

"Air patrols, you say," Admiral Winslow mused. "Then you're convinced that this search is futile?"

"It is the way we're doing it now. Either he's a hundred miles ahead of us, or else he's ducked back somewhere inside the circle where we've already searched."

"Very well. Call in the men, and set up the air patrols. And then I want you to start over again from the landing area, and use dogs."

"Dogs, sir?" Forge said, startled. "The dogs won't have any better luck than we've had."

"Perhaps not. But we may be able to learn something about this Zombi. If we can pick up his trail in a few places, we'll at least know how far he jumps. Have the dogs sent out. All of them."

"Yes, sir." Forge said, and went to the plane to get off the message.

A transport lowered itself down with the dogs—three dozen of them, caged and muzzled. Actually they were cat-like creatures, hideous, voracious, sabre-toothed, long-clawed brutes, and if a dog was capable of affection it was only for its own attendant, who trained it, and kept its motley hide brushed, and brought it tidbits. And the attendant, Forge noted, carried a pistol when he worked his dog.

Captain Durren had come along to see the dogs work, and he stood with Forge and watched the attendants getting them ready. "I pity anyone they get hold of," Durren said. "Even a Zombi."

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"Yeah," Forge said. He remembered an incident when a drunken officer had blundered into a compound the dogs were guarding. The attendants had been there almost immediately, but the officer had been collected in a basket. "Wonder why the Old Man changed his mind."

"You mean about taking the Zombi alive? That's just a joke, you know. Intelligence keeps asking for one, but everyone knows they couldn't keep one if they got it. The Old Man knew you didn't stand a chance of laying eyes on that Zombi. Otherwise, he wouldn't have pulled that gag."

"Now he tells me," Forge groaned, rubbing his eyes sleepily.

"This is a serious situation, you know," Durren said. "The Old Man spent most of yesterday with Intelligence, trying to figure out what to do about this Zombi, and what might happen if we can't catch him. And the consensus is we'd better eliminate him in a hurry. The Old Man will try dogs, or anything else, and your best lead to a fast promotion would be to bring him in some fresh Zombi meat."

"I hope my next promotion doesn't depend on that. A Zombi could drive these dogs nuts."

The non-com in charge of the dogs approached and saluted. "We're ready to start, sir."

Forge looked at the dogs, straining on their leashes, and shuddered. "Wouldn't it be better to leave the muzzles on?"

"They won't follow a trail if they're muzzled. They won't follow on a leash, either."

Admiral Winslow came forward. "I'll take charge of this, Forge. We'll start at the capsule with one team."

"Yes, sir," the non-com said.

They stood well back, and watched the dogs sniff around the capsule. Then the attendants removed the leashes, and the dogs took off with a frightful caterwauling and raced, eyes blazing and fangs dripping saliva, down the slope and into the jungle.

"What d'ya know," Forge breathed. "He walked away from it!"

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Durren shrugged. Admiral Winslow was already hurrying after the dogs, and they followed him.

The pace slowed almost immediately. The dogs milled around with much sniffing and slurping, and slowly edged deeper into the jungle. "Have they lost him?" Forge asked.

"Oh, no," the non-com said. "Trail is a bit stale, and there are probably lots of strange odors to confuse them. This ground cover has a lot of bounce, hasn't it? You could drive a crawler in here without leaving tracks."

For another hour they pushed on slowly, and finally they emerged at the base of another rocky mound. The dogs seemed confused, sniffing their way off in several directions, and then turning back.

"Is this where he made his jump?" Durren asked.

"No," the non-com said. "There's more than one trail. It branches off."

They looked at each other dumbly. "It can't," Admiral Winslow announced. "There must have been more than one, and they separated here. They may be super-humans, but I doubt that they reproduce by fission."

"I'll call up the reserve teams," the non-com said.

A plane dropped down with the other dogs. It took the non-com some time to get things organized, but finally he asked, "Shall I use one team on each trail? It branches off in three directions."

"Three!" Forge muttered. "In that capsule?"

Admiral Winslow signaled the non-com to proceed. Forge and Durren remained with the admiral's group, and followed a trail which circled the base of the knoll. At one point the dogs hovered suspiciously about the mouth of a cave, and one of them sniffed its way inside, came out again. The dogs shuffled on, and minutes later ran headlong into the dogs of another team. There was much growling and snapping, and the attendants waded boldly into the melee and got the animals leashed.

"That explains everything," Admiral Winslow said. "He circled the knoll, hid in a cave for a while, and then went on around and back into the jungle. Where he crossed his trail,

there were three trails for the dogs to follow. Hold these dogs back, and we'll catch up with the others."

Winslow moved off at a fast trot, and Forge and Durren had to hurry to keep up with him. "It doesn't *quite* explain everything," Forge muttered. "It doesn't explain why he's walking."

"He knew we'd try to trail him," Durren said, "so he left us something to follow. Quite a refined sense of humor, eh? If he'd gotten out of that capsule and taken a fifty-mile jump, we'd have had to give up, and look at the amount of work all these men might have accomplished today. He's sabotaging our war effort by doing a little walking."

"But if the dogs happen to get close to him, he'll take the fifty-mile jump."

"Naturally," Durren said. "I haven't got teleportation, but if I heard those dogs after me I think I could manage a jump almost that long."

They caught up with the dogs, and beat their way forward through the jungle. The afternoon waned and dusk came early among the brittle, thick-leaved trees. Insects swarmed over them, and tormented the dogs, who stopped frequently to snap and scratch. But they kept pushing forward.

"I was wondering if something could happen to one of these Zombis that would keep him from teleporting. Like spraining an ankle might keep one of us from walking."

"Spraining a mental ankle? I haven't the vaguest idea. But I think we'll know before long."

"What makes you think so?"

"Haven't you noticed? We're going faster. Trail's getting warmer. We're catching up with him."

They were moving faster, and the dogs had begun to ignore the insects. They jostled each other, struggling to get to the head of the pack, and their howls changed to a tense, deep-throated roar that echoed dismally through the jungle. Suddenly the sounds changed again, to a rapacious yelping, and they broke into a run.

The men struggled forward, the attendants vainly trying

to keep up with the dogs. Admiral Winslow stumbled along, his chest heaving, his eyes alight with excitement. "We'll scare him, anyway," he chanted. "We'll give him a good scare. He'll never sleep well again on this planet."

The dogs were out of sight. They had spread out, leaving a broad trail of torn branches and bent trees. They were crashing forward, their yelps a full-throated, terrifying chorus. Suddenly a scream pierced through the jungle, and another, and another, and then there was no sound but the triumphant, tearing growls of the dogs.

"They got him!" Admiral Winslow shouted.

Weariness dropped away from them, and they broke into a run.

The attendants arrived first. They hauled off the dogs, snapped on their leashes, and pulled them back out of sight of their prey. Winslow panted up to the pathetic, torn and bloody heap of flesh, and stood over it triumphantly for a moment.

But only for a moment. Suddenly he staggered backwards. He screamed. His fists flailed frantically at the air, at his chest, his face, and he toppled forward and lay, kicking and clawing, and his panting, choking voice sobbed, "No, no, no . . ."

Forge and Durren rushed up, stared at Winslow, and then at the mound of mutilated flesh. Limbs were torn free from the body. The throat was gone, devoured, but the face was miraculously untouched. It was the fresh, unspoiled face of a young woman, a lovely young woman, with a lock of hair tumbled over her forehead, and dimpled cheeks, and a small, turned-up nose. But even in death her eyes were wide-staring and terrified.

"God!" Forge breathed. "It's his sister!"

"Sylvia Winslow?" Durren said.

"Yes. Probably didn't know where she was, or what was chasing her. It's a wonder she didn't die of fright."

"It would have been better if she had."

Forge stood with head bowed, his face buried in his hands. Durren stumbled away, and Forge heard him off in the jun-

Sharp eyes waited in the gloom; alert young muscles were tensed for action.

A rat crept into the open, hesitated, edged forward. The eyes took aim. The muscles acted, and a slingshot twanged. The rat toppled, and lay twitching.

A boy leaped forward and seized it. He untied a bag from his belt, and thrust in the rat. "There," he said, chortling gleefully as he carefully knotted the bag. "There. Four of 'em. I guess we'll eat tonight."

A sound reached his ears, an almost imperceptible fleck of sound, but he froze where he stood, looked quickly at the opening, and then began to edge back into the shadows. Silently his lips formed a word: "Zombi!"

His hand went to his belt, jerked out a weapon. He called it a knife, but actually it was a length of stiff wire set in a crude wooden handle. The end had been patiently worked into a tapering, deadly point. He slipped behind a splintered cabinet, and waited.

A figure appeared in the opening, looked the room over cautiously, and stepped in. The Zombi sensed danger. He advanced only a couple of steps and stood pivoting slowly, his weapon held ready to fire. The boy, shrunk into his hiding place, watched him hatefully.

Suddenly the boy moved. His bare feet felt their way surely and silently across the cluttered floor. His last steps were a furious charge, the knife arched and plunged, and buried itself to the handle in the green-smocked back.

As the Zombi fell he wrenched the knife free. One leap carried him to the opening, and another took him out into the gray light of evening, running furiously, running for his life.

There would be other Zombis there, immediately. It always happened that way. He had never heard a Zombi utter a sound, but his father had told him the Zombis could think thoughts at each other a long way off, and understand them, and he believed it. Whenever he stabbed one of them he had a mob of them after him almost before he could get his legs working.

He charged headlong across a crumbling bit of pavement

and dove into the ruins of a smashed building. Fire snapped and crackled over his head as he dove, and drilled a neat hole in the exposed concrete foundation on the far side. He rolled to the bottom, regained his feet, and ran. Burrowing into some rubble, he slipped through the narrow, concealed entrance of a tunnel. He scooted through it on hands and knees, came up in an adjoining building, and risked a sprint across some weed-cluttered open ground. Behind him he could hear shallow popping noises, followed by hisses.

"Gas pellets," he muttered.

He was safe, now—almost. A basement, another tunnel, and he emerged under a building that was so flattened that even the rats avoided it. He had cleared out a hideaway for himself, and from a metal cabinet that was wedged under the ruins at a crazy angle he took a large sheet of paper.

It was a map, carefully drawn, and covered with minute notes. He placed an X at the spot where he had stabbed the Zombi, and circled it. Beside the basement opposite, he wrote, "Gas," and noted the date. He sighed. "It'll be weeks before I'll get any more rats there."

He replaced the map, and turned his attention to his knife. With a sharp stone he sawed a notch in the handle. "Twelve," he said, patting it affectionately. If he could get hold of a gun, he'd really mow them down. But he couldn't. It was too risky. That was how Willie Ulstead had gotten it. He'd tried to grab a Zombi's gun, after he'd stabbed him, and the Zombi wouldn't let go, and the others had been there before Willie could get away. No, the only way to do it was to stab and run. But it sure would be fun with a gun . . .

There was no light in the damp, crumbling sub-cellar where his parents lived. He slipped in out of the night, into a heavier darkness, and whistled softly as he approached, so as not to frighten them. "Light up, Ma," he said.

When she had a small blaze going he gave her the bag of rats, and went over to sit by his father. "Something for you, Dad," he said, and from under his ragged coat he took a bottle.

His father kept blank, unseeing eyes on the opposite wall. Beneath a filth-clotted beard his face was pasty-white. His trembling fingers closed on the bottle. It slipped from his grasp, and the boy caught it and placed it on his lap.

"Look, Dad. Something special."

His father raised the bottle, and squinted. "Whiskey!" he said, in an awed whisper. "Whiskey! Where . . ."

"Dug it out," the boy said. "Thought you'd like it."

"We'll save it for special occasions," the father muttered. "Make it last. Ought to last a long time. We don't have many occasions. But I guess this is one, 'cause you found it. Mother?"

"No," she said. "You drink it."

"It's no special occasion, drinking alone." He broke the seal, opened the bottle, and sniffed. Impulsively he tipped it up, drank deeply, and smacked his lips. "Mother?"

"Just a taste."

He poured a little into a shallow plate, and watched her drink. Then he looked at the boy hesitantly. "Jerry?"

The boy took the bottle, took a sip, and grimaced. He returned the bottle to his father, who carefully replaced the cap.

