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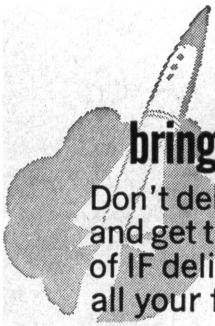

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SHORT STORIES

SERIAL — Conclusion

FEATURES

Cover by SCHELLING from RAINDROP

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When is a Robot?

The cloud is still no bigger than a man's hand, but there it is: the time is rapidly drawing near when man will be able to replace his damaged parts with artifacts — a little later, build in better parts than nature ever designed — later still, instill in his own body equipment to handle functions nature never dreamed of.

A most interesting and enjoyable book, *The Semi-Artificial Man* by Harold M. Schmeck, Jr. (Walker), makes it clear just how close we are to at least the first of these goals. There are scores of persons now alive who ought in all reason to be dead — persons whose kidneys have ceased to function, whose hearts have given out or gone into uncontrolled fibrillation, whose lungs have stopped supplying the blood with oxygen.

It is not science fiction but fact that in all of these cases doctors, engineers, chemists and physicists, working together, have managed to produce machines to take up the work that the so-called "vital organs" of the body no longer can do. The machines do not work every time. Sometimes they do not even work indefinitely. But it is a twentieth century miracle that they work at all. For those kidney patients in the Pacific Northwest who, twice a week, lie on a hospital bed and watch their own blood flow out into a machine composed of pumps and cellophane sheets, filtering out the poisons that their own organs are helpless to deal with, the measures of these accomplishments of medicine are, literally, life or death.

That's all fact, not fancy — for further information, see Schmeck's book, or your daily paper. But there's more to the story than that. It is only a step from replacing a damaged organ to building one that is better — not a repair but an improvement. The human lung is a marvelous creation, but it is liable to pneumonia, cancer, emphysema and a hundred other ailments; and it is quite helpless to deal with even so simple a problem as extracting oxygen from the plentiful supply in sea-water. It is not hard to imagine that some sort of electronic lung-substitute will one day come off the drawing boards and into use — capable of keeping our blood oxygenated by extracting the vital gas from air, from water, or if need be from its own built-in storage supplies if we choose to wander for a time in empty space. There is even a name for the sort of hybrid creature, half man and half machine, that will use these super-prosthetics: the "cyborg", or cybernetic organism.

What would you call them? Men? Or robots?

The chances are that the time will come when it's going to be hard to tell! — THE EDITOR

RAINDROP

by HAL CLEMENT

Illustrated by GIUNTA

Harmless little Raindrop! It was life or death to one human, and feast or famine to the race!

I

"It's not very comfortable footing, but at least you can't fall off."

Even through the helmet phones, Silbert's voice carried an edge that Bresnahan felt sure was amused contempt. The younger man saw no point in trying to hide his fear; he was no veteran of space and knew that it would be silly to pretend otherwise.

"My mind admits that, but my stomach isn't so sure," he replied. "It can't decide whether things will be better when I can't see so far, or whether I should just give up and take a running dive back there."

His metal-clad arm gestured toward the station and its comfortable spin hanging half a mile away. Technically the wheel-shaped structure in its synchronous orbit was above the two men, but it took careful observing to decide which way was really "up."

"You wouldn't make it," Silbert

replied. "If you had solid footing for a jump you might get that far, since twenty feet a second would take you away from here permanently. But speed and velocity are two different animals. I wouldn't trust even myself to make such a jump in the right direction—and I know the vectors better than you do by a long shot. Which way would you jump? Right at the station? Or ahead of it, or behind it? And which is ahead and which is behind? Do you know?"

"I know which is ahead, since I can see it move against the star background, but I wouldn't know which way to jump. I *think* it should be ahead, since the rotation of this overgrown raindrop gives us less linear speed than the station's orbit; but I wouldn't know how far ahead," Silbert said.

"Good for you." Bresnahan noted what he hoped was approval in the spaceman's tone as well as in his words. "You're right as far as you committed yourself, and I wouldn't dare go any farther myself. In any case, jumping off this stuff is a losing game."

"I can believe that. Just walking on it makes me feel as though I were usurping a Biblical prerogative."

The computerman's arm waved again, this time at the surface underfoot, and he tried to stamp on it at the same moment. The latter gesture produced odd results. The material, which looked a little like clear jelly, gave under the boot but bulged upward all around it. The bulge moved outward very slowly in all directions, the star patterns reflected in the surface writhing as it passed. As the bulge's radius increased its height lessened, as with a ripple spreading on a pond. It might have been an ultra-slow motion picture of such a ripple, except that it did not travel far enough. It died out less than two yards from Bresnahan's foot, though it took well over a minute to get that far.

"Yeah, I know what you mean. Walking on water was kind of a divine gift, wasn't it? Well, you can always remember we're not right on the water. There's the pressure film, even if you can't see it."

"That's so. Well, let's get on to the lock. Being inside this thing can't be much worse than walking around on its surface, and I have a report to make up." Silbert started walking again at this request, though the jellylike response of the water to his footfalls made the resulting gait rather odd. He kept talking as he led the way.

"How come that friend of yours can't come down from the station and look things over for himself? Why should you have to give the dope to him second-hand? Can't he take weightlessness?"

"Better than I can, I suspect," replied Bresnahan, "but he's not my friend. He's my boss, and pays the bills. Mine not to reason why, mine but to act or fry. He already knows as much as most people do about Raindrop, here. What more he expects to get from me I'm not sure. I just hope that what I can find to tell him makes him happy. I take it this is the lock."

They had reached a disk of metal some thirty feet in diameter, projecting about two feet from the surface of the satellite. It continued below the surface for a distance which refraction made hard to estimate.

Its water line was marked by a ring of black, rubbery-looking material where the pressure film adhered to it. The men had been quite close to it when they landed on Raindrop's surface a few minutes before. but it is hard to make out landscape details on a water surface under a black, starfilled sky; the reflection underfoot is not very different from the original above. A five-mile radius of curvature puts the reflected images far enough down so that human depth perception is no help.

Waves betrayed themselves, of course, and might have shown the lock's location—but under a gravitational acceleration of about a tenth of an inch per second squared, the surface waves raised by space-suit boots traveled much more slowly than the men who wore them. And with their high internal energy losses they didn't get far enough to be useful.

As a result, Bresnahan had not realized that the lock was at hand until they were almost upon it. Even Silbert, who had known about where they would land and could orient himself with Raindrop's rotation axis by celestial reference features, did not actually see it until it was only a few yards away.

"This is the place, all right," he acknowledged. "That little plate near the edge is the control panel. We'll use the manhole; no need to open the main hatch as we do when it's a matter of cargo."

He bent over—slowly enough to keep his feet on the metal—and punched one of the buttons on the panel he had pointed out. A tiny light promptly flashed green, and he punched a second button.

A yard-square trap opened inward, revealing the top of a ladder. Silbert seized the highest rung and pulled himself through the opening head first—when a man weighs less than an ounce in full space panoply it makes little real difference when he elects to traverse a ladder head downward. Bresnahan followed and found himself in a cylindrical chamber which took up most of the inside of the lock structure. It could now be seen that this must extend some forty feet into the body of Raindrop.

At the inner end of the compartment, where curved and flat walls met, a smaller chamber was partitioned off. Silbert dove in this direction.

"This is a personnel lock," he remarked. "We'll use it; it saves flooding the whole chamber."

"We can use ordinary spacesuits?"

"Might as well. If we were going to stay long enough for real work, we'd change—there is local equipment in those cabinets along the wall. Spacesuits are safe enough, but pretty clumsy when it comes to fine manipulation."

"For me, they're clumsy for anything at all."

"Well, we can change if you want; but I understood that this was to be a fairly quick visit, and that you


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were to get a report back pronto. Or did I misread the tone your friend Weisanen was using?"

"I guess you didn't, at that. We'll go as we are. It still sounds queer to go swimming in a spacesuit."

"No queerer than walking on water. Come on, the little lock will hold both of us."

The spaceman opened the door manually—there seemed to be no power controls involved—and the two entered a room some five feet square and seven high. Operation of the lock seemed simple; Silbert closed the door they had just used and turned a latch to secure it, then opened another manual valve on the other side of the chamber. A jet of water squirted in and filled the space in half a minute. Then he simply opened a door in the same wall with the valve, and the spacesuited figures swam out.

This was not as bad as walking on what had seemed like nothingness. Bresnahan was a good swimmer and experienced free diver, and was used to being suspended in a medium where one couldn't see very far.

The water was clear, though not as clear as that sometimes found in Earth's tropical seas. There was no easy way to tell just how far vision could reach, since nothing familiar and of known size was in view except for the lock they had just quitted. There were no fishes—Raindrop's owners were still debating the advisability of establishing them there—and none of the plant life was familiar, at least to Bresnahan. He knew that the big sphere of water had been seeded by "artificial" life forms — algae and bacteria whose genetic patterns had been altered to let them live in a "sea" so different from Earth's.

II

Raindrop was composed of the nuclei of several small comets, or rather what was left of those nuclei after some of their mass had been used in reaction motors to put them into orbit about the earth. They had been encased in a polymer film sprayed on to form a pressure seal, and then melted by solar energy, concentrated by giant foil mirrors.

Traces of the original wrapping were still around, but its function had been replaced by one of the first tailored life forms to be established after the mass was liquid. This was a modification of one of the gelatin-capsule algae, which now encased all of Raindrop in a microscopically thin film able to heal itself after small meteoroid punctures, and strong enough to maintain about a quarter of an atmosphere's pressure on the contents. The biological engineer who had done that tailoring job still regarded it as his professional masterpiece.

The methane present in the original comet material had been oxidized by other bacteria to water and carbon dioxide, the oxygen of course coming from normal photosynthesis. A good deal of the ammonia was still present, and furnished the principal reason why genetic tailoring was still necessary on life forms being transplanted to the weightless aquarium.

The men were drifting very slow-

ly away from the lock, though they had stopped swimming, and the younger one asked,

"How do we find our way back here if we get out of sight?"

"The best trick is not to get out of sight. Unless you want to examine the core, which I've never done, you'll see everything there is to see right here. There is sonic and magnetic gear—homing equipment—in your suit if you need it, though I haven't checked you out on its use. You'd better stay with me. I can probably show you what's needed. Just what points do you think Weisanen wants covered?"

"Well, he knows the general physical setup—temperature, rotation, general current pattern, the nature of the skin. He knows what's been planted here at various times; but it's hard to keep up to date on what's evolved since. These tailored life forms aren't very stable toward mutation influences, and a new-stocked aquarium isn't a very stable ecological environment. He'll want to know what's here now in the way of usable plants, I suppose. You know the Agency sold Raindrop to a private concern after the last election. The new owners seem willing to grant the importance of basic research, but they would sort of like a profit to report to the stockholders as well."

"Amen. I'm a stockholder."

"Oh? Well, it does cost something to keep supply ships coming up here, and—"

"True enough. Then this Weisanen character represents the new owners? I wonder if I should think of him as my boss or my employee."

"I think he is one of them."

"Hmph. No wonder."

"No wonder what?"

"He and his wife are the first people I ever knew to treat a space flight like a run in a private yacht. I suppose that someone who could buy Raindrop wouldn't be bothered by a little expense like a private Phoenix rocket."

"I suppose not. Of course, it isn't as bad as it was in the days of chemical motors, when it took a big commercial concern or a fair-sized government to launch a manned spaceship."

"Maybe not; but with fourteen billion people living on Earth, it's a little unusual to find a really rich individual, in the old Ford-Carnegie tradition. Most big concerns are owned by several million people like me."

"Well, I guess Weisanen owns a bigger piece of Raindrop than you do. Anyway, he's my boss, whether he's yours or not, and he wants a report from me, and I can't see much to report on. What life is there in this place besides the stuff forming the surface skin?"

"Oh, lots. You just aren't looking carefully enough. A lot of it is microscopic, of course; there are fairly ordinary varieties of pond-scum drifting all around us. They're the main reason we can see only a couple of hundred yards, and they carry on most of the photosynthesis. There are lots of non-photosynthetic organisms—bacteria—producing carbon dioxide just as in any balanced eco-

ology on Earth, though this place is a long way from being balanced. Sometimes the algae get so thick you can't see twenty feet, sometimes the bacteria get the upper hand. The balance keeps hunting around even when no new forms are appearing or being introduced. We probably brought a few new bacteria in with us on our suits just now; whether any of them can survive with the ammonia content of Raindrop this high I don't know, but if so the ecology will get another nudge.

"There are lots of larger plants, too—mostly modifications of the big seaweeds of Earth's oceans. The lock behind us is overgrown with them, as you can see—you can look more closely as we go back—and a lot of them grow in contact with the outer skin, where the light is best. Quite a few are free-floating, but of course selection works fast on those. There are slow convection currents, because of Raindrop's size and rotation, which exchange water between the illuminated outer regions and the darkness inside. Free-floating weeds either adapt to long periods of darkness or die out fast. Since there is a good deal of hard radiation near the surface, there is also quite a lot of unplanned mutation over and above the regular gene-tailoring products we are constantly adding to the pot. And since most of the organisms here have short life spans, evolution goes on rapidly."

"Weisanen knows all that perfectly well," replied Bresnahan. "What he seems to want is a snapshot—a report on just what the present spectrum of life forms is like."

"I've summed it up. Anything more detailed would be wrong next week. You can look at the stuff around us—there. Those filaments which just tangled themselves on your equipment clip are a good example, and there are some bigger ones if you want *there*— just in reach. It would take microscopic study to show how they differ from the ones you'd have gotten a week ago or a year ago, but they're different. There will be no spectacular change unless so much growth builds up inside the surface film that the sunlight is cut down seriously. Then the selection factors will change and a radically new batch—probably of scavenger fungi—will develop and spread. It's happened before. We've gone through at least four cycles of that sort in the three years I've worked here."

Bresnahan frowned thoughtfully, though the facial gesture was not very meaningful inside a space helmet.

"I can see where this isn't going to be much of a report," he remarked.

"It would have made more sense if you'd brought a plankton net and some vacuum jars and brought up specimens for him to look over himself," replied Silbert. "Or wouldn't they mean anything to him? Is he a biologist or just a manager?"

"I couldn't say."

"How come? How can you work for him and not know that much?"

"Working for him is something new. I've worked for Raindrop ever since I started working, but I didn't

meet Weisanen until three weeks ago. I haven't been with him more than two or three hours' total time since. I haven't talked with him during those hours; I've listened while he told me what to do."

"You mean he's one of those high-handed types? What's your job, anyway?"

"There's nothing tough or unpleasant about him; he's just the boss. I'm a computer specialist—programming and maintenance, or was until he picked me to come up here to Raindrop with him and his wife. What my job here will be, you'll have to get from him. There are computers in the station, I noticed, but nothing calling for full-time work from anyone. Why he picked me I can't guess. I should think though, that he'd have asked you rather than me to make this report, since whatever I am I'm no biologist."

"Well, neither am I. I just work here."

Bresnahan stared in astonishment.

"Not a biologist? But aren't you in charge of this place? Haven't you been the local director for three years, in charge of planting the new life forms that were sent up, and reporting what happened to them, and how Raindrop was holding together, and all—?"

"All is right. I'm the bo's'un tight and the midshipmite and the crew of the captain's gig. I'm the boss because I'm the only one here full time; but that doesn't make me a biologist. I got this job because I have a decently high zero-gee tolerance and had had experience in space. I was a space-station handyman before I came here."

"Then what sort of flumdiddle is going on? Isn't there a professional anywhere in this organization? I've heard stories of the army using biochemists for painters and bricklayers for clerks, but I never really believed them. Besides, Raindrop doesn't belong to an army—it isn't even a government outfit any more. It's being run by a private outfit which I assumed was hoping to make a profit out of it. Why in blazes is there no biologist at what has always been supposed to be a biological research station, devoted to finding new ways of making fourteen billion people like what little there is to eat?"

Silbert's shrug was just discernible from outside his suit.

"No one ever confided in me," he replied. "I was given a pretty good briefing on the job when I first took it over, but that didn't include an extension course in biology or biophysics. As far as I can tell they've been satisfied with what I've done. Whatever they wanted out of Raindrop doesn't seem to call for high-caliber professionals on the spot. I inspect to make sure no leaks too big for the algae to handle show up, I plant any new life forms they send up to be established here, and I collect regularly and send back to Earth the samples of what life there is. The last general sampling was nearly a month ago, and another is due in a few days. Maybe your boss could make do with that data—or if you like I can offer to make the regular

sampling run right away instead of at the scheduled time. After all, he may be my boss too instead of the other way around, so I should be reporting to him."

Bresnahan thought for a moment. "All right," he said. "I'm in no position to make either a decent collection or a decent report, as things stand. Let's go back to the station, tell him what's what, and let him decide what he does want. Maybe it's just a case of a new boss not knowing the ropes and trying to find out."

"I'd question that, somehow, but can't think of anything better to do. Come on."

Silbert swam back toward the lock from which they had emerged only a few minutes before. They had drifted far enough from it in that time so that its details had faded to a greenish blur, but there was no trouble locating the big cylinder. The door they had used was still open.

Silbert pulled himself through, lent Bresnahan a hand in doing likewise, closed the portal, and started a small pump. The pressure head was only the quarter atmosphere maintained by the tension of the alga skin, and emptying the chamber of water did not take long. The principal delay was caused by Bresnahan's failure to stand perfectly still; with gravity only a little over one five-thousandths Earth normal, it didn't take much disturbance to slosh some water away from the bottom of the lock where the pump intake was located.

Silbert waited for some of it to settle, but lacked the patience to wait for it all. When he opened the door into the larger lock chamber the men were accompanied through it by several large globules of boiling liquid.

"Wasteful, but helps a bit," remarked the spaceman as he opened the outside portal and the two were wafted through it by the escaping vapor. "Watch out—hang on there. You don't have escape velocity, but you'd be quite a while getting back to the surface if you let yourself blow away." He seized a convenient limb of Bresnahan's space armor as the younger man drifted by, and since he was well anchored himself to the top rung of the ladder was able to arrest the other's flight. Carefully they stepped away from the hatch, Silbert touching the closing button with one toe as he passed it, and looked for the orbiting station.

This, of course, was directly overhead. The same temptation which Bresnahan had felt earlier to make a jump for it came back with some force; but Silbert had a safer technique.

He took a small tube equipped with peep-sights from the equipment clip at his side and aimed it very carefully at the projecting hub of the wheel-shaped station—the only part of the hub visible, since the station's equator was parallel to that of Raindrop and the structure was therefore edge-on to them. A bright yellow glow from the target produced a grunt of satisfaction from Silbert, and he fingered a button on the tube. The laser beam, invisible in the surrounding vacuum, flicked

on and off in a precisely timed signal pattern which was reported faithfully by the source-return mirror at the target. Another response was almost as quick.

III

A faintly glowing object emerged from the hub and drifted rapidly toward Raindrop, though not quite toward the men. Its details were not clear at first, but as it approached it began to look more and more like a luminous cobweb.

"Just a lattice of thin rods, doped with luminous paint for spotting and launched from the station by a spring gun," explained Silbert. "The line connecting it with the station isn't painted, and is just long enough to stop the grid about fifty feet from the water. It's launched with a small backward component relative to the station's orbit, and when the line stops it it will drift toward us. Jump for it when I give the word; you can't miss."

Bresnahan was not as certain about the last statement as his companion seemed to be, but braced himself anyway. As the glowing spiderweb approached, however, he saw it was over a hundred feet across and realized that even he could jump straight enough to make contact. When Silbert gave the word, he sprang without hesitation.

He had the usual moment of nausea and disorientation as he crossed the few yards to his target. Lacking experience, he had not "balanced" his jump perfectly and as a result made a couple of somersaults en route. This caused him to lose track of his visual reference points, and with gravity already lacking he suffered the moment of near-panic which so many student pilots had experienced before him. Contact with one of the thin rods restored him, however; he gripped it frantically and was himself again.

Silbert arrived a split second later and took charge of the remaining maneuvers. These consisted of collapsing the "spiderweb"—a matter of half a minute, in spite of its apparent complexity, because of the ingenuity of its jointing—and then starting his companion hand-over-hand along the nearly invisible cord leading back to the station. The climb called for more coordination that was at first evident; the spaceman had to catch his less experienced companion twice as the latter missed his grip for the line.

Had Silbert been going first the situation might have been serious. As it was, an extra tug on the rope enabled him to catch up each time with the helpless victim of basic physics. After the second accident, the guide spoke.

"All right, don't climb any more. We're going a little too fast as it is. Just hold on, to the rope now and to me when I give the word. The closing maneuver is a bit tricky, and it wouldn't be practical to try to teach you the tricks on the spot and first time around."

Silbert did have quite a problem. The initial velocities of the two men in their jumps for the spiderweb had not, of course, been the correct ones to intercept the station—

if it had been practical to count on their being so, the web would have been superfluous. The web's own mass was less than fifty pounds, which had not done much to the sum of those vectors as it absorbed its share of the men's momentum. Consequently, the men had an angular velocity with respect to the station, and they were *approaching* the latter.

To a seventeenth century mathematician, conservation of angular momentum may have been an abstract concept, but to Silbert it was an item of very real, practical, everyday experience—just as the orbit of a comet is little more than a set of numbers to an astronomer while the orbit of a baseball is something quite different to an outfielder. The problem this time was even worse than usual, partly because of Bresnahan's mass and still more because of his inexperience.

As the two approached the station their sidewise motion became evident even to Bresnahan. He judged that they would strike near the rim of the spinning structure, if they hit it at all, but Silbert had other ideas.

Changing the direction of the spin axis by landing at the hub was one thing—a very minor one. Changing the *rate* of spin by meeting the edge could be a major nuisance, since much of the apparatus inside was built on and for Earth and had Earth's gravity taken for granted in its operation. Silbert therefore had no intention of making contact anywhere but at one of the "poles" of station. He was rather in the situation of a yo-yo whose string is winding up on the operator's finger; but he could exercise a little control by climbing as rapidly as possible "up" the cord toward the structure or allowing himself to slide "down" away from it.

He had had plenty of experience, but he was several minutes playing them into a final collision with the entry valve, so close to the center of mass of the station that the impact could produce only a tiny precession effect. Most of its result was a change in the wheel's orbit about Raindrop, and the whole maneuver had taken such a small fraction of an orbital period that this effect nearly offset that produced when they had started up the rope.

"Every so often," remarked the spaceman as he opened the air lock, "we have to make a small correction in the station orbit; the disturbances set up by entering and leaving get it out of step with Raindrop's rotation. Sometimes I wonder whether it's worth the trouble to keep the two synchronized."

"If the station drifted very far from the lock below, you'd have to jump from the liquid surface, which might be awkward," pointed out the younger man as the closing hatch cut off the starlight.

"That's true," admitted the other as he snapped a switch and air started hissing into the small lock chamber. "I suppose there's something to be said for tradition at that. There's the safety light—" as a green spot suddenly glowed on the wall—"so you can open up your suit

whenever you like. Lockers are in the next room. But you arrived through this lock, didn't you?"

"Right. I know my way from here."

Five minutes later the two men, divested of space suits, had "descended" to the rim of the station where weight was normal. Most of this part of the structure was devoted to living space which had never been used, though there were laboratory and communication rooms as well. The living space had been explained to Bresnahan, when he first saw it, why Silbert was willing to spend three quarters of his time alone at a rather boring job a hundred thousand miles from the nearest company. Earth was badly crowded; not one man in a million had either as much space or as much privacy.

Weisanen and his wife had taken over a set of equally sumptuous rooms on the opposite side of the rim, and had been in the process of setting up housekeeping when the two employees had descended to Raindrop's surface a short time before. This had been less than an hour after their arrival with Bresnahan on the shuttle from Earth; Weisanen had wasted no time in issuing his first orders. The two men were prepared to find every sign of disorder when the door to the "headquarters" section opened in response to Silbert's touch on the annunciator, but they had reckoned without Mrs. Weisanen.

At their employer's invitation, they entered a room which might have been lived in for a year instead of an hour. The furniture was good, comfortable, well arranged, and present in quantity which would have meant a visible bulge in a nation's space research budget just for the fuel to lift it away from the earth in the chemical fuel days.

Either the Weisanens felt strongly about maintaining the home atmosphere even when visiting, or they planned to stay on the station for quite a while.

The official himself was surprisingly young, according to both Bresnahan's and Silbert's preconceived notions of a magnate. He could hardly have been thirty, and might have been five years younger. He matched Bresnahan's five feet ten of height and looked about the same weight; but while the computerman regarded himself as being in good physical shape, he had to admit the other was far more muscular. Even Silbert's six feet five of height and far from insignificant frame seemed somehow inadequate beside Weisanen's.

"Come in, gentlemen. We felt your return a few minutes ago! I take it you have something to report, Mr. Bresnahan. We did not expect you back quite so soon." Weisanen drew further back from the door and waved the others past him. "What can you tell us?" He closed the door and indicated armchairs. Bresnahan remained on his feet, uneasy at the incompleteness of his report; Silbert sank into the nearest chair. The official also remained standing. "Well, Mr. Bresnahan?"

"I have little—practically nothing—to report, as far as detailed, quan-

titative information is concerned," the computerman took the plunge.

"We stayed inside the Raindrop only a few minutes, and it was evident that most of the detailed search for life specimens would have to be made with a microscope. I hadn't planned the trip at all effectively. I now understand that there is plankton-collecting apparatus here which Mr. Silbert uses regularly and which should have been taken along if I were to get anything worth showing to you."

Weisanen's face showed no change in its expression of courteous interest. "That is quite all right," he said. "I should have made clear that I wanted, not a detailed biological report, but a physical description by a non-specialist of what it is like subjectively down there. I should imagine that you received an adequate impression even during your short stay. Can you give such a description?"

Bresnahan's worried expression disappeared, and he nodded affirmatively.

"Yes, sir. I'm not a literary expert, but I can tell what I saw."

"Good. One moment, please," Weisanen turned toward another door and raised his voice. "Brenda, will you come in here, please? You should hear this."

Silbert got to his feet just as the woman entered, and both men acknowledged her greeting.

Brenda Weisanen was a full head shorter than her husband. She was wearing a robe of the sort which might have been seen on any housewife expecting company; neither man was competent to guess whether it was worth fifty dollars or ten times that. The garment tended to focus attention on her face, which would have received it anyway. Her hair and eyebrows were jet black, the eyes themselves gray, and rounded cheeks and chin made the features look almost childish, though she was actually little younger than her husband. She seated herself promptly, saying no more than convention demanded, and the men followed suit.

"Please go on, Mr. Bresnahan," Weisanen said. "My wife and I are both greatly interested, for reasons which will be clear shortly."

Bresnahan had a good visual memory, and it was easy for him to comply. He gave a good verbal picture of the greenish, sunlit haze that had surrounded him—sunlight differing from that seen under an Earthly lake, which ripples and dances as the waves above refract it. He spoke of the silence, which had moved him to keep talking because it was the "quietest" silence he had known, and "didn't sound right."

He was interrupted by Silbert at this point; the spaceman explained that Raindrop was not always that quiet. Even a grain-of-dust meteoroid striking the skin set up a shock wave audible throughout the great sphere; and if one were close enough to the site of collision, the hiss of water boiling out through the hole for the minute or two needed for the skin to heal could also be heard. It was rather unusual to be able to spend even the short time they had just had

inside the satellite without hearing either of these sounds.

Bresnahan nodded thanks as the other fell silent, and took up the thread of his own description once more. He closed with the only real feature he had seen to describe—the weed-grown cylinder of the water-to-space lock, hanging in greenish emptiness above the dead-black void which reached down to Raindrop's core. He was almost poetical in spots.

The Weisanens listened in flattering silence until he had done, and remained silent for some seconds thereafter. Then the man spoke.

"Thank you, Mr. Bresnahan. That was just what we wanted." He turned to his wife. "How does that sound to you, dear?"

The dark head nodded slowly, its gray eyes fastened on some point far beyond the metal walls.

"It's fascinating," she said slowly. "Not just the way we pictured it, of course, and there will be changes anyway, but certainly worth seeing. Of course they didn't go down to the core, and wouldn't have seen much if they had. I suppose there is no life, and certainly no natural light, down there."

"There is life," replied Silbert. "Non-photosynthetic, of course, but bacteria and larger fungi which live on organic matter swept there from the sunlit parts. I don't know whether anything is actually growing *on* the core, since I've never gone in that far, but free-floating varieties get carried up to my nets. A good many of those have gone to Earth, along with their descriptions, in my regular reports."

"I know. I've read those reports very carefully, Mr. Silbert," replied Weisanen.

"Just the same, one of our first jobs must be to survey that core," his wife said thoughtfully. "Much of what has to be done will depend on conditions down there."

"Right." Her husband stood up. "We thank you gentlemen for your word pictures; they have helped a lot. I'm not yet sure of the relation between your station time and that of the Terrestrial time zones, but I have the impression that it's quite late in the working day. Tomorrow we will all visit Raindrop and make a very thorough and more technical examination—my wife and I doing the work, Mr. Bresnahan assisting us, and Mr. Silbert guiding. Until then—it has been a pleasure, gentlemen."

Bresnahan took the hint and got to his feet, but Silbert hesitated. There was a troubled expression on his face, but he seemed unable or unwilling to speak. Weisanen noticed it.

"What's the matter, Mr. Silbert? Is there some reason why Raindrop's owners, or their representatives, shouldn't look it over closely? I realize that you are virtually the only person to visit it in the last three years, but I assure you that your job is in no danger."

Silbert's face cleared a trifle.

"It isn't that," he said slowly. "I know you're the boss, and I wasn't worried about my job anyway. There's just one point—of course

you may know all about it, but I'd rather be safe, and embarrassed, than responsible for something unfortunate later on. I don't mean to butt into anyone's private business, but Raindrop is essentially weightless."

"I know that."

"Do you also know that unless you are quite certain that Mrs. Weisanen is not pregnant, she should not expose herself to weightlessness for more than a few minutes at a time?"

Both Weisanens smiled.

"We know, thank you, Mr. Silbert. We will see you tomorrow, in spacesuits, at the big cargo lock. There is much equipment to be taken down to Raindrop."

IV

That closing remark proved to be no exaggeration.

As the four began moving articles through the lock the next morning, Silbert decided at first that the Weisanen's furniture had been a very minor item in the load brought up from Earth the day before, and wondered why it had been brought into the station at all if it were to be transferred to Raindrop so soon. Then he began to realize that most of the material he was moving had been around much longer. It had come up bit by bit on the regular supply shuttle over a period of several months. Evidently whatever was going on represented long and careful planning — and furthermore, whatever was going on represented a major change from the original plans for Raindrop.

This worried him, since Silbert had become firmly attached to the notion that the Raindrop plan was an essential step to keeping the human race fed, and he had as good an appetite as anyone.

He knew, as did any reasonably objective and well-read adult, how barely the advent of fusion power and gene tailoring had bypassed the first critical point in the human population explosion, by making it literally possible to use the entire surface of the planet either for living space or the production of food. As might have been expected, mankind had expanded to fill even that fairly generous limit in a few generations.

A second critical point was now coming up, obviously enough to those willing to face the fact. Most of Earth's fourteen billion people lived on floating islands of gene-tailored vegetation scattered over the planet's seas, and the number of these islands was reaching the point where the total sunlight reaching the surface was low enough to threaten collapse of the entire food chain. Theoretically, fusion power was adequate to provide synthetic food for all; but it had been learned the hard way that man's selfishness could be raised to the violence point almost as easily by a threat to his "right" to eat natural — and tasty — food as by a threat to his "right" to reproduce without limit. As a matter of fact, the people whom Silbert regarded as more civilized tended to react more strongly to the first danger.

