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Cover by WENZEL

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TALK, TALK, TALK

Once upon a time we were noted for making pronouncements about what writers really should be doing with their time. "There are two kinds of writers," we used to say. "The kind who write, and the kind who talk. The kind who talk are a lot wittier and brighter and better company; but the kind who write are the ones to pay attention to — after all, that's the name of the game." And then we smugly pointed out that we were The Kind Who Wrote.

Candor compels us to announce that this is no longer entirely true. Over the past few years we've been doing a whale of a lot of talking — on radio and on television, to fan groups and scientific groups and management associations and literary clubs and churches and temples and . . . well, you name it, we've done it, our motto has become, Have Mouth, Will Travel.

This is not the kind of news bul-

letin that we ordinarily take up your time with in these pages, but it has its interesting aspects. You know — what in the world does a science-fiction writer have to say to, for instance, the American Management Association or the Porcelain Enamel Institute?

Glad you asked the question. Here's the answer:

What we tell the various business, professional and other groups is basically a sort of science-fiction story. We start with what is now happening in science and society; we extrapolate with a free hand; and we show what the world may be like for them, and for all of us, over the next few decades or centuries.

Essentially what we tell them is a science-fiction story without plot or characters. And most of the time there is a discussion period, or at least a few questions passed up by

the Program Committee from the floor, and so we get some sort of idea of what the audiences gain from all this; and, curiously enough, the things that interest them are very much the things that interest us died-in-the-wool fans. Life on other worlds? They're as curious about it as we are. Robots and androids? They're quite as intrigued as we about the idea of creating artificial intelligences to help us out — or keep us company. If the ten or twenty thousand people we've talked to in the flesh in recent times are a fair sample, we don't have any monopoly in curiosity about the future.

And yet clearly there's some kind of a difference between Them and Us. What can it be?

For one thing, there are a lot more of Them than there are of Us. Taking the United States alone for the moment, there's a gross population of some 200,000,000, of whom maybe a hundred thousand will read any given magazine more or less frequently, and perhaps five times as many will read whatever magazine or book is handy at the rate of one a month or thereabouts, and perhaps ten times as many will pick up *Galaxy* or the latest Heinlein novel once or twice a year. There are really only about a million conscious science-fiction readers in the United States (not counting that larger number who are willing to read it as long as nobody tells them what it is) . . .

so our total representation in the populace is maybe a half of one per cent.

But judging from our contacts with the 99½% majority, we should be reaching at least half of them — or rather, half of that portion of them able to read and write fluently in the English language, anyway. Why are so many people turned off to science fiction? — when really, it's the kind of thing they're interested in, did they but know it?

That isn't a rhetorical question. If anyone has the answer, we'd be glad to know it. Because it's all very well to be a proud but tiny elite; but it's even more fun to be the advance guard of an enormous new movement; and apart from what good it would do *us* to have millions of new converts to sf, think of what good it would do *them*. To the extent that science fiction is more than fun, it is an authentic help at the vital task of being ready for tomorrow when it comes . . . and tomorrow is coming very fast for all of us. We all need every bit of advance warning we can get; and all the TV documentaries and *Life-Time-Newsweek* takeouts don't compare with the immediacy we get when we project *ourselves* into the future in a science-fiction story.

Must be some way to turn Them on. Any ideas?

— THE EDITOR



THE SOFT WEAPON

by LARRY NIVEN

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

*The Outsiders were a billion years
dead, but some of their weaponry
survived — and could destroy Man!*

I

Logically Jason Papandreou should have taken the *Court Jester* straight home to Jinx. But —

He'd seen a queer star once.

He'd been single then, a gunner volunteer on one of Earth's war-

ships during the last stages of the last kzinti war. The war had been highly unequal in Earth's favor. Kzinti fight gallantly and ferociously and with no concept of mercy, and they always take on several times as much as they can handle.

Earth's ships had pushed the kzinti back out of human space, then pushed a little further, annexing two kzinti worlds for punitive damages. The fleets had turned for home. But Jason's captain had altered course to give his crew what might be their last chance to see Beta Lyrae.

Now, decades later, Jason, his wife and their single alien passenger were rattling around in a ship built for ten times their number. Anne-Marie's curiosity was driving her up the walls with the frustration of not being able to open the stasis box in the forward locker. Nessus the mad puppeteer had taken to spending all his time in his room, hovering motionless and morose between the sleeping plates. Jinx was still several weeks away.

Clearly a diversion was in order.

Beta Lyrae. A six degree shift in course would do it.

Anne-Marie glared at the locker containing the stasis box. "Isn't there *any* way to open it?"

Jason didn't answer. His whole attention was on the mass indicator, the transparent ball in which a green radial line was growing toward the surface. Growing and splitting.

"Jay?"

"We can't open it, Anne. We don't have the equipment to break a stasis field. It's illegal anyway."

Almost time. The radial double line must not grow too long. When a working hyperdrive gets too deep into a gravity well, it disappears.

"Think they'll tell us what's inside?"

"Sure, unless it's a new weapon."

"With our luck it will be. Jay, nobody's ever found a stasis box that shape before. It's bound to be something new. The Institute is likely to sit on it for years and years. — Whup! Jay, what are you *doing*?"

"Dropping out of hyperspace."

"You might warn a lady." She wrapped both arms around her midsection, apparently making sure everything was still there.

"Lady, why don't you have a look out that side window?"

"What for?"

Jason merely looked smug. His wife, knowing she would get no other answer, got up and undogged the cover. It was not unusual for a pilot to drop-out in the depths of interstellar space. Weeks of looking at the blind-spot appearance of hyperspace could wear on the best of nerves.

She stood at the window, a tall, slender brunette in a glowing green falling jumper. A Wunderlander she had been, of the willowy low-gravity type rather than the fat, balloon-like low-gravity type, until Jason Papandreou had dropped out of the sky to add her to his collection of girls in every port. It hadn't worked out that way. In the first year of marriage she had learned space and the *Court Jester* inside out, until she was doubly indispensable. Jay, Anne, Jester, all one independent organism.

And she thought she'd seen everything. But she hadn't seen this! Grinning, Jason waited for her reaction.

"Jay, it's *gorgeous*! What is *it*?"

Jason moved up to circle her waist with one arm. She'd put on weight in the last year, muscle weight, from moving in heavier gravities. He looked out around her shoulder . . . and thought of smoke.

There was smoke across the sky, a trail of red smoke wound in a tight spiral coil. At the center of the coil was the source of the fire. A double star. One member was violet-white, a flame to brand holes in a human retina, its force held in check by the polarized window. The companion was small and yellow. They seemed to burn inches apart, so close that their masses had pulled them both into flattened eggs, so close that a red belt of lesser flame looped around them to link their bulging equators together. The belt was hydrogen, still mating in fusion fire, pulled loose from the stellar surfaces by two gravitational wells in conflict.

The gravity war did more than that. It sent a loose end of the red belt flailing away, away and out in a burning maypole spiral that expanded from flame-red to smoke-red, bracketing the sky and painting a spiral path of stars deep red across half the universe.

"They call it Beta Lyrae," said Jason. "I was here once before, back when I was free and happy. Mph. Hasn't changed much."

"Well, no."

"Now don't you take all this for granted. How long do you think those twins can keep throwing hydrogen away? I give it a million years, and then, pft! No more Beta Lyrae."

"Pity. We'd better hurry and wake Nessus before it disappears."

The being they called Nessus would not have opened his door for them.

Puppeteers were gregarious even among alien species. They'd had to be. For at least tens of thousands of years the puppeteers had ruled a trade empire which included all the races within the sixty-light-year sphere men called Known Space and additional unknown regions whose extent could not be guessed. As innate cowards the puppeteers had to get along with everyone. And Nessus too was usually gregarious. But Nessus was mad.

Nessus was cursed with courage.

In a puppeteer courage is a symptom of insanity. As usual there were other symptoms, other peripheral indications of the central disorder. Nessus was now in the depressive stage of a manic-depressive cycle.

Luckily the depression had not hit him until his business with the Outsiders was over. In the manic stage he had been fun. He had spent every night in a different stateroom. He had charcoal-drawn cartoons which now hung in the astro-gation room, cartoons which Jason could hardly believe were drawn by a puppeteer. Humor is generally linked to an interrupted defense mechanism. Puppeteers weren't supposed to have a sense of humor. But now Nessus spent all his time in one room. He wanted to see nobody. There was one thing he might open his door for.

Jason moved to the control board and pushed the panic button.

The alarm was a repeated recording of a woman's scream. It should have brought the puppeteer galloping in as if the angel of death were at his heel. But he trotted through the door seconds later than he should have. His flat, brainless heads surveyed the control room for signs of damage.

The first man to see a puppeteer had done so during a Campish revival of *Time for Beany* reruns. He had come running back to the scout ship, breathless and terrified, screaming, "Take off! The planet's full of monsters!"

"Whatta they look like?"

"Like a three-legged centaur with two Cecil the Seasick Sea Serpent puppets on its hands, and no head."

"Take a pill, Pierson. You're drunk."

Pierson's Puppeteer is a sentient herbivore whose brain is housed in a bony bulge between the two long, flexible necks. The heads at the ends of those necks are mostly jaws, furnished with flexible lips and tongues. If a man had jaw-muscle strength in his grip and the senses of taste and smell in his fingertips, his hands would be as good at tool-building as a puppeteer's mouth. A flowing brown mane covers the cranial bulge and runs in a strip along the spine to the hind hip.

Nessus was an atypical puppeteer. His mane was straggly and unkept. It should have been twisted, brushed and tied in a manner to show his status in puppeteer society. But it

showed no status at all. Perhaps this was appropriate. There was no puppeteer society. The puppeteers had apparently left the galaxy en masse some twelve years ago, leaving behind only their insane and their genetically deficient.

"What is wrong?" asked Nessus.

"There's nothing wrong," said Jason.

Anne-Marie said, "Have a look out the window. This window."

Their employer obediently moved to the window. He happened to stop just next to one of the cartoons he'd drawn while in the manic phase, and Jason, looking from the puppeteer to the cartoon, found it more difficult than ever to associate the two.

The cartoon showed two human gods. Only the lighting and the proportions showed that they were gods. Otherwise they were as individually human as a very good human artist could have drawn them. One, a child just about to become a teenager, was holding the galaxy in his hands. He wore a very strange grin as he looked down at the glowing multicolored spiral. The other figure, a disgruntled patriarch with flowing white hair and beard, was saying, "All right, now that you've had your little joke . . ."

Nessus claimed it was an attempt to imitate human humor. Maybe. Would an insane puppeteer develop a sense of humor?

Nessus (his real name sounded like a car crash set to music) was insane. There were circumstances under which he would actually risk his

life. But the sudden puppeteer exodus had left a myriad of broken promises made to a dozen sentient races. The puppeteers had left Nessus and his fellow exiles with money to straighten things out. So Nessus had rented the *Court Jester*, rented all twelve staterooms, and gone out to the furthest edge of known space to deal with a ship of the Outsiders.

"I recognize this star," he said now. "Amazing. I really should have suggested this stop myself. Had I not been so depressed I certainly would have. Thank you, Jason."

"My pleasure, sir." Jason Papan-dreou really sounded like he'd invented the gaudy display just to cheer up a down-in-the-mouths puppeteer. Nessus cocked a sardonic head at him, and he hastily added, "We'll be on our way again whenever you're ready."

"I'll scan with deep-radar," Anne-Marie said helpfully.