"Well," he said, rubbing his hands. "Well." He beamed. "How many rats did you get, Jerry?"

"Four," the boy said. "They're fat ones, too. I guess there's still lots of people buried in the ruins for 'em to eat."

"Jerry!" his mother moaned.

"Got another Zombi, too," the boy said casually.

His mother turned slowly, her face pale. "Oh, Jerry. Do be careful. What would your father and I do if something happened to you?"

"Die a little sooner," the father mumbled. "Die a little sooner. Does it matter?"

The boy picked up a well-thumbed book, and moved into the feeble light of the fire to read. The rats sizzled and sputtered, and whenever he turned a page he looked up to sniff hungrily.

He ignored the glances his mother and father sent his way. It made him uneasy, the way they looked at him, as if he

were a stranger to them. And it made him uneasy the way they seemed strangers to him. His mother's buxom figure had dissolved into an appalling, sickly thinness. Her dark hair had suddenly become silvery white. His father's hair had vanished entirely as his beard grew, and he seldom stirred from his pile of rags. From a hearty, fearless man he had become one who cringed at an unexpected noise and babbled pathetically in his sleep.

"Jerry?"

"Yes, Ma."

"I wish you'd stay away from the Zombis."

"They got it coming," the boy said stoutly. "They got Paul and Bill, didn't they? And Sue? I'm gonna get as many as I can, and go right on killing 'em until I die."

"I wish you'd speak to him, John."

"No." The father shook his head. The drink of whiskey had buoyed up his spirits, and he sat with the bottle in his hand, reading the label over and over and nodding his head jerkily. "No. There's nothing to live for. He might as well go down fighting as to hide like a rat until he's hunted down. If I could get out of this hole I'd account for a few of 'em myself."

The mother lifted her hands helplessly, and turned her attention to the rats.

"You could have gotten away if it wasn't for me," the father said softly. "Both of you. You shouldn't have stayed. You could have gotten away, and Jerry could have grown up, and I bet he'd have given the Zombis a good account of himself. The human race needs boys like him, to learn to fly the ships and handle the guns. But if all he can do is stab a few in the back, why, I say let him stab."

"I guess we'd better eat," the mother said nervously.

They turned their ravenous attention to the rats.

With the sharp edge of his hunger blunted somewhat, Jerry felt like talking. "Lots of moon up tonight, dad," he said.

"That so?"

"Dad, why don't the soldiers ever come over and fight the Zombis?"

"They can't, son. The Zombis don't stay put long enough to be fought, even if the soldiers could get past the barrier."

"Then why don't the Zombis go over and fight the soldiers?"

"They're afraid. Whenever they try it, they get licked."

Jerry scratched his head thoughtfully. "Then how can anybody ever win the war if nobody fights?"

"They're fighting all the time, I guess, but not big battles. Except maybe the ships out in space, but it's been so long since we've heard anything . . . I really don't know. It's an odd kind of war, and these Zombis are an odd kind of people."

"Savages!" the mother sobbed.

"I suppose so," the father said wearily. "I suppose . . . I suppose they just mean to starve us out, since they can't whip us. Corner us and starve us out. Everywhere."

The fire was dying down. Jerry looked at it sadly. It would have been nice to build up a big fire, and have it warm all night. There was plenty of stuff to burn, but fires could be seen, and fires made smoke that could be seen and smelled, and it just wasn't safe.

"I think . . ." he began, and stopped.

Noises sounded above them—a rain of hollow, popping sounds and sinister hisses. Jerry was on his feet in a bound. "Gas pellets! Quick! This tunnel." He pawed stones and dirt away from the opening. "You first, Ma. Hurry, Dad."

"No!" John Corban waved them away. "Go on, both of you. I've been a burden to you long enough."

Jerry leaped to the corner and seized his father's arm. "Not much time," he gasped, pulling him frantically. His father fought back, pushed him away. His mother joined him, and they dragged the struggling man across the floor to the opening.

"There. Inside—quick!"

"I'm not going," John Corban said firmly.

"Very well." His wife brushed a lock of white hair back from her face, and smiled. "If you stay, I stay with you."

He glared at her furiously for an instant, but only an instant. Then he turned, and hauled himself into the tunnel,

pulling himself forward with his arms, dragging his useless stumps of legs after him. His wife followed, trying to help him along, and Jerry entered last and spent a long time filling up the opening, packing it with a solid wall of dirt to keep the deadly gas from cutting them down before they got clear of the tunnel.

Their progress was slow. Air was bad in the tunnel, and the going was so cramped and uncomfortable that Jerry, who had spent hours of exhausting work in digging it, wished he had made it larger.

Suddenly John Corban stopped, his wife struggled briefly and then halted her frantic shoving, and from the rear Jerry hissed, "Keep going, Dad."

His father's muffled voice drifted back to him. "Seems to be a cave-in."

Jerry was silent for a moment. "You'll have to dig it through," he said finally. "Shove the dirt back to Ma, and she'll shove it back to me."

They worked, panting and perspiring in the choking darkness. "Doesn't seem to be . . . any end to it," John Corban gasped.

"Keep at it, Dad," Jerry called bravely.

The air was rapidly getting worse. As Jerry shoved the dirt behind him it began to fill up the tunnel, leaving them struggling for breath in the short section marked off by the length of their three bodies.

The dirt stopped coming. "It's not worth it," John Corban said. "We couldn't have lasted much longer anyway. Better let it happen here. At least the rats won't be eating us."

"Keep digging, Dad," Jerry pleaded.

"Can't. I'm getting dizzy."

"Make him dig, Mal"

His mother did not answer. Jerry grabbed her leg and shook it. "Dad, Ma's passed out!"

He heard the desperate lunge his father made, and then: "Got my hand through."

"Push the dirt the other way," Jerry gasped.

Suddenly they could breathe freely. Jerry massaged his

mother's legs, and she revived and lay motionless, sobbing. His father began to haul himself along, and Jerry urged his mother forward. The tunnel stretched on unendingly. The already slow pace lagged until it seemed to Jerry that they moved only by fitful jerks. It was no trial to him, because most of his time had been given over to digging tunnels or crawling through them. But he feared for his parents, who had not left their cellar for weeks.

"Another cave-in," John Corban said.

Jerry's mother spoke the first word she had uttered since entering the tunnel, a desperate, aching cry. "No!"

"Maybe it's the end," Jerry said. "I mean, the end of the tunnel. It won't be stopped up very far. But Dad, if they've gassed this cellar, we'll be done for."

"Might as well find out," his father said. "We'll be done for if we stay here much longer."

"Be quiet about it, Dad."

A few minutes later they were in the cellar, delighting in the coolness of the damp, musty air. They rested quietly without speaking. Zombis might still be around, and this cellar was not a good hiding place. Stars glimmered dimly through a multitude of openings, but fortunately there was no moonlight except the distant haze in the sky from the artificial moons set up by the soldiers.

Jerry's mind was working furiously. They could not stay here. They would have to find a new place to live, and at once. He had several suitable places picked out. He would, in fact, have moved his parents long before if his father had not stubbornly rejected the idea. And now both of them were tired out from the trip through the tunnel, and they still had a hard, dangerous trek ahead of them if they were to reach safety before dawn.

"I'd better check for Zombis," he said.

Suddenly his father began to weep. The first outburst was a wild, uncontrolled sobbing, and Jerry sprang to his feet in horror, expecting any moment to see the silhouette of a Zombi against the night sky. Then he managed to muffle his sobs, but he wept on, and on, until Jerry's mother crawled over

to him and stroked his head and moaned tirelessly, "John, John, John." And still he did not stop.

Jerry bent over, found his hand, and shook it awkwardly. "Dad? What's the matter, Dad?"

"The whiskey," John Corban sobbed. "I left the whiskey."

9

ON THE DAY that Lieutenant Willis Perrin reported for duty aboard the battleship *Castor*, the admiral personally escorted him to the officers' mess, rapped for attention, and said pompously, "I have the honor to present to you our new staff officer, Lieutenant Willis Perrin. He was at Ferrano."

A moment of stunned silence followed, and then those at the rear stood up to better see this phenomenon, someone clapped noisily, and the room erupted into cheers and applause that blew out two circuits on the ship's intercom system.

The *Castor* immediately accorded Perrin a status normally reserved for visiting politicians, and a veneration seldom given anyone below the rank of deity. Perrin had, just prior to his assignment, made the astounding leap from unranked spaceman to the commissioned rank of lieutenant, and no one held it against him. He arrived accompanied by glowing recommendations from lofty sources, and no one went out of his way to prove them wrong. When the new lieutenant spoke, which was seldom, all ranks from the most lowly spaceman to the admiral listened attentively and ventured no contradiction.

For Lieutenant Willis Perrin had been at Farrano.

Ferrano! In its long annals of heroic achievement the Federation Space Navy had never had a day that compared with Ferrano. In a few blazing hours it annihilated a Zombi fleet and so severely decimated a second fleet speeding to the rescue that it turned and fled, hopelessly routed.

The Zombis' brutal invasion had been turned back. Their ships were chased beyond the Dropoff into uncharted space. Their land forces were left isolated and unsupported on the multitude of planets the Zombis had already devoured, to be mopped up at leisure as soon as the Federation Army perfected a technique of attack.

And as soon as the border area was secured, the Federation Fleet would range far into uncharted space in search of the Zombis' home worlds.

That was Ferrano—the most decisive battle in human history, and certainly the most important. It was the turning point of the war.

"In my opinion," Lieutenant Perrin said crisply, "you are misinterpreting the significance of Ferrano."

The remark was received in respectful silence. The place was the ship's communications center, and the various duty officers and technicians were in a relaxed and talkative mood. The squadron to which the *Castor* was attached was cruising slowly along the Dropoff, unmolested. With little else to occupy their attention, the communications men were engaged in a spirited argument on how best to end the war, fast.

Lieutenant Perrin had not come to the room to engage in idle conversation. The ship's instruments had detected a lone Zombi ship, far out of range in uncharted territory, cruising parallel with the squadron. It was obviously a recon ship, keeping a watchful eye on the squadron's movements, but Lieutenant Perrin found its presence disturbing. He was technically off duty, but he had been in the communications center for some hours, warily looking over reports on the Zombi ship's movements.

He stood at an observation port, peering into the blackness of space, and spoke over his shoulder. He was old, for a junior officer, and he had been in space, and in the navy, for a long time, and the unthinking frivolity of the conversation in the room disgusted him.

"You are quite right," he said, "in considering Ferrano a

turning point, but it is not *the* turning point. It may not even be a turning point in our favor."

There was a yelp of protest from a very young officer, who leaped into flustered silence when Perrin flashed a foreboding scowl in his direction. "It is not a turning point in the course of the war," Perrin went on. "It is a turning point in the nature of the war. There is a difference."

"I don't quite understand," a lieutenant commander said politely.

"It is a turning point in the space war just as Willar was a turning point in the land war. The Zombis lost the best part of three armies on Willar, as near as we are able to figure out. Their losses could easily have been three times that severe. Never since then have they attacked Federation land forces in a defensive position. But their invasion continued, and they continued to successfully occupy planets. They simply changed their tactics.

"Ferrano is a similar turning point. I think we can be safe in the assumption that never again will a Zombi fleet attack one of our fleets. Our ships out-maneuvered theirs, our weapons out-range theirs, and our battle tactics are immeasurably superior. Our men are also superior fighting men—for that kind of battle. Unless the Zombis are complete idiots, which I doubt, they will never again engage us in that kind of battle. Ferrano will simply mark a turning point in the Zombis' tactics."

The lieutenant commander was doubtful, but respectful. "In what way?"

"Who knows how a Zombi thinks? We have yet to take a single prisoner, and if we did we probably couldn't interrogate him. How could we interrogate a man who communicates telepathically? But if I were a Zombi . . ."

Perrin's voice trailed away. He turned again to the observation port. Somewhere off in the darkness, too far away to be detected by other than the most sensitive instruments, was the Zombi ship. What would he do if he were a Zombi?