Raindrop had been the proposed answer. As soon as useful, edible


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life forms could be tailored to live in its environment it was to be broken up into a million or so smaller units which could receive sunlight throughout their bulks, and use these as "farms."

But power units, lights, and what looked like prefabricated living quarters sufficient for many families did not fit with the idea of breaking Raindrop up. In fact, they did not fit with any sensible idea at all.

No one could live on Raindrop, or in it, permanently; there was not enough weight to keep human metabolism balanced. Silbert was very conscious of that factor. He never spent more than a day at a time on his sampling trips, and after each of these he always remained in the normal-weight part of the station for the full number of days specified on the AGT tables.

It was all very puzzling.

And as the day wore on, and more and more material was taken from the low-weight storage section of the station and netted together for the trip to Raindrop, the spaceman grew more puzzled still. He said nothing, however, since he didn't feel quite ready to question the Weisanens on the subject and it was impossible to speak privately to Bresnahan with all the spacesuit radios on the same frequency.

All the items moved were, of course, marred with their masses, but Silbert made no great effort to keep track of the total tonnage. It was not necessary, since each cargo net was loaded as nearly as possible to an even one thousand pounds and it was easy enough to count the nets when the job was done. There were twenty-two nets.

A more ticklish task was installing on each bundle a five hundred pound-second solid-fuel thrust cartridge, which had to be set so that its axis pointed reasonably close to the center of mass of the loaded net and firmly enough fastened to maintain its orientation during firing. It was not advisable to get rid of the orbital speed of the loads by "pushing off" from the station; the latter's orbit would have been too greatly altered by absorbing the momentum of eleven tons of material. The rockets had to be used.

Silbert, in loading the nets, had made sure that each was spinning slowly on an axis parallel to that of Raindrop. He had also attached each cartridge at the "equator" of its net. As a result, when the time came to fire it was only necessary to wait beside each load until its rocket was pointing "forward" along the station's orbit, and touch off the fuel.

The resulting velocity change did not, in general, exactly offset the orbital speed, but it came close enough for the purpose. The new orbit of each bundle now intersected the surface of Raindrop—a target which was, after all, ten miles in diameter and only half a mile away. It made no great difference if the luggage were scattered along sixty degrees of the satellite's equatorial zone; moving the bundles to the lock by hand would be no great problem where each one weighed about three and a half ounces.

With the last net drifting toward the glistening surface of Raindrop, Weisanen turned to the spaceman.

"What's the best technique to send us after them? Just jump off?"

Silbert frowned, though the expression was not obvious through his face plate.

"The best technique, according to the AGT Safety Tables, is to go back to the rim of the station and spend a couple of days getting our personal chemistry back in balance. We've been weightless for nearly ten hours, with only one short break when we ate."

Weisanen made a gesture of impatience which was much more visible than Silbert's frown.

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed. "People have remained weightless for a couple of weeks at a time without permanent damage."

"Without having their bones actually turn to rubber, I grant. I don't concede there was no more subtle damage done. I'm no biophysicist, I just believe the tables; they were worked out on the basis of knowledge gained the hard way. I admit they have a big safety factor, and if you consider it really necessary I won't object to staying out for four or five days. But you haven't given us any idea so far why this should be considered an emergency situation."

"Hmmm. So I haven't. All right, will you stay out long enough to show Brenda and me how to work the locks below, so we can get the stuff inside?"

"Why—of course—if it's that important we'll stay and do the work too. But I didn't—"

Silbert fell silent as it dawned on him that Weisanen's choice of words meant that he had no intention of explaining just yet what the "emergency" was. Both newcomers must have read the spaceman's mind quite accurately at that point, since even Bresnahan was able to, but neither of them said anything.

Conversation for the next few minutes consisted entirely of Silbert's instructions for shoving off in the proper direction to reach Raindrop, and how to walk on its not-quite-zero-gravity, jellylike surface after they reached it. The trip itself was made without incident.

Because fast movement on the surface was impossible, several hours were spent collecting the scattered bundles and stacking them by the lock. The material could not be placed inside, as most of it had to be assembled before it could go under water; so for the moment the lesson in lock management was postponed. Weisanen, after some hesitation, agreed to Silbert's second request that they return to the station for food and rest. He and his wife watched with interest the technique of getting back to it.

With four people instead of two, the velocity-matching problem might have been worse, but this turned out not to be the case. Silbert wondered whether it were strictly luck, or whether the Weisanens actually had the skill to plan their jumps properly. He was beginning to suspect that both of them had had previous

space experience, and both were certainly well-coordinated physical specimens.

According to the tables which had been guiding Silbert's life, the party should have remained in the high-weight part of the station for at least eighty hours after their session of zero-gee, but his life was now being run by Weisanen rather than the tables. The group was back on the water twelve hours after leaving it.

Bresnahan still had his feeling of discomfort, with star-studded emptiness on one side and its reflection on the other, but he was given little time to brood about it.

The first material to go into the lock consisted of half a dozen yard-wide plastic bubbles of water. Silbert noted with interest that all contained animal life, ranging from barely visible crustacea to herring-sized fish.

"So we're starting animal life here at last," remarked the spaceman. "I thought it was a major bone of contention whether we ever would."

"The question was settled at the first meeting of the new board," replied Weisanen. "Life forms able to live here — or presumably able to live here — have been ready for several years. Please be careful in putting those in the lock — just the odd-numbered ones first, please, first. The evens contain predators, and the others should be given a few hours to scatter before they are turned loose."

"Right. Any special techniques for opening? Or just get the bubbles through the second lock and cut them open?"

"That will do. I assume that a few hours in the currents inside, plus their own swimming abilities, will scatter them through a good part of the drop."

"It should. I suppose they'll tend to stay pretty close to the skin because of the light; I trust they can take a certain amount of hard radiation."

"That matter has been considered. There will be some loss, damage, and genetic change, of course, but we think the cultures will gain in spite of that. If they change, it is no great matter. We expect rapid evolution in an environment like this, of course. It's certainly been happening so far."

Bresnahan helped push the proper spheres into the lock at the vacuum end and out of it at the other, and watched with interest as each was punctured with a knife and squeezed to expel the contents.

"I should have asked about waiting for temperatures to match," remarked Silbert as the cloud of barely visible, jerkily moving specks spread from the last of the containers, "but it doesn't seem to be bothering them."

"The containers were lying on Raindrop's surface all night, and the satellite is in radiative equilibrium," pointed out Bresnahan. "The temperatures shouldn't be very different anyway. Let's get back outside and see what's going on next. Either these water-bugs are all right, or they're beyond our help."

"Right." Silbert followed the suggestion, and the newly released animals were left to their own devices.

Outside, another job was under way. The largest single items of cargo had been a set of curved segments of metal, apparently blue-anodized aluminum. In the few minutes that Silbert and Bresnahan had been inside, the Weisanens had sorted these out from the rest of the material and were now fitting them together.

Each section attached to its neighbor by a set of positive-acting snap fasteners which could be set almost instantly, and within a very few minutes it became evident that they formed a sphere some twenty feet in diameter. A transparent dome of smaller radius was set in one pole, and a cylindrical structure with trap doors in the flat ends marked the other. With the assembly complete, the Weisanens carefully sprayed everything, inside and out, from cylinders which Silbert recognized as containing one of the standard fluorocarbon polymers used for sealing unfindable leaks in space ships.

Then both Weisanens went inside.

Either the metallic appearance of the sphere was deceptive or there were antennae concealed in its structure, because orders came through the wall on the suit-radio frequency without noticeable loss. In response to these, Bresnahan and the spaceman began handing the rest of the equipment in through the cylindrical structure, which had now revealed itself as a minute air lock. As each item was received it was snapped down on a spot evidently prepared to receive it, and in less than two hours almost all the loose gear had vanished from the vicinity of Raindrop's entry lock. The little that was left also found a home as Weisanen emerged once more and fastened it to racks on the sphere's outer surface, clustered around the air lock.

The official went back inside, and, at his orders, Silbert and the computerman lifted the whole sphere onto the top of the cylindrical cargo lock of the satellite. Either could have handled the three-pound weight alone, but its shape and size made it awkward to handle and both men felt that it would be inadvisable to roll it.

"Good. Now open this big hatch and let us settle into the lock chamber," directed Weisanen. "Then close up, and let in the water."

It was the first time Silbert had caught his boss in a slip, and he was disproportionately pleased. The hatch opened outward, and it was necessary to lift the sphere off again before the order could be obeyed.

Once it was open, the two men had no trouble tossing the big globe into the yawning, nearly dark hole — the sun was just rising locally and did not shine into the chamber —but they had to wait over a minute for Raindrop's feeble gravity to drag the machine entirely inside. They could not push it any faster, because it was not possible to get a good grip on sphere and lock edge simultaneously; and pushing

down on the sphere without good anchorage would have done much more to the pusher than to the sphere.

However, it was finally possible to close the big trap. After making sure that it was tightly latched — it was seldom used, and Silbert did not trust its mechanism unreservedly — he and Bresnahan entered the lock through the smaller portal.

"Aren't there special suits for use inside Raindrop, a lot more comfortable than this space armor?" asked Weisanen.

"Yes, sir," replied the spaceman, "though the relative comfort is a matter of opinion. There are only three, and two of them haven't been used since I came. They'll need a careful checkout."

"All right. Bring them in here, and then let the water into this lock." Silbert found the suits and handed them to Bresnahan to carry out the first part of the order, while he went to the controls to execute the second.

"All ready?" he asked.

"All set. Both lock doors here are shut, and the three of us are inside. Let the flood descend."

"Wrong verb," muttered Silbert to himself.

He very cautiously cracked the main inner hatch; opening it would have been asking for disaster. Even at a mere quarter atmosphere's pressure the wall of water would have slammed into the evacuated lock violently enough to tear the outer portal away and eject sphere and occupants at a speed well above Raindrop's escape value. There was a small Phoenix rocket in the station for emergency use, but Silbert had no wish to create a genuine excuse for using it. Also, since he was in the lock himself, he would probably be in no condition to get or pilot it.

V

The water sprayed in violently enough through the narrow opening he permitted, bouncing the sphere against the outer hatch and making a deafening clamor even for the spacesuited trio inside. However, nothing gave way, and in a minute it was safe to open the main hatch completely.

Silbert did so. Through the clear dome which formed the sphere's only observation window he could see Weisanen fingering controls inside. Water jets from almost invisible ports in the outer surface came into action, and for the first time it became evident that the sphere was actually a vehicle. It was certainly not built for speed, but showed signs of being one of the most maneuverable ever built.

After watching for a moment as it worked its way out of the lock, Silbert decided that Weisanen had had little chance to practice handling it. But no catastrophe occurred, and finally the globe was hanging in the greenish void outside the weed-grown bulk of the lock. The spaceman closed the big hatch, emerged through the personnel lock himself, and swam over to the vehicle's entrance.

The outer door of the tiny air

lock opened manually. Thirty seconds later he was inside the rather crowded sphere removing his helmet — some time during the last few minutes Weisanen had filled the vehicle with air.

The others had already unhelmeted and were examining the "diving" suits which Bresnahan had brought inside. These were simple enough affairs; plastic form-fitting coveralls with an air-cycler on the chest and an outsized, transparent helmet which permitted far more freedom of head movement than most similar gear. Since there was no buoyance in this virtually weight-free environment, the helmet's volume did not create the problem it would have on Earth. Silbert was able to explain everything necessary about the equipment in a minute or two.

Neither of the Weisanens needed to have any point repeated, and if Bresnahan was unsure about anything he failed to admit it.

"All right." Raindrop's owner nodded briskly as the lesson ended. "We seem to be ready. I started us down as soon as Mr. Silbert came aboard, but it will take the best part of an hour to reach the core. When we get there a regular ecological sampling run will be made. You can do that, Mr. Silbert, using your regular equipment and techniques; the former is aboard, whether you noticed it being loaded or not. Brenda and I will make a physical, and physiographical, examination of the core itself, with a view to finding just what will have to be done to set up living quarters there and where will be the best place to build them."

Silbert's reaction to this remark may have been expected; both Weisanens had been watching him with slight smiles on their faces. He did not disappoint them.

"*Living* quarters? That's ridiculous! There's no weight to speak of even at Raindrop's surface, and even less at the core. A person would lose the calcium from his skeleton in a few weeks, and go unbalanced in I don't know how many other chemical ways —"

"Fourteen known so far, Mr. Silbert. We know all about that, or as much as anyone does. It was a shame to tease you, but my husband and I couldn't resist. Also, some of the factors involved are not yet public knowledge, and we have reasons for not wanting them too widely circulated for a while yet." Brenda Weisanen's interruption was saved from rudeness by the smile on her face. "I would invite you to sit down to listen, but sitting means nothing here — I'll get used to that eventually, no doubt.

"The fact you just mentioned about people leaching calcium out of their skeletons after a few days or weeks of weightlessness was learned long ago—even before long manned space flights had been made; the information was gained from flotation experiments. Strictly speaking, it is not an effect of weightlessness *per se*, but a feedback phenomenon involving relative muscular effort — something which might have been predicted, and for

all I know may actually have been predicted, from the fact that the ankle bones in a growing child ossify much more rapidly than the wrist bones. A very minor genetic factor is involved; after all, animals as similar to us as dolphins which *do* spend all their time afloat grow perfectly adequate skeletons.

"A much more subtle set of chemical problems were noticed the hard way when manned space stations were set up, as you well know. A lot of work was done on these, as you might expect, and we now are quite sure that all which will produce detectable results in less than five years of continuous weightlessness are known. There are fourteen specific factors — chemical and genetic keys to the log jam, if you like to think of it that way.

"You have the ordinary educated adult's knowledge of gene tailoring, Mr. Silbert. What was the logical thing to do?"

"Since gene tailoring on human beings is flagrantly illegal, for good and sufficient reasons, the logical thing to do was and is to avoid weightlessness," Silbert replied. "With Phoenix rockets, we can make interplanetary flight at a continuous one-gravity acceleration, while space stations can be and are centrifuged."

Brenda Weisanen's smile did not change, but her husband looked annoyed. He took up the discussion.

"Illegal or not, for good or bad reasons, it was perfectly reasonable to consider modifying human genetic patterns so that some people at least could live and work normally and indefinitely in a weightless environment. Whether it shocks you or not, the thing was tried over seventy years ago, and over five hundred people now alive have this modification — and are not, as I suppose you would put it, fully human."

Bresnahan interrupted. "I would *not* put it that way!" he snapped. "As anyone who has taken work in permutation and combination knows perfectly well, there is no such thing as a fully human being if you define the term relative to some precise, specific idealized gene pattern. Mutations are occurring all the time from radiation, thermal effects, and just plain quantum jumping of protons in the genetic molecules. The sort of phenomenon is used as example material in elementary programming courses, and one of the first things you learn when you run such a problem is that no one is completely without such modifications. If, as I suppose you are about to say, you and Mrs. Weisanen are genetically different enough to take weightlessness, I can't see why it makes you less human. I happen to be immune to four varieties of leukemia virus and sixteen of the organisms usually responsible for the common cold, according to one analysis of my own gene pattern. If Bert's had ever been checked we'd find at least as many peculiarities about his—and I refuse to admit that either of us is less human than anyone else we've ever met."

"Thank you, Mr. Bresnahan,"

Brenda Weisanen took up the thread of the discussion once more. "The usual prejudice against people who are known to be significantly different tends to make some of us a little self-conscious. In any case, my husband and I can stand weightlessness indefinitely, as far as it is now possible to tell, and we plan to stay here permanently. More of us will be coming up later for the same purpose."

"But why? Not that it's any of my business. I like Raindrop, but it's not the most stimulating environment and in any case I'm known to be the sort of oddball who prefers being alone with a collection of books to more other activities."

The woman glanced at her husband before answering. He shrugged.

"You have already touched on the point, Mr. Silbert. Modifving the human genetic pattern involves the same complication which plagued medicine when hormones became available for use in treatment. Any one action is likely to produce several others as an unplanned, and commonly unwanted, by-product. Our own modification is not without its disadvantages. What our various defects may be I would not presume to list in toto — any more than Mr. Bresnahan would care to list his — but one of them strikes very close to home just now. Aino and I are expecting a child, and about nine times out of ten when a woman of our type remains in normal gravity any child she conceives is lost during the fifth or sixth month. The precise cause is not known; it involves the mother's physique rather than the child's, but that leaves a lot still to be learned. Therefore, I am staying here until my baby is born, at the very least. We expect to live here. We did not ask to be modified to fit space, but if it turns out that we can live better here — so be it."

"Then Raindrop is going to be turned into a—a—maternity hospital?"

"I think a fairer term would be 'colony,' Mr. Silbert," interjected Weisanen. "There are a good many of us, and most if not all of us are considering making this place our permanent home."

"Which means that breaking it up according to the original plan to supply farming volume is no longer on the books."

"Precisely."

"How do you expect to get away with that? This whole project was planned and paid for as a new source of food."

"That was when it was a government project. As you know, it became a private concern recently; the government was paid full value for Raindrop, the station, and the shuttle which keeps it supplied. As of course you do not know, over eighty per cent of the stock of that corporation is owned by people like myself. What we propose to do is perfectly legal, however unpopular it may make us with a few people."

"More than a few, I would say. And how can you afford to be really unpopular, living in something as

fragile as Raindrop?" queried Bresnahan. "There are lots of spaceships available. Even if no official action were or could be taken, anyone who happened to have access to one and disliked you sufficiently could wreck the skin of this tank so thoroughly in five minutes that you'd have to start all over again even if you yourselves lived through it. All the life you'd established would freeze before repairs could be made complete enough to stop the water from boiling away."

"That is true, and is a problem we haven't entirely solved," admitted the other. "Of course, the nasty laws against the publication of possible mob-rousing statements which were found necessary as Earth's population grew should operate to help us. Nowadays many people react so negatively to any unsupported statement that the word would have trouble getting around. In any case, we don't intend to broadcast the details and comparatively few people know much about the Raindrop project at all. I don't think that many will feel cheated."

Silbert's reaction to the last sentence was the urge to cry out, "But they *are* being cheated!" However, it was beginning to dawn on him that he was not in the best possible position to argue with Weisanen.

He subsided. He himself had been living with the Raindrop project for three years, had become closely identified with it, and the change of policy bothered him for deeper reasons than his intelligence alone could recognize.

Bresnahan was also bothered, though he was not as deeply in love with the project as the spaceman. He was less impressed by Weisanen's conviction that there would be no trouble; but he had nothing useful to say about the matter. He was developing ideas, but they ran along the line of wondering when he could get to a computer keyboard to set the whole situation up as a problem. His background and training had left him with some doubt of any human being's ability — including his own — to handle all facets of a complex problem.

Neither of the Weisanens seemed to have any more to say, either, so the sphere drifted downward in silence.

VI

They had quickly passed the limit which sunlight could reach, and were surrounded by blackness, which the sphere's own interior lights seemed only to accentuate.

With neither gravity nor outside reference points, the sphere was of course being navigated by instrument. Sonar equipment kept the pilot informed of the distance to the nearest point of the skin, the distance and direction of the lock through which they had entered, and the distance and direction of the core. Interpretation of the echoes was complicated by the fact that Raindrop's outer skin was so sharply curved, but Weisanen seemed to have that problem well in hand as he drove the vehicle downward.

Pressure, of course, did not change significantly with depth. The thirty

per cent increase from skin to core meant nothing to healthy people. There was not even an instrument to register this factor, as far as Silbert could see. He was not too happy about that; his spaceman's prejudices made him feel that there should be independent instrumentation to back up the sonar gear.

As they neared the core, however, instruments proved less necessary than expected.

To the mild surprise of the Weisanens and the blank astonishment of Silbert—Bresnahan knew too little to expect anything, either way — the central region of the satellite was not completely dark. The light was so faint that it would not have been noticed if they had not been turning off the sphere's lamps every few minutes, but it was quite bright enough to be seen, when they were a hundred yards or so from the core, without waiting for eyes to become dark-adapted.

"None of your samples ever included luminous bacteria," remarked the official. "I wonder why none of them ever got close enough to the skin for you to pick up."

"I certainly don't know," replied Silbert. "Are you sure it's caused by bacteria?"

"Not exactly by a long shot; it just seems the best starting guess. I'm certain it's not heat or radioactivity, and offhand I can't think of any other possibilities. Can you?"

"No, I can't. But maybe whatever is producing the light is attached to the core—growing on it, if it's alive. So it wouldn't have reached the surface."

"That's possible, though I hope you didn't think I was criticizing your sampling techniques. It was one of my friends who planned them, not you. We'll go on down; we're almost in contact with the core now, according to the fathometer."

Weisanen left the lights off, except for the tiny fluorescent sparks on the controls themselves, so the other three crowded against the bulge of the viewing port to see what was coming. Weightlessness made this easier than it might have been; they didn't have to "stand" at the same spot to have their heads close together.

For a minute or so, nothing was perceptible in the way of motion. There was just the clear, faintly luminous water outside the port. Then a set of slender, tentacular filaments as big around as a human thumb seemed to writhe past the port as the sphere sank by them; and the eyes which followed their length could suddenly see their point of attachment.

"There!" muttered Brenda Weisanen softly. "Slowly, dear — only a few yards."

"There's no other way this thing can travel," pointed out her husband. "Don't worry about our hitting anything too hard."

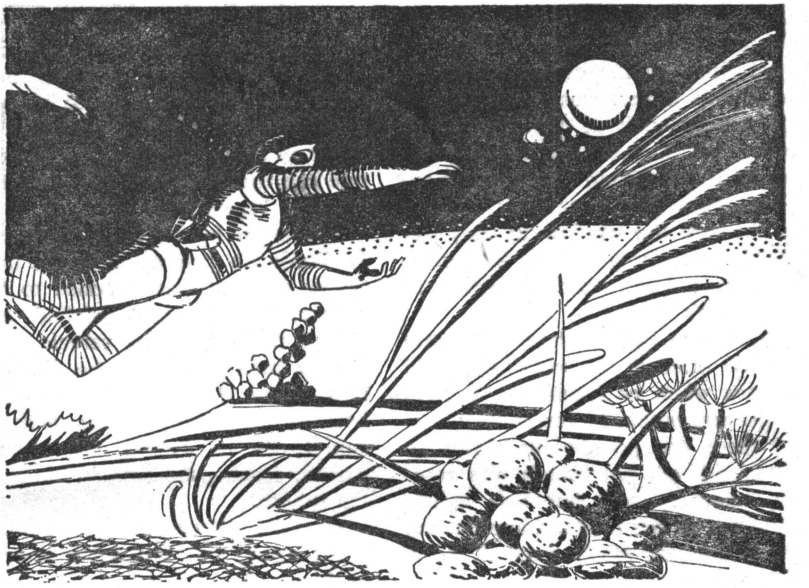
"I'm not — but look! It's beautiful! Let's get anchored and go outside."

"In good time. It will stay there, and anyway I'm going out before you do — long enough before to, at least, make reasonably certain it's safe."

The wife looked for a moment as though she were about to argue this point, if her facial expression could be read accurately in the faint light, but she said nothing. Bresnahan and Silbert had the intelligence to keep quiet as well; more could be learned by looking than by getting into the middle of a husband-wife disagreement, and now there was plenty to look at.

The core was visible for at least two hundred yards in all directions, as the sphere spun slowly under Weisanen's control. The light definitely came from the life forms which matted its surface.

Presumably these were fungi, since photosynthetic forms could hardly have grown in such an environment, but they were fungi which bore little resemblance to their Terrestrial ancestors. Some were ribbon-like, some feather-like, some snaky—even patches of what looked like smoothly mown lawn were visible. The greenish light was evidently not pure color, since other shades were visible; red, purple, and yellow forms stood out here and there in eye-catching contrast to grays and browns. Some forms were even green, though it seemed unlikely that this was due to chlorophyll. Practically all seemed to emit the vague light which bathed the entire scene—so uniformly that outlines would have been hard to distinguish were it not for a few specimens which were much brighter than the others. These types bore what might have been spore pods; brilliantly luminous knobs ranging



from fist to grapefruit size, raised "above" the rest of the surface as much as eight or ten feet on slender stalks. These cast shadows which helped distinguish relief.

The woman was right; weird it might be, but the scene was beautiful.

Weisanen cut off the water jets and waited for a minute or two. The vehicle drifted slowly but perceptibly away from the surface; evidently there was some current.

"We'll have to anchor," he remarked. "Bren, stay inside until we've checked. I'll go out to see what we can fasten ourselves to; there's no information at all on what sort of surface there may be. A fair-sized stony meteoroid—really an asteroid—was used as the original core, but the solids from the comets would be very fine dust. There could be yards of mud too fine to hold any sort of anchor surrounding the solid part. You gentlemen will please get into the other suits and come with me. If nothing has happened to any of us in half an hour, Bren, you may join us."

"There are only three suits," his wife pointed out.

"True. Well, your spacesuit will do; or if you prefer, one of us will use his and let you have the diving gear. In any case, that problem is low-priority. If you gentlemen are ready we'll go. I'll start; this is strictly a one-man air lock."

All three had been climbing out of their spacesuits as Weisanen was talking. The other garments were easy enough to get into, though Bresnahan found the huge helmet

unwieldy even with no weight. Weisanen was through the lock before either of the others was ready to follow; Silbert was slowed by his space-born habit of double-checking every bit of the breathing apparatus, and Bresnahan by his inexperience. They could see their employer through the window as they finished, swimming slowly and carefully toward the weedy boundary of Raindrop's core.

Both men stayed where they were for the moment, to see what would happen when he reached it. Brenda Weisanen watched even more closely; there was no obvious reason to be afraid, but her breath was coming unevenly and her fists tightly clenched as her husband approached the plants and reached out to touch the nearest.

Nothing spectacular happened. It yielded to his touch; when he seized it and pulled, it broke.

"Either the plants are awfully fragile or there is fairly firm ground anchoring them," remarked Silbert. "Let's go outside. You're checked out on the controls of this thing, aren't you, Mrs. Weisanen?"

"Not in great detail," was the reply. "I know which switches handle lights and main power for the lock pump, and which control bank deals with the jets; but I've had no practice in actually handling it. Aino hadn't, either, until we started this trip an hour ago. Go ahead, though; I won't have to do anything anyway. Aino is anchoring us now."

She gestured toward the port. Her husband could now be seen through it carrying something a harpoon, with a length of fine line attached to it. A couple of yards from the surface he poised himself and hurled the object, javelin style — or as nearly to that style as anyone can manage in water — into the mass of vegetation.

The shaft buried itself completely. Weisanen gave a tug on the line, whose far end was attached to the sphere. He seemed satisfied and turned to look at the vehicle. Seeing the men still inside, he gestured impatiently. Bresnahan followed Silbert through the tiny air lock as rapidly as its cycling time would permit, leaving the woman alone in the sphere.

Outside, Weisanen was several yards away, still beckoning imperiously.

"You can talk, sir," remarked Silbert in ordinary tones. "There's no need for sign language."

"Oh. Thanks; I didn't see any radio equipment in these helmets."

"There isn't any. The helmets themselves aren't just molded plastic; they're a multi-layered arrangement that acts as an impedance matcher between the air inside and the water outside. Sound goes through water well enough; it's the air-water interface that makes conversation difficult. This stuff gets the sound across the boundary."

"All right; good. Let's get to work. If the figures for the size of the original nucleus still mean anything, we have nearly twenty million square feet to check up on. Right now we won't try to do it all; stay in sight of the sphere. Get

test rods and plankton gear from that rack by the air lock. Mr. Silbert, use the nets and collectors as you usually do. Mr. Bresnahan, you and I will use the rods; simply poke them into the surface every few yards. The idea is to get general knowledge of the firmness of the underlying surface, and to find the best places to build—or attach—permanent structures. If you should happen to notice any connection between the type of vegetation and the kind of ground it grows on, so much the better; surveying by eye will be a lot faster than by touch. If any sort of trouble comes up, yell. I don't see why there should be any, but I don't want Brenda out here until we're a little more certain."

The men fell to their rather monotonous tasks. The plant cover, it developed, ranged from an inch or two to over a yard in thickness, not counting the scattered forms which extended their tendrils scores of feet out toward the darkness. At no point was the underlying "ground" visible.

Where the growing cover was pushed or dug away, the core seemed to be made of a stiff, brownish clay, which reached at least as deep as the test prods could be pushed by hand. This rather surprised Silbert, who had expected either solid rock or oozy mud. He was not geochemist enough to guess at the reactions which might have formed what they actually found, and was too sensible to worry about it before actual analyses had been made.

If Weisanen had any opinions, he kept them to himself.

Bresnahan was not worried about the scientific aspect of the situation at all. He simply poked away with his test bar because he had been told to, devoting only a fraction of his attention to the task. His thoughts were elsewhere.

Specifically, he was following through the implications of the information the Weisanens had furnished during the trip down. He admitted to himself that in the other's position he would probably be doing the same thing; but it seemed as though some compromise should be possible which would salvage the original purpose of Raindrop.

Bresnahan did not, of course, expect to eat as well as the average man of mid-twentieth century. He never had, and didn't know what he was missing. He did know, however, that at his present age of twenty-five there was a smaller variety of foodstuffs available than he could remember from his childhood, and he didn't want that process to go any farther. Breaking up Raindrop according to the original plan seemed to him the obvious thing to do. If land and sea farming areas were disappearing under the population flood, the logical answer was farming areas in the sky. This should be as important to the Weisanens as to anyone else.

He felt a little uneasy about bringing the matter up again, however. Somehow, he had a certain awe of Weisanen which he didn't think was entirely due to the fact that the latter was his employer.

Several times their paths came close together as the two plied their test bars, but Bresnahan was unable to wind his courage up to the necessary pitch for some time — not, in fact, until they had been exploring the region uneventfully for over half an hour and Weisanen had finally, with some hesitation, decided that it was safe for his wife to join them.

There was some slight rivalry between Silbert and Bresnahan over who should give up his diving gear to the woman and resume his spacesuit. If Bresnahan had won, a good deal of subsequent trouble might have been avoided; but when all four were finally outside, Silbert was wearing space armor. He had pointed out quite logically that he was the most used to it and would work better than any of the others in its restrictions.

VII

The key to the subsequent trouble was that one of the restrictions involved communication. If Silbert had been able to hear clearly, he might have understood what was developing before it had gone too far; but he couldn't. His space helmet lacked the impedance-matching feature of the diving gear, and the latter equipment had no radios.

Some sound did get through his helmet both from and into the water, but not much; for real conversation he had to bring the helmet into physical contact with that of the other party. He therefore knew little of what went on during the next few minutes. He spent them continuing his ecology sample, and paid little attention to anything else.

With Mrs. Weisanen present, some of Bresnahan's unease in her husband's presence left him, and he brought up at last the point which had occurred to him.

"I've been wondering, sir," he opened, "why it wouldn't be possible to break up Raindrop just as was planned, and still use the smaller drops as homes for people like yourselves. I can't see that it would be very different from your present plan."

Weisanen did not seem annoyed, but answered in a straightforward fashion. "Aside from the fact that we would prefer to be in a single city rather than a lot of detached houses which would require us to visit our neighbors by spaceship, the smaller drops will have the radiation problem. Here we have nearly five miles of water shielding us."

"Hmph. I never thought of that."

"No reason why you should have. It was never your problem."

"But still — what do we do about food? Conditions on Earth are getting worse all the time. Starting another Raindrop project would take years. Couldn't you at least compromise? Permit the small drops to be skimmed off the surface of this one while you are living here, and while another Raindrop is set up?"

"I don't like the idea. Can you imagine what it will be like here with shock waves from exploding steam bubbles echoing all through the globe every time the skin is opened for a new farm lot?"

"Why should they break the skin? I should think they'd want to draw off the water through the lock, or other locks which might be built, anyway; otherwise there'd be a lot of waste from boiling. I should think —"

Weisanen's annoyance suddenly boiled over, though no sign of it had been visible before.