Jason laughed. "Can you imagine how many ships must have scanned this system already?"

"Just for luck."

A moment later there was a Beep. Anne-Marie yelped.

Jason said, "I don't believe it."

"Two in one trip!" his wife caroled. "Jay, that's some sort of record!"

It was. Using deep-radar had been more of a habit than anything else. A deep-radar on high setting was an easy way to find Slaver stasis boxes, since only stasis fields and neutron stars would reflect a hyperwave pulse. But Beta Lyrae *must* have been searched many times before. Searching was traditional.

Nessus turned from the window. "I suggest that we locate the box, then leave it. You may send a friend for it."

Jason stared. "Leave it? Are you kidding?"

"It is an anomaly. Such a box should have been found long since. It has no reason to be here in the first place. Beta Lyrae probably did not exist a billion and a half years ago. Why then would the Slavers have come here?"

"War. They might have been running from a tnuclip fleet."

Anne-Marie was sweeping the deep-radar in a narrow beam, following the smoky spiral, searching for the tiny node of stasis her first pulse had found.

"You hired my ship," Jason said abruptly. "If you order me to go on, I'll do it."

"I will not. Your species has come a long way in a short time. If you do not have prudence, you have some workable substitute."

"There it is," said Anne-Marie. "Look, Jay. A little icy blob of a world a couple of billion miles out."

Jason looked. "Shouldn't be any problem. All right, I'll take us down."

Nessus said nothing. He seemed alert enough, but without nervousness and general excitability that would have meant the onset of his manic stage. At least Beta Lyrae had cured his depression.

II

The *Traitor's Claw* was under the ice. Ice showed dark and deep

outside her hexagonal ports. In lieu of sight her crew used a mechanical sense like a cross between radar and X-ray vision. The universe showed on her screens as a series of transparent images superimposed: a shadow show.

Four kzinti watched a blob-shaped image sink slowly through other images, come to a stop at a point no different from any other.

"Chuft-Captain, they're down," said Flyer.

"Of course they're down." Chuft-Captain spoke without heat. "Telepath, how many are there?"

"Two human." There was a quiet, self-hating resignation in the Telepath's speech. His tone became disgust as he added, "And a puppeteer."

"Odd. That's a passenger ship. A puppeteer couldn't need all that room."

"I sense only their presence, Chuft-Captain." Telepath was pointedly reminding him that he had not yet taken the drug. He would do so only if ordered. Without an injection of treated extract of sthondat lymph his powers were low. Little more than the knack for making an accurate guess.

"One human has left the ship," said Flyer. "No, two humans."

"Slaverstudent, initiate hostilities. Assume the puppeteer will stay safely inside."

The planet was no bigger than Earth's moon. Her faint hydrogen atmosphere must have been regularly renewed as the spiral streamer whipped across her orbit. She was

in the plane of the hydrogen spiral, which now showed as a glowing red smoke trail cutting the night sky into two unequal parts.

Anne-Marie finished tucking her hair into her helmet, clamped the helmet to her neck ring, and stepped out to look around.

"I dub thee Cue Ball," she said.

"Cute," said Jason. "Too bad if she's named already."

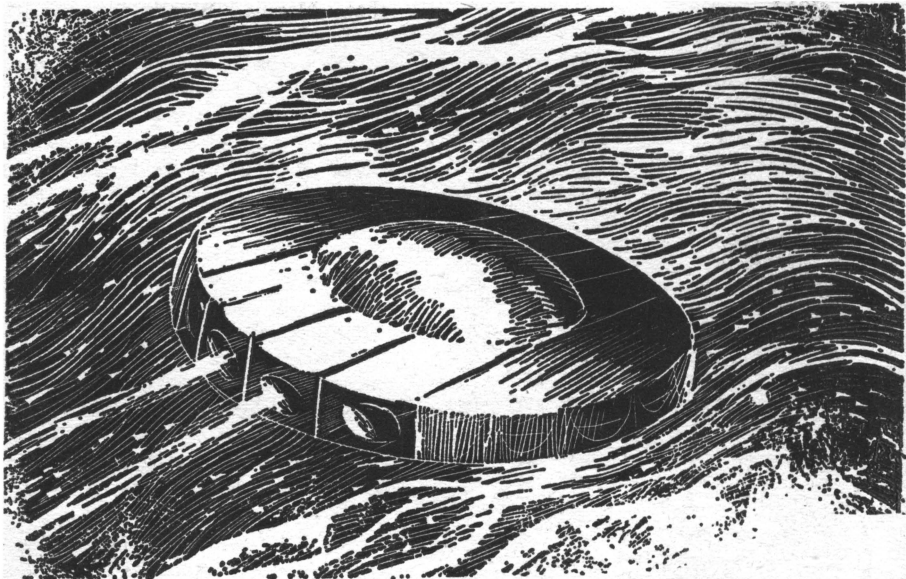
They moved through the ship's pressure curtain, Jason toting a bulky portable deep-radar. The escalladder carried them down into the ice.

They moved away, following the dark image in the deep-radar screen. Jason was a head shorter than his wife and twice as wide; his typical Earther's build looked almost Jinxian next to hers. He moved easily in the low gravity. Anne-Marie, bouncing like a rubber clown, kept pace with him only by dint of longer legs and greater effort.

Jason was standing right over the image of the stasis box, getting ready to mark the ice so they could dig for it, when the image vanished.

The *crack!* jerked his head around. He saw a cloud of steam explode into the near-vacuum, a cloud lit from below by a rosy light. Anne-Marie was already sprinting for the ship in low flying leaps. He turned to follow.

A form like a big, roly-poly man shot through the light into what must by then have been a cloud of tiny ice crystals. It was a *kzin* in a vac suit, and the thing in its hand was a police stunner. It landed running. Under the conditions its aim was inhumanly accurate.



Jason collapsed like a deflating balloon. Anne-Marie was pin-wheeling across the ice, slowly as dreams in the low gravity. The kzin ignored them both. It was using a jet backpack to speed it along.

The ship's heavy, flush-fitting door started to close over the pressure curtain. Too slowly. Jason clung to consciousness long enough to see the kzin's backpack carry it up the escalladder and through the pressure curtain. His mind hummed and faded.

Present in the crew's relaxroom were two humans, one puppeteer, and a kzin. The kzin was Chuft-Captain. It had to be that way, since the prisoners had not had the chance to refuse to talk. Chuft-Captain was a noble, entitled to a partial

name. Had he not been alone with the prisoners he would have been showing fear. His crew watched the proceedings from the control room.

The puppeteer lifted a head at the end of a drunkenly weaving neck. The head steadied, stared hard. In kzin he said, "What is the purpose of this action?"

Chuft-Captain ignored him. One did not speak as an equal to a puppeteer. Puppeteers did not fight, ever. Hence they were herbivorous animals. Prey.

The male human was next to recover from the stunners. He stared in consternation at Chuft-Captain, then looked around him. "So none of us made it," he said.

"No," said the puppeteer. "You may remember I advised —"

"How could I forget? Sorry about



that, Nessus. What's happening?"

"Very little at the moment."

The male looked backed at Chuft-Captain. "Who are you?"

"You may call me Captain. Depending on future events, you are either my kidnap victims or my prisoners of war. Who are you?"

"Jason Papandreou, of Earth origin." The human tried to gesture, perhaps to a point at himself, and found the electronic police web binding him in an invisible grip. He finished the introductions without gestures.

"Very well," said Chuft-Captain. "Jason, are you in possession of a stasis box, a relic of the Slaver empire?"

"No."

Chuft-Captain gestured to the screen behind the prisoners. Telepath nodded and switched off. The prisoner had lied; it was now permissible to bring in help to question him.

It had been a strange, waiting kind of war.

Legally it was no war at all. The *Traitor's Claw* showed in the Kzin records as a stolen ship. If she had been captured at any time, all the kzin worlds would have screamed loudly for Chuft-Captain's head as a pirate. Even the ship's name had been chosen for that eventuality.

There had never been a casualty; never, until now, a victory. A strange war, in which the rules were flexible and the dictates of personal honor were often hard to define and to satisfy. Even now . . . What does one do with a captured puppeteer? You couldn't eat him; puppeteers

were officially a friendly power.

A strange war — but better than no war at all. Perhaps it would now get better still.

The kzin had asked one question and turned away. A bad sign. Apparently the question had been a formality

Jason wriggled once more against the force field. He was embedded like a fly in flypaper. It must be a police web. Since the last war the kzinti worlds had been living in probationary status. Though they might possess and use police restraint devices, they were allowed no weapons of war.

Against two unarmed humans and a puppeteer, they hardly needed them.

Anne-Marie stirred. Jason said, "Easy, honey."

"Easy? Oh, my neck. What happened?" She tried to move her arm. Her head, above the soft grip of the police web, jerked up in surprise; her eyes widened. And she saw the kzin.

She screamed.

The kzin watched in obvious irritation. Nessus merely watched.

"All right," said Jason. "That won't do us any good."

"Jay, they're *kzinti*!"

"Right. And they've got us. Oh, hell, go ahead and scream."

That shocked her. She looked at him long enough to read his helplessness, then turned back to the kzin. Already she was calmer. Jason didn't have to worry about his wife's courage. He'd seen it tested before.

She had never seen a kzin; all

she knew about them she had heard from Jason, and little of that had been good. But she was no xenophobe. There was more sympathy of feeling between Anne-Marie and Nessus than there was between Nessus and Jason. She could face the kzin.

But he couldn't read the puppeteer's expression. It was Nessus he was worried about. Puppeteers hated pain worse than they feared death. Let the kzin threaten Nessus with pain and there was no telling what he'd do. Without the puppeteer they might have a chance to conceal the stasis box.

It might be very bad if the kzinti got into a stasis box.

A billion and a half years ago there had been a war. The Slavers, who controlled most of the galaxy at the time, had also controlled most of the galaxy's sentient species. One such slave species, the tnuclipun, had at last revolted. The Slavers had had a power like telepathic hypnosis, a power that could control the mind of any sentient being. The tnuclipun slaves had possessed high intelligence, higher technology and a slyness more terrifying than any merely mental power. Slavers and tnuclipun slaves alike, and every sentient being then in the galaxy, had died in that war.

Scattered through known and unknown space were the relics of that war, waiting to be found by species which had become sentient since the war's end. The Slavers had left stasis boxes, containers in stasis fields which had survived unchanged through a billion and a half years

of time. The tnuclipun had left mutated remnants of their biological engineering: the frumious bandersnatch of Jinx's shorelines, the stage trees which were to be found on worlds scattered all across known space, the tiny cold-world sunflowers with their rippling reflective blossoms.

Stasis boxes were rare and dangerous. Often they held abandoned Slaver weapons. One such weapon, the variable-sword, had recently revolutionized human society, bringing back swordplay and dueling on many worlds. Another was being used for peaceful ends; the disintegrator was too slow to make a good weapon. If the kzinti found a new weapon, and if it were good enough. . . .

Their kzinti captor was a big one, thought Jason, though even a small one was a big one. He stood eight feet tall, as erect as a human on his short hind legs. The orange shade of his fur might have been inconspicuous to a kzin's natural prey, but to human eyes it blazed like neon. He was thick all over, arms, legs, torso; he might have been a very fat cat dipped in orange dye, with certain alterations. You would have had to discount the naked pink ratlike tail, the strangely colored irises which were round instead of slitted, and especially the head, rendered nearly triangular by the large cranial bulge, more than large enough to hold a human brain.