He started. A grayish shadow slid gracefully out of the

void, approached the *Castor*, and disappeared from his angle of vision. Perrin leaped into action. His hand smashed at the general alarm. He sent the duty officer sprawling, and snapped out orders with a quiet urgency. For a terrible minute or two nothing happened, except that the others in the room exchanged nervous whispers and two or three of them tapped their heads significantly.

Then the admiral came on the intercom, requesting more information, and the first report came in from the emergency squad that Perrin's orders had sent prowling around the ship's outer shell.

"I saw him—or it," a voice announced. "When I went for him, he just disappeared."

"Scared him off, eh?" the admiral broke in. "Nice going, Perrin. That was quick thinking."

"Admiral," Perrin said, "I recommend that we abandon ship."

"You recommend *what*?"

"That we abandon ship."

The admiral momentarily forgot that Perrin had been at Ferrano. His reply was ungentlemanly, unprintable, and full of unsupportable allusions to Perrin's ancestry. He was developing at length the lieutenant's relationship with the cowardly snash lizzards of Liroy's jungle, when an explosion tore the *Castor* in half.

The communications room emptied in a frantic rush for life suits, but Perrin remained at his post, calmly switched to emergency power, and proceeded to describe the fate of the *Castor* to a horrified fleet headquarters:

"A Zombi in a powered suit teleported himself to the immediate vicinity of the ship, used his power unit for a fast approach, planted his explosives, and disappeared—teleported himself away. A search party saw him vanish, but failed to find the explosives. Probably couldn't have removed them to a safe distance if they had. My signals are ignored by other ships of this squadron, and I have seen six flashes from this observation post in the last thirty seconds. The entire squadron may be affected. All survivors have abandoned

ship. Lieutenant Willis Perrin reporting and requesting immediate assistance for survivors of the squadron from all ships in the sector."

Perrin repeated his message five times before he closed down his station. He prowled through the sealed-off nose of the ship looking for a life suit, found none, and settled down with a book to wait until he ran out of air.

As his posthumous citation said, it was only due to his heroism that the fleet ever knew what happened in those fateful seconds near the Dropoff. The squadron was decimated. The Federation Space Navy lost ninety-seven ships almost instantaneously, and there were no other ships in position to rescue the survivors. When the battle cruiser *Altair* arrived on the scene space was littered with pathetically drifting, suffocated bodies, and in the twisted hulk of the *Castor* Lieutenant Perrin was peacefully dead with a book on his lap.

10

"I SAY, Colonel..."

"Yes, Mike?" The colonel turned a page, and laid the well-thumbed volume on the table, face down. He looked up inquiringly.

"When is it going to end?"

The colonel looked at the captain's serious, young-old face, and managed a smile. "I don't know, Mike."

"This inactivity isn't good for the men, sir."

"It isn't good for me, either. But there isn't much we can do about it, is there? Unless we can come up with some kind of a reverse Corban Plan that would work on the attack. Got any ideas?"

The captain looked away. "No, sir."

"Nor have I. So we're stuck here. We don't dare attack

them, and they don't dare attack us. But the advantage is all with them, because while we're sitting smugly safe in these circles, they can move around and take over world after world and wreck little cities and murder the civilians and generally ignore us."

"You know how it's going to end," the captain said.

"I suppose I do. We can sit here until our food runs out, and then we can either launch some kind of foolish attack and get ourselves killed, or we can surrender, with the only other alternative being to starve. But I keep hoping that someone will think of something."

"Maybe someone will." The captain did not sound hopeful. "It comes down to this," the colonel said. "The Zombis couldn't win any kind of battle in space without tremendous odds, and they couldn't win a ground battle, no matter what the odds, when they had to attack us. So they've made it a war of trickery and sabotage. For a long time there was just no stopping a Zombi saboteur. They blew up our ships in space, and wrecked ground and supply installations, and they got the fleet whittled down to a point where it was almost crippled. The navy tells us they have the problem licked, now, but from the way the Zombis keep breaking through what's left of the fleet it looks as if it's too late."

"The problem won't stay licked, anyway," the captain said. "The Zombis keep dreaming up new techniques."

"You have to give them credit. They keep learning. They thought they were pretty hot stuff, and it took them awhile to realize that they didn't know much about military science. But when they stopped fighting our kind of war and concentrated on their own special talents, it left us helpless. Look at the way they took this planet. Smuggled in a few men, blew up all the utilities and any military installations of importance, terrorized the civilian population, chased the army into defensive positions, and forced the navy to evacuate. All that with not more than a battalion of troops, and without a single battle worthy of the name. Then they moved in and took over. They're doing the same thing on world after world

while our navy keeps getting pushed back. Yes, I know how it's going to end."

The captain raised his hands helplessly. "There must be some way."

"That's what I keep telling myself. But lately I haven't been sounding very convincing. Oh, it's not going to end suddenly. The Zombis made a mistake, there. They turned their invasion into a war of attrition, and they lost their heads and hit at us any way they could, which meant that the civilians suffered the most. You don't surrender to an invader who's been murdering women and children—not if you can help it. A lot of humans are going to fight until they die, and strike back at the Zombis any way they can, and it could go on for another generation. Maybe it will never stop entirely. I don't think the Zombis can exterminate the human race, even if they want to. There are too many of us, on too many worlds, and the Federation covered a lot of space. But our human civilization will be smashed, if it hasn't been already. That's how it will end."

"Then why do we sit here, sir? Why don't we go out and fight? Even if we're wiped out, we'll have contributed something."

"These are good troops, Mike, and we don't want to waste them. We have them ready just in case someone does think of something. It'd be a pity if a plan were worked out, and then there was no one to carry it out. There's nothing we can do but wait as long as we can."

"I suppose so."

The colonel turned away wearily, and picked up his book.

Outside, someone shouted. Footsteps clumped along the tunnel. A babble of excited voices reached them. The colonel laid his book aside, and the captain got to his feet. "See what it is," the colonel said.

A knock sounded as the captain reached the door. He jerked it open, stepped back. "Excuse me, sir," a sergeant said "But—come here, you!"

He pushed a boy into the room.

It was a savage-looking youngster, perhaps ten years old,

perhaps older—or younger. His hair was unkempt and shaggy, his clothing dirty and ragged. His feet were bare. His smudged face had a pinched, hungry thinness. He seemed completely unawed by the armed soldiers who surrounded him. He looked about the room curiously, took a second glance at some leftovers on a mess tray, and turned to face the colonel.

"He sneaked in through the lines," the sergeant said. "Got clear to number three tunnel before anyone noticed him. He says he comes from Zombiland."

"Armed?" the colonel said with a smile.

"Only with this."

The colonel took the weapon, gave it a cursory examination, and winced as he absently pressed his thumb against the point. "Deadly," he said. "And what might these notches mean?"

"Them are for Zombis," the boy said.

"Zombis? You mean you killed—" He counted "—twelve Zombis?"

"I don't rightly know if they died, sir. I just stab 'em and run. It ain't safe to wait around, 'cause they think thoughts when they're stabbed, and the next thing you know there's a mob of 'em around."

"So you stabbed twelve Zombis?"

"In the back," the boy said. "They always have guns 'n things, so I gotta take 'em in the back."

"Sounds like an appropriate fate for a Zombi—getting stabbed in the back." He leaned forward. "You wouldn't spoof us, would you?"

"Huh? No, sir. I got twelve, and some of the kids has done better. Pinky Ulstead got twenty-three before they got him."

"This is very interesting," the colonel said. "Sergeant, I want to have a talk with this young man. And he looks hungry. Have something sent down, will you?"

"Yes, sir." The sergeant saluted, and the door closed behind him.

Now, then. Have a chair, won't you, ah . . ."

"Corban, sir. Jerry Corban."

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The colonel and the captain exchanged quick glances. "Corban? I don't suppose you have a William Corban in the family."

"That's my brother Bill. He was in the army."

"Was?"

"Sure. He was a colonel, like you. I guess he's dead, now, 'cause we stopped hearing from him."

The colonel took a deep breath. "What about the rest of your family?"

"Well, Ma and Dad, they're over in the city—what you call Zombiland. I got a pretty good cellar for 'em. My brother Paul, he was in the navy, an' they told us he's missin', so I guess he's dead, too. An' my sister, Sue, she was on her honeymoon out at Rainbow's End when the Zombis came, an' we ain't heard nothin' from her, either, an' Ma's real worried, except that it's been a long time, now, an' maybe she ain't worried so much any more."

The captain said incredulously, "Your mother and father are over in Zombiland, living in a cellar?"

"Sure."

"Good God! How do you live? What do you eat?"

"Rats, mostly. There's lots of rats."

"Are there many people over there, son?" the colonel asked.

"Quite a few, I guess. We kind of keep away from each other, 'cause the Zombis might notice if there was a lot of us together."

"They told us everyone got out, sir," the captain said.

"I guess most people did," the boy said. "But my Dad—he got his legs blowed off when the Zombis blew up the power plant, and everyone was in such a rush we couldn't get anyone to move him, so we stayed."

They were interrupted by the sergeant, bringing in a mess tray. The boy stared, and licked his lips as they put it on his lap. "Wow! Is this for me?"

"Certainly," the colonel said.

The boy hesitated. "If you don't mind, sir, I'd like to take it to Ma and Dad."

"We'll see that you get some to take to your parents. You eat yours here. It'll be easier to carry back that way."

"I guess it would, sir."

They watched him devour the food. When he pushed the tray back with a sigh, and patted his stomach, the tray was sparkling clean.

"More?" the captain asked.

"Better not," the colonel said. "It might make him sick. Now tell me, Jerry. How did you get out of Zombiland?"

"I found a pipe," the boy said. "Under the ground. It goes under that barrier thing of theirs. I dug my way out when I got to the end."

"Why did you come here? You might have gotten yourself killed, you know. At night we shoot at anything that moves."

The boy grinned. "I don't reckon you'd see me move. The Zombis don't. And I came because I wanted a gun. I could get me a lot of Zombis with a gun."

"This pipe," the colonel said. "Could my soldiers crawl through it?"

"I guess not. It's pretty tight for me."

"We might dig a tunnel and crawl through," the captain said.

The colonel nodded. "We might."

"And if a boy can kill twelve Zombis with that thing, a few soldiers inside the barrier should be able to raise hell."

"They'd be surrounded as soon as they started anything."

"The boy gets away with it," the captain said.

"It's something to think about," the colonel said thoughtfully. "We wouldn't have to risk a lot of men, and if we planned it carefully—spent some time observing their habits before we tried anything—we might lay a nice ambush. All right. Find out everything the boy knows about Zombiland, and see what you can make of it. But first I want him bathed and checked over by the medics, and I want him to have any clothing you can find that fits him."

"Please, sir," the boy said. "I have to go back tonight. Ma and Dad would worry."

"Sure, son. You can go back, and we'll give you as much

stuff as you can carry for them. But come again tomorrow night, and plan to stay for a few days. We want you to help us. We want to plan a hot little party for the Zombis."

"Can I have a gun, sir?"

"We just might be able to arrange that. Let me tell you something, son. Your brother Bill was a great soldier. The whole army knows about him. We're proud of him. And he wasn't a colonel, he was a general. You can tell your Ma and Dad that. It was Major General William Corban, and we don't even know for sure that he got killed. A lot of soldiers died on Willar, but as far as we know there's still some fighting going on there. And if he's still alive, we're sure he's still fighting. You can tell them that."

The boy's eyes sparkled. "Sure. I'll tell them. Do you know anything about my brother Paul?"

"No, I don't, son. But whatever happened to him, I'm certain he did honor to his family and to his service. And I'll tell you something else. Your brother Bill was a great soldier, but I think maybe you're a greater one. Now run along, and get cleaned up."

The sergeant took him away. The colonel was silent for a long time, and then he opened a drawer, took out a photograph, and set it up on the table.

"He's just about the age of my boy," he said. "I wonder if Jim is doing the same thing on Birror. I'd like to think so. But that's just what I meant, Mike. We're being defeated—hell, we are defeated. But we aren't beaten. Even the kids are fighting, and I guess they aren't doing so badly. I'll bet Jerry Corban and his pals give the Zombis fits. What'd he say as he went out the door?"

"He wanted to know if we had any gas masks."

"So they try to gas them out. They're giving the Zombis fits, all right. We'll see how he does it, and we just might come up with something. Maybe the plan we need, or maybe we'll just make a few Zombis uncomfortable, but we can't leave all the fighting on this planet to the kids."