"Mr. Bresnahan, it matters very little what you think when you forget that Raindrop is now, legally and properly, private property. I dislike to sound selfish and misanthropic, but I belong to a group which has gone to a great deal of thought and labor to get for itself, legally and without violence, an environment which it needs and which no one else—including the people responsible for our existence—was willing to provide. In addition, if you would think with your brain instead of your stomach you'd realize that the whole original project was pure nonsense. The only possible way mankind can keep himself adequately fed is to limit his population. If you'll pardon the pun, the whole idiotic project was a drop in the bucket. It might have put the day of reckoning back five years, conceivably ten or fifteen, but then we'd have been right back where we started. Even with fusion energy there's a limit to the number of space farms which could be built in a given time, and the way Earth's population grows it would soon be impossible just to make new farms fast enough, let alone operate them. Cheating people? Nonsense! We're doing the rest of mankind a favor by forcing them to face facts while there are a few billion less of them to argue with each other. One group has had to exercise the same sort of control the rest of mankind should be using for a good half century. We didn't *dare* have children except when it was practicable to keep the mother in orbit for the best part of a year. Why should we be particularly sympathetic with the rest of you?"

"I see your point," admitted Bresnahan, "but you've forgotten one other thing. The food problem is yours, too. What will you do as *your* food supply shrinks like everyone else's? Or worse, when people decide not to send any food at all up here, since you won't send any down? Raindrop is a long way yet from being self-supporting, you know."

A grin, clearly visible in the light from a nearby plant knob, appeared on Weisanen's face; but his irritation remained.

"Slight mistake, my young friend. There is another minor modification in our structure; our saliva glands produce an enzyme you lack. We can digest cellulose." He waved his hand at the plants around them.

"How do you know these plants contain cellulose?"

"All plants do; but that's a side issue. The weeds near the surface were analyzed long ago, and proved to contain all the essentials for human life — in form which we can extract with our own digestive apparatus. Raindrop, as it now is, could support all of us there are

now and there are likely to be for a couple of generations. Now, please get back to checking this little world of ours. Brenda and I want to decide where to build our house."

Bresnahan was silent, but made no move to get back to work. He floated for a minute or so, thinking furiously; Weisanen made no effort to repeat or enforce his order.

At last the computerman spoke slowly -- and made his worst mistake.

"You may be right in your legal standing. You may be right in your opinion about the value of Raindrop and what the rest of the human race should do — personally, I want a family some day. You may even be right about your safety from general attack because the communication laws will keep down the number of people who know about the business. But, right or wrong, if even a single person with access to a spaceship *does* find out, then you — and your wife — and your baby — are all in danger. Doesn't that suggest to you that some sort of compromise is in order?"

Weisanen's expression darkened and his muscles tensed. His wife, looking at him, opened her mouth and made a little gesture of protest even before he started to speak; but if she made a sound it was drowned out.

"It certainly suggests something, young fellow," snapped the official. "I was hoping the matter wouldn't descend to this level, but remember that while we can live here indefinitely, you cannot. A few weeks of weightlessness will do damage which your bodies can never repair. There is no regular food down here. And we control the transportation back to the station and weight."

"Aino — no!" His wife laid a hand on his arm and spoke urgently. "Wait, dear. If you threaten at all, it's too close to a threat of death. I don't want to kill anyone, and don't want to think of your doing so. It wouldn't be worth it.'

"You and the little one *are* worth it. Worth anything! I won't listen to argument on that."

"But argument isn't needed. There is time. Mr. Bresnahan and his friend will certainly wait and think before risking the consequences of a mob-raising rumor. He wants a compromise, not —"

"His compromise endangers you and the others. I won't have it. Mr. Bresnahan, I will not ask you for a promise to keep quiet; you might be the idealistic type which can justify breaking its word for what it considers a good cause. Also, I will not endanger your life and health more than I can help. Brenda is right to some extent; I don't want a killing on my conscious either, regardless of the cause. Therefore, you and Mr. Silbert will remain here at the core until Brenda and I have returned to the station and made sure that no communication gear will function without our knowledge and consent. That may be a few days, which may be more than your health should risk. I'm sorry, but I'm balancing that risk to you against one to us."

"Why should it take days? An hour to the surface, a few minutes to the station—"

"And Heaven knows how long to find and take care of all the radios. Neither of us is an expert in that field, and we'll be a long time making sure we have left no loopholes."

"Will you at least stop to find out whether the air renewers in these diving suits are indefinite-time ones, like the spacesuit equipment? And if they aren't, let me change back into my spacesuit?"

"Of course. Change anyway. It will save my trying to get the substance of this conversation across to Mr. Silbert. You can tell him on radio while we are on the way. Come with me back to the sphere and change. Brenda stay here."

"But, dearest — this isn't right. You know —"

"I know what I'm doing and why I'm doing it. I'm willing to follow your lead in a lot of things, Bren, but this is not one of them."

"But —"

"No buts. Come, Mr. Bresnahan. Follow me."

The wife fell silent, but her gaze was troubled as she watched the two men vanish through the tiny lock. Bresnahan wondered what she would do. It was because he felt sure she would something that he hadn't simply defied Weisanen.

The woman's face was no happier when the computerman emerged alone and swam back to a point beside her. Her husband was visible through the port, outsized helmet removed, beckoning to her.

For a moment Bresnahan had the hope that she would refuse to go. This faded as she swam slowly toward the sphere, occassionally looking back, removed the anchor in response to a gesture from the man inside, and disappeared through the lock. The vehicle began to drift upward, vegetation near it swirling in the water jets. Within a minute it had faded from view into the darkness.

"Just what's going on here?" Silbert's voice was clear enough; the suit radios carried for a short distance through water. "Where are they going, and why?"

"You didn't hear any of my talk with Weisanen?"

"No. I was busy, and it's hard to get sound through this helmet anyway. What happened? Did you argue with him?"

"In a way." Bresnahan gave the story as concisely as he could. His friend's whistle sounded eerily in the confines of his helmet.

"This — is — really — something. Just for the record, young pal, we are in a serious jam, I hope you realize."

"I don't think so. His wife is against the idea, and he'll let himself get talked out of it—he's a little afraid of the results already."

"Not the point. It doesn't matter if the whole thing was a practical joke on his part. They're out of sight, in a medium where no current charts exist and the only navigation aids are that sphere's own sonar units. He could find his way back to the core, but how could he find *us*?"

"Aren't we right under the lock and the station? We came straight down."

"Don't bet on that. I told you — there are currents. If we made a straight track on the trip down here I'll be the most surprised man inside Luna's orbit. There are twenty million square feet on this mudball. We'd be visible from a radius of maybe two hundred — visible and recognizable, that is, with our lights on. That means they have something like two hundred search blocks, if my mental arithmetic is right, without even a means of knowing when they cover a given one a second time. There is a chance they'd find us, but not a good one — not a good enough one so that we should bet your chance of dodging a couple of weeks of weightlessness on it. When that nut went out of sight, he disposed of us once and for all."

"I wouldn't call him a nut," Bresnahan said.

"Why not? Anyone who would leave a couple people to starve or get loaded with zero-gee symptoms on the odd chance that they might blab his favorite scheme to the public—"

"He's a little unbalanced at the moment, but not a real nut. I'm sure he didn't realize he'd passed the point of no return. Make allowances, Bert; I can. Some of my best friends are married, and I've seen 'em when they first learned a kid was on the way. It's just that they don't usually have this good a chance to get other people in trouble; they're all off the beam for a little while."

"You're the most tolerant and civilized character I've met, and you've just convinced me that there can be too much of even the best of things. For my money the guy is a raving nut. More to the point, unless we can get ourselves out of the jam he's dropped us into, we're worse than nuts. We're dead."

"Maybe he'll realize the situation and go back to the station and call for help."

"There can be such a thing as too much optimism, too. My young friend, he's not going to get to the station."

"What? Why not?"

"Because the only laser tube not already in the station able to trigger the cobweb launchers is right here on my equipment clip. That's another reason I think he's a nut. He should have thought of that and pried it away from me somehow."

"Maybe it just means he wasn't serious about the whole thing."

"Never mind what it means about him. Whatever his intentions, I'd be willing to wait for him to come back to us with his tail between his legs if I thought he could find us. Since I don't think he can, we'd better get going ourselves."

"Huh? How?"

"Swim. How else?"

"But how do we navigate? Once we're out of sight of the core we'd be there in the dark with absolutely nothing to guide us. These little lights on our suits aren't —"

"I know they aren't. That wasn't the idea. Don't worry; I may not be able to swim in a straight line, but I can get us to the surface even-

tually. Come on; five miles is a long swim."

Silbert started away from the glow, and Bresnahan followed uneasily. He was not happy at the prospect of weightlessness and darkness combined; the doses on the trip down, when at least the sphere had been present for some sort of orientation, had been more than sufficient.

The glow of the core faded slowly behind them, but before it was too difficult to see Silbert stopped.

"All right, put your light on. I'll do the same; stay close to me." Bresnahan obeyed both orders gladly. "Now, watch."

The spaceman manipulated valves on his suit, and carefully ejected a bubble of air about two feet in diameter. "You noticed that waste gas from the electrolyzers in the diving suits didn't stay with us to be a nuisance. The bubbles drifted away, even when we were at the core," he pointed out. Bresnahan hadn't noticed, since he wasn't used to paying attention to the fate of the air he exhaled, but was able to remember the fact once it was mentioned.

"That of course, was not due to buoyancy, so close to the core. The regular convection currents started by solar heat at the skin must be responsible. Therefore, those currents must extend all the way between skin and core. We'll follow this bubble."

"If the current goes all the way, why not just drift?"

"For two reasons. One is that the currents are slow — judging by their speed near the skin, the cycle must take over a day. Once we get away from the core, the buoyancy of this bubble will help; we can swim after it.

"The other reason is that if we simply drift we might start down again with the current before we got close enough to the skin to see daylight.

"Another trick we might try if this takes too long is to have one of us drift while the other follows the bubble to the limit of vision. That would establish the up-down line, and we could swim in that direction for a while and then repeat. I'm afraid we probably couldn't hold swimming direction for long enough to be useful, though, and it would be hard on the reserve air supply. We'd have to make a new bubble each time we checked. These suits have recyclers, but a spacesuit isn't built to get its oxygen from the surrounding water the way that diving gear is."

"Let's just follow this bubble," Bresnahan said fervently.

At first, of course, the two merely drifted. There simply was no detectable buoyancy near the core. However, in a surprisingly short time the shimmering globule of gas began to show a tendency to drift away from them.

The direction of drift was seldom the one which Bresnahan was thinking of as "up" at the moment, but the spaceman nodded approval and carefully followed their only guide. Bresnahan wished that his training had given him more confidence in instrument readings as opposed

to his own senses, but followed Silbert hopefully.

IX

The fourteen hours he spent drifting weightless in the dark made an experience Bresnahan was never to forget, and his friends were never to ignore. He always liked crowds afterward, and preferred to be in cities or at least buildings where straight, clearly outlined walls, windows, and doors marked an unequivocal up-and-down direction.

Even Silbert was bothered. He was more used to weightlessness, but the darkness he was used to seeing around him at such times was normally pocked with stars which provide orientation. The depths of Raindrop provided *nothing*. Both men were almost too far gone to believe their senses when they finally realized that the bubble they were still following could be seen by a glow not from their suits lights.

It was a faintly blue-green illumination, still impossible to define as to source, but unmistakably sunlight filtered through hundreds of feet of water. Only minutes later their helmets met the tough, elastic skin of the satellite.

It took Silbert only a few moments to orient himself. The sun and the station were both visible — at least they had not come out on the opposite side of the satellite— and he knew the time. The first and last factors were merely checks; all that was really necessary to find the lock was to swim toward the point under the orbiting station.

"I don't want to use the sonar locater unless I have to," he pointed out. "There is sonar gear on the sphere. I should be able to get us close enough by sighting on the station so that the magnetic compass will work. Judging by where the station seems to be, we have four or five miles to swim. Let's get going."

"And let's follow the great circle course," added Bresnahan. "Never mind cutting across inside just because it's shorter. I've had all I ever want of swimming in the dark."

"My feeling exactly. Come on."

The distance was considerably greater than Silbert had estimated, since he was not used to doing his sighting from under water and had not allowed for refraction; but finally the needle of the gimballed compass showed signs of making up its mind, and with nothing wrong that food and sleep would not repair the two men came at last in sight of the big lock cylinder.

For a moment, Silbert wondered whether they should try to make their approach secretly. Then he decided that if the Weisanens were there waiting for them the effort would be impractical, and if they weren't it would be futile.

He simply swam up to the small hatch followed by Bresnahan, and they entered the big chamber together. It proved to be full of water, but the sphere was nowhere in sight. With no words they headed for the outer personnel lock, entered it, pumped back the water, and emerged on Raindrop's surface. Silbert used

his laser, and ten minutes later they were inside the station. Bresnahan's jump had been a little more skillful than before.

"Now let's get on the radio!" snapped Silbert as he shed his space helmet.

"Why? Whom would you call, and what would you tell them? Remember that our normal Earth-end contacts are part of the same group the Weisanens belong to, and you can't issue a general broadcast to the universe at large screaming about a plot against mankind in the hope that someone will take you seriously. Someone might."

"But — "

"My turn, Bert. You've turned what I still think was just a potentially tragic mistake of Weisanen's into something almost funny, and incidentally saved both our lives. Now will you follow my lead? Things could still be serious if we don't follow up properly."

"But what are you going to do?"

"You'll see. Take it from me, compromise is still possible. It will take a little time; Aino Weisanen will have to learn something I can't teach him myself. Tell me, is there any way to monitor what goes on in Raindrop? For example, can you tell from here when the lock down there is opened, so we would know when they come back."

"No."

"Then we'll just have to watch for them. I assume that if we see them, we can call them from here on regular radio."

"Of course."

"Then let's eat, sleep, and wait. They'll be back after a while, and when they come Aino will listen to reason, believe me. But we can sleep right now, I'm sure; it will be a while yet before they show up. They should still be looking for us — getting more worried by the minute."

"Why should they appear at all? They must have found out long ago that they can't get back to the station on their own. They obviously haven't found us, and won't. Maybe they've simply decided they're already fugitive murderers and have settled down to a permanent life in Raindrop."

"That's possible, I suppose. Well, if we don't see them in a couple of weeks, we can go back down and give them a call in some fashion. I'd rather they came to us, though, and not too soon.

"But let's forget that; I'm starved. What's in your culture tanks besides liver?"

X

It did not take two weeks. Nine days and eight hours after the men had returned to the station, Silbert saw two spacesuited figures standing on the lock half a mile away, and called his companion's attention to them.

"They must be desperate by this time," remarked Bresnahan. "We'd better call them before they decide to risk the jump anyway." He activated the transmitter which Silbert indicated, and spoke.

"Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Weisanen.

Do you want us to send the cobweb down?"

The voice that answered was female.

"Thank God you're there! Yes, please. We'd like to come up for a while." Silbert expected some qualifying remarks from her husband, but none were forthcoming. At Bresnahan's gesture, he activated the spring gun which launched the web toward the satellite.

"Maybe you'd better suit up and go meet them," suggested the computerman. "I don't suppose either of them is very good at folding the web, to say nothing of killing angular speed."

"I'm not sure I care whether they go off on their own orbit anyway," growled the spaceman rising with some reluctance to his feet.

"Still bitter? And both of them?" queried Bresnahan.

"Well — I suppose not. And it would take forever to repair the web if it hit the station unfolded. I'll be back." Silbert vanished toward the hub, and the younger man turned back to watch his employers make the leap from Raindrop. He was not too surprised to see them hold hands as they did so, with the natural result that they spun madly on the way to the web and came close to missing it altogether.

When his own stomach had stopped whirling in sympathy, he decided that maybe the incident was for the best. Anything which tended to cut down Weisanen's self-assurance should be helpful, even though there was good reason to suspect that the battle was already won. He wondered whether he should summon the pair to his and Silbert's quarters for the interview which was about to ensue, but decided that there was such a thing as going too far.

He awaited the invitation to the Weisanens' rooms with eagerness.

It came within minutes of the couple's arrival at the air lock. When Bresnahan arrived he found Silbert already in the room where they had first reported on their brief visit to Raindrop. All three were still in spacesuits; they had removed only the helmets.

"We're going back down as soon as possible, Mr. Bresnahan," Weisanen began without preliminary. "I have a rather lengthy set of messages here which I would like you and Mr. Silbert to transmit as soon as possible. You will note that they contain my urgent recommendation for a policy change. Your suggestion of starting construction of smaller farms from Raindrop's outer layers is sound, and I think the Company will follow it. I am also advising that material be collected from the vicinity of the giant planets— Saturn's rings seem a likely source — for constructing additional satellites like Raindrop as private undertakings. Financing can be worked out. There should be enough profit from the farms, and that's the logical direction for some of it to flow.

"Once other sources of farm material are available, Raindrop will not be used further for the purpose. It will serve as Company headquar-

ters—it will be more convenient to have that in orbit anyway. The closest possible commercial relations are to be maintained with Earth."

"I'm glad you feel that way, sir," replied Bresnahan. "We'll get the messages off as soon as possible. I take it that more of the Company's officials will be coming up here to live, then?"

"Probably all of them, within the next two years or so. Brenda and I will go back and resume surveying now, as soon as we stock up with some food. I'll be back occasionally, but I'd rather she kept away from high weight for the next few months, as you know."

"Yes, sir," Bresnahan managed, by a heroic effort, to control his smile —almost. Weisanen saw the flicker of his lip, and froze for a moment. Then his own sober features loosened into a broad grin.

"Maybe another hour won't hurt Brenda," he remarked. "Let's have a meal together before we go back."

He paused, and added almost diffidently. "Sorry about what happened. We're human, you know."

"I know," replied Bresnahan. "That's what I was counting on."

"And that," remarked Silbert as he shed his helmet, "is that. They're aboard and bound for the core again, happy as clams. And speaking of clams, if you don't tell me why that stubborn Finn changed his mind, and why you were so sure he'd do it, there'll be mayhem around here. Don't try to make me believe that he got scared about what he'd nearly done to us. I know his wife was on our side, basically, but she wasn't about to wage open war for us. She was as worried about their kid as he was. Come on; make with the words, chum."

"Simple enough. Didn't you notice what he wanted before going back to Raindrop?"

"Not particularly — oh; food. So what? He could live on the food down there — or couldn't he? Don't you believe what he said?"

"Sure I believe him. He and his wife can digest cellulose, Heaven help them, and they can live off Raindrop's seaweed. As I remarked to him, though — you heard me, and he understood me — they're human. I can digest kale and cauliflower, too, and could probably live off them as well as that pair could live off the weeds. But did you ever stop to think what the stuff must taste like? Neither did they. I knew they'd be back with open mouths — and open minds. Let's eat — anything but liver!" END

Guesting Time

by R. A. LAFFERTY

Things were a bit crowded where they came from — and were getting that way here!

Winston, the Civil Servant in Immigration and Arrivals, was puzzled when he came that morning. There were several hundred new people behind the cyclone fences, and no arrivals had been scheduled.

"What ships landed?" he called out. "Why were they unscheduled?"

"No ships landed, sir," said Potholder, the senior guard.

"Then how did these people get here? Walk down from the sky?" Winston asked snappishly.

"Yes, sir, I guess so. We don't know who they are or how they keep coming here. They say they are from Skandia."

"We have few Scandanavian arrivals, and none of such appearance as this," said Winston. "How many are there?"

"Well, sir, when we first noticed them there were seven, and they hadn't been there a moment before."

"Seven? You're crazy. There are hundreds."

"Yes, sir. I'm crazy. A minute after there were seven, there were seventeen. But no more had come from anywhere. Then there were sixty. We separated them into groups of ten and watched them very closely. None crossed from one group to another, none came from anywhere else. But soon there were fifteen, then twenty-five, then thirty in each group. And there's a lot more of them there now than when you started to talk to me a moment ago, Mr. Winston."

"Corcoran is my superior and will be here in a minute," Winston said. "He'll know what to do."

"Mr. Corcoran left just before

you arrived, sir," said Potholder. "He watched it a while, and then went away babbling."

"I always admired his quick grasp of a situation," said Winston. He also went away babbling.

There were about a thousand of those Skandia people, and a little later there were nine times that many. They weren't dowdy people, but the area wouldn't hold any more. The fences all went down, and the Skandias spread out into the city and towns and country. This was only the beginning of it. About a million of them materialized there that morning, then the same thing happened at ten thousand other Ports of Entry of Earth.

"Mama," said Trixie, "there are some people here who want to use our bathroom." This was Beatrice (Trixie) Trux, a little girl in the small town of Winterfield.

"What an odd request!" said Mrs. Trux. "But I suppose it is in the nature of an emergency. Let them in, Trixie. How many people are there?"

"About a thousand," said Trixie.

"Trixie, there can't be that many."

"All right, you count them."

All the people came in to use the Trux's bathroom. There were somewhat more than a thousand of them, and it took them quite a while to use the bathroom even though they put a fifteen-second limit on each one and had a timekeeper with a bell to enforce it. They did it all with a lot of laughter and carrying on, but it took that first bunch about five hours to go through, and by that time there were a lot more new ones waiting.

"This is a little unusual," Mrs. Trux said to some of the Skandia women. "I was never short on hospitality. It is our physical resources, not our willingness, that becomes strained. There are so many of you!"

"Don't give it a thought," the Skandia women said. "It is the intent that counts, and it was so kind of you people to invite us. We seldom get a chance to go anywhere. We came a little early, but the main bunch will be along very soon. Don't you just love to go visiting."

"Oh, yes, yes," said Mrs. Trux. "I never realized till now just how much I wanted to go visiting."

But when she saw the whole outdoors black with the new people, Mrs. Trux decided that she had better stay where she was.

Truman Trux was figuring with a pencil.

"Our lot is fifty feet by a hundred and fifty feet, Jessica," he said. "That is either 7,500 or 75,000 square feet depending on how many zeroes you carry it out to."

"You were always good at math," said Mrs. Trux. "How do you do it anyhow?"

"And do you know how many people are living with us here on this lot, Jessica?" Truman asked.

"Quite a few."

"I am guessing between six and seven thousand," said Truman. "I found several more blocks of them this morning that I didn't know

about. They have a complete city built in our back yard. The streets are two and a half feet wide; the houses are eight feet by eight feet with six foot ceilings, and most of them are nine stories high. Whole families live in each room and cook there besides. They have shops and bazaars set up. They even have factories built. I know there is an entire wholesale textile district in our back yard. There are thirteen taverns and five music halls in our yard to my own knowledge, and there may be more."

"Well, some of those places are pretty small, Truman. The Little Hideout is in the broom closet of the Big Hideout, and I don't know if we should count it as a separate tavern. You have to go into the Sideways Club sideways; the Thinman Club is only nine inches wide from wall to wall and it's quite a trick to bending an elbow there; and the Mouse Room is small. But the better clubs are up in our attic, Truman. Did you ever count them? The Crazy Man Cabaret is up there, and the After Hours Club. Most of the other attic clubs are key clubs and I'm not a member. They've set up the Skandia Art Theatre in our basement now you know. They have continuous performances."

"I know it, Jessica, I know it."

"Their comedies are so funny that I nearly die. The trouble is that it's so crowded there that you have to laugh in when the one next to you laughs out. And I cry just like they do at their tragedies. They're all about women who can't have any more children. Why don't we have a bunch more, Truman? There's more than twenty shops in our yard where they sell nothing but fertility charms. I wonder why there aren't any children with the Skandia?"

"Ah, they say that this is just a short first visit by a few of them and they didn't presume to bring their children with them. What is that new racket superimposed on the old?"

"Oh, that's the big drums and the cymbals. They're having a political campaign to elect temporary officials for the time of their visit here. Imperial City, that's the town in our yard and our house, will elect delegates to go to the Congress to represent this whole block. The elections will be tonight. Then we'll really hear some noise, they say. The big drums don't really waste space, Truman. There are people inside them and they play them from the inside. Some of our neighbors are getting a little fussy about the newcomers, but I always did like a house full of people."

"We have it now, Jessica. I never got used to sleeping in a bed with nine other people, even if they are quiet sleepers. I like people, and I am fond of new experiences. But it is getting crowded."

"We have more of the Skandia than anyone else in the block except the Skirveys. They say it's because they like us more than some of the others. Mamie Skirvey is taking four kinds of the fertility pills now. She is almost sure she will be able to have triplets. I want to too."

"All the stores are stripped, Jessica, and all the lumber yards and

lumber camps; and the grain elevators will be empty in two more days. The Skandia pay for everything in money, but nobody knows what it says on it. I haven't got used to walking on men and women when I go out, but there's no avoiding it since the ground is covered with them."

"They don't mind. They're used to it. They say it's crowded where they come from."

The Winterfield *Times-Tribune* Telegraph had a piece about the Skandia:

> The plain fact is that for two days the Earth has had ten billion visitors from Skandia, wherever that is. The plain fact is that the Earth will die of them within a week. They appear by invisible transportation, but they have shown no inclination to disappear in the same manner. Food will be gone, water will be gone, the very air we breathe will be gone. They speak all our languages, they are polite, friendly and agreeable. And we will perish from them.

A big smiling man broke in on Bar-John, who was once again president of Big State Amalgamated, formerly U. S. A.

"I'm the president of the Skandia Visitation," he boomed. "We have come partly to instruct you people and we find that you do need it. Your fertility rate is pathetic. You barely double in fifty years. Your medicine, adequate in other fields, is worse than childish in this. We find that some of the nostrums peddled to your people actually *impede* fertility. Well, get in the Surgeon General and a few of the boys and we'll begin to correct the situation."

"Gedoudahere," said President Bar-John.

"I know you will not want your people to miss out on the population blessing," said the Skandia Visitation President. "We can aid you. We want you to be as happy as we are."

"Jarvis! Cudgelman! Sapsucker!" President Bar-John called out. "Shoot down this man. I'll implement the paper work on it later."

"You always say that but you never do," Sapsucker complained. "It's been getting us in a lot of trouble."

"Oh, well, don't shoot him down then if you're going to make an issue of it. I long for the old days when the simple things were done simply. Dammit, you Skandia skinner, do you know that there are nine thousand of you in the White House itself?"

"We intend to improve that this very hour," the Skandia president said. "We can erect one, two, or even three decks in these high-ceilinged rooms. I am happy to say that we will have thirty thousand of our people quartered in the White House this night."

"Do you think I like to take a bath with eight other persons — not even registered voters — in the same tub?" President Bar-John complain-

ed. "Do you think I like to eat off a plate shared by three or four other people? Or to shave, by mistake, faces other than my own in the morning?"

"I don't see why not," said the Skandia Visitation President. "People are our most precious commodity. Presidents are always chosen as being those who most love the people."

"Oh, come on, fellows," said President Bar-John. "Shoot down the ever-loving son. We're entitled to a free one now and then."

Jarvis and Cudgelman and Sapsucker blazed away at the Skandia, but they harmed him not at all.

"You should have known that we are immune to that," the Skandia said. "We voted against its effect years ago. Well, since you will not cooperate, I will go direct to your people. Happy increase to you, gentlemen."

Truman Trux, having gone out from his own place for a little change, was sitting on a park bench.

He wasn't actually sitting on it, but several feet above it. In that particular place, a talkative Skandia lady sat on the bench itself. On her lap sat a sturdy Skandiaman reading the *Sporting News* and smoking a pipe. On him sat a younger Skandia woman. On this younger woman sat Truman Trux, and on him sat a dark Skandia girl who was filing her fingernails and humming a tune. On her in turn sat an elderly Skandia man. As crowded as things had become, one could not expect a seat of one's own.

A fellow and his girl came along, walking on the people on the grass.

"Mind if we get on?" asked the girl.

"Quite all right," said the elderly gentleman on top. "'Sall right," said the girl working on her nails. "Certainly," said Truman and the others, and the *Sporting News* man puffed into his pipe that it was perfectly agreeable.

There was no longer any motor traffic. People walked closely packed on streets and sidewalks. The slow stratum was the lowest, then the medium (walking on the shoulders of the mediums and combining the three speeds). At crossings it became rather intricate, and people were sometimes piled nine high. But the Earth people, those who still went out, quickly got onto the Skandia techniques.

An Earthman, known for his extreme views, had mounted onto a monument in the park and began to harangue the people, Earth and Skandia. Truman Trux, who wanted to see and hear, managed to get a nice fifth level seat, sitting on the shoulders of a nice Skandia girl, who sat on the shoulders of another who likewise to the bottom.

"Ye are a plague of locusts!" howled the earth-side crank. "Ye have stripped us bare!"

"The poor man!" said the Skandia girl who was Truman's understeady. "He likely has only a few children and is embittered."

"Ye have devoured our substance and stolen the very air of our life. Ye are the Apocalyptical grasshoppers, the eleventh plague."

"Here is a fertility charm for your wife," said the Skandia girl, and reached it up to Truman. "You might not need it yet, but keep it for the future. It is for those who have more than twelve. The words in Skandia say 'Why stop now?' It is very efficacious."

"Thank you," said Truman. "My wife has many charms from you good people, but not one like this. We have only one child, a young girl."

"What a shame! Here is a charm for your daughter. She cannot begin to use them too early."

"Destruction, destruction, destruction on ye all!" screamed the Earthside crank from atop the monument.

"Quite an adept," said the Skandia girl. "To what school of eloquence does he belong?"

The crowd began to break up and move off. Truman felt himself taken down one level and then another.

"Any particular direction?" asked the Skandia girl.

"This is fine," said Truman. "We're going toward my home."

"Why, here's a place almost clear," said the girl. "You'd never find anything like this at home." They were now down to the last level, the girl walking only on the horizontal bodies of those lounging on the grass. "You can get off and walk if you wish," said the girl. "Here's a gap in the walkers you can slip down into. Well, toodle."

"You mean toodle-oo?" Truman asked as he slid off her shoulders.

"That's right. I can never remember the last part of it."

The Skandia were such friendly people!

President Bar-John and a dozen other regents of the world had decided that bruskness was called for. Due to the intermingling of Earth and Skandia populations, this would be a task for small and medium arms. The problem would be to gather the Skandia together in open spots, but on the designated day they began to gather of themselves in a million parks and plazas of the Earth. It worked perfectly. Army units were posted everywhere and went into action.

Rifles began to whistle and machine guns to chatter. But the effect on the Skandia was not that expected.

Instead of falling wounded, they cheered everywhere.

"Pyrotechnics yet!" exclaimed a Skandia leader, mounting onto the monument in our own park. "Oh, we are honored!"

But, though the Skandia did not fall from the gunshot, they had begun to diminish in their numbers. They were disappearing as mysteriously as they had appeared a week before.

"We go now," said the Skandia leader from the top of the monument. "We have enjoyed every minute of our short visit. Do not despair! We will not abandon you to your emptiness. Our token force will return home and report. In another week we will visit you in substantial numbers. We will teach you the full happiness of human proximity, the glory of fruitfulness, the blessing of

adequate population. We will teach you to fill up the horrible empty places of your planet."

The Skandia were thinning out. The last of them were taking cheering farewells of disconsolate Earth friends.

"We will be back," they said as they passed their last fertility charms into avid hands. "We'll be back and teach you everything so you can be as happy as we are. Good increase to you!"

"Good increase to you!" cried the Earth people to the disappearing Skandia. Oh, it would be a lonesome world without all those nice people! With them you had the feeling that they were really close to you.

"We'll be back!" said the Skandia leader, and disappeared from the monument. "We'll be back next the monument.

"We'll be back next week and a lot more of us," and then they were gone.

"— And next time we'll bring the kids!" came the last fading Skandia voice from the sky. END

SIGN OF THE WOLF

by FRED SABERHAGEN

It struck like a wolf from out in space — and the men were defenseless against it!