"The trap you stumbled into is an old one," said the kzin. "One ship or another has been waiting on this world since the last war. We

have been searching out Slaver stasis boxes for much longer than that, hoping to find new weapons."

A door opened, and a second kzin entered. It stayed there in the dilated doorway, waiting for the leader's attention. There was something about its appearance —

"But only recently did we hit upon this idea. You may know," said their orange captor, "that ships often stop off to see this unusual star. Ships of most species also have the habit of sending a deep-radar pulse around every star they happen across. No student of Slavers has ever found method behind the random dispersion of stasis boxes throughout this region of space.

"Several decades ago we did find a stasis box. Unfortunately it contained nothing useful, but we eventually found out how to turn the stasis field on and off. It made good bait for a trap. For forty Kzin years we have waited for ships to happen by with stasis boxes in their holds. You are our second catch."

"You'd have done better finding your own boxes," said Jason. He had been examining the silent kzin. This one was smaller than their interrogator. His fur was matted. His tail drooped, as did his pointed ears. For a kzin the beast was skinny, and misery showed in his eyes. As certainly as they were aboard a fighting ship, this was not a fighting kzin.

"We would have been seen. Earth would have acted to stop our search." Apparently dismissing the subject, their interrogator turned to the smaller kzin and spat out an imita-

tion of cats fighting. The smaller kzin turned to face them.

A pressure took hold of Jason's mind and developed into a sudden splitting headache.

He had expected it. It was a strange thing, but — put a sane alien next to an insane one, and usually you could tell them apart. And kzinti were much closer to human than were any other species; so close that they must at one time have had common microbe ancestors. This smaller kzin was obviously half crazy. And he wasn't a fighter. To be in this place at this time, he had to be a trained telepath, a forced addict of the kzinti drug that sent nine hundred and ninety-nine of out a thousand kzinti insane and left the survivor a shivering neurotic.

He concentrated on remembering the taste of a raw carrot. Just to be difficult.

III

Telepath sagged against a wall, utterly spent. He could still taste yellow root munched between flat-topped teeth. Chuft-Captain watched without sympathy, waiting.

He forced himself to speak. "Chuft-Captain, they have not hidden the stasis box. It may be found in a locker to the left of the control room."

Chuft-Captain turned to the wall screen. "See to it. And get the puppeteer's pressure suit. Then seal the ship."

Flyer and Slaverstudent acknowledged and signed off.

"The relic. Where'd they find it?"

"Chuft-Captain, they did not. The stasis box was found in deep interstellar space, considerably closer to the Core, by a ship of the Outsiders. The Outsiders kept it to trade in known space."

"What business did the prisoners have with the Outsiders?"

"The puppeteer had business with them. It merely used the humans for transportation. The humans do not know what business it was."

Chuft-Captain spat in reflex fury, but of course he could not ask a kzin to read the mind of a herbivore. Telepath wouldn't, and would have to be disciplined; or he would, and would go insane. Nor could Chuft-Captain use pain on the puppeteer. He would get the information if it was worthless; but if the puppeteer decided it was valuable, it would commit suicide.

"Am I to assume that the Outsiders did in fact sell the relic to the prisoners?"

"Chuft-Captain, they did. The sum was a puppeteer's recorded word of honor for fourteen million stars in human money."

"A lordly sum."

"Perhaps more than lordly. Chuft-Captain, you may know that the Outsiders are long-lived. The male human has speculated that they intend to return in one or more thousands of years, when the recording of a puppeteer's voice is an antique worth eights of times its face value."

"Urrr. I shouldn't stray into such byways, but — are they really that long-lived?"

"Chuft-Captain, the Outsider ship was following a starseed in order to trace its migratory pattern."

"Urrr-rrr!" Starseeds lived long enough to make mating migrations from the galactic core to the rim and back, moving at average speeds estimated at point eight lights. . . .

A patterned knock. The others entered, wearing pressure suits with the helmets thrown back. Flyer carried the puppeteer's pressure suit, a three-legged balloon with padded mittens for the mouths, small clawed boots, an extra bulge for a food pouch and a hard, padded shield to cover the cranial hump. Slaverstudent carried a cylinder with a grip-notched handle. Its entire surface was a perfectly reflecting mirror: the sign of the Slaver stasis field.

The prisoners, the human ones, were silently glaring. Their post-telepathy headaches had not helped their dispositions. Telepath was resting from the aftereffects of the drug.

"Open it," said Chuft-Captain.

Slaverstudent removed an empty cubical box from the table, set the stasis box in its place and touched a pressure-sensitive surface at the table's edge. The cylinder ceased to be a distorting mirror. It was a bronzy metal box which popped open of its own accord.

The kzin called Slaverstudent reached in and brought out:

A silvered bubble six inches in diameter, with a sculptured handle attached. The handle would not have fit any gripping appendage Chuft-Captain knew of.

A cube of raw meat in something like a plastic sandwich wrap.

A hand. An alien hand furnished with three massive, clumsy-looking fingers set like a mechanical grab. It had been dipped in something that formed a clear, hard coating. One thick finger wore a chronometer.

"A bad thing has happened," said Nessus.

The kzin who had opened the box seemed terribly excited. He turned the preserved hand over and over, yowrling in kzinti. Then he put it down and picked up the bubble-with-a-handle.

"Let me guess," said Jason. "That's not a Slaver box. It's a tnuclipun box."

"Yes. The first to be found. The handle on the bubble tool is admirably designed to fit a tnuclipun hand. The preserved Slaver must be a trophy — I am quoting the student of Slavers. Jason, this may be a disaster. The tnuclipun were master technologists."

The "student of Slavers" was running his padded, retractile-clawed hands over the sphere-with-a-handle. No detail at all showed on the sphere; it was the same mirror-color as the stasis field which had disgorged it. The handle was bronzy metal. There were grooves for six fingers and two long, opposed thumbs; there was a button set in an awkward position. A deep, straight groove ran down the side, with a guide and nine notched settings.

Anne-Marie spoke in a low voice. "Looks like the handle of a gun."

"We need information," said Jason. "Nessus, is that bigger kzin the boss? The one who speaks Interworld?"

"Yes. The one with the bubble tool is a student of the Slaver Empire. The one with the white stripe is the pilot. The mind reader is resting. We need not fear him for several hours."

"But the boss kzin understands Interworld. Do the others?"

I think not. Your inaptly named Interworld is difficult for non-humans to learn and to pronounce."

"Good. Anne, how are you doing?"

"I'm scared. We're in big trouble, aren't we, Jay?"

"We are. No sense fooling ourselves. Any ideas?"

"You know me, Jay. In a pinch I usually know who to call for help. The integrator if the house stops, the taxi company when a transfer booth doesn't work. Step into an autodoc when you feel sick. If your lift belt fails you dial E for Emergency on your pocket phone. If someone answers before you hit the ground, scream." She tried a smile. "Jay? Who do we call about kzinti kidnappings?"

He smiled back. "You write a forceful note to the Patriarch of Kzin. Right, Nessus?"

"Also you threaten to cut off trade. Do not worry too much, Anne-Marie. My species is expert at staying alive."

"Undoubtedly a weapon," said Slaverstudent. "We had best try it outside."

"Later," ordered Chuft-Captain. Again Slaverstudent dipped into the cylindrical box. He removed small containers half filled with two kinds of small-arms projectiles; a colored cap which might easily have fitted a standard bowling ball; a transparent bulb of clear fluid; and a small metal widget that might have been anything. "I see no openings for bullets."

"Nor do I. Flyer, take a sample of this meat and find out what it is made of. Do the same with this — trophy, and this bulb. Telepath, are you awake?"

"Chuft-Captain, I am."

"When can you again read the —"

"Chuft-Captain, please don't make me —"

"At ease, Telepath. Take time to recover. But I intend to keep the prisoners present while we investigate this find. They may notice some detail we miss. Eventually I will need you."

"Yes, Chuft-Captain."

"Test that small implement for radio or hyperwave emissions. Do nothing else to it. It has the look of a subminiature communicator, but it might be anything, a camera, even an explosive."

"Slaverstudent, you will come with me. We are going outside."

It took several minutes for the kzinti to get the prisoners into their suits, adjust their radios so that everybody could hear everybody else, and move them through the double-door airlock.

To Jason the airlock was further proof that this was a warship. A

pressure curtain was generally more convenient than an airlock; but if power failed during a battle, all the air could leave the ship in one whoof. Warships carried double doors.

Two stunners followed them up the sloping ice tunnel. Jason had thought there would be four. He'd need to fight only the boss kzin and one other. But both carried stunners and both seemed alert. . . .

He took too much time deciding. The boss made Nessus stand on a flexible wire grid, then did the same with Anne-Marie and Jason. The grid was a portable police web, and it was as inflexibly restraining as the built-in web in the ship.

The kzinti returned down the sloping tunnel, leaving Jason, Anne-Marie and Nessus to enjoy the view.

It was a lonely view. The blue and yellow stars were rising, invisibly. They showed only as a brighter spot at one foot of the red-smoke arch of hydrogen. Stars showed space-bright in curdled patterns across the sky; they all glowed red near the arch. The land was cold, rock-hard ice, rippling in long, low undulations that might have been seasonal snowdrifts millions of years ago, when the Lyrae twins were bigger and brighter. Black faceted rocks poked through some of the high spots.

Several yards away was the *Court Jester*. A thick, round-edged, flat-bottomed disk, she sat on the ice like a painted concrete building. Apparently she intended to stay.

Jason stood at parade rest on the police web. Anne-Marie was six inches to his right, facing him. For

all of his urge to touch her, she might have been miles away.

Two days ago she had carefully painted her eyelids with semi-permanent tattoo. They showed as two tiny black-and-white-checked racing victory flags, rippling when she blinked. Their gaiety mocked her drawn face.

"I wonder why we're still alive," she said.

Nessus' accentless voice was tiny in the earphones. "The captain wants our opinion on the putative weapon. He will not ask for them, but will take them through the telepath."

"That doesn't apply to you, does it?"

"No. No kzin would read my mind. Perhaps no kzin would kill me; my race holds strong policies on the safety of individual members. In any case we have some time."

"Time for what?"

"Anne-Marie, we must wait. If the artifact is a weapon we must recover it. If not, we must survive to warn your people that the kzinti are searching out Slaver stasis boxes. We must wait until we know which."

"Then what?"

"We will find a way."

"We," said Jason.

"Yes. Our motives coincide here. I cannot explain why at this time."

But why should a puppeteer risk his life, his *life*, for Earth? Jason wondered.

The boss kzin emerged from the airlock carrying the sphere-with-a-handle. He stood before

Jason and held it before his eyes. "Examine this," he commanded and turned it slowly and invitingly in his four-fingered hands.

There was the reflecting sphere, and there was the bronzy-metal gun handle with its deeply scored groove and its alien sculpturing. The groove had nine notched settings running from top to bottom, with a guide in the top notch. Squiggles which must have been tnucltip numbers corresponded to the notches.

Jason prayed for the police web to fail. If he could snatch the artifact — The Kzin moved away, walking uphill to a rise of icy ground. A second kzin emerged from the pressure curtain carrying an unfamiliar gadget of kzinti make. The two kzinti spat phrases at each other. Kzinti language always sounds like insults.

Nessus spoke quietly. "The meat was protoplasmic, protein and highly poisonous. The small, complex tnucltip implement does operate in hyperspace, but uses no known method of communication. The fluid in the clear bulb is forty per cent hydrogen peroxide, sixty per cent hydrogen oxide, purpose unknown."