The telephone rang. The colonel picked it up, listened, slowly hung up.

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"Bad news?" the captain asked.

"Relay from fleet headquarters. The Zombis have broken through again."

"How far did they get this time?"

"Earth."

PART THREE

I

FOR WEEKS and months Paul Corban's life at the *Raxtinu* went on unchanged. He seldom saw Doctor Alir. He thought that he was avoiding her, but eventually it occurred to him that she must be avoiding him, as if the memory of the one magic and pathetic moment in his arms embarrassed her. His love for her did not change, but he made it a thing apart from him, and sealed it off as one might a fragile, untouchable flower.

Unintentionally she had betrayed him, as he had betrayed his people. He did not blame her, but neither did he want her beauty constantly tormenting him with memory of his unconscious treachery, for he was certain that only his love for her had made him trust her.

Miles Fletcher and Roger Froin, the two martyred humans, came no more, and Corban lacked the courage to seek them out. He knew there were others from the Federation among the inmates, though he had no idea who they were or where they lived, and whenever he found a patient giving him more than a passing glance he imagined that it was a fellow human regarding him with burning hatred.

"Eventually," he told himself, "I shall go mad. And then—then perhaps it will be easier."

For some days he concentrated on losing his mind, and the fact of his sanity became a thing of torment.

More and more Corban kept to himself, avoiding even casual contact with his fellow inmates. For days at a time he did not leave his room. Books might have lessened his suffering, but there were no books, except the insipid volumes the Donirians thought suitable for their insane. His meal tray

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appeared, and more often than not disappeared without his having touched it. He lost weight, and a numbing lethargy descended upon him. He would lay for hours on his invisible bed staring trance-like at the soft-toned dullness of the ceiling.

In the evening he would be jerked back to reality when the sweetly-cracked tones of the old man's voice came drifting through the dusk. He found the songs increasingly irritable. He closed his window tightly, and still the music reached him as a faintly throbbing thread of beauty touched with pathos. He paced his room angrily, muttered threats, and delivered vicious kicks at the softly unyielding substance of his bed. One evening when it seemed that he could stand it no longer he stormed into the park, seized the old man's crude instrument, and broke it over his knee.

The old man was first astonished, and then grief-stricken. He gathered the splintered wreck to him tenderly, and sobbed, "why did you do that?"

Corban turned stonily and marched away. He wondered, afterwards, if the old man would fashion himself another instrument and find a less hostile audience for his songs. Perhaps he did, but Corban never heard him sing again. Paradoxically, he came to miss his songs.

In the darkness he would stand by his window gazing up at the stars. He was not entirely certain of his orientation, but he felt that some of them must be Federation stars, the stars of his people, and he knew that the crashing thunder of war was enveloping them and ripping through their peaceful skies, and that he, Paul Corban, was responsible.

His brother Bill would be in it. Corban was certain of that. Bill was a soldier, and a good one, and not the kind to run from a fight, whether it was the childish neighborhood brawls he delighted in as a boy, or a war that spanned the galaxy. He'd be in it from the start, if he could manage it.

And his sister Sue—she should be married by now. He prayed that she was deliriously happy, and that her husband had carried her off to some distant place of safety; back to old Earth, or to the far fringes of the Federation where not a single ripple of violence would disturb her life.

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At home there was little Jerry, and his parents. Jerry was no longer the baby he'd been when Corban last saw him. But surely Jerry and his parents were safe. The Donirian monsters could not penetrate that far into the Federation. Or could they?

Corban knew that they could, and he knew that his people would be crushingly defeated. Oh, they would fight. They would fight valiantly, and for all their superhuman powers the Donirians would know they'd been in a war. But to what purpose? The human race would suffer whatever fate the Donirians had planned for it.

Paul Corban was responsible, and there was nothing he could do. Nothing.

"Eventually," he would say, staring up at the stars and wondering what battles might be flaming that instant, "eventually I shall go mad." But he remained tortuously sane.

He was barely conscious of the slow seepage of time. Day trailed relentlessly after night, and the monotonous succession of days and nights came to mean little to him. He slept only when exhaustion overpowered his weakened body and the sharp remorse of his thoughts. He slept until he awoke, and he remained awake until he slept. How long had he been a prisoner? Months? Years? It no longer mattered, and he ceased caring.

One night he awoke suddenly from a feverish, exhausting sleep and found Doctor Alir standing beside his bed. He looked up at her wonderingly, closed his eyes, opened them again. He was not dreaming. She was real—she had changed. Her haggard face had an unnatural pallor. She looked down at him, and took a step closer as he pushed himself to a sitting position.

"They're taking you away," she announced.

"Oh," Corban said. "Well . . . does it matter?"

Long afterwards he remembered the pain that touched her face, the way she blinked her eyes, and caught her breath sharply, staggering backwards. He remembered, and wondered if, perhaps, it did matter.

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"They're taking you away," she said again. "They're taking you to . . ."

He watched and waited, but she did not finish. She turned away from him, her hands pressed tightly against her face, muffling her words. "Good-bye," she said. "I'm sorry. You must believe that. And—good-bye."

She was gone.

It was still night when they came for him. There seemed to be a touch of mystery in their whisking him away into the darkness. Otherwise, his departure was merely the reverse of his arrival, except that his two attendants wore scarlet clothing. There was the ride in the ground car, the imperceptible teleporting through the long series of high-domed, circular stations that now had a dreary, nighttime emptiness, and finally they stood before a gate. Corban assumed that it was a gate in a wall, though he could see neither. A uniformed guard passed them through, and Corban was instantly teleported by his attendants to his room.

It reminded Corban of his hospital room, except that this room was larger and its dim light was faintly red. But it was a six-sided cell, with a bathroom and, around the ceiling, a grillwork. Near one wall was the base plate for the invisible bed.

One of the attendants touched his arm, and gestured. Puzzled, Corban watched his antics blankly until he understood. They wanted his clothing. He undressed, and they took his garments and vanished.

Corban's only feeling was one of overwhelming weariness. He slumped onto the bed and fell asleep.

2

HE WAS awakened abruptly by someone screaming into his ear. He leaped from the bed in alarm, and found himself face to face with a woman. Like himself, she was nude. She

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stared at him dully. Her hair was a tangled, drooping mess, her eyes vacant, her face oddly expressionless. Corban was too dumbfounded to move, or even speak, and the woman continued to stare and made no sound.

A man flashed into the room, a nude man, who spun around awkwardly, uttered a guttural grunt, and leaped towards the woman. She screamed again, and vanished. The man also vanished, without a glance at Corban. Corban sat down heavily.

Seconds later they were back, the man intent in his pursuit of the woman, the woman interested only in staring at Corban. They passed through the room several times, and when they finally failed to reappear Corban got to his feet with a shudder.

He examined the room. The walls were solid, and there was no exit. "Only a teleport could get out," he mused. But the man and woman—who must be fellow patients, or inmates, or whatever they were, because they were nude like Corban—were teleports. Then this place was unlike the *Raxtinu* where only the officials were able to practice teleportation.

The woman returned. She stood guilelessly in the center of the room and gazed at Corban with such unabashed admiration that he lost his feeling of disgust and became amused. He sat down on the bed again, and looked back at her levelly. She showed no embarrassment, and Corban continued to look at her, wondering how long the strange impasse might continue. Then the man returned.

He landed soundlessly behind the woman, seized her roughly, and jerked her backwards. Corban was on his feet in an instant. He sprang forward and smashed his fist into the man's face. As he crumpled to the floor, the woman uttered a sharp cry and advanced on Corban boldly.

Corban backed away in alarm, which seemed to confuse her. She halted, and watched him retreat to the far corner of the room. The man regained consciousness, got dazedly to his feet, and disappeared. He returned almost at once, followed by a woman and another man. Others arrived singly or in pairs, nude adults of both sexes, until the room was

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crowded and Corban stood with his back to the wall facing a belligerent mob.

Some produced unintelligible grunts and shouts and screams, and others only glared angrily, or made childlike mocking faces at him, or gestured threateningly. Suddenly they rushed him.

Corban braced himself against the wall, and hurled himself forward. He smashed brutally at the hate-filled faces, saw one man go down, and then another. An arm clutched at his throat, and he seized it and felt it snap. They had gotten behind him, hurling themselves on his back. He crouched, flung one over his head, and observed indifferently that it was a woman. A man swung a wild, killing blow at his head, and Corban ducked, gave him a knee in the groin.

But he was decisively outnumbered. From behind him hands closed on his throat. He clutched at them, seized a finger and broke it, but the hands would not relax. A fist crashed against his forehead. Flailing hands scratched and tore and pounded at him as he went down.

Suddenly he was released. The room was filled with red-suited attendants, and as they arrived those of his assailants who were conscious fled. The attendants indifferently teleported the others away. A man in the light-blue uniform of a doctor arrived and gave Corban's scratches and bruises a quick examination and cursory treatment. Then he was alone, except for the woman he had seen first. She crouched in a corner, and her dumbly admiring eyes never left him.

Corban flung himself onto the bed. He had been a fool, he thought, to fight back. Supposing they had killed him? Death might be even preferable to madness.

Madness. These blabbering, face-making nudes were assuredly mad, and yet—they were superhumans. They teleported themselves, they probably spoke, if they spoke at all, telepathically, since all of their verbal utterances had been incoherent. Telekinesis? Probably, but it didn't really matter. There was nothing about the place that could be moved, mentally or otherwise.

He lost himself in thought, groping for an explanation.

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In the *Raxtinu* his fellow inmates had been normal in all respects except for the lack of the Donirian superpowers of mentality. Here the inmates had those powers, and were totally irrational. He had thought the *Raxtinu* an insane asylum, and he had been wrong. There the inmates had been normal beings in a supernormal world. That made them subnormal, but they were not insane.

But in any vast civilization the odds were that a certain percentage of the population would be mentally unbalanced. Truly insane. And an intelligent people would recognize their insanity as such, and provide for them in some way.

This was their asylum. Corban was confined with Donir's insane superhumans.

The woman continued to watch him. Corban looked at her absently, and it occurred to him that he had been awake for a long time without food. A chilling thought occurred to him. The inmates of this place came and went at will. Perhaps food was not delivered to the rooms. Perhaps they had to go for it themselves. If that were true, Corban would starve. Only a teleport could leave or enter this room. And though the thought of death was not discomforting, he wanted it to come, if it came, through some agent that worked faster and less distressingly than starvation.

He walked towards the woman, and as she looked up at him hopefully. He pointed to his mouth. He had little hope of making her understand anything, but after a moment a smile lit her face. She danced about him recklessly, her movements impulsive, her expression radiant. Then she disappeared.

She returned with a man in the uniform of a doctor. He opened an instrument bag, and to Corban's amazement began to examine his teeth. Corban patiently explained that he was hungry. The doctor choked off his startled protests, and continued with the examination. Satisfied with the soundness of Corban's dental equipment, he contemptuously shrugged off his questions about food, and vanished.

Corban tried the woman again, pointing to his mouth and making the motions of eating. This time the woman did un-

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derstand. She brought food, wrapped in a flimsy, fabric-like napkin.

"Of course," Corban told himself, attacking it hungrily. "No dishes, or trays, or tableware, or anything else that the inmates could use to harm themselves or each other. Not even any clothing."

His reverie was interrupted. The woman was back again, with more food. She continued to bring food, in spite of his spoken and gesticulated protests, until the floor was littered with the small, napkin-enclosed parcels. When he had eaten, and finally made her understand that he wanted no more, she cheerfully removed them one at a time, and then she returned to crouch in a corner. There she remained. She was there when he went to sleep, and she was there when he awakened.

Day and night were meaningless in the constant, dim red light of the room, but Corban estimated that several days passed before any of the other inmates returned. Then they began to come singly, flashing into the rooms, looking at him curiously, and disappearing. If they showed any sign of lingering, a glance from him brought a prompt departure.

"That fight gave me a reputation," Corban told himself.