The dark shape, big as a man, come between the two smallest of the three watchfires, moving in silence like that of sleep. Out of habit, Duncan had been watching that downwind direction, though his mind was heavy with tiredness and with the thoughts of life that came with sixteen summers' age.

Duncan raised his spear and howled, and charged the wolf. For a moment the fire-eyes looked steadily at him, appearing to be a full hand apart. Then the wolf turned away; it made one deep questioning sound, and was gone into the darkness out beyond the fires.

Duncan stopped, drawing a gasping breath of relief. The wolf would probably have killed him if it had faced his charge, but it did not yet dare to face him in firelight.

The sheeps' eyes were on Duncan, a hundred glowing spots in the huddled mass of the flock. One or two of the animals bleated softly.

He paced around the flock, sleepiness and introspection jarred from his mind. Legends said that men in the old Earthland had animals called dogs that guarded sheep. If that were true, some might think that men were fools for ever leaving Earthland.

But such thoughts were irreverent, and Duncan's situation called for prayer. Every night now the wolf came, and all too often it killed a sheep.

Duncan raised his eyes to the

night sky. "Send me a sign, star-gods," he prayed, routinely. But the heavens were quiet. Only the stately fireflies of the dawn zone traced their steady random paths, vanishing halfway up the eastern sky. The stars themselves agreed that three-fourths of the night was gone. The legends said that Earthland was among the stars, but the younger priests admitted such a statement could only be taken symbolically.

The heavy thoughts came back, in spite of the nearby wolf. For two years now Duncan had prayed and hoped for his mystical experience, the sign from a god that came to mark the future life of every youth. From what other young men whispered now and then, he knew that many faked their signs. That was all right for lowly herdsmen, or even for hunters. But how could a man without a genuine vision ever be much more than a tender of animals? To be a priest, to study the things brought from old Earthland and saved — Duncan hungered for learning, for greatness, for things he could not name.

He looked up again, and gasped, for he saw a great sign in the sky, almost directly overhead. A point of dazzling light, and then a bright little cloud remaining among the stars. Duncan gripped his spear, watching, for a moment even forgetting the sheep. The tiny cloud swelled and faded very slowly.

For centuries now the berserker machines had warred on Earth-descended men. Automatons loosed in some forgotten war, the machines moved as raiders through the galaxy, destroying whatever life they could find and overcome.

One such machine slid out of the interstellar intervals toward Duncan's planet, drawn from afar by the Sol-type light of Duncan's sun. To turn life into death was a berserker's function, and this sun and this planet promised life.

The berserker machine was the size of a small planetoid, and its power was immense, but it knew well that some planets were defended, and it bent and slowed its hurtling approach into a long cautious curve.

There were no warships in nearby space, but the berserker's telescopes picked out the bright dots of defensive satellites, vanishing into the planet's shadow and reappearing. To probe for more data, the berserker computers loosed a spy missile.

The missile looped the planet, and then shot in, testing the defensive net. Low over nightside, it turned suddenly into a bright little cloud.

Still, defensive satellites formed no real obstacle to a berserker. It could gobble them up almost at leisure if it moved in close to them, though they would stop long-range missiles fired at the planet. It was the other things the planet might have, the buried things, that held the berserker back from a killing rush.

Also it was strange that this defended planet had no cities to make light sparks on its nightside, and that no radio signals came from it into space.

With mechanical caution the berserker moved in, toward the area scouted by the spy missile.

In the morning, Duncan counted his flock — and then recounted, already scowling. Then he searched until he found the slaughtered lamb. The wolf had not gone hungry after all. That made four sheep lost, now, in ten days.

Duncan tried to tell himself that dead sheep no longer mattered so much to him, that with a sign such as he had been granted last night his life was going to be filled with great deeds and noble causes. But the sheep still did matter, and not only because their owners would be angry.

Looking up sullenly from the eaten lamb, he saw a brown-robed priest, alone, mounted on a donkey, climbing the long grassy slope of the grazing valley from the direction of the Temple Village. He would be going to pray in one of the Caves in the foot of the mountain at the head of the valley.

At Duncan's beckoning wave — he could not leave the flock to walk far toward the priest — the man on the donkey changed course. Duncan walked a little way to meet him.

"Blessings of Earthland," said the priest shortly, when he came close. He was a stout man who seemed glad to dismount and stretch, arching his back and grunting.

He smiled as he saw Duncan's hesitation. "Are you much alone here, my son?"

"Yes, Holy One. But — last night, I had a sign. For two years I've wanted one, and just last night it came."

"Indeed? That is good news." The priest's eyes strayed to the mountain, and to the sun, as if he calculated how much time he could spare. But he said, with no sound of impatience: "Tell me about it, if you wish."

When he heard that the flash in the sky was Duncan's sign, the priest frowned. Then he seemed to keep himself from smiling. "My son, that light was seen by many. Today the elders of a dozen villages, of most of the Tribe, have come to the Temple Village. Everyone has seen something different in the sky-flash, and I am now going to pray in a Cave, because of it."

The priest remounted, but when he had looked at Duncan again, he waited to say: "Still, I was not one of those chosen to see the sky-gods' sign; and you were. It may be a sign for you as well as for others, so do not be disappointed if it is not only for you. Be faithful in your duties and signs will come." He turned the donkey away.

Feeling small, Duncan walked slowly back to his flock. How could he have thought that a light seen over half the world was meant for one shepherd? Now his sign was gone, but his wolf remained.

In the afternoon, another figure came into sight, walking straight toward the flock from the direction of Colleen's village. Duncan tightened the belt on his woolen tunic, and combed grass from his hair with

his fingers. He felt his chin, and wished his beard would really begin to grow.

He was sure the visitor was Colleen when she was still half a mile away. He kept his movements calm and made himself appear to first notice her when she came in sight on a hilltop within hailing distance. The wind moved her brown hair and her garments.

"Hello, Colleen."

"Hello, Duncan the Herdsman. My father sent me to ask about his sheep."

He ran an anxious eye over the flock, picking out individuals. Praise be to gods of land and sky. "Your father's sheep are well."

She walked closer to him. "Here are some cakes. The other sheep are not well?"

Ah, she was beautiful. But no mere herdsman would ever have her.

"Last night the wolf killed again." Duncan gestured with empty hands.

"I watch, I light fires. I have a spear and a club, and I rush at him when he comes, and I drive him away. But sooner or later he comes on the wrong side of the flock, or a sheep strays."

"Another man should come from the village," she said. "Even a boy would help. With a big clever wolf, any herdsman may need help."

He nodded, faintly pleased at her implying he was a man. But his troubles were too big to be soothed away. "Did you see the sky-flash, last night?" he asked, remembering with bitterness his joy when he had thought the sign was his.

"No, but all the village is talking about it. I will tell them about the wolf, but probably no man will come to help you for a day or two. They are all dancing and talking, thinking of nothing but the sky-flash." She raised puzzled eyes beyond Duncan. "Look."

It was the priest, rushing past half a mile from them on his way down valley from the Caves, doing his best to make his donkey gallop toward the Temple Village.

"He may have met your wolf," Colleen suggested.

"He doesn't look behind him. Maybe in the Caves he received an important sign from the earth-gods."

They talked a while longer, sitting on the grass while he ate the cakes she had brought him.

"I must go!" She sprang up. The sun was lowering and neither of them had realized it.

"Yes, hurry! At night the wolf may be anywhere on the plain."

Watching her hurry away, Duncan felt the wolf in his own blood. Perhaps she knew it, for she looked back at him strangely from the hilltop. Then she was gone.

On a hillside, gathering dried brush for the night's watchfires, Duncan paused for a moment, looking at the sunset.

"Sky-gods, help me," he prayed. "And earth-gods, the dark wolf should be under your dominion. If you will not grant me a sign, at least help me deal with the wolf." He bent routinely and laid his ear to a rock. Every day he asked some god for a sign, but never —

He heard a voice. He crouched

there, listening to the rock, unable to believe. Surely it was a waterfall he heard, or running cattle somewhere near. But no, it was a real voice, booming and shouting in some buried distance. He could not make out the words, but it was a real god-voice from under the earth.

He straightened up, tears in his eyes, even the sheep for a moment forgotten. This wonderful sign was not for half the world, this was for him! And he had doubted that it would ever come.

To hear what it said was all-important. He bent again and listened. The muffled voice went on unceasingly, but he could not understand it. He ran a few steps up the hill, and put his ear against another exposed earth-bone of rock. Yes, the voice was plainer here; sometimes he could distinguish a word. "Give," said the voice. Mumble, mumble. "Defend," he thought it said. Even the words he recognized where spoken in strange accents.

He realized that darkness was falling, and stood up, in fearful indecision. The sheep were still his responsibility, and he had to light watchfires, he had to, for the sheep would be slaughtered without them. And at the same time he had to listen to this voice.

A form moved toward him through the twilight, and he grabbed up his club — then he realized it was Colleen.

She looked frightened. She whispered: "The sun went down, and I feared the dark. It was a shorter way back to you, than on to the village."

The berserker moved in toward the nightside of the planet, quickly now, but still with caution. It had searched its memory of thousands of years of war against a thousand kinds of life, and it had remembered one other planet like this, with defensive satellites but no cities or radios. The fortifiers of that planet had fought among themselves, weakening until they could no longer operate their defenses, had even forgotten what their planet-weapons were.

The life here might be shamming, trying to lure the berserker within range of the planet-weapons. Therefore the berserker sent its mechanical scouts ahead, to break through the satellite net, and range over the land surface, killing, until they provoked the planet's maximum response.

The fires were built, and Colleen held the spear and watched the sheep. Wolf or not, Duncan had to follow his sign. He made his way up the dark hillside, listening at rock after rock. And ever the earth-god voice grew stronger.

In the back of his mind Duncan realized that Colleen had arranged to be trapped with him for the night, to help him defend the sheep, and he felt limitless gratitude and love. But even that was now in the back of his mind. The voice now was everything.

He held his breath, listening. Now he could hear the voice while he stood erect. There, ahead, at the foot of a cliff, were slabs of rock tumbled down by snowslides. Among them might be a cave.

He reached the slabs, and heard the voice rumble up between them. "Attack in progress. Request human response. Order one requested. This is defense control. Attack in progress —"

On and on it went. Duncan understood some of it. Attack, request, human. Order one requested — that must mean one wish was to be granted, as in the legends. Never again would Duncan laugh at legends, thinking himself wise. This was no prank of the other young men; no one could hide in a cave and shout on and on in such a voice.

No one but a priest should enter a cave, but probably not even the priests knew of this one. It was Duncan's, for his sign had led him here. He had been granted a tremendous sign.

More awed than fearful, he slid between slabs of rock, finding the way down, rock and earth and then metal under his feet. He dropped into a low metal cave. It was as he had heard the god-caves described, very long, smooth, round and regular, except here where it was bent and torn under the fallen rocks. In the cave's curving sides were glowing places, like huge animal eyes, giving light enough to see.

And here the shouting was very loud. Duncan moved toward it.

We have reached the surface, the scouts radioed back to the berserker, in their passionless computer-symbol language. Here intelligent life of the earth-type lives in villages. So far we have killed eight hundred and thirty-nine units. We have met no response from dangerous weapons.

A little while the berserker waited, letting the toll of life-units mount. When the chance of this planet's being a trap had dropped in computer-estimation to the vanishing point, the berserker moved in to close range, and began to mop the remaining defensive satellites out of its way.

"Here I am." Duncan fell on his knees before the metal thing that bellowed. In front of the god-shape lay woven twigs and eggshells, so old as to be hardly more than dust. Once priests had sacrificed here, and then they had forgotten this god.

"Here I am," said Duncan again, in a louder voice.

The god heeded him, for the deafening shouting stopped.

"Response acknowledged, from defense control alternate 9,864," said the god. "Planetary defenses now under control of post 9,864."

How could you ask a god to speak more plainly?

After a little time of silence, the god said: "Request order one."

That seemed understandable, but to make sure, Duncan asked: "You will grant me one wish, mighty one?"

"Will obey your order. Emergency. Satellite sphere ninety per cent destroyed. Planet-weapon responses fully programmed, activation command requested."

Duncan, still kneeling, closed his eyes. One wish would be granted. The rest of the words he took for a warning to choose his wish with

care. If he wished, the god would make him the wisest of chiefs, or the bravest of warriors. The god would give him a hundred years of life, or a dozen young wives.

Or Colleen.

But Colleen was out in the darkness, now, facing the wolf. Even now the wolf might be prowling near, just beyond the circles of firelight, watching the sheep, and watching the tender girl. Even now Colleen might be screaming —

Duncan's heart sank utterly, for he knew the wolf had beaten him, had destroyed this moment on which the rest of his life depended. He was a herdsman. And if he could make himself forget the sheep, he could not want to forget Colleen.

"Destroy the wolf! Kill it!" he choked out.

"Term wolf questioned."

"The killer! To destroy the killer! That is the only wish I can make!" He could stand the presence of the god no longer, and ran away through the cave, weeping for his ruined life. He ran to find Colleen.

Recall, shouted the electronic voice of the berserker. Trap. Recall. Hearing, its scattered brood of scout machines rose at top acceleration from their planet work, curving and climbing toward their great metal mother. Too slow. They blurred into streaks, into fireworks of incandescent gas.

The berserker was not waiting for them, it was diving for deep space, knowing the planet-weapons reached out for it. It wasted no circuits now to compute why so much life had been sacrificed to trap it. It saw new force fields thrown up ahead of it, walling it in. No escape.

The whole sky was in flames, the bones of the hills shuddered underfoot, and at the head of the valley the top of the mountain was torn away and an enormous shaft of something almost invisible poured from it infinitely up into the sky.

Duncan saw Colleen huddling on the open ground, shouting to him, but the buried thunder drowned her voice. The sheep were running and leaping, crying under the terrible sky. Duncan saw the dark wolf among them, running with them in circles, too frightened to be a wolf. He picked up his club and ran, staggering with the shaking earth, after the beast.

He caught the wolf, for he ran toward it, while it ran in circles without regard for him. He saw the sky reflected in its eyes, facing him, and he swung his club just as it crouched to leap.

He won. And then he struck again and again, making sure.

All at once there was a blue-white, moving sun in the sky, a marvelous sun that in a minute turned red, speading itself out to vanish in the general glow. Then the earth was still at last.

Duncan walked in a daze, until he saw Colleen trying to round up the sheep. Then he waved to her, and trotted after her to help. The wolf was dead, and he had a wonderful sign to tell. The gods had not killed him. Beneath his running feet, the steadiness of the ground seemed permanent. END

WAY STATION

by IRVING E. COX, JR.

Illustrated by NODEL

They could not live outside the sheltering walls of the dome—nor could they survive inside it!

I

"This Haywood person," she said, "has been teaching young people that they can go outside Marstation without a sacred helmet." Eunice Mackdee, a sloppy, fat woman, was clearly a fanatic — she admitted belonging to the ultraconservative Orthodox Scientists — yet her voice was surprisingly calm.

"You have evidence of this, Mrs. Mackdee?" the chief scientist asked.

"Enough, including the testimony of my own son."

Ponderously the chief scientist turned toward Bruce Haywood. "Do you wish at this time to make a statement in your own defense?"

"Defense, sir?" Bruce Haywood laughed uneasily. "But it's ridiculous. We're all scientists at Marstation. We have the irrevocable right to the free expression of ideas — "

"Only in terms of the principles of science."

"The issue here, sir, is freedom to think!"

"Will you give me a straight answer? Have you been teaching young people to go outside Marsta-

tion without their sacred helmets?"

Haywood hesitated. In the conflict between orthodoxy and the abstract ideal of truth, what was an honest answer? Taking advantage of his hesitation, Mrs. Mackdee volunteered:

"I want it clearly understood that I have no personal feeling of vengeance for this Haywood person. My son is lost to Orthodox Science; I accept that. But as a mother I have a duty to save other innocent, young minds from his kind of teaching."

"Don't be an absolute ass, Mrs. Mackdee!" Haywood exclaimed. "We're all lost if we continue to tie ourselves to rituals we no longer understand."

"Orthodox Scientists," she responded in cold dignity, "have no doubt about the rituals."

"Some of us aren't even sure why we're here at Marstation," Haywood countered.

"To service interplanetary craft —"

"Which have not landed at our port in six centuries!" Haywood reminded her.

Pursing her lips so that she appeared to be smiling benignly, Mrs. Mackdee turned toward the chief scientist. "Isn't it an appropriate time to begin the formal hearing?"

The chief scientist sighed and slipped the sacred, ritual helmet over his head, indicating that he would hereafter be functioning in his official capacity as the religious and political leader of the community. He glanced at the brief which Mrs. Mackdee had submitted.

"Your first witness, I take it, is Ted Brand?"

"Yes — one of Haywood's boyhood friends."

Ted Brand entered the hearing room and took the oath on the sacred books of science, swearing that he would give nothing but objectively factual scientific evidence. He sat rigidly in the chair facing the chief scientist. Throughout his testimony, Brand stared directly at his inquisitor, never allowing his glance to stray in Bruce Haywood's direction.

Reading from a card which he held nervously in his hand, Ted Brand said, "Bruce Haywood and I lived in the south sector, near the perimeter of Marstation, when we were kids. Sometimes after our regular, daily training periods in the ritual we would go to an abandoned playground which was built close to the base of the airseal dome over Marstation. It was here . . ."

Vividly Haywood remembered those carefree days of childhood, before he had started training as a teacher of the scientific ritual. He liked to go to that abandoned playground because there he had an unobstructed view of the arid, red desert outside Marstation. To him it did not appear a barren waste, but rather hospitable and fertile because of the green lichen growing on the red soil and along the banks of the dry river beds, as straight as if they had been carved like canals upon the face of the planet.

Mrs. Mackdee asked Brand if Haywood had ever touched one of the broad, aluminum beams which

formed the airseal dome above Marstation. While such an act was now illegal — one of several sacrileges recently prohibited by the code of law which the Orthodox Scientists had persuaded the government to authorize — it had not been a crime when Haywood was a boy. Had he touched the beam? Of course, several times and in Brand's presence, as Brand testified at the hearing. And once Haywood had done more.

It happened late in the afternoon. Haywood climbed to the top of a rusting jungle gym. The joint formed by a beam and a horizontal supporting girder was directly above him. He could reach it easily.

He fingered the rivets while he examined the edges of the beams. The dome was like an enormous, latticed window, built in the shape of a huge hemisphere. Yet in the open spaces between the beams there was no visible material, like the pieces of window glass carefully preserved in the museum of the temple of science.

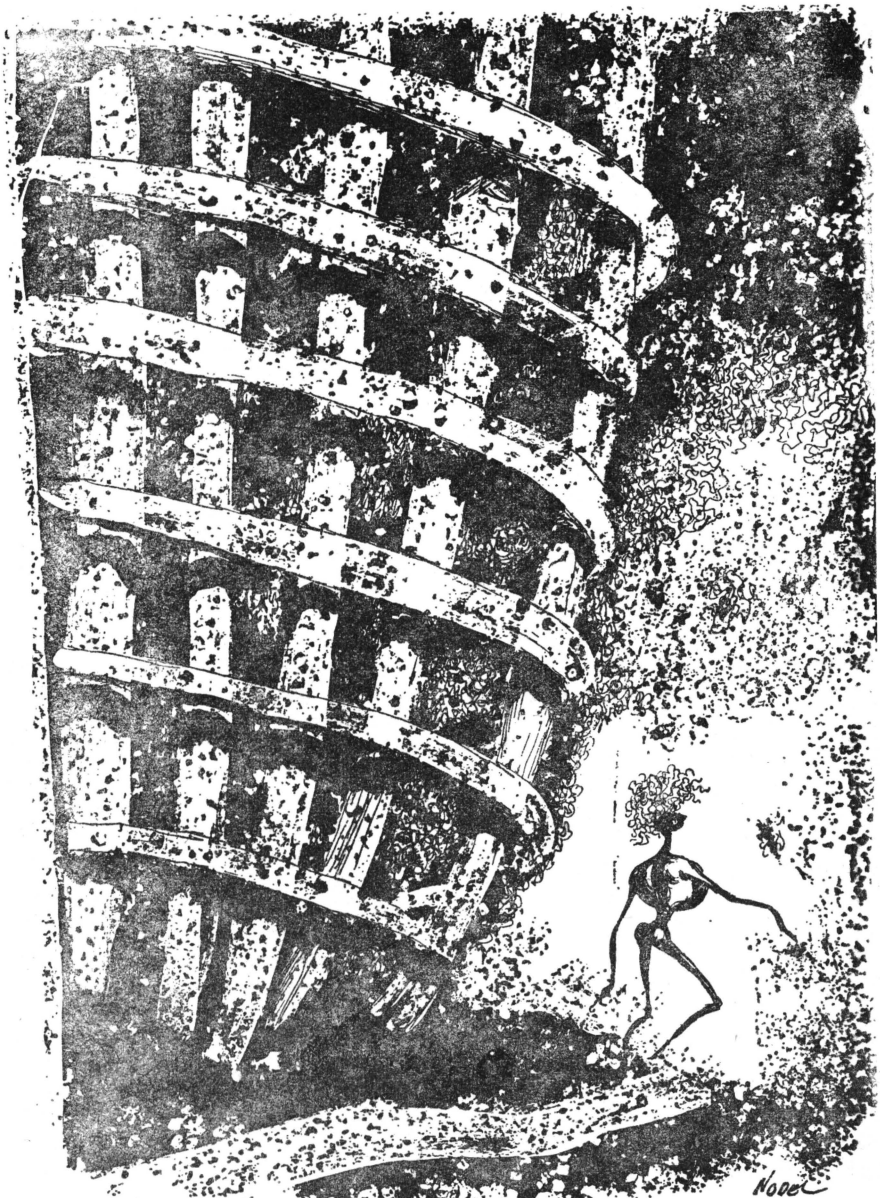
What, then, sealed the air within Marstation, walling out the thin atmosphere of the planet? A curtain of atomic energy, said the Orthodox Scientists. For all Haywood knew they could be right. The sacred books of science were crowded with references to the power of the atom. Atomic energy was somehow created in the sealed reactors which were the only source of power in Marstation. The scientists — and every citizen of the station was a scientist — took the power for granted, but no one knew what an atom was; nor was it permissible to make scientific investigation of the data in the texts. In the remote past St. Einstein had stolen the secret of the atom from the gods; that was all man needed to know about it.

Bruce Haywood clung to the aluminum beam searching the metal for any sign of an outlet from which the protective curtain of invisible atoms might be projected. He had made the same test before; as always, he found nothing. If there were no outlet, did it follow that the curtain of atoms did not exist?

Haywood had always been taught that atomic power would, in an instant, destroy any material object it touched. He took from his pocket a tiny spool of magnetic tape on which he recorded his ritual assignments from the learning center, and he dropped the spool through the opening in the airseal dome.

Nothing happened. The tape slid down the beam, bounced on the red earth outside, and rolled back under the dome. Ted Brand had seen it all; Haywood was certain of that. At Haywood's hearing, Brand completed his testimony by referring to that same incident.

"It was a clever trick, of course. I never understood how Bruce made it look as if that spool of tape had actually passed through the dome unharmed. We all know that's impossible; the tape would have been burned to a crisp. So I simply wouldn't ask Bruce how he did it; I didn't want him to think I had been taken in by a trick."


Node

"Do you consider this recital of gossip evidence?" Haywood demanded of the chief scientist when Brand had been dismissed from the stand.

"Mr. Haywood," the chief retorted, "I must remind you that this is a formal hearing. You have the right to respond to a direct question if you choose; but you may not interrupt the proceedings to make comments upon the testimony." He looked at the Mackdee brief again. "The next witness is Dr. Will Storm."

"He volunteered his testimony," Eunice Mackdee said in pride. And he's the type that would, Haywood thought; old Stormy was just the type.

An aging, red-faced man entered the hearing room and, after having ceremoniously bowed to the panel of judges, seated himself in the witness chair. Beaming at them all, he adjusted his jacket so that they could see his lapel pin, a replica of the sacred helmet worn by citizens who had been publicly honored by the Orthodox Scientists.

"I am both awed and honored that my opinion should be sought by so august a body of scientists," Dr. Storm began in the magnificent organ bellow which had made him so impressive a figure to many of his students. Not to Haywood, though, who thought the doctor was a bumbling farce, hypnotized by the sound of his own voice. He had the not unusual skill among teachers of churning out words by the hour, yet saying nothing; but his role of the learned philosopher was so perfectly stereotyped few of his students ever suspected his quackery.

"It is my earnest hope that I may adequately satisfy your inquiry into this tragic situation, while at the same time I do no injustice to my former student, Bruce Haywood," Storm continued, still beaming, "though I must admit I am not at all surprised to find Haywood having problems. An experienced teacher — and as you know I've been teaching for twenty years — is an expert judge of human nature; and I must admit that from the first day when Bruce Haywood was assigned to my group, I had serious doubts about his qualifications . . ."

II

That first day: Haywood remembered it clearly. Only three years had passed since he had enrolled in the final learning group which he was required to pass before entering the Temple of Science as a probationary teacher. Haywood was in his early twenties then, a quiet, introspective youth still trying to rationalize answers to the annoying questions that plagued his mind.

The class met in a large lecture hall on the top floor of the Temple — five students and a teacher in a room designed to accommodate three hundred. After listening to the first few minutes of Storm's opening lecture Haywood concluded that the professor had nothing to say. Stealthily he slid his chair toward the side of the hall, until he was able to peer through the glassless win-

dow at the city beneath the dome and the red desert surrounding it.

From the highest floor of the Temple the distant blue hills seemed closer and more inviting than ever. What lay behind them? What lay past the curve of the horizon? Haywood felt imprisoned within the city, held captive in a microscopic bubble fixed to the surface of the vast and beautiful world.

Why had Marstation been built originally? Who had established the routines of science and for what reason? Was it all the pointless distortion of myth, or was it simply a misunderstanding of fact? So much that was printed in the sacred scientific books was obviously nonsense — the mathematics involving gravity, for example, since the measurable force at Marstation was considerably less than that assumed in the texts. But Haywood couldn't quite bring himself to reject all of science because of its more obvious errors; such thinking resembled too closely the fanaticism of the Orthodox Scientists. But how was truth to be sifted from the sacred texts?

Suddenly Haywood became aware of a dead silence. He focused his attention again upon Dr. Storm, uncomfortably aware that the teacher was glaring at him coldly.

"And how would you present the problem, Mr. Haywood?"

"Sorry, sir," he apologized. "I didn't hear the question."

"So we have a slow learner with us, I see." Storm beamed and the other students knew this was their cue to laugh, which they did dutifully. "You may find it necessary to do considerable extra work, Mr. Haywood, to keep up with the class."

"I shall do what I am assigned, sir."

"Indeed, I should hope so — if you mean to be graduated with your class. By tomorrow I expect you to commit to memory the first five pages in the sacred text of St. Darwin. You will use the full text, which is in the Temple library, rather than the summary editions which you have been accustomed to reading in the past."

Haywood was delighted by the assignment of the extra work, for it was the first time in his life that he was granted access to the library in the Temple of Science. Freedom to use the original texts was to him the one worthwhile result of Storm's class. He not only memorized the designated pages, but read on in St. Darwin's book until the library was closed for the night.

Among the texts brought from earth by the founders, the mystic — and perhaps magic — volumes written by St. Einstein and St. Darwin were the best known and the least understood. The men were both said to have been outstanding chief scientists on earth, since their names were so often cited in the lesser known sacred texts. Of the two, St. Darwin was the least comprehensible to both teacher and student, for he wrote of a voyage he had taken by floating upon a vast body of water. Since it was clearly impossible for such a quantity of water to exist —

according to calculations made by the mathematicians in the Temple, the weight of it would crush the thin outer crust of any planet — St. Darwin's expedition was clearly a symbolic presentation of scientific fact.

The riddle buried in the symbolism intrigued Haywood, as it had hundreds of scholars before his time. Why would so great a chief scientist have chosen to express his ideas in imagery that was not only absurd but also repugnant to the average reader?

As the year passed, Haywood took every opportunity, even repeated additional assignments from Dr. Storm, to read in the Temple library. Beyond St. Darwin he expanded his interests to other books which had been brought to Marstation by the founders. The basic sacred texts of technology did not interest him, but Haywood was fascinated by the material which the librarians classified as mystical writing. These texts were never given as assignments, and they were almost never read.

In the course of time the students in Storm's class were issued their sacred helmets in a solemn ceremony conducted by the chief scientist. Following the blessing and the usual prayers, each man in Haywood's group pulled his helmet over his head. In single file they marched after Dr. Storm toward the airlock exit from the station.

We're like knights, Haywood thought, recalling one of the books he had read in the library. It gave him a sense of identification with the long history of earth, and the insight helped him understand his own world better.

The five students followed Storm to the launching pad and the service buildings which stood on the desert soil some distance outside the city. Without a hitch they went through the ritual of running the complex machinery of a space port. Blindly each man performed a specific skill. Perhaps he no longer understood the reason for his job or the machine he ran, but that hardly mattered.

Haywood watched the agricultural technicians who were working the farmed acres which lay between the station and the launching pad. Narrow poles carried a spiral of feathery, metal filaments high above the furrows; these poles were familiar devices used for collecting water from the frost which settled on the red planet after dark. A split-second shock of heat through the metal pole transformed the frost into minute drops of water, which slid down the filaments, through the hollow pile, and into insulated tanks below. Regularly, twenty times each hour during the bitterly cold night, the precious water dripped into the tanks.

Haywood realized abruptly that this source of water must have been invented to meet the conditions existing on the red planet. None of the texts which he had read in the library — and by that time he had broused through hundreds — mentioned that there was any need on earth for a special water collection.

This suggested that water on earth might exist in such abundance that earth people took it for granted.

When his learning group had been taken outside the dome for two consecutive weeks to practice their rituals, Dr. Storm began to relax his close supervision. Haywood seized upon this opportunity to wander off from the others, far enough so that no one would necessarily see what he was up to. Thus alone, he made the vital test. He removed his helmet and kept it off for several minutes. As he had surmised, the globe about his head was more hinderance than help. He breathed more easily the clear, cold air of the red planet; it was invigorating, and far from harmful.

He had the proof at last. But proof of what? If men could live as easily without the dome and without the helmet, why had they been necessary to the founders? Haywood had the feeling that understanding was on the fringe of his mind, just beyond his grasp. But he couldn't clarify his thinking, except for a vague conviction that the answer was in the mystical writings of St. Darwin.

III

It was not, in the end, the gospel of St. Darwin or even Haywood's own experience with the helmet that gave him his first real clue to the truth, but rather a forgotten pamphlet on child care. No text in the library contained a picture of a man; the founders had, perhaps understandably, considered it pointless to give valuable space to the obvious. But in the dusty, aging, faded pamphlet Haywood found a brief description of a newborn child, "The small, helpless, pink-skinned infant, with its short, stubby arms and legs, its head so disproportionately large relative to the trunk of the body . . ."

A cold shock shuddered through Haywood's mind. In almost those identical words his mother had once described her child who died of the bleeding sickness. Pink skin; large head; these always characterized the deformed monstrosities which never survived birth at Marstation. But this was the normal earth child, not a monstrosity! There was no bleeding sickness, then — merely the reaction of a normal infant to an unendurable environment.

We're the deformed, Haywood thought, nauseated by disgust with himself. We've changed physically so that we can survive. He raced back to the gospel of St. Darwin, and poured over the pages, intuitively fitting together the logical structure of an ancient earth science. Survival of the fittest; natural selection; adaptation.

Adaptation! Now he knew the truth and his nausea was gone. How foolish to be disgusted by the change an organism made within itself, pulling itself up by the bootstraps in order to survive! What a magnificent thing was man, to meet the challenge of a new environment and to maintain a foothold of life on a strange, new world.