"What's the Slaver expert carrying?"

"That is an energy output sensor."

The puppeteer seemed calm enough. Did he know of some way to interrupt a police web?

Jason couldn't ask, not when the boss kzin could hear every word. But he had little hope. A police web belonged to the same family as a pilot's crash field, triggered to enfold the pilot when signaled by

excessive pressure on his crash webbing. A crash web was as deliberately foolproof as any last-ditch failsafe device. So was a police web.

Probably the puppeteer was slipping back into the manic state and was now convinced that nothing in the universe could harm him.

Somehow that made Jason's failure worse. "One thing you should know, Jason, is that my species judges me insane . . ." It was one of the first things the puppeteer had told him. Unable to trust his own judgment, Nessus had warned him by implication that he would have to trust Jason's.

They'd both trusted him.

"I had to show you Beta Lyrae," he said bitterly.

"It was a nice idea, Jay, really it was."

If he'd been free he'd have found a wall and tried to punch it down.

IV

Chuft-Captain stood on a rise of permafrost and let his eyes scan the horizon. Those points of dark rock would make good targets.

The weapon was uncomfortable in his hand, but he managed to get one finger on the presumed trigger button. He aimed at the horizon and fired.

Nothing happened.

He aimed at a closer point, first pressing and releasing the trigger button repeatedly, then holding it down. Still nothing.

"Chuft-Captain, there is no energy release."

"The power may be gone."

"Chuft-Captain, it may. But the notches in the handle may control intensity. The guide is now set on 'nil.'"

Chuft-Captain moved the guide one notch down. A moment later he had to resist the panicky urge to throw the thing as far as possible. The mirror-faced sphere was twisting and turning like something alive, changing shape like a drug nightmare. It changed and flowed and became —

A long, slender cylinder with a red knob at the end and a toggle near the handle. The handle had not changed at all.

"Chuft-Captain, there was an energy discharge. Eek! What happened?"

"It turned into this. What do I do next?"

Slaverstudent took the artifact and examined it. He would have liked to fire it himself, but that was the leader's privilege and right. And risk. He said, "Try the toggle."

At a forward motion of the toggle the red knob lit up and leapt across the ice. Chuft-Captain wiggled the handle experimentally. The red knob, still receding, bobbed and weaved in response to stay in the line with the cylindrical barrel. When the knob was a red point sixty yards distant, Chuft-Captain stopped it with the toggle.

"Variable-sword," he muttered. He looked for a target. His eyes lit on a nearby tilted spire of dark rock or dirty ice.

Chuft-Captain gripped the artifact in both furry hands, like a big game fishing pole, and swung the

red light behind the spire. The artifact fought his pressure, then gave way. The top half of the spire toppled, kicking up a spray of chipped ice.

"A variable-sword," he repeated. "But not of Slaver design. Slaverstudent, have you ever heard of a weapon that changes shape?"

"No, Chuft-Captain, neither of the past nor of the present."

"Then we've found something new."

"Yes!" The word was a snarl of satisfaction.

"That tears it," said Anne-Marie. "It's a weapon."

Jason tried to nod. The police web held him fast.

The other kzinti came outside and moved up the rise. Four kzinti stood spitting at each other, looking like four fat men, sounding like a cat-fight. Nessus said, "The first notch must have been neutral. They intend to find out what the other notches do."

"It changes shape," said Anne-Marie. "That's bad enough."

"Quite right," said the puppeteer. "The artifact is now our prime target."

Jason grinned suddenly. The puppeteer reminded him of a cartoon:

Two bearded, dirty convicts, hanging three feet off the ground by iron chains. One convict saying, "Now, here's my plan . . ."

First we wish away the police web. Then —

Again the kzini captain moved the guide. The gun reverted to sphere-and-handle, then flowed into something hard to see at a distance. The

boss kzin must have realized it. He came down the hill, followed by the others. One at a time the kzinti moved them to the top of the rise, so that they stood several yards behind the firing line, but still in the police web.

The boss kzin resumed his firing stance.

Position number two was a parabolic mirror with a silvery knob at the center. It did nothing at all to the rock Chuft-Captain was using for a target, though Slaverstudent reported an energy discharge. Chuft-Captain considered, then turned the weapon on the puppeteer.

The puppeteer spoke in the human tongue. "I can hear a faint high-pitched whine."

"Another control dial has formed," Slaverstudent pointed out. "Four settings."

Chuft-Captain nodded and tried the second setting. It did not affect the puppeteer. Neither did the third and fourth.

"Chuft-Captain, will you hold down the trigger?" Slaverstudent cautiously peeped over the lip of the parabolic mirror. "Urrrr. I was right. The knob is vibrating rapidly. Setting number two is a sonic projector — and a powerful one, if the puppeteer can hear it through near-vacuum and the thickness of its suit."

"But it didn't knock him out or anything."

"Chuft-Captain, we must assume that it was designed to affect the Slaver nervous system."

"Yes." Chuft-Captain moved the

guide to setting number three. As the gun changed and flowed, he said, "We have found nothing new. Sonics and variable-swords are common."

"Mutable weapons are not."

"Mutable weapons could not win a war, though they might help. Urrr. This seems to be a projectile weapon. Have you the small-arms projectiles from the stasis box?"

"Chuft-Captain, I do."

The magazine under the barrel swung out for loading. It took both kinds of projectiles. Chuft-Captain again sighted on the rock, using the newly formed telescopic sight.

His first shot put a nick exactly where he aimed it.

His second, with the second variety projectile, blew the rock to flying shards. Everybody ducked but Chuft-Captain.

"Should I empty the magazine before moving the guide?"

"Chuft-Captain, I do not think it matters. The bullets should certainly be removed, but the trunctipun must have known that occasionally they would not be. Will you indulge my curiosity?"

"Since your curiosity is a trained one, I will," Chuft-Captain moved the guide. The projectiles still in the gun popped out through the shifting surface. The artifact became a sphere-with-handle, and then . . . a sphere-with-handle. The new sphere was smaller than the neutral setting. It had a rosy hue and a smooth, oily texture unmarred by gunsights or secondary controls.

The trigger button did nothing at all.

"I tire rapidly of these duds."

"Chuft-Captain, there is energy release."

"Very well." Chuft-Captain fired at the puppeteer, using his marksman's instinct in the absence of a gunsight. The puppeteer showed no ill effects.

Neither did the female human.

In momentary irritation Chuft-Captain thought of firing the dud at Telepath, who was standing nearby looking harmless and useless. But nothing would happen; he would only upset the Telepath. He moved the guide to the fifth setting.

The artifact writhed, became a short cylinder with an aperture in the nose and two wide, flat, metallic projections at the sides. Chuft-Captain's lips drew back from neatly filed feline teeth. *This* looked promising.

He drew aim on what was left of the target rock — a dark blot on the ice.

The gun slammed back against his hand. Chuft-Captain was whirled half around, trying to keep his feet and fighting the sudden pressure as a fireman fights a fire hose. Releasing the trigger didn't shut off the incandescent stream of plasma gas. Pressing the trigger again did. Chuft-Captain blinked his relief and looked around to assess damages.

He saw a twisting trail of melted ice like the path of an earthworm hooked on LSD. Telepath was screaming into his helmet mike. An ominously diminishing scream. The other kzinti were carrying him toward the airlock at a dead run.

From the trail of thin, icy fog his suit left on the air, the weapon's firestream must have washed across his body, burning holes in nearly heatproof fabric.

The human female was running toward her ship.

A glance told him that the other prisoners were still in the police web. Telepath must have knocked the female spinning out of the force field while trying to escape the firestream. She was plainly visible, running across flat ice.

Chuft-Captain shot her with the stunner, then trudged away to pick her up.

He had her back in the web when Flyer and Slaverstudent returned.

Telepath will live, but in critical shape. They had dumped him in the freeze box for treatment on Kzin.

As for Position Five on the tnucltip relic —

"It's a rocket motor," said Slaverstudent. "As a short range weapon it could be useful, but primarily it is a one-kzin reaction pistol. One-tnucltip, that is. I doubt if it would lift one of us against respectable gravity. The flat projections at the sides may be holds for feet. The tnucltipun were small."

"Pity you didn't think of this earlier."

"Chuft-Captain, I acknowledge my failure."

Chuft-Captain dropped it. Privately he too acknowledged a failure: he had not considered the female dangerous. Humans were sentient, male and female both. He would not forget it again.

Position Six was a laser. It too was more than a weapon. A telescopic sight ran along the side, and there was a microphone grid at the back. Focus it on the proper target, and you could talk voice-to-voice.

"This will be useful," said Slaver-student. "We can find the voice and hearing ranges for tnuclipun from this microphone."

"Will that make it a better weapon?"

"Chuft-Captain, it will not."

"Then keep your passion for useless knowledge to yourself." Chuft-Captain moved the guide to the seventh setting.

V

"Darling?" Anne-Marie didn't move. The police web held her in a slumped sitting position. Her chest rose and fell with shallow breathing. Her eyes were closed, her face relaxed.

"Nice try," Jason told her.

"She cannot hear you," said Nessus.

"I know she can't hear me."

"Then why — ? Never mind. What did that rocket setting look like to you?"

"A rocket."

"Using what fuel source?"

"Is it important?"

"Jason, I know nothing of warfare or of weapons, but my species has been making and using machines for some considerable time. Why did the projectile weapon not include its own projectiles? Why

did it throw them away when it changed shape?"

"Oh" Okay, it can't throw away its own mass." Jason thought about that. "You're right. It can't be using its own fuel. Nessus, it's a jet. There was an intake somewhere that nobody noticed. Wait a minute. You couldn't use it in space."

"One would affix a gas cart-ridge at the intake."

"Oh. Right."

"One could not be sure a given atmosphere would burn. How is the gas heated?"

"A battery in the handle? No, it couldn't put out enough power, not without — but there has to be one. Nessus? The kzinti could be listening."

"I think it does not matter. The kzinti will know all about the weapon soon enough. Only the captain can profit from learning more before he turns the weapon over to his superiors."

"Okay. The battery must use total conversion of matter."

"Could you not build a fusion motor small enough to fit into the handle?"

"You're the expert. Could you? Would it give enough power?"

"I do not think so. The handle must contain a wide variety of mechanisms to control the changing of shapes."

They watched the kzinti test out the laser form.

"You could do it direct," said Jason. "Change some of the matter in the reaction gas to energy. It'd give you a terrifically hot exhaust. Nessus, is there any species

in known space that has total conversion?"

"None that I have heard of."

"Did the trunctipun?"

"I would not know."

"Things weren't bad enough. Can you see kzinti warships armed and powered with total conversion?"

A gloomy silence followed. The kzinti were watching the weapon change shape. The boss kzin had not spoken; he may or may not have been listening to their discussions.

Anne-Marie made small protesting sounds. She opened her eyes and tried to sit up. She swore feelingly when she found that the web was holding her in her cramped position.

"Nice try," said Jason.

"Thanks. What happened?" She answered herself, her voice brittle and bitter. "They shot me, of course. What have I missed?"

The seventh setting was a blank, flat-ended cylinder with a small wire grid near the back. No gun-sight. It did nothing when Chuft-Captain clicked the trigger button; it did nothing when he held it down, and nothing when he clicked it repeatedly. It had no effect on the target rock, the puppeteer, the humans. Its only effect on Slaverstudent was to make him back warily away, saying, "Chuft-Captain, please, there is an energy discharge."