But in time they gained confidence. They came in greater numbers, until they seemed to be descending upon him with the force of a legendary plague of insects. Their attitude changed from hesitant curiosity to bold mockery. They taunted him. They pinched and jostled him when he was eating. If he made a threatening gesture, they simply disappeared, or teleported themselves across the room, out of reach. Through it all the woman who had established herself as his custodian—or in his custody, he couldn't decide which—sat on the floor and watched blankly.

His helplessness infuriated him. He could not possibly elude them. His room was his prison, from which escape was impossible, and yet they entered and left at will. He took to lunging savagely at his tormentors, to striking blows which seldom landed. With a sinister cunning he sat for hours on his bed, watching the manner in which they appeared and

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plotting a technique that would catch them before they could orientate themselves. But while he was momentarily trapping one, half a dozen more would arrive, to leer at him, and babble inarticulate jeers, and strike or kick him from the rear. Sleep became impossible.

Corban began to rage like a caged animal. When he managed to stun one man temporarily, he flung himself onto him and beat his unconscious body to a bloody pulp before the attendants arrived to drag him off.

"Keep them out of herel" Corban shouted. "Keep them out, or I'll kill all of them!"

The attendants ignored his raving. The inmates were wary, for a time, but their maliciousness intensified. Corban began to realize that this faithful servant was having difficulty getting food to him. They were taking it away from her before she reached his room.

"It isn't any use," Corban told himself finally. "I went at it the wrong way. I should have tried to ignore them."

He was desperately tired. He was eating little, since the food the woman brought to him was often snatched from his hands before he could eat it. He sat on the edge of his bed, and buried his face in his hands, and resolved to let them do their worst.

In a short time there was a mob around him, pushing at him, and pulling, trying to drag him from the bed, pinching, scratching, kicking. He suffered in impassive silence, keeping his eyes on the floor so that they could not read the defeat in his face.

Suddenly the light-blue uniform of a doctor flashed into the room. The inmates fled immediately. Corban was too weary to look up as the doctor approached him. His arm was gripped firmly, and the room dropped away from him. The last thing he saw was the nude woman seated on the floor against the opposite wall, her pouting, childish, almost pretty face hunched forward over her flabby, middle-aged body.

He was in a dark place, too dark to see. It was permeated with the pungent smell of earth, of strange herbs, of flowers. Clothing was thrust into his hands.

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A softly musical voice said, "Put this on. Quickly."

"Doctor Alir!" he gasped.

"I could not leave you in that place," she said simply.

3

SHE OPENED the door a crack, so he would have enough light to put the clothing on properly. He hesitated when he saw that the garments were the official light-blue of the medical profession. But she said nothing, so he put them on.

They were in a small out-building, a storage place for gardening equipment. It was dusk outside. In the distance Corban could see a vast building, surrounded by some sort of formal garden, with zig-zagging walks and crowds of flowers turning pale blossoms towards the setting sun. The graceful form of the building was almost lovely in the fading light. It was, Corban thought, a quiet-looking madhouse.

When he was dressed she opened the door wider, scrutinized him with care, and gave him a pert nod of satisfaction. "There is only one way to pass the barrier," she whispered. "The guard must pass us through. He must think we are two doctors. Just do as I do. When I step forward, walk beside me. Once we are outside there will be no danger. Do you understand?"

"Yes," he said. He understood perfectly. The danger, the risk, were hers. If they were caught he would be taken back inside, certainly no worse off than he had been before. She was risking everything.

She took his arm. He had no sensation of movement, but they stood before the invisible gate he had passed through when he arrived. He experienced a momentary curiosity. The barrier was necessary, of course, to keep the teleporting inmates from escaping, but a barrier that would contain a teleport must be a miraculous thing. He wondered how it worked.

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The guard gave them the most casual of glances, and jerked at a lever. As Doctor Alir stepped forward he walked beside her. Then they were beyond the barrier, and the peaceful countryside stretched invitingly before them.

"Now," she whispered, tightening her grip on his arm, and they made their first jump.

As the night deepened they made jump after jump, and each darkness-shrouded landing place looked the same to Corban. He did not know whether these teleported changes covered yards or miles, but he knew they were moving away from the torment of the asylum. He knew that when they reached their destination he could sleep, and for the moment that was all he wanted.

Their first jumps went smoothly, and then it became obvious that Doctor Alir was tiring. Corban remembered the two husky attendants who had transported him to and from the *Raxtinu*, and he had no doubt that moving his body imposed a tremendous mental strain on a young woman who seemed no more than a girl. As the pauses between jumps became longer Corban had time to look around and speculate on his whereabouts. Invariably they landed in open fields or patches of woods. Occasionally lights glowed in the distance, but never close by.

Then her grip would tighten again, and she would say, "Ready?" and they would be off.

"She must have planned this carefully," he thought. "She must have come this way before, or she wouldn't know where she was going."

The sky was gray with the first light of dawn when they reached a lovely forest clearing and a small rustic cottage. Unlike any building Corban had seen on this planet, it was constructed of wood. He turned to Doctor Alir.

"You will be safe here," she said. "There is food. I must return at once. If I am not at the hospital at dawn, they might be suspicious."

He glanced quickly at the sky. She gave him a tired smile, and said, "I can go much faster alone. I will return to-

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night, and we will go the rest of the way. Few people ever come here, but it might be best if you remained inside."

She was gone. Corban wearily entered the house, found a bed, and slid easily into the first sound sleep he had enjoyed in months. It was dark again when he awakened. He lay staring at the window for a long time before he realized that he had slept through the day. He went looking for the food she had mentioned, and ate hungrily. Then he made himself comfortable and waited for her.

And she did not come. He paced the floor through the long hours of darkness, and his impatience gradually changed to alarm. The sky lightened, the dawn came freshly to the forest, and his hopes faded. He knew that the worst had happened. Her part in his escape was discovered. Thinking backwards, he wondered how it could have been otherwise, since she had boldly escorted him through the barrier. The guard had only to remember that Doctor Alir had passed through with a strange doctor, and then no one with an iota of intelligence could have any doubt as to what had happened.

She had sacrificed herself to give him his freedom, and as he looked dejectedly about the small house he wondered what he had gained. The food would last only a few days. He did not know where he was, or how close he might be to a human habitation. The first Donirian he met would find his mind a telepathic blank and recognize him as some kind of degenerate. If he survived the violent prejudices of the populace he would at best end up at the *Raxtinu*, or another institution just like it. And the chances were that the entire planet had been alerted by his escape, and he would be quickly returned to the insane asylum. Doctor Alir's noble gesture had been in vain.

But he could make a fight of it. "If she is suspected," he mused, "and if this place belongs to her, or has any connection with her, then I must not leave any evidence that I have been here. On the other hand, I must remain close by, because she might return, sooner or later, or send someone, and that is my only hope."

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A short time later, with as much food and water as he could carry, he moved off into the forest. He wanted a tree which offered comfort, concealment, and a view of the house, and eventually he found one. He fashioned a place for himself in its upper branches, and rested there peacefully through the day, feeling neither lonely nor bored. The chaos of the asylum was much too vivid in his mind for him to be distressed by solitude. At night he descended, and found a sheltered place near the cottage.

On the third day a company of soldiers came. Their sudden appearance in the clearing startled him, but he watched them unmolested from his tree. They searched the house quickly and disappeared, showing no interest in the surrounding forest.

On the seventh night, when his food was exhausted and he was despairingly attempting to plan for the future, Doctor Alir returned. He did not recognize her at first. She was only a dark shadow that came from nowhere and ran frantically towards the house. Lights flashed on, and she raced from room to room, calling, "Paul! Paul!"

He hurried in to her, and she fell sobbing into his arms. But she recovered quickly, and greeted him with a smile. "I was afraid for you," she said.

"I was afraid for you," he told her. He described how he had passed the time waiting for her, and the visit of the soldiers, and she nodded gravely and told him he was very wise.

"We can go, now," she said.

"Could we talk first?" he asked her.

"Only a little. We must go far."

"What happened to you?"

"They thought I had helped you escape," she said. "I knew they might suspect me a little, but they imprisoned me, and questioned me, and I did not expect that."

"The guard would remember," Corban said. "We should have disguised you. I would have suggested it, but I didn't know what we were going to do."

"There was so little time," she said. "I did not know when

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they would miss you, and we had to be past the barrier by then. And I thought the guard would be confused. I had already left earlier, with a friend, when another guard was on duty. Then I returned in a supply caravan, so that no one noticed me."

"I understand," Corban said. "The other guard had seen you leave, and no one had seen you return, so it couldn't have been you leaving a second time."

"The caravans are not examined closely when they enter the barrier. But though it was dark, the guard was certain he recognized me. So they imprisoned me, and questioned me, and they even searched places I might have taken you. This house belongs to my brother, but I sometimes come here to study, so they sent men to search.

"When they found nothing, they released me with apologies. They agreed, finally, that it could not have been me, because I had already left. And there are many doctors who practice there, or who come to observe. At present they have decided that you are dead."

"I hope the thought gives them pleasure!"

"It will not, unless they find your body. But the other patients hated you. It was because they sensed that you were different, I think, and the authorities now are certain that the other patients have killed you and hidden your body somewhere inside the barrier."

"Doctor Alir," Corban said, "why was I taken there?"

She sat down, and motioned for him to come and sit beside her. "I will take the time to tell you this," she said. "Our people are at war."

"I know."

"At the beginning, my people had noble motives. They were going to conquer your people quickly, without harming them at all, if they could. And they were going to cure them."

"Cure them? You mean . . ."

"Yes. As we attempted to cure you."

"You know what they really intended," Corban said bitterly. "Your people knew that the attempt to cure me had failed. They must have known that they could not expect

better results with the remainder of my people. What they really intended was to imprison them, all of them, as they imprisoned me."

Doctor Alir buried her face in her hands. "It was wrong. It was and is. But our leaders said it was our duty to attempt to make your people normal. And at first it seemed to work out as they wanted it. Your people were taken by surprise, and there was almost no fighting. All the doctors that could be spared were sent to work with the prisoners. And then your people began to fight back, and it was terrible." She shuddered, and hunched forward. "Do you know a world your people call Willar?"

"I've heard of it, yes."

"It was there that your people began to fight. One of our armies after another was destroyed. My father, who was a general, died there. And my younger brother."

He took her hand and stroked it gently. "I understand the grief you feel. I have been wondering what has happened to my brothers, and sister, and parents."

"Your people had only a small army on Willar, and though we were finally victorious, the cost was horrifying. And then, not long after that, half of our fleet was destroyed in one battle. Our people do not know these things, even yet. The Council has not dared to tell them. They think we are winning easy and glorious victories. But my elder brother is an assistant minister, and he has told me."

Corban felt dazed. "You mean my people are actually winning?"

"No," she said sadly. "No one wins a war such as this one. But your people are being defeated. Everywhere. And the war has changed. After the horrible victories your people won, it was decided that they were not human, and never could be. There was no longer any thought of curing them. They must be confined or exterminated. Our soldiers are killing your people whenever they can, even the women and children. They no longer try to fight your soldiers. They are afraid to do that. They just try to starve them, and they kill them when they try to surrender. It is madness. It is my

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people who are insane, not yours. And my brother, the assistant minister, feels that a people as resourceful as yours can never be entirely defeated. Some will survive, and they will never forget what my people have done. They will find our worlds, some day, and exact terrible reparations."

"But the other ministers do not agree with him?" Corban asked.

"They think only of hating and killing." She sobbed brokenly. "I caused it. If I had not told you to tell your story, there would have been no war."

"No," Corban said softly. "The fault was mine."

"It was when they decided that your people were not human, were no more than vicious animals, that they had you removed to the asylum."

For a time they sat in silence. He slipped his arm around her, and for a moment she rested her head on his shoulder. Then she jerked away, and got to her feet. "If together we caused this war," she said, "together we must stop it."

Corban laughed. "Just like that? Fine. You tell me what to do, and I'll hurry out and stop it."

She gazed at him wonderingly. "But you don't understand? You are the only one who can stop it."

"What do you want me to do? Go to my people and tell them to stop fighting and surrender? They'd shoot me for a traitor, and go right on fighting."

"Have you forgotten why the war started? We were going to cure your people. Our leaders have lost sight of that, now. We must remind them of it. We must show that in fighting your people, we are really fighting ourselves."

"How?"