In a vague way, without losing

his newly found identification with the past, Haywood began to see himself as a man of this new world. This was his home, no longer the earth from which his fathers had come. Haywood and his people were on the threshold of a new world, a new experience, a greatness still to be defined — if only they would break away from the traditions and the rituals that held them confined within the useless dome of Marstation.

It was then that Haywood realized how fortunate he was to be trained for teaching. He might, otherwise, have wasted a lifetime trying to persuade the chief scientist or the directors of the Temple to understand the insights which seemed so clear to him. The rituals of the Orthodox Scientists had imposed too many controls upon the thinking of adults. But children, still forming their ideas, might understand; as a teacher, Haywood could reach their young minds and give them the fresh, new world which the Orthodox Scientists were blindly rejecting.

From the witness chair at the hearing Dr. Storm gave an unfavorable opinion of Haywood as a student. "Brilliant, I suppose, but moody; not the sort of lad to join in the games and horseplay with the other kids. I always say, you can't trust people who think too much," he concluded.

"What of his work?" the chief scientist inquired.

"Unusually good," Storm admitted — to Haywood's surprise, since his grades had been poor. But Storm added, beaming again at the judges, "However, as I always say, excellent scholarship is not the best recommendation for a teacher. In the teaching profession we need outgoing folks who can understand and adjust; most important, they must be good disciplinarians."

"You had disciplinary trouble with Haywood?"

"I, sir, have never had trouble disciplining a pupil. However, as soon as Haywood's group began the actual practice of the ritual . . ."

Mrs. Mackdee gasped. There was a stir of muttered disbelief among the judges. The chief scientist asked, "At that time, Dr. Storm, did you report that Haywood had removed his helmet in violation of the ritual?"

"No, sir; I always had some doubt about Haywood's qualification as a teacher — and, of course, this hearing indicates how right I was — but —"

"Dr. Storm, why didn't you report Haywood directly to me?"

"I was trying to be too objective, I suppose, too scientific in my attitude. I disliked Haywood; I thought he was far too independent minded to make a good teacher. Consequently, I bent over backward to give him the benefit of every doubt."

"You still haven't answered my question, sir."

"The truth is, I—I didn't exactly see Haywood with the helmet off. I just had the impression that he had removed it."

"Then, in essence, Dr. Storm," the chief scientist summarized, "your actual evidence against Haywood

amounts to nothing. You noted no real violation of the ritual and—"

"But I formed opinions, sir. As I told you, I'm an excellent judge of people. I've never been wrong before."

"Your comments, Dr. Storm, have no doubt been instructive, but unfortunately lacking in objective data."

Mrs. Mackdee intervened. "Ask him! Ask this Haywood person if he had his helmet off outside of the station."

For some seconds the chief scientist studied Haywood's face in silence and Haywood wondered how he would reply to the direct question. The penalty for perjury was no less severe than the penalty for conviction of heresy, and if he told the truth there was a remote chance that someone in the hearing room might understand him. The idea of ultimate freedom for the people confined beneath the dome would then not be lost, whatever sentence was imposed upon Haywood.

However, he was not given the opportunity to reply to the question, for the chief scientist turned toward Mrs. Mackdee and asked:

"Do you believe he took his helmet off outside?"

"Of course not; he would have died at once."

"Then it's a foolish question to ask, don't you think?"

"But he's trying to persuade young people to do precisely that!"

"We must establish more positive proof, Mrs. Mackdee." The chief

scientist glanced impatiently at his watch. "I hope we can conclude this hearing before the graduation ceremonies this afternoon—for your owr son's group, by the way, Mrs. Mackdee. In order to save time, I suggest that we hear your son's testimony now."

"I object," Eunice Mackdee replied. "I intend to prove that other students have been taught these same insidious lies as well as my Ray."

"Your son's evidence will be quite sufficient."

"I want it understood that I have no personal feeling of vindictiveness toward this Haywood person."

"As you have told us, Mrs. Mackdee."

"I am simply doing my duty as a citizen and as an Orthodox Scientist."

"Of course—and as a concerned mother."

"I have nothing but objective love for this unfortunate and misguided teacher. I would be overjoyed if, as a result of this hearing, we might make him comprehend the deep error of—"

"Then, naturally, you have no objection if we hear your son's testimony now." The chief scientist made an impatient gesture, and the guard escorted Ray Mackdee into the hearing room.

The boy was small for his age, nervous and frightened. Like Ted Brand, he refused to look in Haywood's direction. Haywood was sure Ray would betray him, perhaps because he was frightened by the grim determination of his mother; or perhaps because, when he had to make a final choice, he was afraid to consider any truth which opposed the teaching of Orthodox Science.

It was a pity, Haywood thought, for Ray Mackdee was the smartest student—potentially the best future leader—whom Haywood had taught during his three years as a probationary teacher.

Learning groups in the Temple of Science were divided into three types: superior groups, designated as the Talented, which trained students in the most complex rituals of science; average groups, learning the technical skills; and the Basics, where students were capable of learning only the simplest, service rituals such as community maintenance, argriculture and teaching.

To assign the most inadequate teachers to the Talented students and the most capable to the Basics was one of the oldest traditions in Marstation brought by the first colonists from earth. This was the Doctrine of St. Conant, said to be the only truly democratic form of education. "The Talented can learn despite the teacher," or so Orthodox Scientists declared, quoting a popular aphorism attributed to St. Conant, "but Basic groups require the skills of the most capable and the most experienced teachers."

Largely because of Dr. Storm's lukewarm recommendation, Bruce Haywood had been assigned to teach the Talented. During the three years of his probationary teaching he had subtly directed them to areas of research calculated to plant in their minds considerable doubt of the in-

fallibility of Orthodox Science. Haywood was sure that, if Mrs. Mackdee were permitted to call other students to add their testimony to her son's, she could more than prove her charges, even though, in an exact, legal sense, she would be wrong; for Haywood had done nothing in the classroom that was not properly related to the course of study.

In the beginning Ray Mackdee made a poor, perhaps a foolish witness. He stammered and he seemed unsure of himself. Repeatedly his mother interrupted him to put words in his mouth. In a dead monotone, without emotion, he obediently recited what she told him to say.

"Did Mr. Haywood ever advise you to go outside Marstation without your sacred helmet?" the chief scientist asked Ray.

"Not in so many words, but—"

"Of course he did!" Eunice Mackdee snapped.

"Please, Mrs. Mackdee, let your son tell it in his own way."

"I am only doing my duty!"

"You have already made that quite clear, Mrs. Mackdee. Now, son, explain what your teacher did tell you about the outside."

"First, he assigned us to read old books in the library."

Mrs. Mackdee interjected, "Not the sacred texts of Orthodox Science; remember that."

"Our teachers and students have always been free to use any available reading material in their research," the chief scientist reminded her.

"Something shall have to be done about that," she declared. "To put such questionable material into the hands of young people—"

"But there is no restrictive regulation at the present time," he reminded her. "We can hardly ask our judges to convict Mr. Haywood of breaking a rule which doesn't yet exist."

"All this legal quibbling—it's simply an evasion of the truth. This Haywood person has systematically betrayed our children and you cannot argue that fact away."

"That is not my intention. I merely hope to get at some sort of objective fact we can use. Please continue, son. After you completed your reading, what happened?"

"In my learning group we discussed the research."

"Was Mr. Haywood present?"

"Yes, but he never said much. He just let us talk."

Mrs. Mackdee broke in again. "And, as I got the story from Ray, these kids brought up all sorts of issues—questioning the most fundamental truths of Orthodox Science. I have kept as evidence one of Ray's papers in which he tried to prove there is no curtain of atomic energy radiating from the beams in the dome above Marstation. The teacher not only accepted that balderdash, but he gave Ray a good grade for it."

"We encourage freedom of expression, Mrs. Mackdee."

"Only when it is based upon the facts of Orthodox Science."

"We still have no evidence—"

"Let Ray tell you the rest of it!" she interrupted.

"Mr. Haywood used to talk over our papers with us after he graded them. He kept telling us never to believe in something simply because we wanted it to be true. He said every scientific truth had to be tested constantly by repeated experiment."

"There's nothing wrong with that, son."

"Several times he used the dome over Marstation as an example. He said, if we could prove there was no curtain of energy between the beams, then—then the air outside the station would be no different from that inside. And if that were true, we could live anywhere on the planet, free of the dome and without sacred helmets."

"Do you understand now," Mrs. Mackdee demanded, "what this Haywood person has been teaching?"

The chief scientist turned sadly toward Haywood. "Is this true?" he asked.

"In the classroom, I taught only the material approved by the directors of the Temple of Science," Haywood replied.

"Then you deny—"

"Oh, that's quite correct," Ray Mackdee volunteered. "Mr. Haywood never talked about the dome or the outside unless we went to visit him after class."

"At his home, Ray?"

"Yes."

"Did Mr. Haywood invite you for these discussions?"

"No. He's just a real, nice guy, and he'd take the time to chat with us."

"So these discussions took place away from the learning center and not as part of any required assignment. Is this how it happened, Mr. Haywood?"

"As a teacher," Haywood said, "I'm responsible to you and to the directors of the Temple for only what I do as part of my formal classroom work."

"There!" Mrs. Mackdee pointed out triumphantly. "He's as much as admitting the whole thing."

"Nonetheless, Mrs. Mackdee, what Mr. Haywood does outside the temple is his own business."

"Do you mean to tell me he is privileged to teach children to doubt the Orthodox rituals?"

"He hasn't broken any law."

"You're splitting hairs! I intend to see to it—"

"This is an area where we'll need tighter regulations in the future, I suppose. The hearing, Mrs. Mackdee, has shown us several weaknesses in the structure of Temple authority. The directors will, I feel sure, make some revisions in the basic law as a result of our findings."

"I want this Haywood person punished!"

"I realize he has been too friendly with his students and thereby too effective, perhaps, as a teacher—too much of an inspiration to young people; even so, what can we do?"

"Remove him from the classroom, at least."

"Naturally. He'll have to submit to retraining for another ritual."

"And prohibit him further use of the temple library."

"Absolutely. Mr. Haywood has misused the tools of research to arrive at conclusions incompatible with the convictions of Orthodox Science."

Bruce Haywood sat paralyzed by frustration and anger while they settled his future. This defeat seemed so futile; so sit in silence while this fanatic woman destroyed him—because he had practiced an ideal of science which the Orthodox Scientists recited as the keystone of their doctrine. Test truth by experiment—how the scientists could reel off those words to ornament any occasion! Words. Words empty of meaning, the incantations of savages.

Haywood's punishment left him numb. Retraining for another ritual? What else could he do? What else did he want to learn? He was a teacher because his fathers before him had been teachers. He had never for a moment considered any other career. And now Eunice Mackdee, this fat, vindictive woman, had taken it from him. A sentence of death would have been kinder.

"Too friendly, too effective as a teacher," the chief scientist had said, denying the very skills most ardently sought among those selected for training in the teaching ritual. Routed by the aggressive determination of one fanatic, the chief scientist laid bare the spineless, vascilating nature of the Temple administration.

IV

Haywood's hearing ended ten minutes before the graduation exercises were held in the public arena which adjoined the airlock exit from the dome. Though his teaching career was over, Bruce Haywood attended the service, as he had for every graduation since his boyhood. The solemn dedication to youth to service, truth and justice had always symbolized a great deal to him. It was hard for Haywood to make himself believe that this was his last graduation; he would never be admitted to the Temple again. He had fought, no doubt very badly, against ignorance, and ignorance had won handily, without much of a struggle.

Before the chief scientist introduced the graduates, among them Ray Mackdee, he gave his usual oration, a sentimental blend of pretty phrases about democracy, man's right to the free expression of ideas, and the dedication of science to truth. The blatant hypocrisy made Haywood almost physically sick, but then he realized that the hypocrisy had always been there, in every graduation address. He recognized it, now, only because of his bitterness over the result of his hearing.

Who, then, was at fault? Not the chief scientist, for he had always been a consistent, plodding uninspired compromiser. Not Mrs. Mackdee, the honest fanatic of Orthodox Science.

I'm responsible — the thought took Haywood by surprise. We're all to blame. We have made of Marstation exactly the restricted prison we're willing to live in. Maybe this isn't what each of us wants, but we're willing to endure it because

we haven't the courage to fight for something better.

If Haywood had the courage of his convictions, it was time he took some definite action that would demonstrate his convictions as effectively as Mrs. Mackdee dramatized hers. But what could he do? Leap to the speaker's platform, perhaps, seize the microphone from the chief scientist, and explain away the imaginary curtain of atoms.

Not words; words were the weapons of the fanatics. Test truth by experiment! He could demonstrate, obviously and clearly, that the dome was open to the atmosphere of the red planet.

Haywood left his seat and walked toward the platform, which was built close to the base of the dome. The aluminum girders curved upward only inches above the speaker's head. In full view of that audience, Haywood intended to climb a beam and swing himself in and out of the dome.

He reached the platform. The chief scientist shot an angry, annoyed glance at Haywood, but went on with his oration.

Haywood raised his hands toward a beam. He pulled himself through the opening and sat on the outer surface of the beam, dangling his feet into the station. He had expected a reaction, perhaps screams of panic from the audience, but there was nothing. He lowered himself to the platform and grabbed a chair, hauling it through the dome with him. He banged it on the beam to attract attention, but still there was no response from the audience.

Exasperated, he leaped to the platform, seized the microphone from the chief scientist, and screamed into it.

"Don't you see what I'm doing? There is no atomic curtain! There is no dome! You're free to go where—"

There was brief, angry pandemonium in the audience. Guards seized Haywood and dragged him away.

"Confinement, sir?"

"No, final disposal, I think," the chief scientist said.

Instead of being frightened by the sentence of death, Haywood was relieved. It was more considerate than the decision at the hearing to remove him forever from teaching. With nothing further to lose, he broke away from the guards and tried to reach the microphone again. He had a fleeting impression of the chief scientist's face close to his, twisted in an agony of compassion. Then Haywood felt the stab of a needle. Sharp pain, dizzy nausea; nothing.

Disposal.

So this was death.

But slowly the black mist lifted. Slowly he became aware of sensation. First the customary chill of night cold! then the hard ground beneath his back. He opened his eyes.

He stood up slowly, trembling for a moment in the blast of sub-zero wind. Then the loose folds of his skin hardened into the familiar, thick ridges—his people, for some reason, called these goosebumps—which automatically sealed in his body warmth and made him quite

comfortable in the icy night air of the red planet.

On the horizon he saw the dome of Marstation and nearby the useless towers of the space port, sharply silhouetted against the light reflected into the night sky. Near where he had been lain on the earth to die—the usual sentence of disposal passed by the judges of Marstation—Haywood found a knapsack of dried food and a canteen of water. An unsigned note was tucked beneath the knapsack.

"People believe what they will," he read. "Sometimes a belief happens to correspond roughly to the truth; more often it doesn't. You proved that to yourself this afternoon. No one in that audience saw you outside the dome, because they knew as an absolute law of science that no man could survive the passage through the curtain of atomic energy.

"We may be the first people anywhere to have developed our particular distortion of reality in terms of objective science, though I doubt it. While you were under sedation this afternoon we picked your brain clean. The thinking that led you to accept reality has been recorded and filed in the Temple library. It is there, now, for anyone to find it who will read it and understand it—tomorrow, or a century from now. That is all we can do. If we attempt to destroy the science of Marstation, we run the risk of destroying the colony with it. Man has a need for a ritual and a purpose, you said that yourself. And it is important to us to save this colony. Nine hundred of us in a single settlement which once housed twenty thousand—and, for all we know, we may be the only survivors of mankind anywhere in the universe.

"It is my understanding that the others who have gone before you have built a city beyond the mountains. This is a new world for man, a new beginning. Perhaps this time we can keep it a good world, if first we must burn away our neurotic pretentions under the dome of Marstation before we can accept the fact of an outside world. Good luck, Mr. Haywood. Take your place in your world with pride; you've earned it."

Carefully Haywood folded the letter and slipped it into his pocket. Shouldering the knapsack and the canteen, he turned toward the range of mountains. On long, wiry legs he moved in a loping stride across the desert, maintaining an easy, eight-foot pace in order to conserve his strength. With the enormous globe of his chest and, in contrast, the tiny sphere of his hairy head bobbing gracelessly above his legs, Haywood seemed a grotesque distortion of man.

Yet, he had adapted. He felt entirely at home, for this red planet was his world to which he brought a satisfying identification with all the history of man—somehow, with only the best that had been man, for the worst had been lost passing through a way station on Mars. END

STRONG CURRENT

by DAVID GOODALE

What was the message the deserted cities held? And — did it matter?

The rockets were already running when Scout Ship 1014 appeared suddenly off the planet Toran, and instantly they flashed far out to send the ship into what would be a screaming dive almost straight down. Behind, dwindling swiftly, a cloud of exterior fittings that had been wrenched loose by the acceleration glowed when the exhaust brushed them. The ship shifted slightly to head for what the pilot thought to be a continent, but as he had no knowledge of the planet's flora it could as well have been an ocean.

Inside the ship the pilot muttered, crouched over his control panel. He was a thin, grainy-complexioned redhaired man named Skinner — and he was scared. He had had years of training in one of the galaxy's best space schools, but now he relied far more on his years as an aircraft pilot than on anything he had learned in class. When the ship hit high altitude bumps he corrected automatically, slewing the little ship around so that the rockets carved great arcs across the sky.

A short, dark crew member named Bannan hurtled into the control room, his thick body easily handling the heavy acceleration but his balance at a loss with the ship's lurches. A quick swerve sent him

careening into a bulkhead where by bracing his feet he managed to stay. He opened a thick manual he was carrying.

"Skinner, listen. I tell you you'll get us all in a terrible fix. Listen to this: 'Among the most stringent of Space Service regulations are those governing landing procedure. In general, the shift from hyperspace to normal space and the approach to a planet are made only after the most thorough consideration of all possibilities. Damage to the ship or hyperspace apparatus will be punished . . .'"

"Don't worry about the hyperspace apparatus," Skinner broke in. "We lost that long ago."

"Then you've stranded us here!" shouted Bannan. "If you don't pile us ten miles into the planet with your crazy landing we'll never get off it, and if we do we'll be in the brig for breaking all the rules!"

"To hell with the rules," snarled Skinner. "I was once in a ship with a leaky reactor and the pilot did just what I'm doing. We got out just in time. When this crate gives up the ghost it'll take everything with it for miles around. No Space Force detective will have any way of finding out what we're doing now, or whether anyone broke any rules. Now do something useful. Look up Toran in that manual. I think it's inhabited. Is it?"

"Yes," said Bannan after a pause.

"Are they friendly?"

"Yes. Intelligent and friendly."

"Good what color are the land masses?"

"Green."

"Good. That's where we're going," said Skinner.

The third member of the crew, a slender Japanese named Doi, struggled into the room, dragging a mass of wires, detached instruments, and other miscellaneous equipment. He compensated easily for swerves, but the acceleration seemed to tell on him.

"I couldn't find anything wrong," he said. "But something's way out of whack. The random count in the lower reactor has picked way up. I'm going to get a scientillator and see . . ."

"No, don't," Skinner said. "When we really start bouncing you might get electrocuted. Look, Bannan, you and Doi just run around and grab up things to take with us when we land. Open the airlock most of the way, and cut loose its safety locks and chain."

The ship bumped violently and the lights went out. Skinner stayed in his seat, working by touch and a faint flow from his viewscreen. The other two collected whatever equipment they could think of. They knew the little ship so well they were almost as unhampered by the dark as the pilot, though Bannan had lost his book.

As the ship entered the heavier atmosphere it turned over and the rockets flared for all their brilliant length downward. With an ear-splitting screech they descended precipitously toward a land feature that struck Skinner as significant for almost any kind of creature — a great river delta that opened from a stubby isthmus between two continents.

The city was a strange one, halfway between sea and land, with curious convolutions of stone for buildings and water running down many of the streets. The three men used their antigravity raft to give it a long look, from several hundred feet up and an equal distance from the city's edge. They regarded it somberly; it was their only means of getting passage from Toran and, unless they found food, their only means of staying alive. Only a minute after they had left the ship, half sunken with water bubbling around it from the intense skin heat, it had blown up and dug a great crater, throwing rocks and mud for miles.

They had come thirty or forty miles from the landing site, across the flat sand of the river delta on which the city was located. They had been quiet during that trip. Their nerves calmed from the frantic scampering of their close escape, and the immense, empty vistas of sky and sand helped prepare them to realize the drama of their approach to the city. Indeed, as they floated high above the walls of the alien city Doi glanced uncertainly at his two colleagues, and observing their set expressions essayed something profound and significant himself. He was new at this business and not so sure as the older men of the appropriate feelings for different situations.

Skinner spoke, his voice sounding with sturdy practicality instead of the high note audible during the last few minutes on the ship. "You figure to ground it here?" He indicated the sand flats below them.

"No," said Bannan, pondering. "We want to take no chances. I think we'd better fly over the city first, and see if we can scare up anyone or anything before we get off the raft."

"The city isn't far from where the ship landed," remarked Doi. "If we hit so near it just by accident, there must be lots of cities on this coast."

"I saw the city on the viewscreen and aimed for it," said Skinner. "It's the only one I saw, so it's probably the only one for at least a few hundred miles."

At these words there was a sharp hiss and the raft sank slowly. Bannan, who was driving it, fiddled and cursed at the controls. Skinner asked, "What's [illegible]?"

"No jets. The system is sealed, too — it could take hours just to see what's wrong. Doi, when we land you better get out and push."

Doi gave him a strange look. "Push?"

"Right. The bouyancy controls will be hard to handle," said Skinner.

"I know." They would be, for there was only one bouyancy control, a single knob that could change the bouyancy of the raft by thousands of pounds. Usually the control was only roughly set, and any necessary corrections were affected with the raft's jets.

Bannan would have one advantage when he delicately tried to set the knob for the proper bouyancy: when no hand touched the controls the raft would set itself to sink

automatically at the rate of a foot per second. If he could observe the setting the control knob took when it performed this automatic function and then displace it by a millimeter or so he could achieve a mild bouyancy. He tried several times and didn't succeed.

"Catch it, you fool!" Bannan shouted to Doi when he poked at the knob and the raft leaped up for the fourth time. Doi threw himself forward, caught the raft, and swung on it to bring it down.

"Run along and get us going, then swing up," ordered Bannan. Doi pushed at the raft until he was sprinting along beneath, then heaved himself up. The raft sank and his feet dragged and bounced on the ground. Bannan gave a tiny poke to the knob to compensate and the raft soared again, so quickly that it wrenched free of Doi's grip. He fell and would have rolled except that he struck a patch of thin mud.

The mud on his face made Doi's expression unreadable when he trudged up to the raft, but nevertheless Bannan grunted in an abashed fashion. "Hmmph. Missed it that time. Let's try it again, Doi."

"Why don't you take the raft up, let it descend to him so that he can push it when it gets in range, and then he can hop on before it hits the ground and you can take the raft up," said Skinner.

"Yes, yes," Bannan growled. "Of course."

With an abrupt twitch and a quick releasing of the knob he took the raft twelve feet up. Doi waited until it came into reach and then pushed. It accelerated slowly; Doi was tired, was trying to run in wet sand, and was pushing a heavy load.

"Hurry up," Skinner said. Doi muttered something unintelligible. The raft sank lower.

"Get on, quick." Doi leaped and landed on the raft, now only a foot or so off the ground. He slightly unbalanced it before its automatic system could compensate for his extra weight, and the tilting caused Bannan to miss his dab at the control knob. Before he could try again the raft scrunched heavily into the sand and he went flying off the front end. Doi crashed into Skinner.

By now the three men were beginning to look somewhat alike. Skinner's contact with Doi had given him large soiled patches on his uniform, much to his annoyance, while Bannan was drenched and furious. Doi's expression was still unreadable.

"All right," said Bannan. "We're finally going to do this the right way."

"We're almost in the city," objected Skinner, pointing at the silent walls fifty feet away.

"It would still be best to fly over the city first. I'm pretty sure it says so in the Manual. Skinner, you drive the raft. I'll push while the raft descends. However, this time when it gets too low I'll move back and let you take it up. We'll do it as many times as necessary to get the raft moving fast and get me on with plenty of time to spare. I'll push the raft so that we go down

that long straight street there." He pointed at a street that began on the edge of the city and apparently continued far into it.

Skinner stared at him for a moment, skeptical but willing to let Bannan exert himself. He said, "All right, you try."

Bannan pushed until he was trotting, then slowed to let Skinner jerk the raft up, trotting beneath it as it descended. When it came within reach he resumed his pushing.

By this time they had entered and were travelling down the street Bannan had aimed for. Stone walls of alien buildings echoed the sound of his footsteps. Suddenly the sharp smacking of his boots changed to splashing as a ramp dipped away to a water filled street.

With a hoarse shout he pulled at the raft, slowing it, but as the water became deeper he was dragged forward until he was plowing along with water sluicing over his excited face. Doi leaped to help him. Just before the raft touched the water, however, Skinner dabbed at the control knob, causing the raft to leap upwards and throwing both Doi and Bannan into the water. When they emerged, treading to keep their heads above, Bannan shouted: "You crazy damned fool! What did you do that for?"

Skinner was moving quickly about the raft. He picked up two plastic packages and threw them towards the two men. Then he replied, "I just remembered that the raft will sink through water. It sinks until the plungers on the bottom are depressed." Skinner was drifting away quickly; his voice was growing fainter.

"What do we do now?"

"Reconnoitre."

"What!!?"

"I'll use the velocity I have now to traverse the city. You investigate these buildings. I'll figure out some way to manage the raft and come back." He was a long way away now, his voice fading to inaudibility.

They watched silently. Somehow the sense of drama had gone, disappeared as quietly as Skinner was now disappearing. When he approached the water again he jerked the raft up and over a small building at the end of the street. He lowered something, apparently trying to grapple the buildings, and then sank out of sight on the other side.

The smooth building walls afforded no immediate way out of the water. Silently the two men gathered the packs and splashed back along the street until they could stand with their heads and chests out of the water. Doi noticed a feature he had seen before but not understood; along the walls of the buildings were straight shafts of metal that projected about four feet out and parallel to the ground.

"What do you make of those?" he asked. Bannan stopped and looked at them closely.

"Beats me. They look like roosts for some kind of huge birds, near as I can tell."

"Do you think the planet is inhabited by birds?"

"Maybe it used to be. We haven't seen anything living, remember. They may have all died or moved away."

"How come there's water in the streets?"

Bannan was getting irritated. "Maybe the town flooded, maybe that's why they moved away. How should I know?"

"A town like this would flood pretty easily, being on a delta, wouldn't it? Why would birds build a town on a river delta?"

"Maybe they're fishers, dammit!" Bannan's face turned red.

"Here, where the street gives way to the water, it slopes down evenly and quickly," said Doi with a trace of malice in his voice. "It looks like a ramp to me, as if the water were intended to be there."

"Well damn, you're full of spunk today! All right, maybe they built their town so it would have water in it. Maybe they wanted fish to come right up into it from the ocean. The birds could perch up there, and when they saw something . . ." He broke off. The city seemed suddenly very quiet. They glanced around quickly but saw nothing except the strange buildings and enigmatic metal shafts. Bannan spoke:

"Well, anyway, it seems to me the thing to do is to climb up on those perches and see if we can get to the top of a building. If these buildings really are monster aviaries there will be some way to get into them from the top." He went to the side of a building, under a metal shaft that was four feet above his head. "Come on, give me a hand up."

Doi joined him and leaned with his hands against the building. Bannan clumsily climbed onto his back, then put his knees on the slender Asian's shoulders. By stretching upward he could just reach the bar. "Hah," he said. "I can get it."

His wet hands clamped firmly onto the metal. There was a blue flash, and his tone became more heated.

"Yahhh-hoooo!" Doi, through whom the current passed on its way to the water, lunged to one side, leaving Bannan swinging and cursing freely. His foot splashed into the water and caused a fresh screech. He pulled it up.

"Don't touch the water," said Doi. "There's a potential difference between it and the bar. Why didn't you let go?"

"My hands cramped and I couldn't get them loose. They're relaxing now." He dropped into the water. "They say that's bad for the heart, electric current."

Doi began unpacking a line kit from his survival pack.

The main bulk of the line kit was in the two winches attached to either end of the line. The line itself was an invisibly thin monomolecular strand that would support a horrendous weight and also would cut through the hand of anyone who tried to forcibly hold onto it. The winch had a spool, a fixed handle, and an outsize crank handle that could be geared to reel quickly, slowly or could be locked.

Under the affronted gaze of Bannan, who stood gingerly flexing his hands, Doi locked one winch and

used it as a weight to throw the line over the perch nearest the top of the building. He retrieved the thrown winch and passed it around the original line to form a knot, which, with a jerk, quickly travelled up the gossamer thin line and clamped around the perch. Then, with one hand on the fixed handle of the first winch and cranking slowly with the other, he walked up the side of the building. Bannan took the other winch and in a minute both men were standing surveying the roof.

The roof was covered with instruments. There were things that looked like thermometers, wind vanes, pressure devices, cameras, radar, and other devices that were completely inexplicable. The most puzzling were several large, smoothly curved metal affairs, shaped something like miniature ampitheatres or curved divans, that hummed quietly. Doi touched one lightly with two fingers and a reminiscent tingle passed through the fingertips.

"There's a potential gradient on this surface. Heaven knows what the thing does."

They cast for a way to enter the building and eventually found one — an opening and a series of metal bars that led down into a dank darkness. Bannan shied back. "No sir, they're not going to catch me with any of their electrified traps."

"It's a pretty poor trap," Doi said. He swung out on the first bar, then lowered himself until he was standing on the next with his rubber-shod feet. He continued in this way until he was out of sight. His voice echoed up. "Come on." Bannan attempted the same procedure but missed the second bar and awkwardly grabbed the pole from which the bars jutted, so that he banged against three of them at the same time. After a couple of nasty seconds he realized that nothing would happen to him.

"My, Bannan, you're clumsy. Why aren't you dead?"

"There's no current in these bars," Bannan said seriously as he climbed the rest of the way down and joined Doi, who had broken out a small light. They looked around. There was an array of equipment like that on the roof, but it was more massive and was not data-collecting equipment. One square device with many wheels and threads of fine wire could have been a recorder of the data taken above. Cables led from squat machines to the ceiling and probably through it to the instruments above.

There was nothing that gave them any useful information, and they moved down. The floor below was identical except for details, but the ground floor yielded much of interest. One corner of the room was filled with desklike objects, littered with rolls of wire and other odd junk. On one of the desks was a record player and record.

"Fishy business," muttered Bannan as he poked at the set.

"You know, it does smell fishy, like a seafood stand, in here. I was trying to place it. What's the record?"

Bannan picked it up. "One side has *Violation Baby* and *Booby Baby* by Slack-Lipped Harry's Grim Five, and the other has *Dead Baby* by the Cretins."

"Look at how the record player is arranged," said Doi. "The output can be switched from that speaker to this wire recorder and also to these exposed leads. I wonder what they do with it?"

"It must be sort of joke to them."

"Sort of a joke to anyone."

In another corner of the room was a machine from which projected a bar exactly like those on the wall outside. Checking with a thin wire established that it carried no charge. A hole in one side suggested a vending machine.

"Let's try to find some money," said Doi. "I want to see what this machine does." A short search of the desks yielded a cache of metal balls that could have been ball bearings, but were covered with complicated incisions. They tried a ball in the machine and it hummed. A thin wire draped across the bar so that it dangled to the floor quickly melted.

"What a screwy blasted setup," said Bannan.

"No, it isn't screwy. I think I just about have it figured out."

He looked mildly on as Bannan quickly became red in the face. Just before the inevitable explosion, he said, "But if I'm right we'd better get out of here. It was beginning to get dark when we entered the building. It ought to be full night soon."