"A singularly ineffective energy discharge. Take this, Slaverstudent. Make it work. I will wait."

And wait he did, stretched comfortably on the permafrost, his suit holding the cold a safe tenth of an inch away. He watched Slaverstudent's nerves fray under the fixity of his stare.

"What have I missed?"
"Not much. We've decided the jet that knocked you down converts matter to energy."

"Is that bad?"

"Very." Jason didn't try to explain. "The sixth setting was a more-or less conventional message laser."

"The seventh does not work," said Nessus. "This angers the captain. Jason, for the first time I regret never having studied weapons."

"You're a puppeteer. Why should you . . ." Jason let the sentence trail off. There was a thought he wanted to trace down. About the weapon. Not any particular form, but all forms together.

"No sentient mind should turn away from knowledge. Especially no puppeteer. We are not known for our refusal to look at unpleasant truths."

Jason was silent. He was looking at an unpleasant truth.

Nessus had said that it didn't matter what the boss kzin overheard. He was wrong. This was a thing Jason dared not say aloud.

Nessus said, "The Slaver expert wants to go inside with the weapon. He has permission. He is going."

Anne-Marie said, "Why?"

"There is a microphone grid on the seventh setting. Jason, could a soldier use a hand computer?"

"He — " *wasn't a soldier!* Jason clamped his teeth on the words. "Probably could," he said

Presently the Slaver expert returned holding the tnuclipun weapon.

To Jason the artifact had taken on a final, fatal fascination. If he was right about its former owner, then he could stop worrying about its reaching the Patriarch of Kzin. All he had to do was keep his mouth shut. In minutes, he and Anne-Marie and Nessus and the four kzinti would be dead.

Slaverstudent said, "I was right. The artifact answered me in an unknown speech."

"Then it is another —"

Signalling device, he had been about to say. But it would have been



built to signal tnucltipun. And the tnucltipun had been extinct for ages . . . yet the thing had answered back . . . Chuft-Captain felt his back arch with the fighting reflex. There were ghost legends among the kzinti.

"Chuft-Captain, I believe it to be a computer. A hand computer could be very useful to a warrior. It could compute angles for him as he fired explosive projectiles."

"Yes. Can we use it?"

"Not unless we can teach it the Hero's Tongue. It may be too simple to learn."

"Then we pass to setting number Eight." Chuft-Captain moved the guide down to the bottom setting.

Again there was no gunsight. Most of the genuine weapons had had gunsights or telescopic sights. Chuft-Captain scowled, but raised the

weapon and aimed once again at the distant, shattered rock.

Jason cringed inside his imprisoned skin. Again the weapon was writhing, this time to the final setting.

There were so many things he wanted to say. But he didn't dare. The boss kzin must not know what was about to happen.

The gun had twisted itself into something very strange. "That looks familiar," said Nessus. "I have seen something like that, some time."

"Then you're unique," said Anne-Marie.

"I remember. It was one of a series of diagrams on how to turn a sphere inside out in differential topology. Certainly there could be no connection . . ."

The boss kzin assumed marksman stance. Jason braced for the end.

What happened next was not at all what he expected.

Unconsciously he'd been leaning on the police net's force field. Suddenly he was falling, overbalanced. He straightened, not quite sure what had happened. Then he got it. The police net was gone. He slapped Anne-Marie hard on the back, pointed at the *Court Jester*, saw her nod. Without waiting to see her start running, he turned and charged at the boss kzin.

Something brushed by him at high speed. Nessus. Not running away, but also charging into battle. *I was right*, thought Jason. *He's gone manic.*



Chuft-Captain pushed the trigger button. Nothing happened.

It was really too much. He stood a moment, marshalling words for Slaverstudent. A brand new kind of weapon, and it wouldn't *do* anything! Half the settings were duds!

He knew it as he turned: something was wrong. The danger instinct sang in his nerves. He got no other warning. He had not seen the ship lights go out. He heard no sign of pounding clawed feet. The sounds of breathing *had* become a trifle heavy . . .

He started to turn, and something hit him in the side.

It felt like an armored knight had run him through with a blunt lance. It *hurt*. Chuft-Captain lost all his aplomb and all his air, bent sideways as far as he could manage, and toppled.

He saw the world turned sideways, glowing through a blue fog. He saw the human female struggling furtively in Slaverstudent's hands; he saw Flyer aiming a stunner across the ice. He saw two running figures, human and puppeteer, trying to reach the other ship. Flyer's stunner didn't seem to affect them. The human had the tnuclip artifact.

He could breath again, in sharp shallow gasps. That blow in the side must have broken ribs: it could hardly have failed to, since *kzinti* ribs run all the way down. That had felt like a puppeteer's kick! But that was ridiculous. Impossible. A puppeteer kick a *kzin*?

The puppeteer reached the ship far in advance of the slower human. It paused a moment, then turned and ran on across the white undulating plain. The human also paused at the ship's entrance, then followed the puppeteer. Flyer was running after them.

Behind Chuft-Captain the ship-lights were dim, but brightening. Hadn't they been dark when he fell? And the stunners hadn't worked. And the police webs . . .

So. The eighth setting was an energy absorber. Not a new thing, but much smaller than anything he'd heard of.

But what had hit him?

There was a hissing in his ears, a sound he hadn't noticed. Not breathing. Had somebody's suit been punctured? But nobody had been attacked. Except —

Chuft-Captain slapped a hand over his side. He yelled with the pain of motion, but kept his hand pressed tight while he reached for a meteor patch. He risked one look under his hand before applying the patch. There were four tiny holes in the fabric. They might easily have marked the claws of a puppeteer's space boot.

The boss *kzin* held his marksman's stance. Jason was moving toward him at a dead run. He had to get the weapon before the *kzinti* realized what had happened.

Nessus passed him like a live missile. The puppeteer reached the *kzin*, turned skidding on two front legs, and lashed out. Jason winced in

sympathy. That kick had been sincere! It would have torn a man in half, crushed his lungs and ribcage and spine and life.

The mad puppeteer had barely paused. He ran straight toward the *Court Jester*. Jason scooped up the fallen weapon, skidded to a halt and turned.

A kzin had Anne-Marie.

We'll see about that! His fingers moved to the weapon's adjustment guide.

A second kzin held a stunner on him.

The stunner would start working the moment the tnuclip weapon shifted shape. He'd lose everything.

He could hear Anne-Marie swearing tearfully as she fought. Then her voice came loud and clear. "Run, damnit! Jay, run!"

He could throw the weapon to Nessus, then charge to the rescue! They'd get *him*, but . . . but the puppeteer was well out of range . . . and couldn't be trusted anyway. A puppeteer who kicked something that could kick back was beyond psychiatric help.

Anne-Marie was still kicking and using her elbows. Her kzin captor didn't seem to notice. The boss kzin lay curled like a shrimp around the spot of agony in his side. But the third kzin held his pose, still bathing Jason in an imaginary stunner beam.

Jason turned and ran.

He saw Nessus leave the *Jester's* entrance and go on. He guessed what he would find, but he had to look. Sure enough, the door was soldered shut.

A laser would have melted the steel solder away from the hull-metal door. But the third kzin was finally in motion, coming after him, still trying to use the stunner.

Jason ran on. The puppeteer was a diminishing point. Jason followed that point, moving into a cold waste lit by a fiery arch with one bright glare spot. . . .

"Flyer, return to the ship at once."

"Chuft-Captain, he's around here somewhere. I can find him."

"Or he could find you. Return to the ship. The rules of this game have changed."

The kzin was gone. Jason had stalked him for a time, with his weapon set to the energy absorbing phase and with his thumb on the guide. If he had seen the kzin, and if the kzin hadn't seen him . . . a variable-sword, a hair-thin wire sheathed in a stasis field, would have cut one enemy into two strangers. But it hadn't happened, and he wasn't about to follow the kzin back to home base.

Now he lay huddled in the hole he'd dug with the rocket phase.

"Jay!" It was Anne-Marie. "Have to talk quick, they're taking off my helmet. I'm not hurt, but I can't get away. The ship's taking off. Bury the weapon somewh —"

Her voice faded and was gone. The public band was silent.

Nessus's voice broke that silence. "Jason. Turn to the private band."

He had to guess which band Nessus meant. He was third time lucky.

"Can you possibly hear me?"

"Yah. Where are you?"

"I do not know how to describe my position, Jason. I ran six or seven miles east."

"Okay. Let's think of a way to find each other."

"Why, Jason?"

He was puzzled over that. "You think you're safer alone? I don't. How long will your suit keep you alive?"

"Several standard years. But help will arrive before then."

"What makes you think so?"

"When the kzin pilot entered the pressure curtain, I was calling my people for help."

"What? How?"

"Despite recent changes in the fortunes of my people, that is still most secret."

Telepathy? Something in his baggage, or surgically implanted under his skin? The puppeteers kept their secrets well. Nobody had ever found out how the puppeteers could commit painless suicide at will. And how Nessus had done it didn't matter. "Are they coming for you all the way from Andromeda?"

"Hardly, Jason."

"Go on."

"I suppose I must. My people are still in this region of the galaxy, in the sixty-light-year volume you call known space. Their journey began only twelve years ago. You see, Jason, my people do not intend to return to this galaxy. Hence it does not matter how much objective time passes during their journey. They can reach Andromeda in a much

shorter subjective time using normal space drives. Our ships approach very close to lightspeed. Further, they need brave only the dangers of normal space, which they can handle easily. Hyperspace is an unpredictable and uncomfortable thing, especially for those who would spend decades traveling in any case."

"Nessus, your whole species is crazy. How did they keep a secret like that? Every one thinks they're halfway to Andromeda."

"Naturally. Who would stumble across the fleet in interstellar space? Between systems every known species travels in hyperspace . . . except the Outsiders, with whom we have agreements. In any case, my people are within reach. A scout will arrive within sixty days. The scouts are fitted with hyperdrive."

"Then you're safe if you stay hidden." Damn! thought Jason. He was all alone. It was a proud and lonely thing to be a costume hero. "Well, good luck Nessus. I've got to —"

"Do not sign off. What is your plan?"

"I don't have one. I've got to see the kzinti don't get this back, but I've also got to get Anne-Marie away from them."

"The weapon should come first."

"My wife comes first. What's your stake in this, anyway?"

"With the principles behind the tnucltip weapon the kzinti could command known space. My people will be in known space for another twenty-eight human years. Should the kzinti learn of our fleet, it would be an obvious target."

"Oh."

"We must help each other. How long can you live in your suit?"

"Til I starve to death. I'll have air and water indefinitely. Say thirty days, upper limit."

"Your people should not cut costs on vital equipment, Jason. My people cannot arrive in time to save you."

"If I gave you the weapon, could you stay hidden?"

"Yes. If the ship came in sight I could shoot it down with the laser setting. I think I could. I could force myself Jason, will the kzinti call other ships?"

"Damn! Of course they will. They'd find you easy. What'll we do?"

"Can we force entrance to the *Court Jester*?"

"Yah, but they took my keys. We couldn't use the drives or the radio or get into the lockers."

"The laser would let us into the lockers."

"Right."

"Have you weapons aboard?"

"No. Nothing."

"Then the *Court Jester* would be no more than a place from which to surrender. I have no suggestions."

"Chuft-Captain, the eighth setting must be the way the artifact is recharged. It does not itself seem to be a weapon."

"It can be used as one. As we have seen. Don't bother me now, Slaverstudent." Chuft-Captain strove to keep his tone mild. He knew that his rage was the companion of his pain; Slaverstudent knew too.