"We must show that your people can be cured—by curing you."

"You mean . . . arruclam, and cilloclam, and . . ."

"You must master them," she said earnestly. "You must. And when you do, we can stop the war."

IN CORBAN'S left hand he held a balloon; in his right hand, a gadget whose function approximated that of a stop watch. He leaned over the edge of the balcony, released the balloon, and simultaneously squeezed the gadget. The balloon floated slowly downwards.

Corban watched it almost indifferently. How does one go about exercising mental control over an object? Does one think words at it: "Slow down, damn you! Stop in midair. Come back up here." Or does one assume that the object is on a kind of mental fishline, which responds to the slightest movement of the head? Or is it an identification of self with object—empathy, that was the word—so that . . .

He did not know. Not even Doctor Alir was able to tell him. To her it was instinctive, he thought. She was not conscious of an exertion of mental force. She wanted something to move, and it moved.

The balloon touched the floor. Corban squeezed his gadget. "Seven, fourteen," he said. "Control."

"Control," a voice below him repeated. The woman recorded the figures, and looked up with a smile. It was Doctor Alir's mother, Alira, silver-haired but lovely as her daughter, and a doctor herself with years of experience with mental problems. Corban's people had killed her husband and younger son, and she greeted him like a long-lost, dearly loved kinsman, called him her dear boy, and took over his education with a resourcefulness and energy that left Corban dazzled.

Corban leaned back, and looked at the table at his side. A small, pencil-like tube lay on its polished surface. So easily and so smoothly did it roll that Corban could send it the length of the table by breathing on it. But with his mind he could not create a ripple of disturbance in its damning inertness. He remembered a game he had played as a boy, with cylinders of metal and a magnet. One pole of the magnet had chased the cylinders along a smooth surface; the

other pole had attracted them. He had wondered if the force of the telekinesis might be somehow likened to the force of magnetism, and Doctor Alir and her mother had received that suggestion with consternation.

Alira appeared on the balcony beside him. "Supposing you try phase two for awhile," she said. "It will be more pleasant for you in the garden."

She left him in the garden. He stood for a moment looking at this graceful ancestral home of Doctor Alir's, and thinking what a marvelously convenient thing teleportation was for an architect. Rooms could be planned without doors, upper stories added without wastfully allotting space to stairways, and the distance from kitchen to dining room was not even a factor worth considering. Corban believed he could have enjoyed this Donirian civilization, if he could have been a part of it.

But he had to remind himself quickly that few of its people would be as kind and generous as Doctor Alir and her mother.

Phase two: teleportation. The frustrating memory of his days in the hospital came back to him as he stood on a low ledge and attempted to teleport himself to the ground. It was a simple assignment: move a few inches forward and a few inches down. He closed his eyes, and his mind pleaded futilely with his immobile body.

When he opened his eyes Doctor Alir stood beside him, watching him with detached professional interest. She had returned to the *Raxtinu* after his escape, and on the few times he had seen her her manner had been coldly distant. "Try again," she suggested.

Absently he gestured, palms up. "It doesn't seem to be any use. I keep trying one phase after another, and nothing ever happens."

"Don't be so cowardly about it!"

He looked up, startled. Her face was pale, her eyes flashing, her hands clenched and trembling. "You're having a nice rest here, aren't you?" she said bitterly. "You've forgotten all

about the war. If you hadn't, you wouldn't be worrying about how difficult it is. You'd be determined to succeed."

He stepped forward, flushed with anger. "It's easy enough for you to talk about success, when you've always been able to do it."

"You don't have to shout at me. If you're only able to express yourself with uncouth sounds, you might at least try to speak softly."

"Uncouth sounds!" he roared. "Listen. I caused this war. Every casualty on either side is blood on my hands. Do you think I can keep that on my mind every minute and stay sane?"

As he was speaking, Alira appeared. He allowed his voice to trail away while mother and daughter stood looking at each other, talking telepathically, he supposed, and, from their expressions, having a heated argument. Doctor Alir disappeared.

"Poor Alir," Alira murmured. "And poor Paul." She placed a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. "She loves you, you know. Just as you love her. Oh, I know all about it. It's perfectly obvious. She loves you and she knows you can never live in safety on this world, and if that weren't enough there's a war you two are blaming yourselves for. The poor girl is worrying herself frantic. And just to make things worse, the investigation of your escape is still going on, and Alir has been summoned to appear before the Council. Alir is afraid some rumor of your presence here may have gotten around. She thinks the servants may have been indiscreet."

"They're still looking for me, I suppose," Corban said.

"The entire Home Guard is searching. I wouldn't have thought you were that important, but the Council seems to want you pretty badly."

"Perhaps it would be best if I just gave myself up. All this work isn't accomplishing anything, and I might cause trouble for you."

"Now don't you worry about that. The important thing is to keep trying. Try as hard as you can. We really must end this war."

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"I know. But it isn't pleasant to think that it all depends on my doing the . . . the . . ."

He was about to say "impossible," but the memory of Doctor Alir's sudden outburst silenced him.

"You must keep trying, and we'll keep trying, too, to think of some new approach." She looked at him thoughtfully. "Sometimes a sudden shock is effective."

"Not in my case," Corban said dryly. "I had a rather sudden shock when I landed here."

"I wasn't necessarily referring to a physical shock. I personally believe our medical practice tends to err, there. A mental shock might have a more direct effect on the mental processes."

"I've had a few of those, too."

"Yes," she said softly. "I'm sure you have. And it isn't easy to manufacture a mental shock. I must think about it."

Corban stepped back onto the ledge. "Shall I stay on phase two?"

"Yes. Please do." She disappeared, appeared again. "After Alir sees the Council," she said, "she won't be coming back here again. Her presence here seems to disturb both of you."

Corban nodded. The Council. That was the mysterious entity that wanted him badly. He was going to ask Alira if the Council wanted him dead or alive, but she had gone. He sighed, and closed his eyes. "Doctor Alir loved him. Her mother thought so, and her mother should know. But somehow it made no difference—no difference at all.

Phase two: teleportation.

When it seemed that his mind would burst from the effort he exerted, he left the garden and strolled off across the estate. At one time it had been a farm, but Doctor Alir's family had long since lost interest in farming. So now there were meadows of long, sweet-smelling, flower-crowned grass, and small patches of woods. There was a lazily-flowing brook that Corban crossed on stepping stones—stepping stones that he had placed there himself, since no previous resident of the estate had needed stones to cross the brook.

He walked through the meadow and leisurely climbed a

hump in the landscape which was not exactly a hill, but which permitted him to look for some distance over the flat countryside. The circular mansion and its three outbuildings were dreamily peaceful in the warm morning sunlight. A short distance away was the scar that remained from another building—a barn, he supposed, back in the days when the estate had been a farm.

"In a way," he mused, "the Donirians are people just like us. They can be kind and generous, and they can be cruel and selfish. They can be good and bad, strong and weak, and there are things they love and things they hate."

His thoughts turned to himself. He could not remain there indefinitely, attempting to call into action a mental endowment which he did not have. It was like training a color-blind man to see colors. He would work and strain, and all kinds of exercises might be designed to help him, but no matter how frequently and in what manner colors were pointed out to him, he would never properly distinguish them. And medical science was powerless to help him.

Corban was equally helpless to teleport, and all the rest. The powers were not latent within him, as Doctor Alir and her mother assumed. They were lacking entirely. If the fate of his people depended upon his mastering those powers, his people were doomed.

His own future seemed equally bleak. Even if he evaded the authorities, if Doctor Alir provided him with a sanctuary for the remainder of his life, he would always be a prisoner—the prisoner of his own body, among superhumans who had transcended their bodies. If Doctor Alir loved him, as he loved her—but that made no difference. Love could not bloom and survive under such circumstances.

"If I could escape," he thought, "if I could get back to wherever the war is going on . . ."

He would welcome the chance to die for a cause, to go down fighting in this war which he had started. He owed that to his people, but even an honorable death was denied him.

He sighed, and looked again at the mansion, and the un-

broken fields beyond. There were no roads in this Donirian civilization. The only one he had ever seen was the one that led to the *Raxtinu*, and he had long pondered the significance of that one. He decided that ground cars were utilized for all comings and goings, so that the inmates would not be given to speculation on their own mental deficiencies.

As he looked, Alira arrived in the garden, at the place where he had been practicing phase two. Unlike Doctor Alir, she affected many shades of clothing, and today she wore a flashing yellow. She was a vivid figure as she stood motionless for a moment in the garden, and then appeared in turn by each of the three outbuildings.

"Looking for me," Corban thought. Seated as he was, among the trees, he was invisible to her. "I suppose I ought to start back."

She disappeared, and he had just gotten to his feet when the first soldiers arrived. There was a company, at least, in front of the house, and as he blinked and instinctively ducked back into the trees they were everywhere, surrounding the house, searching the outbuildings.

Corban turned and fled blindly. It required no process of reasoning for him to decide that they were after him. He knew, and he ran for his life, ran through the patch of trees and down the slope across a meadow towards a larger wood beyond.

As he ran, he realized that running could not save him. In seconds they would be all over the countryside. They might even be there waiting for him when he reached the trees, waiting and laughing as he frantically churned his legs to escape. His only hope was to hide.

He reached the trees, and flung himself panting to the ground. Looking back, he saw the flash of their green uniforms among the trees he had just left. They were searching, and in an instant they would be searching here. He glanced upwards. He had saved himself once, by hiding in a tree. Perhaps the Donirian mentality could not conceive of a mental cripple climbing trees. He scrambled to his feet and ran again, deeper into the wood.

He was halfway up a tall tree when the first green uniforms appeared below him. The foliage about him was scanty, and he looked longingly at the thick leaves ten feet above him. But he dared not climb further. He eased himself into a sitting position on a branch, and waited.

The soldiers moved about noisily, kicking aside the undergrowth, and finally forming a line that moved forward in a relentless, systematic search. Corban's pounding heart relaxed slightly as they moved off and out of sight, but a short time later he heard them returning. Had they seen him entering this wood, or were they searching as thoroughly everywhere?

They had passed beneath his tree once more, and Corban, flattened against the trunk, clinging fervently to his branch, thought himself safe. Then one of them turned, and looked up.

Blank astonishment crossed the soldier's face. In the same instant the others turned and looked. Their numbers doubled and tripled in an instant, and weapons were raised.

"What a hell of a way to die," Corban thought dully.

Something jerked at him, unbalanced him, hauled at him savagely. He tightened his grip until his white, perspiring hands shed blood on sharp protrusions of bark. Still that unseen force grappled with him. "Telekinesis," he moaned. "They're trying to make me fall."

The force relaxed slowly. A soldier stepped forward, moved to the trunk of the tree, and raised a weapon. Corban looked down into the bulging muzzle. The soldier took aim with a slow, deliberate insolence.

"Perhaps it's best this way," Corban thought. "I could never live long enough to make up for the harm I've done."

He could only wonder why he had lived at all. He had accomplished nothing good, nothing of value. The small happiness he had tasted he had left light-years away, and almost beyond his memory. His recollections of events, recent enough to be recalled vividly, were recollections of torment. Had his besieged mind enjoyed any peace among these superhumans?

Yes, he thought. There were moments of peace. The little

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grove near the *Raxtinu*, and Doctor Alir sitting beside him studying the birds with the small telescope. He had thought himself tragically unhappy, and certainly as a victim of an unattainable love he had small cause for rejoicing. But there was no war to torture his mind, and no burning sence of guilt to turn his nights into a churning hell of sleeplessness. He'd had peace, then, if not contentment, and if he had a soul to barter he would trade it cheerfully for a chance to return to those days of blank hopelessness. The large-leaved, stately trees, the fluttering, multicolored birds, the cheerful, rushing water . . .

The soldier was finally satisfied with his aim. Corban, his mind far away in the *Raxtinu* grove, looked down absently and saw a bluish flash.

5

HIS FIRST thought was that he had fallen. He lay on the ground, looking up at the branches that arched high over his head and stirred in a gentle breeze. He felt a weakness, a dizziness that approached nausea, and he was content to rest for a moment, tensing his muscles to see if he had injured himself. A bird sped across his field of vision, a tiny flash of color. There was a sound nearby that he could not place.