Bannan looked at him wordlessly, then turned to climb the series of rungs. Doi said, "No. This way."

He led the way through a low door that opened into a small room where the floor was under water. He seemed satisfied.

"See? Water."

"Praise be. Are you going to take a bath?"

"I think this wall is the other side of the street wall we climbed up." He jumped into the water, felt along the wall. "Ah. Here:" He ducked under water and disappeared completely. In another couple of seconds he was back. "There's an opening. It leads out into the street. Come on."

Soon the two men emerged into the street and trudged back to high ground. Darkness was falling fast.

"Now there remain only two things," Doi said. "Skinner, with the translating machine, and the aliens."

"You're pretty damn smug!" exploded Bannan, but he couldn't hide from his voice a trace of apprehension that Doi had the answer. "What are the aliens?"

"They live in the sea, in the bottom probably, because they can't see. They communicate by electricity. They probably evolved from creatures like earth's electric eels."

"What about the perches? How can they climb around on those?"

"They're not like ordinary fish. Remember, even on earth there are things like octopus or . . ."

A splash sounded from the water-filled street. In the last dim light they could vaguely see a wave de-

velop as something large gathered velocity just under the surface, and suddenly a huge white shape hurtled from the water and wrapped its twenty foot tentacles around the first two or three metal perches, proceeding from there with a ponderous grace to the top of the building, where it disappeared. It seemed to consist of a long semi-flexible body, bluntly curved at one end and at the other end split into a number of monstrous tentacles.

Doi finished his sentence hesitantly, " . . or like squid."

"I'm glad you figured it out when you did," Skinner said. "I'm not sure I would have tumbled to it for a while." They sat together in one of the largest Toran laboratories, out of the way of the Toranites, who were working on some elaborate piece of equipment. A dim light illumined the misty, cold room. Toranites worked with precision and effortless strength on great accumulations of equipment, hanging from roof or wall perches to get at machines dozens of feet in the air, though sometimes they seemed balked at the more minute mechanical details. Skinner went on.

"I got so I could move the raft around all right. I attached a long rod to the gravity knob for a more delicate control, and I found that by grappling on roofs I could pull the raft where I wanted it. But then I followed those big squids — Toranites — and set the translator microphone to deciphering their twitterings, jibbers, and squeaks, which I guess are just sort of sounding apparatus. Lord knows how long it would have been before I just took the microphone off its leads and pushed the leads right up against the beast's skin."

Bannan seemed about to say something cynical but he restrained himself. "How did you figure it out" Skinner asked Doi. Doi explained.

'I thought they must be sea creatures because of the water in the streets. I couldn't see how they could be birds, as Bannan suggested, or land animals with rowboats. For one thing, if they came from the land and used boats in the streets, as in Venice, there would have been ways to get to the city from the outside — roads, perhaps. But the only way is the sea.

"And if they came from the sea that would also explain why there was only this one city above the ocean's surface. It's one of a kind — most of their activities are carried out in the sea. I tried to imagine what use they would have for a land city, and I decided that one would be scientific research. Sure enough, the first building we entered was jam full of scientific apparatus. I imagine most of it is either equipment that won't work under water or specifically investigates climate and other above-sea conditions.

"There was something else that struck me, and that was the lack of anything that indicated that they could see. There was no meters, calendars, papers, any evidence they had any kind of visual writing. The

incisions in the steel balls were hard to see, because there was no ink in the incisions. What was more, all the equipment was functioning, but there was no one around — maybe they came at night; maybe in fact the light bothered them," he paused.

"If they couldn't see, how could they handle a technology such as the one we're looking at? The immediate answer would be sound and touch, and they obviously have both of those. Touch is essential, and the ability to hear is indicated by the speaker hitched up to that phonograph.

"But it seemed a little thin for them to have such a technology based only on touch and some tremendously complicated languages. Then I remembered three things — exposed leads attached to the phonograph; the absence of any other speakers throughout the building we investigated, although it had many wire recorders; and those large instruments on top of the building and in it, shaped something like large divans. It struck me that those things would be ideal for holding some large body in front of selected banks of instruments, though it would expose that body to changing potentials. Why? And also, why the exposed leads? Obviously, the creatures somehow could feel changes in electricity with high sensitivity. Maybe they were like electric eels, and could to some extent produce it themselves, and perhaps it was less effort for them to buy it, as from the vending machine.

"I wasn't absolutely sure of all this, of course, but it seemed a fairly complete picture and one worth trying."

"Very good," squawked the translator box. They looked around and saw that its microphone leads ran to a motionless Toranite twenty feet away. "I've been listening, and I applaud your insight. You are substantially right on all the important points. Actually, we do have eyes, but compared to yours they have low resolution and high sensitivity, being evolved to detect luminous creatures in the depths of the sea. You notice the faint glow by which we are working. You may have thought that was arranged for you but actually we always use light of about that intensity.

"But that is a niggling point and I must congratulate you on an astute realization of the situation. I can hardly imagine a stranger set of circumstances for creatures such as yourselves.

"And now, our arrangements for you. You will be pleased to learn that we have finished our temporary interstellar radio and have sent a distress signal to Agan Redan, where there is a scout base. You can expect that in about seven of your hours, or at midday tomorrow, you will be rescued."

The scouts relaxed. After a short silence Doi spoke.

"There is something that has been bothering me. The translator has been giving us English in an irregular, jerky rhythm. Is your language delivered in short bursts?"

"No. It can be delivered at almost any rate we choose. I've been listening to the translator pronounce English and I've attempted to feed it Toran in such a way that it produces English of the sort I'm accustomed to. We have a recording of some spoken English here, in fact you stumbled onto it — a disk with grooves, a priceless relic of the first discovery of this planet by the Galactic Federation. I have spent hours listening curiously to that thing, reflecting on its deeper mysteries. I had thought I could manipulate your translator somehow so that it would give the speech rhythm used by the humans recorded on the disk, but your translator is an obstinate sort of device. It has a mind of its own.

"We have only the rest of tonight to exchange information, however, and you gentlemen must be tired. So allow me to put to you several small questions about the Federation, about which I am very curious. Unless, of course, any of you have any more questions?"

"I have one," said Doi. "Is electric current expensive here?"

"Yes. In fact, our prices are outrageous for our technology, though they will soon go down when we start our reactors. Until now it has been very difficult to manufacture."

"Was the vending machine I saw a vendor of raw electricity?"

"Yes. It is for those who feel depleted and don't wish to spend a day in seclusion restoring charge," the Toran answered.

"Then why are the metal bars leading up the sides of buildings carriers of a strong current? It looks to me as if anyone can tap it who wants."

"Anyone can. Those bars are the symptoms of a free economy, democratic and with an emphasis of free enterprise. There are those who object to them, insisting they are annoying, insulting, and cynically commercial, but most, like me, regard them as healthy symptoms of our competitive economy. This is a public building and there is such a bar just behind me. I'll attach the translator leads to it and you can see for yourselves, although I don't imagine the translator will be able to handle many of our idioms."

There was silence and abruptly the translator squawked again. Bannan turned bright red; it seemed to him a crowning insult that the current that had flowed through him should have been a voice, which, in spite of the deadpan squawk of the translator, had that queasy, ingratiating, glad-handed tone that in long years on crowded earth he had come to know so well:

"Friends! Have your tentacles been feeling stiff lately? Has your brrrp-sack lost its resilience? For pure, pullulating sliminess, for unequalled brrrp, no ungeunt can beat BRRRP, the brrrps your brrrp with no brrrp . . ." END

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

THE ALTAR AT ASCONEL

by JOHN BRUNNER

Illustrated by MORROW

The fair world of Asconel had been ravaged by a man, a woman — and Someone who was neither!

Horrorstruck visions raced through Spartak's mind in three successive and distinct stages.

First, there was the appallingly vivid picture of them all condemned to serve the whim of this mentally unstable girl, slaves bound with unseen chains, compelled to take her on a colossal joyride around the wheel of stars which was the galaxy.

Second, there came a flood of memories of Asconel: its seas, its mountains, its forests and open plains, every recollection painful with yearning. He had resigned himself long ago to a life of exile, but

What Has Gone Before

Asconel has been taken over by someone—or something!—that threatens to destroy a hard-working people and a good way of life. The three brothers of its former ruler, Hodat, who has been slain by the usurpers, are Asconel's only hope. Spartak has given up the life of action for the contemplative existence of a monklike scholar. That idyll is destroyed when Vix descends on his peaceful existence with the tale of the rape of their home world. The two half-brothers start for Asconel in Vix's spaceship, but on the way stop at Delcadore where the third brother of the murdered ruler, Tiorin, may be found.

They find their brother, but at a cost. For while they are waiting, a high official of Delcadore commandeers them and their ship for a frightful errand. They are ordered to take a mutant girl, Eunora, to the edge of the galaxy—and abandon her.

They are able to overcome the hypnotic compulsion that would make them carry out these orders—but only through the help of the girl. And then she too takes over their minds. They are her slaves, helpless as children before her mutant brain.

since Vix came to find him he had conceived an ache to go home that now permeated every fiber of his being. The agony of deprivation was almost physical, like hunger—more nearly like sex.

And third, as he began to bring his whirling thoughts under control, followed the shadow of a question. Could even Eunora, who had certainly released them from the Imperial conditioning, reverse the process with her supernatural talent, imposing fresh commands in place of those she had wiped out? *Could* she?

No one said anything. He and his half-brothers simply stared at Eunora, as though her tiny face and body held an infinite fascination for them. Bit by bit, the waiting grew to be a strain on her, and the expression of mocking triumph she wore gave place to a look of uncertainty.

At last she burst out, "Do as I tell you! Do as I tell you!" But the words were tinged with hysteria.

Behind her shoulder, Spartak saw Vineta move. She came forward into the middle of the control room floor, and spoke unexpectedly in a level voice.

"I want to go to Asconel. Because that's where Vix wants to go."

"Shut up!" Eunora rounded on her, the skin around her eyes crinkling up as though she were about to cry.

Murmurs of astonishment came from Vix and Tiorin. Spartak was not less surprised than they at Vineta's intervention, but he was perhaps better equipped to see how

it was possible than they were. He forced his thinking along the most promising line, remembering that Eunora was exposed to all of them at once.

Deliberately he fanned the coals of his resentment into flame, visualizing her as she had been when she was brought to the ship — corpse-stiff, kept alive only by machines, suffering unspeakable cramps and soreness.

Is this how you repay our help? he whispered wordlessly inside his head. And beyond that, more subtly: *Is this the life you want, for years, forever perhaps—the loneliness of power, without love, without friendship and trust?*

"Stop it!" she whimpered, and dashed at him to beat with her little absurd fists on his chest. He folded his arms and stared sternly down at her.

Once you begin it, you can never stop. And behind the thought, carefully constructed pictures of faceless people, by hundreds and then by thousands, plotting to escape from her control and drive her down to final darkness.

"Stop it!" she shrieked again.

He complied, and thought instead of Asconel, a fair world, hospitable and kindly, with himself and Vix and Tiorin and Eunora too enjoying its sunshine, its wine, its fields and cities.

Helpless, the girl bent over and covered her face with her hands. The threatened onslaught of tears overcame her. Impulsively, Vineta put her arm around her shoulders, and she turned and buried her sobs in the long dark hair.

"What — what happened?" Vix whispered, moving as though waking from nightmare.

"I wouldn't be surprised if Vineta could tell you," Spartak answered slowly. "You've been underestimating this girl of yours, Vix! She thinks very clearly indeed."

Vineta, comforting the weeping Eunora, shook her head. "I only know what store Vix sets by going to Asconel. And I couldn't bear to think of him — and all of you — being turned into toys for *her*."

"And there you have it." Spartak grunted. "Eunora found it easy to release the conditioning the Imperial psychologists imposed on us. But to implant new commands of her own against the terrible need we all have to go home and set our people free — that's not something one untrained child can achieve!"

"But —" Vix started to object.

"But never mind how it was done," Tiorin snapped, wiping sweat from his furrowed brow. "The question is, how do we cope with her from now on? If she's apt to repeat that performance—"

"Dump her in space," Vix said shortly. The naked brutality of the words jolted all of them, and especially Eunora, who spun in terror to gaze at him.

"That's disgusting, Vix!" Tiorin countered. "Nonetheless — since you're free of the compulsion to take her to Nylock, I think we should put her down on the nearest habitable planet."

"I . . ." Vineta let the word hang timidly in the air.

"Go on, Vineta. You're a clear thinker than most people. I'd be interested to hear your view."

"Well . . ." Vineta licked her lips. "I've heard from Vix that this mysterious woman Lydis gained power over your late brother Hodat by appearing to read his thoughts. And what I've heard, too, about the way the people of Asconel have been changed from free independent citizens to blind fanatic dupes of the Belizuek cult sounds like the effect of some sort of conditioning. I — well, I didn't have a very happy childhood. Even though I wasn't set apart from everybody the way Eunora is, I often felt the way she did just now — desperate to get even with the universe, wanting to be as cruel to others as they had been to me. So I can't be angry with her.

"And —" she hesitated — "I can't see into your minds the way she can, but I do believe that you're the nicest people I've ever had to deal with. Vix, for all that you have a temper like a star going nova, you can be very kind, and Spartak here is such a gentle person, and strong inside too. I think perhaps when she's recovered from the dreadful things they did to her on Delcadore, Eunora will see that the same as I do. And when she does— well, isn't it going to be tremendously valuable to have someone with us who can see into people's inmost thoughts?"

There was a pause. Tiorin spoke. "I see what Spartak means about you, girl."

Spartak drew a deep breath. "I'd be willing to try, if she'll co-operate."

Eunora gave a little frightened cry. "I see what's in your mind, Spartak! No! No!"

No? His sober bearded face bent close to hers, he let himself think through the idea in detail, trying to maintain the same mood in which he had taken his vows to the order he joined on Annanworld: the sense of disgust inspired by the stupid violence attending the collapse of Imperial authority, the longing for rationality, calm judgment and peace which drove him to his self-imposed exile.

But it wasn't that, he realized later, which impressed her. It was the memory of the agony he suffered while waiting for the antidote to be brought so that he could release her from the painful catatone paralysis.

"I don't like this," Vix muttered in the background. "I still feel we'd be better off if we simply got rid of her."

"Wait," Tiorin counseled. "Look now!"

With an expression of total child-like trust, she had put her tiny hand in Spartak's large one, and he was leading her without another word from the control room.

When Spartak returned, much later, his face was stamped with incredible weariness.

"She's sleeping," he said in answer to an eager question from Tiorin. "Oh, but I've dug some foulness from that mind of hers! Like seek-

ing jewels in a manure pile of dung!"

Vix demanded harshly, "What did you do?"

"Hm?" Rubbing his eyes, Spartak spoke around a yawn. "Oh — I gave her some of the same drug I used on Korisu. I told you it was employed in psychotherapy. Before she's capable of liking us, or anyone, she's got to be cleansed of the hate she's conceived for the human race. And are you surprised at that hate? The Empire, afraid of being toppled by some superiorly gifted assailant, made it policy to deport mutants. And the common people turned that policy into fear for their own security. You'd stand up to a raving crowd, defying them with your gun — or a sword, or your bare fists if it came to that. But she's a child! How can she understand and forgive a mob of fools driven out of their minds with superstitious terror?"

Vix hesitated for a long moment. Finally he shrugged. "I don't like the idea, but — but you know a few things I don't, having spent so long with your nose buried in your books. So far, things have turned out well for us. I'll go along with you. But if she pulls another trick like the one she scared us with, I'll dump her in space!"

"Well said," Tiorin approved. "Now, though, we have a choice to make, Spartak. Vix feels we should go direct to Asconel, for fear of wasting any more time. I think it would be safer to try and contact Tigrid Zen on Gwo. Things have changed terribly on Asconel; even if we disguise ourselves, we might be betrayed by some chance ignorance."

"But will Tigrid Zen be any better informed?" Vix challenged. "If the stories we hear about Bucyon's mastery of Asconel are correct, he won't simply be able to come and go freely. He may not even have been able to land ships at home. And someone who's totally cut off can't give us much guidance."

"I'll give you one sound reason for skipping Gwo," Spartak said. "We cannot win our cause on Gwo. We can only win on Asconel."

"Asconel it is then," Tiorin muttered, and moved to the controls.

XVI

Now that the time of their homecoming was finally upon them, they were overtaken by a sense of estrangement which was irrationally reinforced by the disguises Spartak had prepared. He had some confidence in his beard and the passage of ten years to change him; nonetheless, he had altered his hair-color to blond, Tiorin's and Vix's both to jet-black, worked delicately over the line of chin and eyebrow and nose with soft inert substances injected below the skin, till the resemblance between all three of them and Hodat's brothers reduced to a similarity of stature and gait.

That would have to suffice. Would *have* to.

But the physical illusion combined with a feeling that each was retreating into a universe of private thought where the others could

not follow. In a desperate attempt to retain their newly refound kinship even Vix — warily supervising the controls, ever alert for Bucyon's forces watching the space around Asconel for intruders — was driven to speak at random for the sake of breaking the tension.

"It's winter down there," he muttered.

"We'll have to get some warmer clothing," Spartak agreed, "especially for Eunora, who has nothing."

"I wasn't thinking of that." Vix shrugged. "If there's snow on the ground, it'll be much harder to land without leaving tracks."

Tiorin made to speak, hesitated, finally gave a bitter laugh. "I was just about to ask where we should buy our clothing and whether it would be safe to show our Imperial currency. But it suddenly struck me that we'll be lucky to find anyone with clothing to sell even in a town."

"Aren't you exaggerating?" Vix said.

"I doubt if he is," Spartak put in. "The entire planet will be shockingly changed, Vix. Production, distribution, communications — all reduced to the bare minimum needed to support Belizuek's domination. Rags will have become precious, and to throw away a crust of bread will be unthinkable. Typically, it'll be safe enough to show Imperial currency, and what's more it'll buy incredible quantities of anything that's for sale. But our own money will have become effectively worthless."

"Then how can people live?" Vix demanded savagely.

Vineta spoke up from the corner of the control room in which she huddled with Eunora; being close to her own childhood, she had established a sort of shy intimacy with the mutant girl. "Vix, you've seen how it is on worlds we've travelled to with your order. They live like beasts, ready to fight for a morsel of food, neglecting everything but the sheer necessity of staying alive."

"I guess so," Vix sighed. "But I can't transfer what I've seen on worlds like Batyra Dap to my own beloved Asconel."

His fingers curled like claws, as if he had Bucyon's throat between them.

Spartak said hastily, "We're agreed at least on what we do at first, aren't we? We land as Vix recommends on the southerly tip of the island on which stands the town of Penwyr. There's a concealed site for the ship; the people stood loyal to our father while Vix was putting down the rebels; there's a temple at Penwyr, the only one on the island; and it's — well, if not easy, at any rate possible to get to Penwyr on foot, so that we run the least risk of being reported and attracting the attention of the priesthood. Once arrived, we go directly to the temple and try to find out what Belizuek is behind these screens which always hide him. If we must, we'll kidnap a priest and interrogate him back at the ship. Meantime, Eunora will tell us which of the people we meet still harbor the seeds of resistance to Belizuek, and we'll sound out those we feel we can trust

to guide our long-term planning."

"Can we just walk into the temple?" Tiorin asked. "I know everyone has to go there daily —"

"It's not quite like that," Spartak corrected. "Every morning there's a ceremony to honor Belizuek, but not all the citizens are required to do daily homage. In towns they are expected to go to the temple one day out of three; in the country, one day in six. But it seems not to be looked on as a duty; it's one of the great events in lives which have become uniformly drab and depressing. Accordingly, the temples are open all day, from dawn to dusk, so that people with particularly fervent adoration for Belizuek can go and prostrate themselves."

"What do they do at these sacrifices?" Vineta put in.

Vix said, "Every twenty or thirty days there's a special ceremony at which the volunteers are decked with flowers and walk behind the temple screen to the sound of joyful music."

His face darkened. "What becomes of them, nobody knows except the priests. But they are never seen alive again."

"Are they seen dead, then?" Tiorin growled. "Served as the main dish at a banquet, maybe?"

"What time of day will it be when we set down?" Spartak asked.

"Around sunrise. If we make haste, we can reach Penwyr just in time for the morning ceremony at the temple." Vix scanned his control panel closely, and gave a nod. "I think we can go to land without being challenged. Here's hoping!"

The lock door slid aside. Beyond lay a bleak, forbidding landscape: gray rocks, with the whiteness of drifted snow, skewered with the trunks of leafless trees of which the crowns were just catching the first rays of dawn. There was no sound except the distant noise of the sea, gnashing its teeth. The air was bitterly cold.

But it wasn't the sudden chill which made Spartak shiver and brought the tears stinging to his eyes. It was the sum of all his childhood memories.

Asconel! Mother of us all, that you should be brutally raped and betrayed!

His emotion choked him, and by the long silence he knew his brothers were equally overcome.

The first voice to disturb the cold morning was Eunora's. Scarcely louder than a whisper, it said: "Forgive me, all of you. If I could have seen the love you have for your home, I'd not have frightened you by threatening to make you — make you —"

She could not finish, but they all knew what she meant, and they gave her frosty smiles in acceptance of her apology.

"We must move," Tiorin said practically. "Vix, you'll need to inactivate the ship, fit alarms and boobytraps —?"

"It's as easy as turning a switch," Vix cut in. "The owners who had my ship before were all suspicious people. When we close her up no one but ourselves will be able to get within arm's length of the hull. In any case, no one comes to this

part of the island. No hunting, no fishing worth the name — no reason for visitors."

He patted his chest, making sure he had his concealed sidearm, and led the way down the ladder to the ground.

They picked a route to leave the fewest possible tracks, going first by rocky slopes from which the snow had blown away, then by a road which had been used since the last fall, where there were already plenty of footmarks. It all seemed very straight forward, and Spartak might have relaxed, but for the freezing cold.

They had walked the better part of an hour when there was a sharp exclamation from Vix, leading the way.

The others hurried to see what he had found. He had halted opposite a form half-buried by snow in the meager shelter of a bush.

"He's dead," he said slowly, and the others, shocked, saw that this was indeed a man — very old for his beard was not white only with frost. He must have sat down to rest here while trudging the road, and never got up again.

Spartak exhaled sharply, his breath wreathing in the icy air. "Well, he has no further use for what little he possessed," he grunted, and began without more ado to strip the clothing from the corpse. Tiorin made to object, and he gave him a glare. "If you're going to be squeamish, perhaps you'd rather strip yourself and lend the clothes to Eunora?"

When he'd finished, she was so grotesque in the miscellaneous rags he had supplied that Vix looked doubtful. "Can we really go into Penwyr with her dressed like that?"

"You're fond of betting," Spartak answered. "I'll bet that most of the people we meet will be worse clad yet."

With a last surge of energy he put the fragile corpse out of sight in a bank of snow beyond the bush where it had rested, and they tramped on.

His estimate of the condition of people in Penwyr was correct.

They began to encounter the citizens on the road just before entering the town. This was a day for folk from outlying farms to attend the temple ceremony. They were gathering on foot and in wheezing old groundcars fueled with wood-gas generators. None of them offered to speak to Spartak and his companions, which suited them well.

Two things appalled Spartak especially: first, the numbers on foot — for Asconel had been among the few worlds retaining nuclear-powered transport after the withdrawal of Imperial support. And second, the looks of near-ecstasy on all the faces. Even the children, some of whom one would have expected to be sullen and fractious, were uniformly cheerful.

In the town, placards depicting Bucyon and Lydis were everywhere, mostly on the fronts of stores long closed for lack of goods to sell. Several people in the now large crowd heading for the temple paused to kiss the pictures.

Wary, eyes taking in every detail around, they let themselves be carried along until they were in sight of the temple itself. Originally it must have been the island's agricultural produce mart, a low-roofed building several hundred feet square. Now it was decked with Bucyon's picture and many crude slogans. The crowd paused as it entered the street on which the temple stood and joined with other streams of people from elsewhere in the town, giving Spartak time to read some of the gaudy exhortations:

WE ARE BORN AND WE DIE, BUT BELIZUEK GOES ON FOREVER!

BEFORE THE GALAXY BELIZUEK WAS!

MANKIND ARE ANIMALS BUT BELIZUEK IS AN IMPENETRABLE MYSTERY!

Spartak tried to keep the grim look of hatred from his face as he shuffled his feet to warm them on the frozen ground. When he felt a nudge, he thought at first it was Eunora huddling close to him for shelter against the cold wind, but it was Tiorin who had pressed up in order to whisper.

"Spartak, you've noticed the — the *joy* with which all these people are going to the temple?"

Spartak nodded.

"It terrifies me," Tiorin breathed. "Spartak, what makes us think that we can resist Belizuek ourselves? How do we know that we're not walking into his jaws by coming to his temple? How do we know when we come out we won't be his willing slaves for the rest of our lives?"

XVII

The echo of Tiorin's depressing suggestion made Spartak's head ring like a gong as they were carried willy-nilly forward in the crowd.

It was far too late now to change their minds about entering the temple. The people pressed on every side, eager to get out of the cold and into the steamy warmth of the building. He wished achingly that Eunora could speak directly to his mind, telling him what she was picking up from those around. But she could not, and after Tiorin's brief whisper there were too many other people too close for any more private conversation.

Wondering what was going on inside the mutant girl's head, Spartak used the advantage his height gave to peer around and seek clues to the grip Belizuek exerted on his disciples. None offered themselves. He saw, heard and smelt a horde of dirty, hungry wretches, who seemed to find their plight perfectly natural and indeed enjoyable.

Drug addiction. The concept thrust itself out of a corner of memory. It was apposite. He had only rarely seen victims of an uncontrollable addiction, but they bore the same stamp of single-minded urgency as the people surrounding him.

He began to make guesses, putting himself into the place of the people here. People who had failed to see the necessity for starting over from their own resources when the Empire withdrew its economic and military support.

To such a person, after thousands of years of Imperial domination, the idea of Asconel making its own way would be literally inconceivable And since the Empire was human, what more logical conclusion than that man was unworthy?

He shook his head. It was only half an explanation.

They were coming to the door now. Spartak felt his nape tingle as he sought for any intrusion on his mind — any process comparable to conditioning which might turn him too into a loyal disciple of the greedy deity. But it was useless; he could not tell.

Clutching Eunora's tiny hand, trying to keep within arm's reach of his brothers, he was forced into the temple.

There was little remarkable about it. There were no seats; the people were supposed to pack in shoulder to shoulder and stand during the ceremony. The walls were decorated with prized personal possessions — paintings, sculptures, tapestries and objects in precious metal — described on small attached plaques as voluntary donations by adorers of Belizuek.

The screen at the far end, behind which Belizuek was allegedly concealed, was not, as he had envisaged, some curtain of force akin to the defensive field of a starship. It was just a screen of woven metal links on a frame adorned with gems.

More than likely, it would carry a killing charge.

He got his first sight of the priests now: wearing robes not unlike those affected by his own order on Annanworld, but in various colors, black, white, green and gold. They stood watching the congregation assemble.

Was there any clue to their origin in their physique? He studied them, and concluded that they might as easily have been born on Asconel as any other world of the galaxy. The traffic of the Empire mixed all the existing human stocks.

The eyes of one priest seemed to dwell on him. He repressed a start of alarm.

Glancing around, he decided that there was nothing to mark them out as unusual — many of the men were taller than himself, many of the children were smaller and younger than Eunora. If the priest was curious, it could only be because he did not immediately recognize them. It would be wise to slip away after the ceremony, delaying their return to the empty temple until, perhaps, the curious priest would not be around.

The last of the crowd from the street jammed in through the doors; the doors closed; there was an air of expectancy. All at once, a note of music sounded apparently from nowhere, and the assembly broke into a fervent chant of praise for Belizuek.

Moving his mouth in imitation of the rest, he saw that all eyes were riveted on the screen behind which was Belizuek.

A reason for the unison singing came to him: to weld the crowd together, making it more susceptible to the priests' appeals. But so far

he couldn't detect any more advanced methods working on the people's minds — no hypnotically rhythmic lighting effects, no airborne drugs.

Of course, they might be too subtle for even an aware victim to notice.

The chanting ended. A priest came out before the screen and turned his back on the congregation. There was a pause. He bowed, and everyone bowed with him — Spartak and his companions fractionally late.

Again? No. One bow sufficed.

The priest turned, the people hanging on every movement, and began to address them in ringing tones. His theme was what Spartak had expected. Belizuek was a superior being. Men could have no higher purpose than his service. This desire should supersede all personal ambitions.

Spartak let his attention wander.

So far, he'd seen and heard nothing to account for the blind obedience of once-rational persons. He was jolted back to awareness with boundless amazement when a yell went up from the body of the hall.

"Proof!" someone shouted. And another voice, a woman's: "Proof!"

The priest, unperturbed, continued on his former subject. The voices resumed, now swelling, until the discourse could hardly be made out, and Spartak wondered if he ought to join in himself for fear of exciting notice if he remained silent. He was on the point of doing so when the priest raised a hand.

The shouting stopped as if a switch had been turned.

"Proof you want," the priest intoned. "Proof you shall have!" He turned to face the screen again, bowing more deeply than before.

"Belizuek! We who are less than dust beseech a revelation of your majesty!"

And Spartak learned the answers to all his questions.

At first, it was merely as though the temple had grown larger, the walls receding into a misty distance and beginning to glow. With a shock, a sense of perspective overtook him. Those walls were the very bounds of the universe, and the faint glow was the light of stars — countless in number, inconceivably far away.

Then there was a pause which had the still quality of eternity. Nothing moved, nothing changed.

Seeping in, then, like water oozing through porous rock, came a sense of presence. Personality. Consciousness.

And power!

Somewhere in this monstrous emptiness, perhaps as far off as the dim stars, perhaps further, a being had come into existence to the reach of whose mind the gap between galaxies was no more than a single stride. As though drawn by a magnet, Spartak's dissociated awareness began the eon-long plunge through nowhere to find it and pay his homage.

Out of the misty blur of stars a form took shape: a lens. The lens of this familiar galaxy.

Chance glimpses occurred of well-known features: the Big Dark, which some freak of stellar drift had notched like a sawcut into the galac-

tic rim, a hundred light-years wide; the pattern of globular clusters nicknamed the Eyes of Argus for the multitude and brilliance of them. By now, the other galaxies filling the plenum had dwindled to their customary status of bright blobs on the black curtain of infinity.

But the presence knew them. The presence was aware of everything, from the least bacterium to the pattern of those vanishing galaxies; had sounded and plumbed the furthest void, had weighed and measured the nucleons of the atom. It "said" so.

What petty human could contradict such a declaration?

For it knew all human history, and felt such contempt as made any man wriggle with embarrassment for these squabbling, greedy half-intelligent creatures which had stolen the techniques and artifacts of their greater predecessors and claimed the conquest of the galaxy. To what end? To the downfall of their vaunted Empire, and the return of the species on tens of thousands of worlds to a state no better than the mud-grubbing life of beasts!

Even when it was over, the vision still filled his head and dazzled his eyes. He was passive among the crowd that forced its way from the temple, letting himself be pushed back on the street.

His questions had been answered, and in a way he had not expected. The shock had dazed him.

Someone tried to claim his attention. He shook his head and went on thinking about what he had learned. The person — Tiorin, possibly — gave up in annoyance and turned to someone else: Eunora.

He wasn't interested in what was being said. All that concerned him was in his memory.

It was much later that he realized he was being escorted along a street floored with dirty snow, his companions beside him. He was shivering, having failed to fasten his clothing about him when he left the hot overcrowded temple. Ahead, someone was walking fast with occasional backward glances that suggested anxiety.

"Where are we going?" he forced out.