Neither had referred to the fact that Chuft-Captain now walked crouched to the side. Neither would. The kzin captain could not even bandage himself, though when they reached space he could use the ship's medical equipment to set the bones.

The worst damage had been done to Chuft-Captain's ego.

Had the puppeteer known what he was doing? His small clawed foot had shattered more than a couple of ribs. One day Chuft-Captain might have been Chuft, the hero who found the weapon that beat the human empire to its belly. Now he would be — Chuft, who was kicked by a puppeteer.

"Chuft-Captain, here comes Flyer."

"Good. Flyer! Get your tail in here and lift us fast."

Flyer went past at a quick shuffling run. Slaverstudent shut the airlock after him, helped Chuft-Captain strap down, and was strapping himself in when Flyer did his trick. The ship rose out of the ice, dripping opalescent chunks and shining bluishwhite at the stern.

VII

On the smoky arch of Beta Lyrae, the bright point had reached the zenith. Behind their permanent veil the two stars had pulled apart in their orbits, so that the vague brightness had shaded into an orange tinge on one side and a green on the other.

"One thing we do have," said Jason, "and that's the weapon itself."

"True. We have a laser, a flame-throwing rocket and a shield against police stunners. But not simultaneously."

"I think we may have overlooked a setting."

"Wishful thinking, Jason, is not a puppeteer trait."

"Neither is knowledge of weapons. Nessus, what kind of weapon is this? I'm talking about the whole bundle, not any single setting."

"As you say, I am not an expert on warfare."

"I don't think it's a soldier's weapon. I think it's for espionage."

"Would that be different? I gather the question is important."

Jason stopped to gather his thoughts. He held the gun cradled in his hands. It was still at the eighth setting, the peculiar, twisted shape that Nessus had compared to a diagram from differential topology.

He held history in his hands, history a billion and a half years dead. Once upon a time a small, compactly built biped had aimed this weapon at beings with ball-shaped heads, big single eyes and massive Mickey Mouse hands, great splayed feet and lightly armored skin and clusters of naked pink tendrils at the corners of wide mouths. What could he have been thinking the last time he stored away this weapon? Did he guess that fifteen million centuries later a mind would be trying to guess his nature from his abandoned possessions?

"Nessus, would you say this gadget is more expensive to produce than eight gadgets for similar jobs?"

"Assuredly, and more difficult. But it would be easier to carry than eight discrete gadgets."

"And easier to hide. Have you ever heard of Slaver records describing a shape-changing weapon?"

"No. The tnuclipun would understandably have kept it a secret."

"That's my point. How long could they keep it secret if millions of soldiers had models?"

"Not long. The same objections hold for its use in espionage. Jason, what kind of espionage could a tnuclipun do? Certainly it could not imitate a Slaver."

"No, but it could hide out on a sparsely settled world, or it could pretend to be a tnuclipun slave. It'd have to have some defense against the Slaver power."

"The cap in the stasis box?"

"Or something else, something it was wearing when the Slavers caught it."

"These are unpleasant ideas. Jason, I have remembered something. The Outsiders found the stasis box in a cold, airless world with ancient pressurized buildings still standing. If a battle had been fought there, would the buildings have been standing?"

"Slaver buildings?"

"Yes."

"They'd have been standing if the Slavers won. But then the Slavers would have captured at least one of the weapons."

"Only if there were many such weapons. I concede your point. The owner of the weapon was a lone spy."

"Good. Now — "

"Why were you so sure?"

"Mainly the variety of settings.

The average soldier would get stomped on while he was trying to decide which weapon to use. Then there's a sonic for taking live prisoners. Maybe other settings make them feel fear or pain. The rocket would be silly for a soldier; he'd get killed flying around a battlefield. But a spy could use it for the last stage of his landing."

"All right. Why is it important?"

"Because there ought to be a self-destruct setting somewhere."

"What did — ? Ah. To keep the secret of the mutable weapon. But we have used all the settings."

"I thought it would be number eight. It wasn't. That's why we're still alive. An espionage agent's self-destruct button would be made to do as much damage as possible."

Nessus gasped. Jason hardly noticed. "They've hidden it somehow," he said.

The *Traitor's Claw* was big. She had to be. Redundantly, she carried both a gravity polarizer and a fusion reaction motor. Probably she could have caught anything in real space barring ships of her own class, many of which were serving as police and courier ships in kzinti space. Kzin records listed her as a stolen courier ship. She was a squat cone, designed as a compromise between landing ability and speed in an atmosphere. In contrast, the flat *Court Jester* had been designed for landing ability alone; she would not

have tipped over on a seventy degree slope.

There was more than speed to the *Traitor's Claw's* two drives. Before it had ever seen a gravity polarizer, the human empire had taught the kzinti a lesson they would never forget. The more efficient a reaction drive, the more effective a weapon it makes. A gravity polarizer was not a reaction drive.

Flyer used both drives at once. The ship went up fast. Six thousand miles up the *Traitor's Claw* went into orbit.

"We can find the prisoners with infrared," said Chuft-Captain. "But it will do us little good if they shoot us down. Can the laser setting prevent us from going after them?"

"We can call for more ships," Flyer suggested. "Surely the weapon is important enough."

"It is. But we will not call."

Flyer nodded submission.

Knowing what Flyer knew, Chuft-Captain snarled inside himself with humiliation and the digging agony in his side. He had been kicked by a puppeteer in full view of two subordinates. Never again could he face a kzin of equal rank, never until he had killed the puppeteer with his own teeth and claws.

Could that kick have been cold-bloodedly tactical? Chuft-Captain refused to believe it. But, intended or not, that kick had stymied Chuft-Captain. He could not call for reinforcements until the puppeteer was dead.

He forced his mind back to the weapon. The only setting that could

harm the kzinti was the laser . . . unless the rosy sphere unexpectedly began working. But that was unlikely. He asked, "Is there a completely safe way to capture them? If not —"

"There is the drive," said Slaver-student.

"They have the laser," Flyer reminded him. "A laser that size is subject to a certain amount of spreading. We should be safe two hundred miles up. Closer than that and a good marksman could burn through the hull."

"Flyer, is two hundred miles too high?"

"Cruft-Captain, they are wearing heatproof suits, and we can hover only at one-seventh Kzin-gravity. Our flame would barely warm the ice."

"But there is the gravity polarizer to push us down while the fusion flame pushes us up. The ship was designed for just that tactic. Now, the fugitives' suits are heatproof but the ice is not. Suppose we hovered over them with a five Kzin-gravity flame . . ."

Jason held a five-inch rosy sphere with a pistol grip handle. "It has to be here somewhere," he said.

"Try doing things you ordinarily wouldn't. Moving the gauge while holding the trigger down. Moving the guide sideways. Twisting the sphere."

Silence on the private circuit. Then, "No luck yet."

"The fourth setting was the only one that showed no purpose at all."

"Yah. What in —"

High overhead a star had come into being. It was blue-white, almost violet-white, and for Jason it stood precisely at the zenith.

"The kzinti," said Nessus. "Do not shoot back. They must be out of range of your laser setting. You would only help them find you."

"They've probably found me already, with infrared scopes. What the Finagle do they think they're doing?"

The star remained steady. In its sudden light Jason went to work on the weapon. He ran quickly through the remaining settings, memorizing the forms that used the trigger as an on-off switch, probing and prodding almost at random, until he reached neutral and the relic was a silver sphere with a handle.

The guide would not go sideways. It would not remain between any two of the notches. It would not twist. . . .

"Are you making progress?"

"Nothing, damnit."

"The destruct setting would not be too carefully hidden. If a weapon were captured an agent could always hope the Slavers would destroy it by accident."

"Yah." Jason was tired of looking at the neutral setting. He changed to laser and fired up at the new star, using the telescopic sight. He expected and got no result, but he held his aim until distracted by a sudden change in pressure around his suit.

He was up to his shoulders in water.

In one surge he was out of his hole. But the land around him was gone. A few swells of wet ice rose glistening from a shallow sea that reached to all the horizon. The kzinti ship's downblast had melted everything for miles around.

"Nessus, is there water around you?"

"Only in solid form. From my viewpoint the kzinti ship is not overhead."

They've got me. As soon as they turn off the drive I'll be frozen in my tracks."

"I have been thinking. Do you need the destruct setting? Suppose you change the rocket setting, turn the weapon nose down and fire. The flame will remain on, and the weapon will eat its way through the ice."

"Sure, if we could think of a way to keep it pointed down. Odds are it'd turn over in the first few feet. Then the kzinti find it with deep-radar or seismics and dig it out."

"True."

The water was getting deeper. Jason thought about using the rocket to burn his way loose once the water froze about his ankles. It would be too hot. He would probably burn his feet off. But he might have to try it.

The blue kzinti star hung bright and clear against the arch of dust and hydrogen. A bright pink glow showed the Lyrae stars forty-five degrees from sunset.

"Jason. Why is there a neutral setting?"

"Why not?"

THE SOFT WEAPON

"It is not for collecting energy. The eighth setting does that nicely. It is not for doing nothing. The projectile setting does that, unless you put projectiles in it. Thus the neutral setting has no purpose. Perhaps it does something we do not know about."

"I'll try it."

The bright star above him winked out.

"Chuft-Captain, I cannot locate the puppeteer."

"Its pressure suit may be too efficient to lose heat. We will institute a search later. Inform me when the human stops moving."

VIII

Nessus's idea would be a good one, Jason thought, if only he could make it workable. Much better than the destruct setting. Because if the destruct setting existed, it would almost certainly kill him.

Probably it would kill Nessus too. The destruct setting on an espionage agent's weapon would be made to do as much damage as possible. And there had been total conversion involved in the rocket setting. Total conversion would make quite a bomb, even if it only weighed four pounds, and the converted mass a fraction of a milligram.

The kzinti-produced swamp was congealing from the bottom up. His boots were getting heavy. Each had collected a growing mass of ice. He kept walking so that they wouldn't freeze to the bottom.

He'd searched the neutral setting, handle and sphere, for hidden controls. Nothing showed: nothing obvious. He tried twisting various parts of the handle. Nothing broke, which was good, but nothing would twist either.

Maybe something *should* break. Suppose he broke off the gauge?

He wasn't strong enough.

He tried twisting the ball itself. Nothing.

He tried it again, holding the trigger down.

The silvery sphere twisted one hundred and eighty degrees, then clicked. Jason released the trigger, and it started to change.

"I've found it, Nessus, I've found *something*."

"A new setting? What does it look like?"

Like a white flash, thought Jason, waiting for the single instant in which it *would* look like a white flash. It didn't come. The protean material solidified . . .

"Like a cone with a rounded base, pointing away from the handle."

"Try it. And if you are successful, good-by, Jason. Knowing you was pleasant."

"The blast could include you, too."

"Is it thus you assuage my loss of you?"

"You sure you don't have a sense of humor? Good-by, Nessus. Here goes."

The cone did not explode. A time bomb? Jason was about to start looking for a chronometer on the

thing when he noticed something that froze him instantly.

A hazy blue line led away in the direction he happened to be pointing the cone. Led away and upward at forty degrees, wavering as tremor in his fingers waved the cone's vertex.

Another weapon.

He released the trigger. The line disappeared.

The kzin ship wasn't in sight. Not that he would have used it as a target, not with Anne-Marie aboard.

A hidden weapon. More powerful than the others? He had to find out. Like Chuft-Captain, he tried to assume a marksman's stance.