"The soldiers!" he thought suddenly.

He dug his fingers into the fragrant soil, and weakly pushed himself to a sitting position. He was quite alone. It was some minutes before he could steady himself to stand. He turned towards the puzzling sound, and found a small, rushing stream.

Corban reached for a convenient tree trunk, and clung helplessly. "I was in a tree," he said slowly, "and a soldier fired at me. I was up there . . ."

He looked upwards, stared, and slowly comprehended that

he had not climbed one of these trees. They were taller, and larger, and their leaves were broader. And there was no undergrowth here.

He staggered away, came at length to the edge of the grove, and stopped. The ground dropped away in a sloping field of grain, great, circular patches of it. In the distance was a sprawling building, and to his left a mound ran along a curving road.

"The *Raxtinul*" he gasped. He retreated in haste to the depth of the grove, and unsteadily got himself seated by the stream.

"I was in a tree," he mused slowly, "and the soldier shot me." He examined his body for a trace of a wound, and found none. "I must have fallen, but I didn't hurt myself. And they brought me here." He looked about him awesomely. "But why would they bring me here?"

He listened for a time to the hypnotic gurgling of the water. "They wouldn't," he announced confidently. "The Council wanted me. They wouldn't bring me here." But he was here. Then . . .

He leaped to his feet in a tingling, soaring sweep of exhilaration. He had come by himself! He had been thinking of this very spot when the gun was fired, and he had come. He was here.

"I'll have to try it again," he exulted. "Right away." But he was too weak, and too bewildered, to concentrate. He tried to sit down again, lost his balance, lost consciousness.

The day was far gone when he awoke. Light had faded in the grove, and when he reached the edge he saw that the shadows were long. He could see distant, black-clothed figures in the park by the building. He wondered if the old man would be there, singing his songs.

"I must do it again," he thought. "I must." He closed his eyes, and clenched his fists until the nails stabbed painfully into his flesh. In an overwhelming surge of mental effort he willed himself back by the stream. He opened his eyes on the field of grain, and the *Raxtinu*, and the distant, black figures. The murmuring stream was somewhere behind him,

among the trees. He tried again, and again, as the darkness settled slowly about him and the softly diffused glow from the barrier along the road became visible. When he could try no longer he slumped to the ground and slept.

He awoke with the misty dawn. His muscles were stiff from the unaccustomed hardness of his bed, but he felt none the less rested and refreshed. He thrust aside his pangs of hunger and sat looking towards the *Raxtinu*. The rising sun burned away the mist, and black-clothed figures appeared to stroll in the park. Corban watched, and thought. When the sun was high in the sky he finally reached a decision. He got to his feet and strode resolutely down the slope.

A strange doctor was no novelty at the *Raxtinu*, and the patients, after a glance at his blue clothing, ignored him. He entered the building boldly, but once inside he moved with extreme caution. He could not risk a telepathic encounter with a staff member. He managed to avoid a female doctor by ducking hastily around a corner, and the precaution of glancing ahead before turning into a corridor saved him from a face-to-face encounter with the Director.

His destination was a door, labeled, "For Authorized Personnel Only." What lay on the other side he could only guess—and hope. He reached it safely, and slipped through.

He was in a long corridor. A black-clothed patient approached, pushing an empty cart. He gave Corban a nod as he passed him. Corban moved along warily. The tempting odors of cooking food wafted in from somewhere, to remind Corban of his hunger. He opened a door, looked in quickly, and closed it. Down the corridor he went, trying one door after another, and finally he found the door he sought.

The room was lined with shelves, and on the shelves clothing was stacked, the black clothing of the patients. Corban fumbled from shelf to shelf until he found his size. Standing with his back against the door, he hastily discarded his blue doctor's clothing and attired himself in black. Then, after a cautious glance to make certain the corridor was empty, he left the room and hurried away.

He went directly to the administrative offices. A female

doctor greeted him with a casual nod that showed no sign of recognition. "May I speak with Doctor Alir?" Corban asked.

"Doctor Alir is not here."

"When is she expected back?"

"She will not be back," the doctor said. "She's been . . . transferred."

"She's been transferred?" Corban echoed blankly. The almost imperceptible hesitation in the doctor's voice staggered him. For the first time it occurred to him that the soldiers' presence on Doctor Alir's estate had been no accident, and the fact that they discovered him there, even though he escaped, could have been damning to both Doctor Alir and her mother. "The servants may have been indiscreet," Alira had said. And now Doctor Alir had been—what had they done to her?

"Could I help you?" the doctor said. "Is there anyone else you'd care to talk to?"

Corban turned away. "No, thank you," he muttered, and fled.

The park was cool and restful. Someone had left an invisible chair in a shady spot, and Corban made himself comfortable and looked down towards the stream, where a man and woman were wading and indulging in the delightful nonsense of small children. Corban watched them, and felt an unaccountable surge of jealousy. Strolling patients gave him friendly nods. An attractive young woman, walking some distance away, smiled and beckoned to him. He was back among his own once more, his own kind of people, and the sensation was almost painful. To lose himself among the thousands of black-clad patients, to forget the war, and Doctor Alir, and the asylum, and the nerve-wracking therapy; to forget, and live out his life here in peaceful, uncomplicated certainty . . .

But there would be no forgetting. Wearily he got to his feet.

The woman doctor, mildly surprised to see him again, looked at him inquiringly. "I'd like to speak to the Director," Corban said.

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The doctor said nothing to Corban. But a moment later the Director entered the room. He studied Corban thoughtfully, nodded at the doctor, and gestured at Corban. "Come this way," he said. So matter-of-fact was his manner that Corban wondered if he'd been recognized.

But as soon as they reached his office, the Director turned and pointed a finger. "You," he said, speaking slowly and with great emphasis, "are being most earnestly searched for in every corner of this planet but this one. How did you get here?"

"Where is Doctor Alir?" Corban demanded.

"Yes," the Director said. "There is that." He sat down at his table, and pointed at a chair. Corban remained standing.

"Doctor Alir," the Director said, "is in prison. She confessed her part in your escape. I fear they were somewhat rough with her. Illegal, not to mention immoral, but very effective. Now, how did you get here?"

Corban told him. The Director heard the story twice, and began to ask questions. Just how had Corban felt after his first experience of mentally controlled travel? What sort of sickness did he experience? Why did he wait so long before trying again? Finally, why had he come to see the Director?

"You could have hidden indefinitely in one of the villages," the Director said. "We do not interfere with our patients as long as they behave themselves."

"I want some more therapy," Corban said. "I want to be completely cured. I mean, I want to be cured as you and your people look at my condition. Then I want to go before your rulers and try to stop the war. And I want to get Doctor Alir released, if it's possible."

"You had therapy before," the Director said. "It didn't work."

"I know. But I also know that I never really expected it to work. That must have contributed to the failure."

The Director leaned forward, cupped his chin with one hand, and thoughtfully tapped the table with his other. Corban, angered by his apparent indifference, took a step forward. "I know that it's my people who are being murdered,"

he shouted. "But certainly you, of all people, should have some humane feeling. Any doctor should want to stop a war."

The Director blinked, and gazed at him reproachfully. "Certainly I want to stop the war. I'll remind you that it is not only your people who are being killed. And then, the war has done things. To us. Things you might not understand. Things like what happened to Doctor Alir. But it is not merely a matter of wanting to stop it. You're putting it in terms of a medical problem, you see, and we must approach it on a medical basis. The soldier fired just when your mental state had you properly poised, so the shock must have been the determining factor. But what sort of shock? Would you recognize that weapon if you saw it again?"

"I'm certain I would."

"Very well. Have you had anything to eat since you returned? No? I'll assign you to a room, and you are to eat and get some rest. I'll send for you again when I'm ready for you."

He shrugged off Corban's questions, sending him away. Corban spent an uneasy two hours, wondering if the Director would betray him before he had a chance to carry out the plan for which Doctor Alir had sacrificed so much. Then the Director came for him himself, and escorted him back to his office. Spread out on the table was a small arsenal of weapons. Corban circled the table, and pointed at a deadly-looking, bulging pistol.

"That one," he said. "It made a kind of bluish spark when it fired."

The Director consulted some notes. "Then it was the one," he said. He pushed the other weapons aside, picked up the one Corban had chosen, and pointed it at him. "Good. I want you to move yourself back to that grove by mental power. You can't escape from this room any other way. The door is locked. I'm going to pull this trigger—" he snatched a book from the table, and tossed it into the air—"when that touches the floor. Either you leave, or you get hit."

Corban stared dumbly at the book, which spiraled slowly downwards. "Murder!" he gasped, and the Director's smile only broadened.

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"If it's possible . . ." Corban thought. "The grove. The trees. Birds The brook . . ."

The book touched, and the gun sparked.

Corban was in the grove. He steadied himself against a tree, and was trying to control his nausea when the Director arrived. The Director thumped his chest, checked heart and pulse, and stepped back smiling cheerfully.

"You might have killed me," Corban said.

"My dear patient, that gun is not a killing kind of gun. It merely stuns. It causes a mental paralysis. The effect is probably unknown to your people. The soldiers intended to paralyze you, and lower you safely to the ground. But your mental condition, plus some peculiarity of that particular kind of shock, frustrated them. Shall we return to my office?"

"You mean—"

"But naturally. The same means by which you left it."

Corban strained viciously as the Director looked on, and stroked one cheek with a thoughtful finger, and made soft clucking noises with his tongue. "If we must walk," he said finally, "I suppose we must."

Knowing that the Director could easily have returned him to the office, Corban walked in puzzled silence. But as his dizziness and nausea faded he realized that the walk was good for him, just what he needed. By the time they reached the building he had completely recovered.

Back in the office, the Director seated himself and picked up the weapon. "This is extremely interesting," he remarked. "To my knowledge, no attempt has ever been made to make therapeutic use of this particular kind of shock. And in its normal use this kind of gun has probably never been fired at a person with your particular, ah, deficiencies. The only difficulty is that with your mind in a state of balance the shock merely provides an impetus. We still know nothing of its lasting effects. So . . . excuse me, please, but this is necessary." Quickly he raised the gun and fired.

Unconsciousness crashed down on Corban with the crushing impact of an enormous weight. Then he felt nothing

more. Nothing, and then a slow, sleepy awareness of a painful tingling in his hands and feet. Groggily he opened his eyes, found himself lying on an invisible bed. He was no longer in the office, but the Director sat nearby, watching him intently.

He became conscious of a new sensation, one that bewildered him. Images prodded restlessly at his mind, but they were strange and shapeless images. The Director placed one of the stripped balloons on the floor between them. Corban's mind contemplated it, reached for it, gave it an experimental nudge. The balloon rolled. Corban lifted it a few inches, lost it, and watched it bounce slowly.

"One more dose should cure you completely," the Director said. "Do you feel able to take it?"

"Yes," Corban said.

"There's no hurry. Tomorrow will do."

"Today. Right away. And Doctor Alir must know. Immediately. Will you tell her?"

"I believe I can get word to her. Look, young man. This is a proud moment in medical history. We've never before had a cure with a completely negative case. Never. So no matter what happens, it's a wonderful thing that you've done. I want you to know that, because even with you cured this stopping the war is not going to be easy. The Council is in the hands of some vicious old men, and—you'll see when you appear before them. I might add that you're doing it at your own risk, and it isn't an inconsiderable risk. Do you still want to stop the war?"

Corban gestured at the gun. "Now," he said.

"Now," the Director agreed. He raised the gun, hesitated. "I'm rather glad you feel this way. Doctor Alir sulked around for months under the burden of responsibility for this war, and I assume that you've felt something similar. And the fact of the matter is that I caused it. It was I who called in the government. If I'd had an iota of sense, I'd have made you two youngsters keep things to yourselves. I thought only of the scientific importance of your presence here, and nothing

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at all about the political implications. And I'm old enough to know better. Of course there is one other consideration . . ."

He was still talking when he pulled the trigger.

6

To CORBAN's left the galleries mounted in a dizzying procession towards the clear night sky, and each gallery was an unbroken blur of waiting faces. To his right the seats of the thousand councilmen who ruled the Donirian Worlds rose steeply in narrow, curved tiers. A dome of tinted plastic roofed the enormous amphitheater, and the benign stars winked down in riotous color.