"You're with us again?" Tiorin came eagerly to his side. "I was afraid you'd been taken like these unfortunate wretches."

"Hm? Oh! Oh, yes. I guess I was." The reference drove him back inside himself, his eyes unfocusing and his feet stumbling occasionally on the rock-hard snow.

"The man ahead," Tiorin explained, thinking Spartak was still listening. "Vix recognized him from the campaign he fought here. Says he was a loyal and brave soldier. And Eunora got close enough to tell that he's still trying to resist Bucyon, only goes to the temple because he'd risk exposure if he didn't. We plan to follow until we get him alone and can approach him openly."

But Spartak was lost again in the depths between the galaxies, playing over in his mind the vision he had had of supernal power, monstrous intelligence — and indescribable conceit.

XVIII

Like most towns in Asconel's northern hemisphere, Penwyr relied largely on water-borne transport; it was unusual, however, in being built astride a river instead of on the coast. They continued to follow the man whom Vix recognized until he reached the embankment paralleling the river, by which time they were sure he would take the bridge to the other side of the town, a quarter of low-built, rather mean houses.

He was becoming frightened by then, however, and had quickened his pace so much that it looked as if he might break into a run at any moment. People were about the river's edge, some inspecting boats moored to rings in the stone wall, some working on repairs, some merely leaning over and watching. It was a choice between losing their quarry if he ran, and attracting a good deal of undesirable attention by running themselves.

"Shall I speak to him?" Vineta proposed. "He's not likely to be afraid of a girl."

Tiorin hesitated. "That might be the answer. Spartak, what do you think?"

"No use trying to talk to Spartak," Vix grunted. "He's off moaning again."

Tiorin looked dismayed. "Yes, Vineta, see if you can catch him up and get him talking. Eunora was quite sure he was not a Bucyon man, isn't that right?"

The mutant girl's eyes were on Spartak. She started. "What—? Oh yes. Yes, he's not one of these miserable dupes, like all the others."

"Go ahead," Tiorin ordered, and Vineta hurried off, leaving them to stroll like any of the other idlers along the quay.

"It's horrible," Vix muttered. "Everything's *stopped!* Even during the worst of the revolution here, we kept the main streets running, and the bridge yonder." He threw up an angry arm. "It's all going back to the mud now! What's become of the engineers we had, the builders, the craftsmen?"

"Right now I'm more worried about Spartak," Tiorin muttered. "Eunora, can you tell us what's happened to him? I agree, the — the mental show, or whatever it was, that we had at the temple was pretty impressive, but I was on guard against tampering with my mind, and it's mainly left me with the feeling I'd like to know how it's done."

"Not so impressive," Vix put in. "To people who haven't flown space much, perhaps. Especially to people who thought the Empire was all pure magnificence and got some of their illusions dented. But we've seen what it's like nowadays, and made up our minds that's not the best mankind can do."

"If they spread the cult of Belizuek any further, it's apt to be the only thing we ever did," Tiorin said sourly. "Look, Vineta's beckoning. Spartak hurry up, will you, instead of dawdling along like a dreamer?"

Tiorin kept one eye on Eunora as they approached Vineta and the

man Vix recognized, but she gave no indication of altering her judgment. It was with some confidence that he addressed the allegedly loyal citizen.

"Your name is Tharl, I understand. You won't know us, but I assure you you'll be very interested in what you hear from us."

Tharl, a nervous man of early middle age, clad in old but carefully patched clothes and with a pinched expression on his face, looked from one to other of the people who had been following him. He said at length, "I took you for a party of Bucyon's men set on my heels by the priests. But I should have known better, seeing the child with you. Well, what do you want with me?"

"We've returned to Asconel from travelling ten years long," Tiorin said. "And — we're horrified."

Tharl let a quick smile come and go on his lips. "Say no more! I can provide you little hospitality — my wife and my son both offered themselves to Belizuek, and my two daughters are married and living away. But I have a home still, and some refreshment. Come and join me there!"

"Luck's with us," Vix muttered, and they fell in behind Tharl to cross the bridge over the river. As they had foreseen, the bridge's heated and moving surface was immobile beneath a covering of soiled snow, so they had to walk all the way.

Tharl's house was less neglected than those which flanked it; those had snow on their roofs, whereas his was warm enough to melt it away, and the doors and windows still drew power instead of being converted to manual operation. But all he could offer by way of "refreshment" was stale beer, bread and cheese.

"Ten years!" he murmured as he set out the food and drink. "Why, then I'd have offered you meat and fruit even in dead winter. Do you know that now they kill their herds in the fall, salting the meat in seabrine and keeping only enough stock to breed again in spring? The priests taught them that! I was raised on a farm, and to me it makes no sense."

"You — ah — ah you said your wife and son both offered themselves to Belizuek," Tiorin ventured. "Since then you live on your own."

"That's what saved me from becoming like all these fools you saw at the temple." Tharl's brows drew together over his nose and he stared into the distance. "I learned to hate just in time. Those who didn't have been duped and betrayed. And ultimately they won't be human any more."

He peered curiously at Tiorin; apparently his eyesight was failing. "Tell me, though, how did you know it was safe to address me? If I make myself so obvious the priests will catch me — it's a crime even to think, let alone speak, against Bucyon's rule." Alarm colored his words.

Tiorin hesitated, making a warning gesture to Vix who might have blurted out their true identity. "Ah — we took a chance. My friend here remembers meeting you during the

campaign against the rebels hereabout in the time of the old Warden, Hodat's father. You were loyal then. We felt a man like yourself couldn't have changed so much."

Tharl pursed his lips. He commented, "You can't have been home long. Anyone can be changed and made into a follower of Bucyon. Why, men I fought beside in the old days, Warden's men as they were, have offered themselves to Belizuek since!"

"Does nothing withstand Bucyon, then?" Vix demanded.

It was Tharl's turn for hesitation. coming to a favorable decision, he leaned forward and spoke in a confidential tone.

"A movement — well . . . Put it like this. Over two or three years, I've sounded out those who have a reason to hate Belizuek as I do. Perhaps ten or twelve have proved loyal to the old ways. Of them half have given themselves away, by attacking a priest or profaning the temple — and the rest of us serve to encourage each other. As for rising up against Bucyon, though — it can't be done."

He pointed at Spartak. "Why, even your friend here has been so deeply affected by what happens in the temple that his mind's adrift in space! First it was a wonder, and the curious talked about it and attracted the reluctant; then suddenly it became the only thing that mattered in the lives of the citizens. I escaped, as I said, because I already had a reason for hate. My wife and boy were the first of all to offer themselves in Penwyr. But that apart, I'd have become as bemused as he is."

Worried, Tiorin nudged Spartak as he sat with pale face and staring eyes on the chair next to him.

"Tharl is wrong," Eunora said timidly. "What's affected him isn't the power of Belizuek, but something else."

"What?" Vix snorted, ready to fall back into his long-time assessment of Spartak as a dreamer and a ninny.

"Let him tell you himself," Eunora said, and tugged at Spartak's sleeve.

"Yes?" the bearded man said, coming to the present like a sleeper rousing. "I — I'm sorry. I've been thinking over what I learned down there at the temple."

"That's what we all want to discuss," Tiorin said. "We know what's being done to the people now. If we can discover how it's being done we can try to counteract it."

"You've missed the point," Spartak said. "Don't you know what Belizuek *is?*"

There was a blank silence. Eunora smiled to herself as though enjoying the secret knowledge she could pick from Spartak's unspoken thoughts.

"Well, go on!" Vix burst out.

Spartak shook his head. He seemed bewildered. "Then — well, possibly I'm mistaken." He shivered, as if he were still out in the street instead of in the comparative warmth of Tharl's home.

"I must go back and make sure," he added, rising without waiting for

objections and starting for the door.

"Just a second!" Tharl jumped up and strode to stand in front of him. "Back to the temple? What for?"

"I shall have to get a direct look at Belizuek," Spartak explained with the sweet reasonableness of one addressing a child.

"A direct look —" Tharl was thunderstruck. "How do you propose to manage that? Nobody has ever gone behind the screen they keep around him, except for sacrificial victims and the priests who escort the poor fools. When the temple was new, there were several who tried. They were killed by a deadly charge on the metal mesh."

"When the temple was new," Spartak repeated, apparently struck by a new idea. "Tell me, how was it — well — consecrated?"

Tharl curled his lip. "That I know only too well. Some priests came from Gard in a skyboat — Gard, the old royal island, is the site of the chief temple now. They brought some great chest or case affair which was unloaded with much ceremony. It was transported to the market — what's now the temple — and they held the first big sacrifice, with two victims. My wife and my son."

Tiorin, seeing the man was almost overcome, moved to his side to comfort him. He flashed a scowl at Spartak, who remained quite unaffected. Lost in his own thoughts, the other muttered, "It might be the oxygen . . . If only I knew where we found the ships we appropriated! But there's that blank wall of ignorance supposed to be because it was bad for our self-respect to admit the real source of our skills —"

"You're maundering," Vix cut in. "If you have a point to make, make it!"

"Shut up!" Spartak ordered. This was so different from the usual meekness of the younger man's manner that Vix was taken aback; while he was recovering, Spartak rounded on Eunora.

"Do you think I'm right?" he demanded.

The girl blushed. She said, "I can tell you what I felt, if that's any help. Well!" She licked her lips. "I thought there was somebody behind the screen who went — uh — who went an awfully long way. Like very old, but also very big. Sort of connected to other places. Do you see what I mean?"

Tharl's puzzled eyes roamed around the strangers, but he said nothing.

"It fits, doesn't it?" Spartak urged.

"I don't know," Eunora answered helplessly. "You've studied so many things I never heard about. It would take ages to track down all the possibilities you're considering."

"Then we must go back to the temple," Spartak concluded. "As soon as possible. Tharl, you must have been there at other times than the — the duty services. Presumably you've wanted to appear to be a loyal Bucyon man, to divert suspicion."

Tharl nodded dumbly.

"Then tell me what the routine of the temple is, and how we can

get close to Belizuek without the priests driving us away."

XIX

"You can't," Tharl said shortly.

"But we must," Spartak countered, making a movement as if to brush aside all objections. Eunora, however, caught his eye.

"He's probably right," she said. "Let him explain."

More puzzled than ever at the attention they paid to this slip of a girl, Tharl did so. Listening, Spartak came back by degrees to the realities of the problem. Ceaseless supervision, eavesdropping by priests, traps for the unwary — it sounded as though the temple had been prepared to meet just such an intrusion as he had planned.

The solution, however, came from Vix. He gave a shrug. "How about remote detection devices? Won't they do to settle your doubts? I have instruments aboard the ship which could be demounted temporarily. You could probe the back wall of the temple and get some hint of what lies beyond."

"Of course," Spartak muttered. "It must be the depressing effect of coming back to this ruined world, or I'd have thought of that myself. How long will it take us to get the equipment?"

Vix frowned. "We'd best move under cover of dark," he suggested. "It'll be hard to conceal the gear by day."

"That'll be still more difficult," Tharl put in. "There are strict curfew laws now. Even street-lighting has been abandoned. Every drop of power and fuel is devoted to Belizuek's cult."

"We'll have advance warning of any patrols we run into," Tiorin said, not offering to give details. "I wish you'd explain more fully, though," he added, turning to Spartak.

But the bearded man was engrossed in some calculations conducted on a memo board from his belt-pouch.

With infinite care and in complete silence they stole back towards the dead-seeming town in the pitch blackness and icy cold of the winter's night. In the sky the stars burned like the points of white-hot needles.

It had proved necessary to bring from the ship not only the instruments which Vix had mentioned, but means of powering them too — accumulators and a portable generator. When Tharl said all power went for Belizuek's cult, he meant it. There would not be a power source for them to draw on for half a mile in any direction from the temple. Consequently they were all heavily laden, even Eunora, slipping and stumbling along gallantly at Spartak's side.

They reached the edge of the town and went between dark walls which afforded little shelter from the wind. All the windows were shuttered, many with crude hand-carpentered wooden panels instead of the original plastic power-operated ones. Through cracks gleamed an

occasional handlamp or even a primitive candle.

Once Eunora gave the faint whistle they had chosen as an alarm signal. They dodged into an alley between two houses as a woman emerged to empty some foul-smelling garbage into a street drain. There was no limit to the degree people could regress under Belizuek's domination, Spartak told himself wearily. Next they'd be back to open-pit latrines and epidemics.

He ached to find out whether his guess about the nature of this "deity" was accurate.

They had settled on a street behind the temple as the best site of operations; it was usually unfrequented at night, for this had formerly been Penwyr's busy commercial quarter. All the nearby stores were empty and neglected except one which had been turned into a comfortable residence for the temple staff. The curfew patrols, Tharl assured them, were negligent in this area, for few people would risk going out under the priests' very noses.

They reached it without trouble, and walked along the far side opposite the temple wall, on which the slogans glared luminous for the benefit of — of whom? Any priest who might glance out, Spartak decided with a curl of his lip.

As nearly as he could tell, he had come to a point opposite the end of the screen inside the temple. He beckoned to his companions to assemble the equipment.

Metal stands clinked on the hard-frozen snow as they set down their burdens. He fumbled with numb fingers to make connections between the power supply and the detectors themselves.

Tiorin headed toward one end of the street, Vix and Vineta towards the other, to keep wary watch. Eunora could do that equally well from where Spartak stood. Besides, her tiny hands were deft at the awkward work of organizing the equipment, and she did not have to be given spoken orders.

It was the eeriest task he had ever undertaken. His chief and burning hope was that Belizuek's powers did not extend to the perception of the various probe frequencies he planned to employ.

He coupled in the last device and silently handed the long flex attached to it to Eunora, who dashed across the street and clamped its terminal to the wall of the temple.

That automatically reported the structure-phase of the wall to the other instruments. So guided, they could look through it almost as easily as through glass. Heart pounding, Spartak adjusted the controls and bent to peer at the tiny self-illuminated dials and screens before him.

The range was excessive. He was getting a trace which could only be the nearer side of the concealing screen — irregular metal, probably in mesh or link form. He turned a knob with stiff fingers, and began to get suggestions of something less commonplace.

A mass of complex organics — not quite protoplasmic, but similar.

That fitted. He set another knob for the characteristic vibration modes of oxygen, and read off the data from a quivering needle against an arbitrary scale.

Low oxygen pressure. Very low. But a good deal of carbon dioxide, and nitrogen and a blend of inert gases. *Right!* He began to look for the walls which must enclose this humanly unbreathable atmosphere, and almost at once found the traces which defined it.

Beside him, Eunora was fascinated by the vast amount of information the instruments afforded through a featureless wall; every new conclusion he drew brought a gasp of excitement from her.

"It fits, doesn't it?" he whispered, daring to make the sound which after all was no louder than the chinking and scraping that had accompanied the setting up of their gear.

She gave an enthusiastic nod.

Yes, Spartak thought. *Enclosed in a special atmosphere. Organic, but not giving the same traces as a creature from one of our planets — a Thanis bull, say, which would have comparable mass and dimensions . . . I wonder if I can get any of the internal structure!*

Eunora's teeth threatened to chatter from the cold; she clamped them firmly shut.

Two traces came up on the panel — similar, but not identical. An internal reflection, offering a clue to the details he was after? He checked again, and started. No: it was the same trace from two different points in space.

In other words, the thing beyond the wall had moved.

I am right! Jubilantly he recognized the final confirmation of his suspicions. Eunora could not repress a chuckle as he hastily continued his examination.

And that was why she failed to give him warning.

The first he knew of their discovery was when lights bloomed like suns all down the front of the building, and a door opened to disgorge about a dozen frantic men. Spartak jerked upright, heart seeming to stop its beating.

The horrified Eunora let out a stifled cry of dismay.

"There they are!" a voice yelled, and feet hammered the icy ground.

The equipment would have to be abandoned — there was nothing else for it. Spartak snatched Eunora into his arms and fled towards the end of the street at which Vix and Vineta had been standing guard.

There was no sign of Tiorin. Handlamps had been brought out by the emerging priests, and their dazzling glare concealed the far end of the street.

Nonetheless, he also must have been spotted. Two of the new arrivals were dashing in that direction while the rest came on.

"Spartak!" Vix hissed. He had drawn his concealed sidearm, and was hiding in an embrasure that had once been the entry to a store. "Go around the corner and turn left. I'll give them something to think about and then we'll make off to the right. Split them up!"

"Where's Vineta?" Spartak gasped.

"Right here!" the girl replied from the shadow behind Vix. "I'm staying with Vix, so don't argue!"

Spartak hadn't thought of arguing. He ignored the remark. "Vix, try and destroy the equipment! Maybe they won't learn just how much I now know!"

"You got what you wanted?" Vix was peering toward the brilliant lights, sighting along the barrel of his gun.

"Practically everything!"

At that instant a bolt seared along the street. Why it had been so long delayed, Spartak could only guess — presumably the priests hadn't expected to need weapons when they were alerted. Who had done the alerting was one of the many matters to be left over for later. He ducked reflexively as splinters of stone flew from the spot where the bolt struck.

"See you later at Tharl's!" he whispered, and dived around the corner with Eunora. Behind him, Vix coldly took aim at the abandoned equipment, and fired his first bolt in reply to the priests'.

This district was laid out in conventional grid pattern, so that when Spartak came to the next intersection he could glance back and see clearly the end of the street near the temple. The light there was almost blinding by contrast with the general darkness, but he made out two figures ducking away in the opposite direction from that which he had taken.

Eunora had hidden her face against his chest, satisfied to perceive everything through his eyes.

Vix had obviously kept his promise to give the pursuers something to think about. It was long moments before anyone followed him and Vineta around the corner. The first person to do so was an armed man who fired one random shot; Vix let off another in reply, and provoked a scream, though whether it was of fear or pain Spartak could not tell. Then he ran on again, overtaking Vineta easily, and came to the intersection corresponding to the one at which Spartak himself had paused.

It was foolish, he told himself, not to make himself as scarce as time allowed, but something held him magnet-fashion; later, he decided it was a true premonition.

Vineta stumbled on the icy street. One of the pursuers loosed a bolt at her; it struck within arm's length of her, and she went sprawling. Spartak gasped, and felt Eunora tense against him till she felt like a wooden doll.

From his inadequate cover Vix darted forward, gun in one hand, the other outstretched to seize Vineta and drag her to safety. He fired twice, so that the pursuers held back, and by main force got the girl on her feet, her arm around his shoulder so she could use him as a crutch.

It was a brave thing to do, a good thing to do, but so foolhardy Spartak winced. For with the weight of the injured girl delaying him, they caught him up at the end of the street and he went down under a mob of yelling priests.

Sick at heart, but driven by cold logic to the decision that he could do nothing more practical than ensure that he at least got away, whether or not Tiorin did so, he ducked around the corner and made his way unchallenged into dark and empty streets. It was so unfair that he should get away! Why not Vix, the brave fool?

"What shall I do?" he whispered to the stars. "On my own, what shall I do?"

And neither the stars nor the sobbing Eunora offered an answer.

XX

For the last half mile of their trip back to Tharl's home Eunora stumbled along beside him. She no longer had difficulty keeping up with the man's longer strides; he had brought himself to the verge of exhaustion.

"Is Tiorin here ahead of us?" he demanded as they came in sight of their goal.

She shook her head. "No one is there but Tharl, and he's in a terrible state of anxiety. He's wondering all the time whether he was right to reveal himself to you."

"But he's dependable?" Spartak insisted.

"I'm not so sure as I was," Eunora muttered. "Fear has been working on him ever since we left."

Spartak glanced at her, and for the first time in their headlong flight noticed that she was clutching something to her with both hands. He didn't have to ask what it was; he recognized it. His medical case, which he had brought away from the ship and assumed to have been left on the street with the rest of the abandoned equipment.

"I was holding the handle while you were working," she explained shyly. "When you picked me up I clung to it."

"Well, it's something. Go and tap on Tharl's window. Get him to let us in."

It was painfully clear from Tharl's face that fear had indeed been giving him second thoughts since their departure. He hastened to shut the door and demanded why they were alone.

Spartak told him with crude brevity. Tharl literally wrung his calloused hands.

"Then you must make off at once! They'll search the whole town, house by house. If they find you here it'll be all up with me — and you as well. You say you have a ship? You must go back there at once. Leave Asconel for somewhere safe."

"I'm not leaving," Spartak grunted, dropping into a chair. "Not until Tiorin gets here."

"But if he's been taken too —"

"If he's been taken too, there's no chance of my reaching our ship. They'll pry the location of it out of my brothers' minds."

"Your — your brothers?" echoed Tharl uncertainly.

What point in keeping the secret any longer, if Bucyon's men had both Vix and Vineta, and possibly Tiorin as well? He said wearily, "I'm Spartak, Hodat's half-brother. The others were Vix and Tiorin."

Tharl's eyes grew round with wonder. "Forgive me!" he babbled. "I didn't know, I didn't guess!"

"You weren't supposed to," Spartak told him curtly. He leaned back, closing his eyes. "Eunora, you can warn us of approaching search parties, can't you?"

"I was supposed to warn you of danger down at the temple," the girl answered, eyes filling with tears again. "I failed. I'm — I'm terribly sorry, but I was so fascinated —"

"You're forgiven," Spartak interrupted. "Just don't do it again."

"Excuse my asking," Tharl ventured. "but how can she —?"

"Warn us? She's a mutant."

"A mutant!" Millennia of Imperial prejudice sprang up in Tharl's mind, and he looked terrified.

"Stop it," Spartak ordered angrily. "She's of human stock, and that's more than you can say of Belizuek."

Curiosity and alarm struggled in Tharl's mind; the former won. "Did you find out what he is?" he demanded.

"I think so. He's a living creature, presumably capable of being killed. He requires to be housed in an airtight compartment in which the oxygen is far below our normal air. He's very large — and I suspect larger than any creature we've ever had to do with before. And he's intelligent. But he is also insane."

Tharl turned that over and finally shook his head.

"What he is, in fact," Spartak amplified, "is the last survivor — in our galaxy at least — of the race from whom we inherited our starships."

Tharl stiffened. Spartak snapped, "Don't give me that Imperial propaganda that we built our own. I've studied ten years on Annanworld, and I'm satisfied that we went out from our original system — whatever that was — and found a cache of starships left by a previous race. We converted them to our own use and spread through the galaxy, finding more of them wherever we went, but no other trace of their builders. Not that it matters, really, except that it gives us a set of parameters to define Belizuek."

He ticked off points on his fingers. "Low oxygen. We have vague records to indicate that our predecessors were oxygen-breathers, as we are, but that they literally used up the resources of their own planets and went elsewhere before they needed to colonize the ones we eventually took over. Telepathic control of another species. This has been proposed as the ultimate in the domestication of animals. It fits. A view of the galaxy — and that's perhaps the most important thing of all!" He jerked upright in his chair.

"You've seen the picture of the galaxy which accompanies the 'proof' during the temple services? Didn't you notice that it's an Argian map that it's based on?"

Tharl could only mumble his answer.

"I tell you it is. Because it shows the Big Dark. The Big Dark is a recent phenomenon; it's anomalous, so it's been carefully studied, and it's only some ten to twelve thousand years old. And at its present size . . . well, I'm convinced that Beli-

zuek has only seen human representations of the galaxy. That's the clincher for me.

"I said he was insane. Why else would he have been left behind when the rest of his species took off for — for wherever? Why else should he descend to this petty shift of domesticating human beings, to move him from star-system to star-system? I got it direct, down in the temple. Conceit! Illimitable megalomaniac craving for power! And he couldn't get it from his own species, because when he tried he was made an outcast and abandoned."

"He?" The word was almost a squeak from Tharl.

"I know what you're trying to say," Spartak nodded. "If there's a living creature in every temple of Belizuek, why not speak of 'they'? This is the final evidence I have for his insanity.

"Equipped with the kind of knowledge and techniques which the Empire enjoyed at the height of its power, it was estimated that a man could breed his kind from his own germ-plasm, artificially, to repopulate an abandoned planet. I have no doubt that Belizuek could do the same if he wished. But he doesn't wish. He's afraid of competition. The part of him which is in the Penwyr temple is a second self, not a bred descendant, an offspring. Ten thousand years ago, before we spread through the galaxy, it was open and empty before him! And it took him that long to make up his mind that could trust himself on one single other planet besides Brinze! I say he's insane."

"I see!" Eunora breathed. "That's why I had the impression that he was so large in time and space!"

"Exactly. A vast number of identical selves. And he's telepathic between all of them."

"Then how does he communicate with us? We're different!"

"Do you think he eats the sacrifices he's given?" Spartak said with monumental disgust. "Never. He uses them as a biological amplifier till their brains are burned out, to provide a link between himself and his audience."

Tharl felt for a chair and lowered himself into it without looking. "And you worked all this out since you arrived? Within a day?"

"I —" Spartak checked. He stared at Eunora, who was giggling.

"You?" he said incredulously.

"Not really," she countered. "It took your knowledge to solve the problem. But all day since we were in the temple I've been — asking questions of your subconscious."

Spartak felt sweat prickle on his forehead. "What you're going to be like when you grow up, I don't know! And if we've been deporting people like you to the rim ever since the foundation of the Empire, what *can* be going on out there?"

Still, that was irrelevant. He glared at Tharl. "Well, now you know what became of your wife and son; now you know the nature of the beast we're up against. What are you going to do — order me to leave here and hide like a criminal, or help me further?"

"I don't see what I can do!" Tharl said helplessly. "If your brothers have been captured, it'll be known who they are, and —"

Spartak cut him short. "Are you in touch with any centers of resistance on Gard Island? You said the original temple was there."

"Yes — yes, that's right but . . . No, I know of no resistence movement there. It's become Bucyon's private preserve."

"You know the city itself, perhaps?"

"Oh yes. When your brother Vix celebrated the completion of his campaign, he included me in the honor guard at the Warden's palace."

"In that case, we should make for Gard," Spartak said. "In *any* case. We'll try a direct attack on the original Belizuek that was brought to Asconel. A simple breach in the air-tight container should be enough."

"So simple?" Tharl breathed. "Why, if I'd known —"

"You'd have gone to the temple yourself," Spartak finished for him. He checked, struck by a sudden thought.

"What means would you have used?"

"I'll show you," Tharl said eagerly, and went into the next room. There were scraping sounds.

"Under the floor," Eunora whispered. "A secret cavity."

And Tharl was back, cradling proudly in his arms a shiny energy gun. "The same with which I served your father and brother, sir," he announced. "And charged ready for use."

Spartak pursed his lips. "Here now is your chance to do a far greater service. Will you undertake it?

Tharl looked extremely unhappy, but he didn't say anything.

"You must hide us here for at least a day, to give Tiorin a chance to rejoin us. This is the only meeting-place we have. During the daytime, however, you must go about as usual to avoid suspicion. While you're out, ask what means we can employ to get to Gard. Anything. A boat, a skyboat, whatever can still be hired. And as soon as possible, we'll go."

"We, sir?" Tharl ventured.

"I understood your wife and your son —"

"And your brothers, sir." Tharl placed the butt of the gun on the ground and leaned on it, gazing into nowhere. "I'm not a coward — but after such a long time, to have a plan of action . . . It takes me aback."

Spartak refrained from pushing him any further. He yawned cavernously. "I must sleep," he muttered. "Though I'm not sure I can. Eunora —"

But she had already closed her eyes.

XXI

"Someone's coming!" Eunora whispered. "Officials!"

Spartak jolted out of uneasy slumber. The long winter night had not yet given way to dawn, but the

first thing he saw when he opened his eyes was Tharl, up and dressed and carrying a tray of breakfast: hot broth and bread. His face was pale with alarm.

"Searching for us?" Spartak rapped.

Eunora, puzzled, shook her head. "Apparently not. There are four of them going from house to house. One's a priest, I think. They aren't searching the houses. Just knocking at the doors and telling the people that . . ."

"Telling them what?" Spartak urged.

The girl bit her lip. "Tiorin and Vix were captured. There's going to be a grand ceremony at the chief temple on Gard. They'll voluntarily give themselves up to Belizuek, and everyone who can is urged to go there and witness this final triumph of Bucyon."

Spartak sat rock-still for long moments. "Do they not know about us?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" Eunora knitted her brows. "I think I understand, though. They're hoping you'll make a false step and reveal yourself."

"That sounds like them, all right," Tharl said sourly.

"They're coming closer," Eunora warned. "Only three or four houses away. We'd better get out of sight."

Tensely, crouched in the concealment of a closet, they strained their ears for auditory confirmation of what she had detected, and when he let them out again Tharl gave it fresh emphasis.

"Just as the little girl says," he muttered. "Everyone who possibly can is expected to travel to Gard and see your brothers sacrificed, sir. We'd best make haste, hadn't we?"

"Not too fast," Spartak sighed. "Give them a chance to get over the hill. Then take this money and book us passage."

As they approached the dockside towards sunset, shivering in the chill blasts of icy foam that the night wind whipped off the estuary, two priests stood beside the gangway to their skimmer, searching the faces of all those that passed.

"Are they looking for us, Eunora?" Spartak whispered.

"Luckily no," she murmured in reply. "They're turning away people notoriously lax in their temple attendance. This trip is supposed to be a reward for loyal homage. I don't know what they're doing about strangers. So few people travel nowadays they hadn't considered the problem."

Tharl drew a deep breath. "Leave this to me, sir," he suggested, and as they drew near the priests pushed his way forward.

"Forgive me, sirs!" he shouted, and their heads turned. "Perhaps you'll remember, sirs, that when Belizuek first came to honor Penwyr with his presence my wife and my son were the very first to give him their total service. And I was bitter!" He shook his head in a parody of regret. "I know now it was foolish of me. Why, if the Warden's brothers themselves have returned and agreed to offer themselves up

to Belizuek, what more powerful proof could anyone want that he is indeed the master of us all and truly superior?"

"Clever!" Spartak whispered. "Is it going to work?"

"Oh, yes," Eunora said with a twisted smile. "They're lapping it up. He'd only better be careful he doesn't overdo it — one of them is thinking of singling him out for special temple duty."

If they had been aware that the long bundle of clothing and provisions slung over Tharl's shoulder contained the energy gun he had produced last night, they would have been a deal less eager. But Belizuek was far away from the docks, and these were only human dupes.

Tharl came to rejoin them when they were securely aboard, wiping sweat from his face, and blushing faintly at Spartak's compliments.

"Too early for that, sir," he countered. "We haven't even cast off yet."

In one way at least he was right. That voyage was among the most dreadful experiences of Spartak's entire life. To be with these three or four hundred people who laughed and sang ribald songs while they passed canteens of precious wines and the typical Penwyr sour beer as they might on any festival excursion — then, to remember with a jolt the excuse for such jollification: the planned sacrifice of his brothers, including Vix, whom many of these people had served in the old days, whom they had cheered as the son of the late Warden and brother of Hodat the heir-apparent . . . that was like living a nightmare. And all the time Eunora was alert for some keen-eyed person to pierce his disguise.

The chances of his being betrayed receded somewhat when the word got about that he was a doctor, and a mother whose child was sensitive to seasickness came begging his help. The little boy recovered at once when Spartak tended him, and after that a shy succession of patients surrounded him, asking help and advice for an incredible range of complaints.

Spartak's fury burned inside him like a coal. When he left Asconel for Annanworld, there had been no one hungry, no one very sick, and certainly no one suffering from the deficiency diseases. Yet time and again when he examined those who now presented themselves, he saw that their need was not for drugs, but for soap and water and a proper diet.

Weeping sores. Ulcers. Gums sickly sweet with pus. Children's bones twisted into awkward curves. Eyes matted with a dirty yellow discharge. So the tale went on. More than once, as he was on the point of bursting out at some silly fool about the true reason for his condition, Eunora caught his eye and gave an almost imperceptible headshake, implying, "Don't! He'll go to the priest at once."