His feet were frozen solidly into the ice. He'd been careless. He shrugged angrily, aimed the weapon a little above the horizon, and fired.

A hazy blue line formed. He slowly lowered the vertex until the line touched the horizon.

The light warned him. He threw himself flat on his back and waited for the blast. The light died almost instantly . . . and suddenly the shiny horizon-to-horizon ice rippled and shot from under him. It took his feet along. His body snapped like a whip, and then the ice tore away from his feet.

He was on his face, with agony in his ankles.

The backlash came. The ice jerked under him, harmlessly.

"Jason, what happened? There was an explosion."

"Hang . . . on." Jason rolled over and pulled his legs up to examine

them. The pain was bad. His ankles didn't feel broken, but he certainly couldn't walk on them. The boots were covered with cracked wet ice.

"Jason. Puppeteer. Can you hear me?" It was the slurred, blurry voice of the boss kzin.

"Don't . . . say anything, Nessus. I'm going to answer him." Jason switched his transmitter to the common channel. "I'm here."

"You have discovered a new setting to the weapon."

"Have I?"

"I do not intend to play pup games with you. As a fighter you are entitled to respect, which your herbivorous friend is not — "

"How are your ribs feeling?"

"Do not speak of that again, please. We have something to trade, you and I. You have a unique weapon. I have a female human who may be your mate."

"Well put. So?"

"Give us the weapon. Show us where to find the new setting. You and your mate may leave this world in your own ship, unrestricted."

"Your name as your word?"

No answer.

"**Y**ou lying get of a — " Jason searched for the word. He could say two words of kzinti; one meant hello, and one meant —

"Do not say it. Jason, the agreement stands, except that I will smash your hyperdrive. You must return to civilization through normal space. With that proviso, you may have my name as my word."

"Nessus?"

"The herbivore must protect itself."

"Consider the alternative. Your mate is not entitled to the respect accorded a fighter. Kzinti are carnivorous, and we have been without fresh meat for some years."

"Bluff me not. You'd lose your only hostage."

"We'd lose one arm of her. Then another. Then a lower leg."

Jason felt sick. They could do it. Painlessly, too, if they wished; and they probably would, to avoid losing Anne-Marie to shock.

He gulped. "Is she all right now?"

"Naturally."

"Prove it." He was stalling. Nessus could hear everything; he **might** come up with something . . . and was ever there a fainter hope?

"You may hear her," said the boss kzin. There were clunking sounds; they must be dropping her helmet over her head. Then Anne-Marie's voice spoke swiftly and urgently.

"Jay darling, listen. Use the seventh setting. The *seventh*. Can you hear me?"

"Anne, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she shouted. "Use the seventh — " Her voice died abruptly.

"Anne!"

Nothing.

There was fast, muffled kzinti speech in his earphones. Jason looked at the weapon a moment, then dropped the guide to setting number

seven. Maybe she had something. The cone writhed, became a mirror-surfaced sphere. . . .

"Jason, you now know your mate is unharmed. We must ask for your decision immediately."

He ignored the blurry voice, watched the weapon become a flat-ended cylinder with a grid near the handle. He'd seen the kzinti using that . . .

"Oh," he said.

It was the computer, of course. The tnucltip computer. He smiled, and it hurt inside him. His wife had given him the only help she had to give. She'd told him where to find the only tnuclpin expert in known space.

The hell of it was, she was perfectly right. But the computer couldn't hear him, and he couldn't hear the computer, and they didn't speak a common language anyway.

Wait a minute. This was setting number seven; but if you counted neutral as the first setting, then — no. Setting six was only the laser.

Finagle! The Belter oath fitted. Finagle's First Law was holding beautifully.

His ankles stopped hurting.

Decoyed! He twisted his head around to find his enemy. The bargain had been a decoy! Already his head buzzed with the stunner beam. He saw the kzin, hiding behind a half-melted bulge of ice with only one eye and the stunner showing. He fired at once.

The weapon was on computer setting. His hand went slack.

"I do not understand why she wanted him to use the seventh setting."

"The computer, was it not?"

"Chuft-Captain, it was."

"He could not have used the computer."

"No. Why did the prisoner —"

"She may have meant the sixth setting. The laser was the only weapon a human could have used against us."

"Urrr. Yes. She counted wrong, then."

The ship-to-suit circuit spoke. "Chuft-Captain, I have him."

"Flyer, well done. Bring him in."

"Chuft-Captain, do we still need him?"

The kzin was not in a mood to argue. "I hate to throw anything away. Bring him in."

His head floated, his body spun, his ankles hurt like fury. He shuddered and tried to open his eyes. The lids came up slowly, reluctantly.

He was standing in a police web, slack neck muscles holding his head upright in one-eighth gee. No wonder he hadn't known which way was up.

Anne-Marie was twelve inches to his side. Her eyes held no hope, only exhaustion.

"Damn," he said. One word to cover it all.

The kzinti yowling had been so much a part of the background that he didn't notice it until it stopped. After a moment the boss kzin step-

ped in front of him, moving slowly and carefully and curled protectively around his left side.

"You are awake."

"Obviously."

One massive four-clawed hand held the tnucltip weapon, still at the computer setting. The kzin held it up. "You found a new setting on this. Tell me how to reach it."

"I can't," said Jason. "I found it by accident and lost it the same way."

"That is a shame. Do you realize we have nothing to lose?"

Jason studied the violet eyes, fruitlessly. "What do you mean?"

"Either you will tell me of your own free will, or you can be persuaded to tell, or you cannot. In any case, we have no reason not to remove your mate's arm."

He turned and spoke in the kzinti tongue. The other aliens left the room.

"We will be leaving this world in an hour." The boss kzin turned and settled his orange bulk carefully in a kzinti contour couch, grunting softly with the pain of movement.

He meant it. His position was too simple for doubt. The boss kzin had a tnucltip weapon to take back to Kzin, and he had two human captives. The humans were of no use to him. But he had great use for Jason's knowledge. What he offered was a simple trade: knowledge for the meat on their bones.

"I can't talk," said Jason.

"All right," Anne-Marie said dully.

"I can't." The cone-form was too powerful. Its beam set up spontaneous mass conversion in anything it touched. And he couldn't explain. The boss kzin might hear him; and the kzinti didn't know just what they were after.

"All right, you can't. We've had it. How did they get you?"

"I got stupid. While the boss kzin was talking to me one of the others snuck up and used a sonic."

"The seventh setting —"

"I didn't have time to figure anything out. There isn't enough air to carry sound out there."

"I didn't think of that. How's Nessus?"

"Still free."

The boss kzin broke in. "We will have it soon. The puppeteer has no place to hide and nothing with which to fight. Do you expect it to rescue you?"

Anne-Marie smiled sourly. "Not really."

The other kzinti returned, carrying things. There were pieces of indecipherable kzinti equipment, and there was a medkit from the emergency 'doc in the *Court Jester*. They set it all down next to the police web and went to work.

One piece of kzinti equipment was a small tank with a pump and a piece of soft plastic tubing attached. Jason watched them wrap the tubing three or four times around Anne-Marie's upper arm. They joined the other end to the pump and started it going.

"It's cold," she said. "Freezing."

"I can't stop them," said Jason.

She shivered. "You're sure?"

He gave up. He opened his mouth to shout out his surrender. The boss kzin raised his furry head questioningly — and Jason's voice stopped in his throat.

He'd used the hidden setting just once. For only an instant had the violet beam touched the horizon, but the explosion had damn near killed him. Obviously the hidden setting was not meant to be used on the surface of a planet.

It could be used only from space. Was it meant to destroy whole worlds?

But Anne-Marie hurt!

She said, "All right, you're sure. Jay, don't look like that. Jay? I can grow a new arm. Relax! Stop *worrying* about it!" The anguish in Jason's face was like nothing she'd ever seen.

The burry voice said, "She will never reach an autodoc."

"Shut up!" Jason screamed.

Soft kzinti noises entered the silence. One of the kzinti left: the pilot, the one with the white streak. The others talked. They talked of cooking, kzinti sex, human sex, Beta Lyrae, how to hunt puppeteers, or how to turn a sphere inside out without forming a cusp. Jason couldn't tell. They used no gestures.

Anne-Marie said, "They could have planted a mike on us."

"Yah."

"So you can't tell me what you're hiding."

"No. I wish I spoke Wunderlander."

"I don't speak Wunderlander. Dead language. Jay, I can't feel my arm any more. There must be liquid nitrogen in this tube."

"I'm sorry. I *can't* help."

"It is not working," said Chuft-Captain.

"It should work," said Slaverstudent. "We may not get results with the first limb. We probably will with the second. The second time, they will know that we mean what we threaten." He looked thoughtfully at the prisoners. "Also, I think we should eat our meals in here."

"They know that limbs can be regrown."

"Only by human-built machines. There are none here."

"You have a point."

"It will be good to taste fresh meat again."

Flyer returned. "Chuft-Captain, the kitchen is programmed."

"Good." Chuft-Captain incautiously shifted his bulk, tensed all over at the pain. It would have been nice if he could have put pressure bandages around his ribs. The ribs had been set and joined with pins. But he could not use pressure bandages; they would remind his crew of what had happened. He would be shamed.

Kicked by a puppeteer.

"I have been thinking," he said. "Regardless of what the human tells us, we must take the trunctip relic to Kzin as quickly as possible."

There I will drop you, Slaverstudent, along with the weapon and the freeze box containing Telepath. Flyer, you and I will return here for the herbivore. He cannot be rescued in that time. He will be easy to find. A sight search will find him unless he digs a hole, in which case we may use seismographs."

"He will have a month to anticipate."

"Yes. He will."

"Can you understand me?"

Three pairs of kzinti eyes jerked around. The voice belonged to none of them. It sounded foreign, artificial.

"Repeating. Can you understand me?"

It was the gun speaking. The tnu-ctip weapon.

IX

"It's learned their language," said Jason. And all the hope drained out of him.

"It'll tell them where to find that speaking you were trying to hide."

"Yah."

"Then tell me this, Jay." She was on the edge of hysteria. "What good will it do me to lose my arm?"

Jason filled his lungs and shouted. "Hey!"

Not one kzin moved. They hovered around the weapon, all talking at once.

"Hey, Captain! What sthondat was your sister?"

They all jerked around. He must have pronounced the word right.

"You must not use that word again," said the boss kzin.

"Get this thing off my wife's arm!"

The boss kzin thought it over, spoke to the pilot. The pilot manipulated the police web to free Anne-Marie's arm, used a cloth to protect his hand while he removed the cold, deadly tube. He turned off the pump, readjusted the police web and went back to the discussion. By then the discussion had become a dialogue; the boss kzin had shut the others up.

"How's your arm?"

"Feels dead. Maybe it is. What were we hiding, Jay?"

He told her.

"Ye gods. And now they've got it."

"Could you use an anesthetic?"

"It doesn't hurt yet."

"Let me know. They're all through torturing us. They may eat us, but it'll be all at once."

The computer was doing most of the talking.

A kzin was holding up the tnu-ctip cap, the one they'd found in the stasis box. The computer spoke.

He held up the small metal object that might have been a communicator. The computer spoke again.

The boss kzin spoke.

The computer spoke at length.

The boss kzin picked up the weapon and did things to it. Jason couldn't see what. The kzin was facing away from him. But the weapon writhed. Jason snarled in his

throat. He commonly used curses for emphasis. He knew no words to cover this situation.