The councilmen were arriving. Entire tiers filled up as the eye blinked into the glareless lights that focused on the central dais. The *Raxtinu* Director placed a firm hand on Corban's shoulder.

"All right, young man. From here on it's your show."

Corban took the Director's hand and shook it warmly. To a Donirian accustomed to mental contacts the manuever must have been puzzling, but the Director seemed to understand. "I wish you good fortune," his mind said.

"Are you leaving?"

"I am only allowed a place among the observers, unless I am called to testify. And tonight there are many observers." He vanished.

The Council was in place, now, and on the dais stood the First Councilman, tall, gaunt, white-haired. He wore the green of the Donirian Army. The tense smile that jerked across his grotesquely wrinkled face served only to underscore his sternness.

To Corban's ears the silence was uncanny. To his mind the undulating undertone of mind conversation welled confusedly. Suddenly that, too, was silenced.

"Step forward, Paul Corban."

The words were spoken. Corban saw the disgust that touched the faces of the nearest councilmen, and suppressed a smile. The blur of faces focused upon him as he took one slow step forward, and then another.

Then he projected himself mentally to the witness chair below the dais.

The gasp of astonishment came as a thunderclap. The next moment Corban was staggered by the avalanche of thoughts that poured down upon him, thoughts that raged and insulted and accused and threatened. He rose to his feet and held his head defiantly high, but inwardly his uneasiness grew. He had expected astonishment, but not this overpowering surge of hatred.

The First Councilman raised both hands, and the onslaught ceased. The old man had not yet contained his amazement. His mind asked doubtfully, "Paul Corban?"

Corban faced him and delivered the stiff bow he had rehearsed. "Paul Corban," his mind replied.

The First Councilman winced. He turned away uncertainly, and conferred with men at the table behind him. He returned to tower over Corban, white-lipped and eyes ablaze. His thoughts crackled like radio static. "So, Paul Corban. Your deceit has plunged two civilizations into war with each other, with uncalculable cost and suffering. What have you to say for yourself?"

"I have deceived no one," Corban said.

"You deceived our best medical minds into thinking you mentally incompetent, and in so certifying you. And yet we all saw how you took your place here, and we have all heard your mind responding. If you do not call this deceit, perhaps you would not mind explaining your forthright honesty in this matter."

Mental laughter rolled down from the galleries. Angry laughter. Corban waited uneasily for it to stop. The Director had warned him, "They may think they need a scapegoat. Be careful they don't make one out of you."

Again a gesture from the First Councilman silenced the tumult of thought. "We await your reply, Paul Corban."

"I came to you as a stranger," Corban said. "I came only because I was lost. My ship crashed and I was severely injured, but your doctors saved my life and were kind to me. They considered me an outcast and treated me as one, but I did not understand that. Because they were kind, I told them about myself and my people. I told them the truth, and in turn they gave that truth to this Council. And this Council made me the betrayer of my people by using that truth in a treacherously conceived war. My people had caused you no harm. They did not even know of your existence, but you attacked them, and laid waste to their worlds, and murdered their women and children. What have you to say for yourselves?"

The thoughts rolled down again, some threatening and taunting, some protesting, but there were also words of encouragement and sharp criticism for the First Councilman. It was the first indication Corban had had of a rift in the Council.

Anger twisted the First Councilman's face, and his thoughts cut sharply across the seething mental confusion. "The Donirians undertake no wars save in their own defense. We launched a glorious medical crusade to free your people from themselves, and our kindness was met with the foul savageness of unreasoning animals. Naturally we defended ourselves. Naturally!"

The confusing babble of thoughts continued. There were sharp arguments in the tiers of the Council. The First Councilman raised his arms, and restored order.

"Enough," he said. "I will hear testimony on this deceit."

Witnesses were called in as a group: doctors from the hospital where Corban had been treated after his crash, Doctor Alir and her mother, the *Raxtinu* Director, and a miscellany of persons who'd had some passing contact with Corban. The testimony droned on tediously as Corban's life among the Donirians was reconstructed with painstaking thoroughness. Corban, his eyes on Doctor Alir, scarcely heard it.

She had lost weight. Her face was pale and devoid of expression. One of her hands was bandaged. Her manner was

listless, and several times she swayed and seemed about to fall. Alira supported her with a firm arm, and from time to time whispered a verbal comment that could not be intercepted by the sharp minds of the interpreters.

"The devils!" Corban muttered.

She delivered her testimony indifferently, almost mechanically, as though she had already recited it many times. It amounted to a full confession as she described her part in smuggling Corban out of the asylum, and the efforts of her mother and herself to cure him. The Council listened stoically, and made no comment. There were not even any questions. The Director ended the testimony by detailing the steps in Corban's cure.

The First Councilman asked a question. Was it the Director's opinion that Paul Corban had skillfully feigned his disabilities and likewise feigned the cure at an opportune moment? It was not. The Director was positive that Corban's disabilities had been genuine. He considered the cure to be a medical miracle.

"The Council will take note of the defendant's despicable cleverness," the First Councilman remarked.

The witnesses were dismissed. Corban was asked if he had anything further to say. He scornfully returned the old man's haughty stare.

"How many of my people have been taken prisoner in this war?" he asked.

There was no reply.

"Thousands? Millions?"

No reply.

"The First Councilman knows," Corban said. "He also knows that all of those prisoners have the same disabilities I had when I came to this planet. He knows, and still he uses his high office to distort the truth for his own evil purpose."

Corban paused. No ripple of thought broke the silence. The First Councilman stood transfixed, visibly struggling to contain his anger.

"It was a mentally deficient people who destroyed your fleets and piled your dead high on Willar," Corban said. "They

will not always be so. What has happened to me can happen to others of my people, and then their vengeance will be swift and terrible. I know nothing of your higher beliefs, but among certain of my people there is a saying that an unjust blow travels a full circle. The evil you have unleashed shall return to strike you. I would prevent this, not to save a government that has treated myself and my people cruelly, but to keep two great civilizations from destroying each other."

The First Councilman turned away. He conferred with his Ministers, and for a long, calculating moment he hesitated, as though weighing the mood of the Council. Then he reached his decision. He raised both hands, as though performing a sacred invocation. "The First Councilman invokes the death penalty," he announced.

Corban took a step backwards. He started to protest, and found himself unable to penetrate the heavy silence, the mental silence, that hung so menacingly over him.

He seated himself resignedly. He told himself that he should have expected this, should have known when they called him a defendant. If they had to have a scapegoat he was the logical choice. And if they could stop the war in good conscience by blaming it onto him, he would not protest. Hadn't he blamed it onto himself often enough? If only he could be certain that his death would stop the war . . .

The First Councilman spoke again. "Is there a challenge?"

"Challenge!" flashed quickly from the tiers of councilmen. The welter of thoughts that stabbed and crackled about him dazed Corban. The members of the Council began to change places, to execute complicated maneuvers as if they were playing some ridiculous child's game. Gradually it dawned upon Corban that he was watching an election—on the proposed death penalty for Paul Corban.

Finally the maneuvering stopped. The blur of faces hung motionless above him. The thrusting and challenging thoughts faded to nothingness. A verdict had been rendered, and everyone present knew what it was except Corban.

The First Councilman rose again. He stood for a moment with head inclined. Then he bowed quickly to the left and

to the right, and disappeared. The government had fallen. The clique of war rulers was out. And now everything would depend upon the men who succeeded them.

There was another man on the dais, a younger man, big and powerful-looking, with flashing eyes and a tight smile. "It is our intention," he announced, "to end the war immediately. Is there a challenge?"

Challenges came in a snarling deluge. The complicated maneuvering began again, as the fallen government sought to regain its power, but it seemed to Corban that the ceremony was less involved and did not last as long. When it was over the new First Councilman made the bows, but he kept his place. He addressed the Council.

"We have sought to impose our mores upon an innocent people, and it was not done out of kindness, but out of our own vanity. It shall be our solemn duty to end this folly, and to work together with our brothers, the people of the Galactic Federation, to rebuild what has been destroyed, and to make atonement for our attack where possible. Paul Corban, we wish to ask your help in ending this war. We shall give you a ship captured from your people, so that you may return to them as our envoy."

"There must be satisfactory guarantees of your good faith," Corban said.

"You shall have them."

"I accept."

"Our military leaders will be ordered to stop fighting at once unless attacked, but they have no communications with your people. Time wasted may mean more lives lost."

"I'm ready to leave at once."

"Shall you go alone, or—" the First Councilman's smile broadened. "—would you prefer that one of our people accompany you?"

Corban thought of the reception he might receive at some besieged military outpost, of the skepticism that would greet his story. "I must have credentials to establish my authority with your military leaders as well as those of my own people.

And it probably would be helpful if one of your people of suitable rank accompanied me."

"Very well. Doctor Alir?" Instantly she stood beside Corban. "Paul Corban will leave immediately, and Doctor Alir will accompany him as Special Minister for the Council."

Alir snapped a thought back at him. "I refuse!"

"I am certain," the First Councilman said, "that Doctor Alir will reconsider. Is there a challenge to her appointment?"

There was none. The First Councilman moved down from his dais, and gently placed a hand on Alir's shoulder. She shook it off angrily.

"The Council agrees to end the war," she said. "Shall I tell you why? Is it because you are finally convinced that the war was wrong? No. It is because you are afraid. You know that Federation ships have broken through our home defense, and at this moment are seeking the home planets. You know that they will exact a terrible revenge if they find them. You know that if you destroy these ships others will come. Paul Corban has shown you that the people of the Federation will someday be our superiors. The thoughts that he uttered here are prophetic. An unjust blow travels a full circle. In the name of Justice, I say let the blow fall. I shall not move to prevent it."

"You are wrong, Alir," Corban told her gently, thrilling at the contact between his mind and hers. "You are wrong. Your people can be punished only at the cost of more suffering by my people. The important thing is to end the war. It really does not matter why they want it ended."

The First Councilman returned to his dais. He said again, "I am certain that Doctor Alir will reconsider."

"I would not want her to accompany me unwillingly," Corban told him.

"She will not fail in her duty to her people."

Suddenly the *Raxtinu* Director stood beside them. He placed one hand on Corban's shoulder and the other on Alir's, and drew them close together. "Listen, youngsters," he said. "We have been talking among ourselves about who caused this war. Alir says her people should be punished, but in

reality she wants punishment for herself. Paul did not hesitate to risk his life in coming here. He also sought punishment. Don't you realize that this war was inevitable? The Galactic Federation has been expanding so rapidly that our peoples were bound to clash very soon. It could have happened with no Paul Corban in the *Raxtinu* with a Doctor Alir to take a heroic interest in him and attempt to cure him.

"And without a cured Paul Corban, who can say what course this war might have taken? It is not those few Federation ships that worry the Council. The war ended when Corban made his entrance here. He knocked the props out from under the old men's medical crusade, and he all but jolted the Council out of its seats. You saw that, Alir. And Paul, don't worry about Alir coming with you unwillingly. The new First Councilman is her brother. He knows all about you two."

He disappeared.

"Do you want to come with me?" Corban asked.

She did not answer.

"Among my people," Corban said, his thoughts halting and embarrassed, "it is considered improper for a man and woman to make a journey together unless they are man and wife."

"That is also the attitude of my people," she answered.

"Then . . ."

Corban broke off as the Council rose to its feet. A strange man occupied the dais, a tall man, who stood with arms uplifted, whose calm face commanded attention and respect. His flowing clothing was a pure, dazzling white—the first white clothing Corban had seen among the Donirians.

His thoughts came to Corban, songful and soaring. "May the Supreme Being bless the events of this day . . ."

A priest.

Alir stood looking upwards with the others, and so intent was Corban's admiration of her that part of the prayer escaped him. Then he heard his name.

" . . . Paul Corban, the son of his people, who has suffered duress and thus found the way to freedom from the physical bonds of his being, who like them has tasted fire, who has

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been purified as they now may be purified; and Alir, the daughter of her people. Bless them as they go forth together to bring peace to our troubled stars . . .”

Corban turned to Alir, found her looking at him. “Together?” he asked.

Her reply was no more than a caress. “Yes.”

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