The priest — there was one aboard any passenger vessel on Asconel nowadays — came to Spartak in the end; that encounter was hardly to be avoided. He put a number of

curious questions which Spartak deftly dodged, trying to give the impression that the priest was making himself look ignorant by not knowing the answers already.

In the end the trick worked and the priest made off, embarrassed without being sure why.

It was established beyond a doubt that half the people who had set off from northern islands like Penwyr would never get to Gard in time, when they started to raise the traffic from the nearer ports the next day. The sea seemed to be crawling with passenger vessels. There were even skyboats overhead, the first Spartak had seen since his return. All were converging on Gard for the ceremony. Winter was behind them at this latitude; the sky was blue and the sun mild and warm.

The tremendous strain the influx of pilgrims put on the resources of Gard city worked in their favor. With boats crowding into the port and disembarkation reduced to a panicky rush down the gangplanks so that room could be made for the next vessel, the guards and priests who supervised the travellers could not hope to keep control.

Moreover, here was no poverty-stricken provincial town. Bucyon clearly liked his luxuries as much as anyone. And everything worked, to the wonder of the stranger children. Food was abundant, on quayside stalls and in the city's stores; gaudy posters, banners and streamers decorated the buildings for the great day tomorrow, and relic hawkers offered — when there were no priests in sight — such precious items as hairs from Bucyon's beard and Lydis's nail-clippings.

Spartak, taken in at first by this deception, was half-minded to buy one of the relics and put it under the microscope to see if Lydis's alleged mind-reading powers were due to a cellular mutation; then he realized these were frauds to trap the credulous.

His heart ached as he beheld his former home. His knuckles whitened on the handle of the medical case he carried, now much depleted after the voyage.

"If I could only get next to Bucyon!" he whispered.

"Not a chance," Tharl muttered, glancing around to make sure they were not overheard as they trudged, with thousands of others, toward the center of the city. Ahead, the streets were in full operation, and there were delighted squeals from the youngest children who had never seen a molecular-flow street before. "He's always guarded very strictly. And Lydis, who can read thoughts, never leaves his side."

"Where is the temple?" Spartak demanded.

"It used to be the Place of Grand Assembly," Tharl told him.

Spartak came to a decision, arranged a meeting-place with Tharl for later, and sent him off to find them a place to stay. Then he and Eunora went straight to the temple.

It had not been altered much to accommodate its change of function. Behind it loomed the dark shape of the Warden's palace, now

Bucyon's home. The Warden's chair had been moved forward to make room for a huge gilded dome. Inside there dwelt Belizuek: the original self of which all the local Belizuek's were only reflections, in Spartak's view.

The size of the dome took him aback. Either this Belizuek was a monster, or there were several layers of armour around him, in which case would even an energy gun . . .?

He checked himself. Before making any plans, he needed to get details of the planned ceremony. There was a gang of men at work assembling a high dais close to the Warden's chair; it only required a few friendly words and the flash of a five-circle coin to get the full program.

This dais was to be the place where Vix and Tiorin were displayed to any in the crowd who might doubt their identity. From it they would state their intention of entering voluntarily into the "full service" of Belizuek. Bucyon and Lydis would be present; they would leave the palace in ceremonial procession at such a time, reach the temple at such another time, begin the ritual at such another time . . .

Spartak seized on the crucial point that they would leave their groundcar at the far end of the horseshoe-shaped temple. He tipped their informant and returned thither. There were many idle sightseers around, so they attracted no special attention.

"I have it!" he whispered, and snapped his fingers. He shot a glance at Eunora. "Will it work?"

"I — I don't know." She was very pale. "Can you get Tharl to the right place with his gun?"

"I'm sure I can. I was raised in the Warden's palace, remember, and that dominates the far end of the Assembly. But am I asking too much of you?"

"I don't think so," Eunora murmured. "Until I meet Lydis face to face I can't be sure. But I had a lot of practice in dissembling back home. I think even to a mind-reader I *may* be able to tell a lie."

XXII

The great day, when the last traces of the old order would be wiped away forever as the late Warden's brothers acknowledged the dominion of Belizuek and entered freely into his full service, dawned mild and sunny, and grew rapidly hot.

Long before the scheduled time of the ceremony people were thronging into the streets. Those fortunate enough to view it in person crammed the horseshoe seating of the Place of Grand Assembly, where music and songs in honor of Belizuek whiled the time away, and the ordinary populace put on what they had left in the way of presentable clothing and made do with the public watch-screens and amateur tumblers fooling around in the gutters.

The dais was completed. Covered in gaudy banners, it stood waiting for the victims.

Punctually on schedule, Bucyon — gorgeous in ceremonial armour that shone chrome-bright and daz-

zling — entered his groundcar. Beside him, pale, very beautiful and dressed as always in a floor-long black gown, sat Lydis. The people disciplined their minds into adoring patterns, fearing the rumored talent which had brought her to her present eminance.

Everywhere the procession passed there were yells of delight and applause, and chanting in honor of Belizuek, and of Bucyon who had blessed Asconel by bringing him here. Occasionally a visitor from elsewhere on the planet, who remembered the old days well enough to have kindled a spark of envy at the continuing luxury of Gard contrasted with the poverty at home, shouted less fervently than the rest. But soon the pressure of anxiety lest he be discovered drove him to outbellow his neighbors.

It was a spectacle to dim the most vivid memory of the old days, anyhow: the guards, the priests in their most brilliant robes, and at the center the lovely Lydis and the handsome Bucyon, acknowledging the love of their subjects with an occasional gracious wave.

And were not the last hangers-on of the old order due to renounce their pretensions today?

Certain unscheduled events also took place.

Not long after the dignitaries began to fill their seats in the Assembly, a fat man in a front rank clapped his hand to his nape and looked to see if he had killed a stinging insect.

There was nothing on his palm.

Another minute or so, and he began to complain loudly to his neighbors that it was terribly hot. Sweat ran from his face. He fought for breath, loosening the neckband of his coat, and swore at the sun for beating down so fiercely. It was not long before he closed his eyes and began to breathe in enormous gasps. Alarmed, those around him sought help, and were relieved at the approach of a fair-bearded man who identified himself as a doctor.

Instructions were crisply issued to carry the fat man to shade, rest him and let him recover his spirits. That attended to, the fair-bearded man fell talking with those who had appealed for his aid.

It was entirely natural that as the arrival of Bucyon was signaled he should slip into the place the fat man had left vacant.

It had not all gone so smoothly. As he tensed to see Bucyon enter the vast stadium-like temple Spartak was vaguely surprised to think that he was here exactly as arranged. Yesterday afternoon, when he found that Tharl had been overanxious to please, and provided them with accommodation in a place he felt fit for a Warden's son, there had been a lot of trouble. Ultimately they had had to settle for the rooms after all — Gard was packed to overflowing with the pilgrims from overseas.

To the Big Dark with fears of appearing conspicuous, anyway. The short conversation he had had with those around him here had satisfied him that Bucyon did not rule wholly by the power of Belizuek. Here

gathered were men and women who were conscious traitors; they would never be called on for the full service of Belizuek! They were Bucyon's willing accomplices in the business of raping Asconel.

It was only to be expected. Bucyon's own forces — even if along with the priests you counted in the crews from a respectably sized spacefleet — wouldn't suffice to administer a population of nine hundred million, no matter how pliant.

But the proof of his suspicion made him feel sick.

At least they h[illegible]n't suspected him in their turn. He was acknowledged as a fit companion, a tribute to the glibness of his tongue and his courtly manners. Almost it seemed it was easier to conduct nefarious business in broad daylight than under the cover of night. The trouble they had had sneaking Tharl into the Warden's palace. With Eunora keeping watch for patrols so that they could dodge into shadow every time, they had still spent better than four hours getting Tharl inside.

Spartak's eyes strayed toward the palace. Was the man safe where he was supposed to be?

Tharl twisted himself into a marginally more comfortable position. The hot, clammy air from the discharge pipe of the air circulators coated his skin with dirty moisture. But he had gloves, and his hands would not slip on the switches of his gun. Lovingly he sighted it for the hundredth time on the distant golden dome shielding the alien monster Belizuek.

He felt himself a changed person since the moment he met Spartak and his brothers. He had been given back his sense of purpose in life. He had been offered a chance to avenge the slaughter of his wife and son.

He lowered the gun to a resting position and gave a sigh of contentment. Nothing else mattered. He was still bruised from a fall he had taken trying to get up the interior of this ventilation pipe,, still anxious about the noise he'd made which might have alarmed a guard — but apparently had not — and both hungry and tired into the bargain. To the Big Dark with such complaints! He had the important thing: a job to do.

Once more he lifted the gun and peered through its telescope. His heart quickened. Spartak was in position among the dignitaries on the steeply banked seating. It couldn't be much longer now.

If only the little girl played her part —!

The next in the sequence of unscheduled events didn't come until Bucyon and Lydis were getting down from their groundcar. The archpriest Shry — a curiously horrible figure, his back enormously bulging with some soft outgrowth of tissue — came to greet them. Bands played. The watchers cheered.

Under the arms of the guards who held back the crowd, a little girl slipped like an eel, clutching a bunch of flowers. A cry of alarm went up.

Guards leveled their guns. Then they hesitated, seeing how tiny she was, how well-scrubbed and attractive in her too-small, faded frock, and how innocuous the posy that she now shyly offered to Bucyon.

The tryant scowled for a second, wondering who had arranged this "spontaneous" gesture of affection and why he had not been warned. He glanced at Lydis, who was frowning. But when after some seconds she did not tell him to desist, he put on a smile and accepted the flowers, afterward patting the girl's head.

She was by now almost overcome by the strain of her great moment, and when Bucyon had gone on she slipped out of sight. Under one of the temporary stands erected to watch the procession she keeled over and slept for more than half an hour.

The posy had contained the last of Spartak's precious supply of the drug with which he had restored her to sanity. Handing it to Bucyon, she had triggered an injector that shot the entire dose into the fleshy ball of his thumb.

And all the time she had slid away from the probing of Lydis and Shry. To resist them, to lie and deceive them for about ninety seconds, had cost her every ounce of her energy, so that when she fell down in a faint she knew neither where she was nor whether she would ever wake up.

Spartak felt a lurching sensation of relief. Bucyon was coming up the main aisle of the Assembly holding the posy he had given to Eunora. Provided the injector hadn't misfired, he was going to be extremely tractable . . .

And that, presumably, was Shry. Spartak shivered as he studied the gross misshapen form of the archpriest. Yet Lydis found nothing distasteful in him; she accepted his arm as he helped her to her chair to one side of and behind the Warden's — which Bucyon sank into. Fanfares made the very sky resound, and were themselves drowned by the bellows of applause that issued from the crowd.

Then they brought Vix and Tiorin down the aisle.

Silence fell, for which Spartak was eternally grateful. He ached to see his brothers treated thus. Their disguises had been stripped, their hair restored to its original flaming red and they were clad in plain white suits, with their feet bare in an age-old penitential gesture.

And there was apparently no sham about Bucyon's claim that they were to sacrifice themselves voluntarily. They were neither bound nor very closely guarded. And as they came down the long aisle they held their heads high and walked like heroes.

The horrifying idea struck him that if they spotted him they would feel it an honor to give him away. He cursed not having found time to change his appearance once again, and made what shift he could to hide his face behind a raised hand.

But they passed on, to take their places on the altar-like dais. All was in readiness.

The only explanation he could think of for their obvious willingness to come to their own funeral was that Belizuek's emanations were already in control of their minds. And indeed, now he turned his attention to it, Spartak thought he could feel the same awe-inspiring presence which had impressed the Penwyr congregation.

For a moment, indeed, it tempted him to yield, seeming to say, "Fool! Even if Belizuek is in truth a living creature, is he not the last of a line greater than the human race — those squabbling borrowers of another's power?"

And further: "What can I do to thwart the destiny of this whole planet? I, one man, with a feeble plan that depends on a dozen outrageous coincidences to succeed!"

He hoped Tharl was going to be on time.

People had recognized Vix and Tiorin, and their faces reflected their complete conviction about Bucyon's claims. He really did have them here; they really were about to enter Belizuek's service. Some, especially those near Spartak, had harbored doubts till this very last moment. Now they were mentally congratulating themselves on having thrown in their lot with the winning party.

Shry stepped to the front of the dais and began to address the crowd in a whining bleat of a voice, describing the event they all knew they were about to witness. But no one complained; behind the words there slowly grew the sense of Belizuek's presence, the aura of a master of galaxies, the sense of being in a supernatural creature's power.

Spartak sweated and fidgeted. He had told Tharl to fire arbitrarily five minutes after the commencement of the ceremony. Never had five minutes been so long! Already the waves of mental control were battering his deafness; most of the crowd had succumbed willingly and instantly.

Something must have gone wrong. Tharl must have been discovered.

The plan was a failure. Asconel was doomed and he with it.

Shry reached the climax of his introduction, turned his twisted body and threw up an arm in a dramatic gesture towards Tiorin and Vix —

And with impeccable theatrical timing, Tharl loosed the first of his energy bolts against the golden dome enclosing Belizuek.

XXIII

The second bolt followed, then the third, fourth and fifth, with the impersonal regularity of a clock's ticking. And on the fifth the golden dome was broached.

A noise like a scream was heard, half with the ears, half with the mind, and a foul stink oozed out over the crowd. It reminded Spartak of the stench from mud exposed by an exceptionally low tide at the mouth of a river much used for the disposal of sewage.

Paralysis overtook everyone present for the space of long seconds — except himself.

The first shot had brought him

to his feet. Before the last had struck, he had fought his way down the nearest transverse aisle and was clambering over the barrier separating the seats from the longitudinal aisle up which his brothers had so lately been marched on show.

His head was ringing with both sound and soundless cries: the yells of dismay that had now broken out among the crowd, the incoherent jabbering of orders to the guards, something being shrieked in a high panicky voice by the woman Lydis. All these were commonplace reactions to what had happened. But overlying them, permeating the very air, was a sudden terrible sense of doom, the emanation from Belizuek's mind as his body was exposed to the oxygen-rich air of this planet preferred by men.

Spartak thought of the tens of millennia through which Belizuek's species had used up the atmospheres of their old worlds, adapting little by little, growing used with every passing generation to a higher concentration of carbon dioxide, a lower percentage of available oxygen, until the contact of this rawer air was like acid poured on naked flesh.

But that didn't matter right now. For the present he had the advantage of knowing what had happened. It was a slender weapon to offer against Bucyon's armor, but he had to make the most of it.

He glanced at Vix and Tiorin. They were standing bewildered, blinking at each other and the familiar Place of Grand Assembly, like men newly woken from a bad dream. But it would take Belizeuk a while to die, and until he did die, the invisible talons would remain fast on their minds.

Now — action!

Spartak drew himself up to his full height and confronted the man who till this morning had been only a name to him — Bucyon, who had come from space to rape and ruin a beautiful world in the name of an obscene monster. And who now, if he was human, must be open for mastery by the first who seized control of him.

"Bucyon!" Spartak bellowed, hands cupped around his mouth. The name seemed to plough through the oppressive mental aura like an energy bolt, leaving a visible track of white steam. "Bucyon, *speak to your people!*"

Spartak had spent long on his choice of phrase. That was his ultimate selection: a command both innocuous and deadly.

Shry had gone wailing to see what harm was done to the golden dome. Half out of sight of Spartak, he was waving his arms frantically, trying to make guards and other priests come to him and help repair the damage. But the woman Lydis — doubtless aware of the drug now coursing through Bucyon's body — had jerked to her feet and now stood rockstill, her eyes burning Spartak.

The call he had uttered took effect. Hoping for some guidance from Belizuek's human deputy, the crowd quieted, the guards tensed for anticipated orders, the priests hesitated as they made to obey Shry's beckoning signals.

"Speak to your people, the people of Asconel!" Spartak shouted again. "Tell them — *what is Belizuek?"*

But he was watching Lydis, not Bucyon, and was prepared when she gasped and tried to clutch at the big man's arm, wanting to prevent the betrayal which he could not help because the drug compelled him to total honesty.

Spartak jumped forward, hurling himself at the overhang of the dais and rolling onto its boards like a high-jumper clearing a difficult mark. As he moved, he was still calling: "Bucyon, Bucyon, tell them, tell them — the people of Asconel want to hear from you! *Tell them about Belizuek!"*

On the last breathless yell he was at Bucyon's side, and his shoulder slammed against Lydis's, heedless of her sex. Fragile as a foamed dummy, she staggered back and fell against the chair from which she had risen, and remained dazed for a few precious moments during which Spartak alone had Bucyon's ear.

The drug took over his will, and he spoke helplessly to the attentive audience.

"Belizuek is the last survivor of the species that ruled the galaxy before man."

The oppressive aura of hate and desperation redoubled its intensity, as if a storm cloud had settled over the Assembly. Spartak risked a glance behind him, fearing that Shry might have contrived to effect repairs.

"He's a material creature, isn't he?" he shouted. "Not a mystical spirit! Not a supernatural being! But a creature that had to feed and breathe as we do!"

"Yes!" Bucyon agreed, helpless to deny it.

"And that can be killed as we can!"

"Yes!"

Already the impact of this revelation was having its effect among the crowd. Those who had believed otherwise were pale with dismay; the conscious traitors who had never been duped were yet paler, for some of them thought they recognized a familiar countenance behind the new beard on Spartak's face, despite the dyeing of his hair.

"Why is he still with us, when the rest of his kind have gone? Tell them that!"

"They cast him out," Bucyon answered. "They exiled him to the world called Brinze, where men found him."

"Why?"

"They said it was because he was insane!" Spittle was gathering on the corners of Bucyon's mouth and running down into his beard. His eyes were rimmed white as he strove and failed to stop his tongue from speaking.

"Ah, and he was supposed to be immortal, wasn't he?" Spartak thundered. "And he's not! One breath of Asconel's clean clean sweet air, and he's dying!"

But so slowly! Was there not another charge in Tharl's gun, to burn directly into Belizuek's substance? Spartak could feel the maddened

will to survive which the creature was now broadcasting like raw energy, and so too could everyone else. In the living brains of those who surrounded him, human and alien thought were locked into terrible conflict, and —

And it stopped.

Exactly as though the sun had come out, the sense of death and disaster ceased, and Spartak allowed himself to hope for victory. He half-turned, and was met by a scream from the cripple Shry.

"Belizuek lives! It's only the servant who's died — burned out — his brain failed! Bring the captives over here!"

Guards, still blindly obedient to Shry's command, made for the passively waiting Vix and Tiorin.

"Tell them to stop!" Spartak gasped at Bucyon.

But Lydis was on her feet, thrusting herself between her overlord and the man who had dared to stand against him.

"No!" she hissed, so close to Spartak that tiny drops flew from her rage-contorted mouth and struck his cheek. "Belizuek is All! Belizuek is the Master! Belizuek was before the galaxy was!"

Time froze. The guards were poised to pinion Vix and Tiorin, the people were still too confused to act, and he could say nothing. Even crippled by the breach in his protective dome, there was no knowing what Belizuek could do if he were given a fresh victim to serve as a telepathic link between himself and his slaves.

An idea? A glimmer of hope? Spartak pushed Lydis aside roughly and addressed Bucyon once more. "Tell the people what Belizuek does with his servants! Say what becomes of those who go behind the screen into his presence!"

"He won't answer," Lydis spat. "Your drug has spent itself, and I control his mind. Guards! Guards!"

Indeed, Bucyon's face had taken on the vacant look of an idiot. He stood swaying and gazing out over the Assembly without seeing it.

A sense of defeat which had nothing to do with Belizuek's emanations overcame Spartak. The guards closed on his brothers, Lydis laughed madly in triumph —

And Tharl let go the last charge from his energy gun.

Like a white-hot steel bar it blazed down toward the rent in the golden dome.

In the final yard of its passage it speared Shry and turned him into a staggering horror wrapped in flame. Beyond him, only half spent on such a petty target, it burned deep, deep into the vitals of Belizuek, and Lydis screamed as though the pain were hers alone.

A unison shock raced through the crowd. The guards about to seize the captives turned. The priests cried out in terror, Spartak in relief.

Then Vix moved.

He shook himself as though rousing from a long sleep, clubbed both fists together and brought them up into the kidneys of the guard who would have seized him. The man gave a yell of agony and clap-

ped his hands to the seat of the pain. Vix reached past him and took his sidearm and his sword in simultaneous precise movements. The sidearm he thrust into Tiorin's hand as the other man also came to himself, and without a pause jabbed the sword's point home in the exposed neck of the disarmed guard.

He opened his throat in a cry which had not been heard since Bucyon usurped the Warden's chair. It was like turning back the pages of the past.

"For Ascone-e-e-*el*!"

And he was away.

Spartak was giddy with the speed of it. His eyes could not follow the instant blur that his half-brother became, a red-topped living torch of disaster for those who stood in his way. Behind, calmer, Tiorin weighed the gun he had suddenly acquired, then with a thoughtful look raised and aimed it. A bolt scattered the priests from around the golden dome, sending them tumbling off the edge of its raised platform. Another dispersed those muddled guards who thought to come to the rescue of their fellows. Another discouraged a group of conscious traitors who were trying to get out of the far end of the Assembly.

But by then Vix had cleared a path all the way to Spartak's side, and five men lay coughing the blood which smeared his blade. He clapped Spartak on the arm and yelled at him. "A miracle, brother, a miracle! I love you for it!"

And he was after Bucyon himself, the sword swinging high to split the bemused usurper's skull.

"Stop!" Spartak cried. "He's no more than a booby now — his mind's gone!"

"Let the people see!" Vix answered savagely, and struck.

With that final blow, even before Bucyon toppled headlong, the berserk madness left him. In its place, there was a cold white fury that made Spartak shiver as he looked on it.

Tiorin came forward to stand with his brothers. No one lifted a hand to prevent him.

"I'm Vix of Asconel!" Vix roared at the frightened people. "Here's Tiorin, your rightful Warden! Here's Spartak our brother to whom we owe our deliverance and *yours!*" He pointed with his sword, and the blade dripped red.

"And here's the last of those who led you by the nose!" Vix bellowed. "The woman Lydis who betrayed my brother!"

He whirled, and was quick enough to grasp her by the robe as she made to flee. The robe tore, fell away, exposed her maggot-pale body to the pitiless glare of the noontide sun.

There was utter silence. Spartak felt nausea rise to choke his throat.

Lydis was not a human mutant, accidentally gifted with the power to read minds.

She was a tool of Belizuek. And instead of breasts on the front of her torso, she had a black pulsating growth that squirmed and leaked a stinking ichor as it followed its alien parent into the doorway of death.

The crowd saw. The crowd rose

up, and panicked, and fled, and left the brothers to their solitary triumph.

XXIV

They were together again, in the Warden's suite of the palace: the brothers, and those who had most signally served Asconel during its time of terror, among whom were Tharl and Eunora. The mutant girl sat a little apart, clutching in both hands a big cup of sweet fruit-juice, while the men relaxed over wine of Asconel's finest vintage. Tharl had taken a place next to her, as a symbol of apology for the way he had first reacted to the news of her talent.

"That's what turned the tide for us," Spartak murmured, thinking of the way Lydis's robe had fluttered to the ground.

"Well, obviously," Tiorin agreed from the head of the table around which they had gathered. "It turned my stomach, I tell you frankly. And I'd already begun to suspect something of the sort."

"But how could Hodat not have known?" Vix snapped.

Tharl cleared his throat. "I've been making some inquiries. If you'll forgive my admitting that I probed into the private affairs of your family . . . ?"

"Go on," said Spartak. "Our private affairs are now of public interest."

"Well put, sir. In fact, what turned up was to your late brother's great credit. There was no foundation for the common gossip about a liaison between him and Lydis. He'd stuck strictly to his original intention of marrying a woman who'd advantage Asconel's future by allying us with some other prosperous world. He was deluded into believing that Lydis's mind-reading was — well — at his service, so to speak, and he flattered and bribed her to make her stay on his side."

"Where did the marriage story get started, then?" Tiorin asked.

"Who can say?" Tharl shrugged. "Perhaps she planted the rumor herself. We'll never know now."

True enough. The death of her alien parasite had killed her within an hour.

"Speaking of things to people's credit," Tiorin murmured, "I don't believe I ever got around to complimenting you, Eunora. I'm sure Spartak and Vix have stood deputy for me, but now things are less hectic than they were, I must thank you. And ask you something, too."

He paused. Everyone grinned broadly. They had become perfectly accustomed to Eunora's talent, and the last trace of the Empire's anti-mutant policy had faded even from Tharl's mind.

"How I withstood the probing of both Lydis and Shry while I was giving the flowers to Bucyon," Eunora nodded. I don't think I shall ever know. All I remember is the sense of shock which I had when I realized the two things I hadn't known beforehand: first, that Lydis was directly in contact with Belizuek, and second, that Shry was also, but far more — more firmly."

"The parasitic growth on his back," Spartak put in, "must have weighed as much as he did."

"And felt like it," Eunora agreed grimly. "All I can say is that when I reacted to the shock, I must have forced myself into the identity I'd taken on I was just a simple-minded little girl, overawed at being in the great man's presence, scared at my own daring in offering him the flowers . . . I blanked out until I came to under the stand half an hour later, and then I had to hide to keep out of the way of all the people who were fleeing from this final horror, the exposure of Lydis."

"But that's what turned the tide, as I said," Spartak repeated. "Even with Belizuek dying, and cut off from mental contact with his slaves; even with Bucyon killed in front of them, there were people in that crowd who'd staked their futures on Bucyon and to the Big Dark with the rest of the citizens. Let 'em rot!"

Tiorin's face darkened. "Don't I know it! Most of them came fawning to me directly, saying didn't I want the cooperation of those who had been administering the planet under Bucyon because they knew all the ropes now . . . Some of them were men I'd known in father's day, too. And of course, a lot more of them tried to bribe their way offworld. But we caught most of them, I think."

"Excuse me, sirs," Tharl put in diffidently. "Something I've been wondering . . . How *was* it that killing the — the main Belizuek got rid of all the others so easily?"

"Hmmm?" Spartak turned his head. "Oh, yes. I wasn't absolutely right in what I told you back at Penwyr, but nearly so. Remember I told you that Belizuek was insane, and especially afraid of competition, even from his own derived images?"

Tharl nodded, frowning with concentration but making a gallant effort to follow Spartak's exposition.

"For fear that one of his — ah — duplicates should achieve independence and usurp his uniqueness, he'd made sure the mental linkage between them was very tight. It proved too tight. The effect of death on the central organism was reflected in a psychic paralysis of all the others. They could have existed as separate entities — but he'd forbidden them to."

He shrugged, and Tharl muttered thanks.

"I'll tell you something, sir," he added after a moment. "You came to me later and congratulated me on the uncanny rightness of the timing for the last bolt I fired, yes?"

"Agreed!" Tiorin said warmly. "It was a real crisis point —"

"Well, sir," Tharl broke in, looking unaccountably depressed, "I'd saved that bolt, for a mixture of all sorts of reasons. First I was going to save it for myself. Then I thought, if I'm discovered, all I need do is jump down this shaft I'm in — a fall of a hundred-odd feet into a rockhard floor should finish me off. So instead I saved it in case you were wrong about the way to kill Belizuek. I figured I could at least kill Bucyon if he

went through with his plan to sacrifice you."

"But you fired again before I struck Bucyon down," Vix objected.

"Yes, sir. I thought and thought, and for a long time I was worried because Spartak was standing so close to Bucyon, I couldn't get a clear shot. Then finally I decided it was taking too long for things to settle down. I couldn't have completed the job. And there was a clear shot at Shry, who was after all Belizuek's chief spokesman and chaplain to Bucyon and all the rest of it. I figured if Belizuek was already dead, he'd be in a really frantic state, and he wasn't — he was calling people up to help him, and peering into the hole my bolts had made, as I could see clearly through the telescope on my gun . . . So I said, 'What's more likely to put a stiff dose of fear in their guts than to see Belizuek's best-beloved shriveled like a leaf in a fire?' And I let the last bolt go."

"To which decision we owe the fact that we're here now," Tiorin said soberly.

"May I ask a question, Warden?" Tharl said formally.

"Go ahead."

"Are your brothers going to stay here now? I feel Asconel needs them still."

Tiorin glanced at the other two, inviting them to speak for themselves.

"No," Vix said gruffly, and got to his feet. He paced across to the window and stood with his back to them as he went on. "No, a fighting man is a center of discord on a peaceful world, and that's what Asconel is going to be from now on. I'll away back to my roving. And — and there's something else, too."

He didn't elaborate, but neither of his brothers had to ask what he meant. Vineta had died during the day following their capture by the priests from the injuries sustained when she was shot down. And for the first time in his life, the loss of one of his women had touched his heart. He could not bear to remain on the world where Vineta had died.

"You, Spartak?" Tiorin said, to distract them from the vaguely embarrassed silence that followed.

"No, I shan't stay here either," Spartak said at length. "Oh, I'll not be leaving till I'm sure Asconel is on the proper orbit again, but in a year or so I'll say farewell."

"I shall regret your loss," Tiorin said quietly. "But as you wish. Back to your studies on Annanworld, then?"

"Annanworld? Oh no." Spartak gave a smile that made him look briefly like a wild beast.

"Why not?" Vix demanded, surprised. He turned away from the window to face them again. "The way I understood it, your order would take you back if you didn't soil your hands with violence while you were away. And you didn't. Everything you did to help overthrow Bucyon was of the nature of — well — of scheming rather than fighting. Or are they so super-subtle

they'd define what you did to him as violence?"

"No, we distinguish force from violence, and force is occasionally unavoidable . . . But why should I saw 'we'?" Spartak leaned back in his chair. "I'm not returning. I'm sure of that.

"You see, after much cogitation I've come to a conclusion. My Superior, Father Erton, was half right as well as half wrong when he warned me against leaving for Asconel. The rightness lay in his saying that to stand against the — what do they call it? — the onset of the Long Night was beyond any man's powers. What we've done here on Asconel is good, and worth it. But it's not turned the tide of galactic decline, has it? Only built an island around which the tide will flow. Perhaps the clearest warning lies in the fact that one mentally sick survivor of a race which grew weary and departed before we left our original system could bring one of our finest planets into total subjugation.

"I'm going to look for the seeds of the first truly human galactic conquest. I'm going to the rim, to the worlds where for ten thousand years the Empire shipped its mutants and its misfits, and where rumor says men — yes, men, for they're born of human loins — build their own starships instead of borrowing the leavings of another species. I don't know exactly where to make for, but a good start might be to resume our interrupted journey to Nylock. Hm, Eunora?" He shot a twinkling grin at the mutant girl.

"And when I find someone in a position to do something, I shall report on the existence of a world called Brinze. For the priests of Belizuek were human too, though they'd sold their birthright and their power of free thought. And before I die I hope to see the people there set at liberty as those of Asconel have already been."

The words died in the silent room. Finally Vix went to Spartak's side and stood gazing down at him.

"You're right," he said. "And if you want a ship and a pilot, say the word!" He put out his hand.

END

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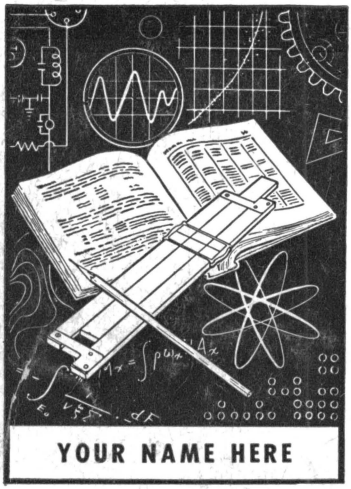

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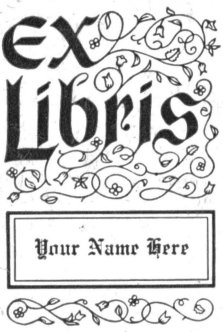

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