The boss kzin spoke briefly and left, cradling the weapon. One of the others followed: the expert on Slavers. Jason caught one glimpse of the weapon as the boss kzin went through the door.

The kzin with the white stripe, the pilot, remained.

Jason felt himself starting to shake. The weapon, the soft, mutable weapon. When the boss kzin had left the room, he'd carried a gun handle attached to a double cone with rounded bases and points which barely touched.

He didn't understand.

Then his eyes, restlessly searching the room as if for an answer, fell on the empty stasis box. There was a tnuclip cap, and a small metal object which registered in hyperspace, and a preserved Slaver hand . . .

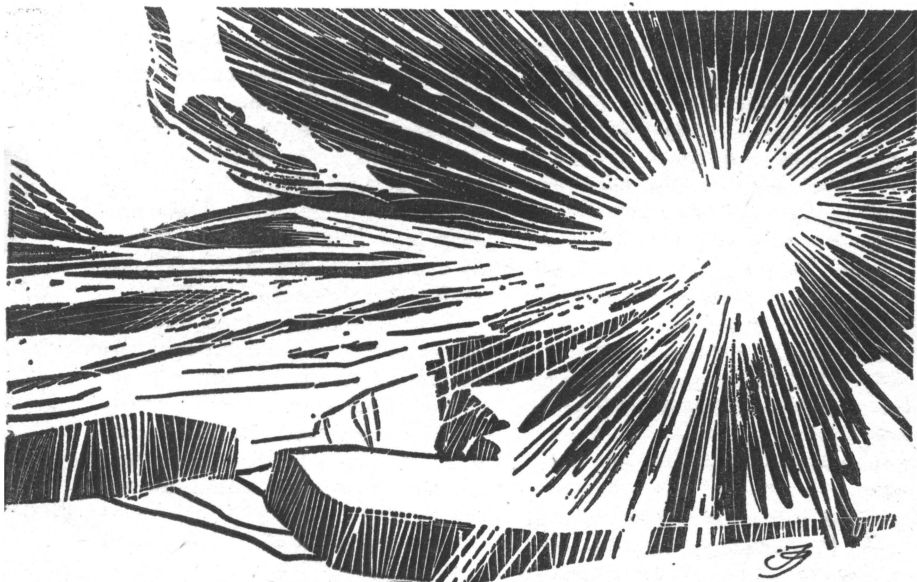
It began to make sense.

Did the computer have eyesight? Obviously. The kzinti had been showing it objects from the stasis box.

Take a computer smart enough to learn a language by hearing it spoken for an hour. Never mind its size; any sentient being will build a computer as small as possible, if only to reduce the time lag in thinking with impulses moving at lightspeed or less. Let the computer know only what its tnuclipun builders taught it, plus what it had seen and heard in this room.

It had seen a tnuclipun survival





kit. It had seen members of a species it did not recognize. The unfamiliar beings had asked questions which made it obvious that they knew little about tnuclipun, and that they could not ask questions of a tnuclip. They didn't speak the tnuclipun language. They were desperately anxious for details about a tnuclipun top secret weapon.

Obviously they were not allies of the tnuclipun.

They must be enemies. In the Slaver War there had been, could be, no neutrals.

He said, "Anne."

"Still here."

"Don't ask questions, just follow orders. Our lives depend on it. See that kzin?"

"Right. You sneak up on him from behind; and I'll hit him too."

from behind, I'll hit him with my purse."

"This is not funny. When I give the word, we're both going to spit at his ear."

"You're right. That's not funny."

"I'm in dead earnest. And don't forget to compensate for low gravity."

"How are you going to give the word with a mouthful of saliva?"

"Just spit when I do. Okay?"

Jason's shot brushed the kzin's furry scalp. Anne-Marie's caught him square in the ear. The kzin came to his feet with a howl. Then, as both humans cleared their throats again, the kzin moved like lightning. The air stiffened suddenly about their heads.

The kzin contemptuously returned to his crouch against a wall.

It became very hard to breathe. Blinking was a slow, excruciating process. Talking was out of the question. Warm air, laden with CO₂, did not want to dissipate. It stayed before their faces, waiting to be inhaled again and again. The kzin watched them struggle.

Jason forced his eyes closed. Blinking had become too painful. He tried to remember that he'd planned this; that it had worked perfectly. Their heads and bodies were now entirely enclosed by the police web.

Now here's my plan.

"The puppeteer ran east," said Chuft-Captain. And he turned west. He didn't want to kill the puppeteer without knowing it.

The weapon was hard and awkward in his hand. He was a little afraid of it, and a little ashamed of being afraid: a hangover from that awful moment when the weapon spoke. There were ghost legends among the kzinti. Some of the most fearsome spoke of captured weapons haunted by their dead owners.

Nobles weren't supposed to be superstitious, not out loud.

A computer that could learn new languages was logical. The only way to reach the setting for the matter conversion beam had been to ask the computer setting; and that was logical too. A matter conversion beam was a dangerous secret.

Briefly, Chuft-Captain wondered about that. It seemed that for an honorable kzin every recent change

was a change for the worse. The conquest of space had ended when kzinti met human. Then had come the puppeteers with their trade outposts; any kzin who attacked a puppeteer invariably found himself, not harmed physically, but ruined financially. No kzin could fight power like that. Would the tnucltip weapon reverse these changes?

There had been a time, between the discoveries of atomic power and the gravity polarizer, when it seemed the kzinti species would destroy itself in wars. Now the kzinti held many worlds, and the danger was past. But was it? A matter conversion beam. . . .

There is no turning away from knowledge.

Haunted weapons. . . .

He stopped on a rise of permanent frost some distance from the ship. By now half the sky was blood red. An arm of the hydrogen spiral was sweeping across the world, preparing to engulf it. Hours or days from now the arm would pass, moving outward on the wings of photon pressure, leaving the world with a faintly thicker atmosphere.

But we'll be long gone by then, Chuft-Captain thought. Already he was looking ahead to the problem of reaching Kzin. If human ships caught the *Traitor's Claw* entering Kzin's atmosphere, the kzinti would clearly be violating treaty rules. But they weren't likely to be caught, not if Flyer did everything right. . . .

"Chuft-Captain, this setting has no gunsight."

"No? You're right, it doesn't." He considered. "Perhaps it was meant only for large targets. A world seen from close up. The explosion was fierce."

"Or its accuracy may be low. Or its range. I wonder. Logically the tnuctpun should have included at least a pair of notches for sighting."

Something's wrong. The danger instinct whispered in his ear. *Superstition*, he snarled, and he raised the weapon stiffly, aiming well above the horizon. "Let us find the answer," he said.

In this area of Cue Ball the ice had melted and refrozen. It was as flat as a calm lake.

Nessus had stopped at the edge. He'd faced around, stopped again, held the pose for several minutes, then faced back and started across the flat, red-tinged ice. Muscles rippled beneath his pressure suit.

It wasn't as if he expected to help his human employees. They had gotten themselves into this. And he had neither weapons nor allies nor even stealth to aid him. A human infantryman could have crawled on his belly, but Nessus' legs weren't built that way. On a white plain with no cover he had to trot upright, bouncing gaily in the low gravity.

His only weapon was his hind leg.

Thinking that, he remembered the jarring impact as he planted his foot in the kzin's side. Two hundred and forty pounds of charging

puppeteer applied over five square inches of clawed space boot. The shock wave had jarred up through thigh and hip and spine, jerked at his skull and continued along the necks to snap his teeth shut with a sharp double *Click*. Like kicking a mountain, a soft but solid mountain.

The next instant he was running, really terrified for the first time in his life. But behind him the kzin had vented a long whistling scream and folded tightly around himself...

Nessus went on. He'd trotted across the frozen lake without seeing kzinti or kzinti ship. Now the ice was beginning to swell and dip. He'd reached the periphery of the blast area. Now there was a touch of yellow light ahead. Small and faint, but unmistakably yellow against the pink ice.

Ship lights.

He went on. He'd never know why. He'd never admit it to himself.

Thock! Hind boot slamming solidly into hard meat. Whistling shriek of agony between sharp-filed carnivore teeth.

He wanted to do it again. Nessus had the blood lust.

He went up a rise, moving slowly, though his feet wanted to dance. He was weaponless, but his suit was a kind of defense. No projectile short of a fast meteorite could harm him. Like silicone plastic, the pressure suit was soft and malleable under gentle pressures — such as walking — but it instantly became rigid all over when something struck it.

He topped the rise.

The ship lights might have come from the *Court Jester*. They didn't. Nessus saw the airlock opening, and he charged down the slope so the next rise hid him from view.

The kzinti ship was down. They must have landed with the gravity polarizer; otherwise he would have seen them. If they had then captured Jason on foot, he might still be alive. He might not. The same went for Anne-Marie.

Now what? The kzinti ship was beyond this next rise of ice. At least one kzin was outside. Were they looking for *him*? No, they'd hardly expect him here!

He had reached the trough between the two swells. They were long and shallow and smooth, like waves near an ocean shoreline.

The top of the swell behind Nessus suddenly sparkled with harsh bluewhite sunlight.

Nessus knew just what to do, and he did it instantly. No point in covering his cranial bulge with his necks; he'd only get his larynxes crushed. The padding would protect his brain, or it wouldn't. He folded his legs under him and tucked his heads tight between his forelegs. He didn't have to think about it. The puppeteer's explosion reflex was no less a reflex for being learned in childhood.

He saw the light; he curled into a ball, and the ground swell came. It **batted** him like a beach ball. His rigid, form-fitting shell retained his shape. It could not prevent the ground swell from slamming him

away, nor his brain from jarring under its thick skull and its extra padding.

X

He woke on his back with his legs in the air. There was a tingly ache along his right side and on the right sides of his necks and legs. Half his body surface would be one bruise tomorrow. The ground still heaved; he must have been unconscious for only a moment.

He clambered shakily to his feet. The claws were an enormous help on the ice. He shook himself once, then started up the rise.

Suddenly and silently the kzinti ship topped the rise. A quarter of a mile down the swell it slid gracefully into space in a spray of ice. It was rotating on its axis, and Nessus could see that one side was red hot. It skimmed through the near-vacuum above the trough, seeming to drift rather than fall. It hit solidly on the shallow far rise and plowed to a stop.

Still upright. Steam began to surround it as it sank into melting ice.

Nessus approached without fear. Surely any kzin inside was dead, and any human too. But could he get in?

The outer airlock door was missing, ripped from its hinges. The inner door must have been bent, for it leaked a thin fog from the edges. Nessus pushed the Cycle button and waited.

The door didn't move.

Nessus cast an eye around the airlock. There must be telltales to sense whether the outer door was closed and whether there was pressure in the lock.

There was one, a sensitized surface in the maimed outer doorway. Nessus pushed it down with his mouth.

Air sprayed into the enclosure, turned to fog and blew away. Nessus' other head was casting about for a pressure sensor. He found it next to the air outlet. He swung alongside it and leaned against it so that his suit trapped the air. He leaned into the pressure.

The inner door swung open. Nessus fought to maintain his position against the roaring wind. When the door was fully open he dodged inside. The door slammed just behind him.

Now. What had happened here?

The kzinti lifiesystem was a howling hurricane of air replacing what he'd let out. Nessus poked into the kitchen, the control section and two privacy booths without seeing anything. He moved down the hall and looked into what he remembered would be the interrogation room. Perhaps here . . .

He froze.

Anne-Marie and Jason were in the police web. Obviously; because both were standing and both were unconscious. They appeared undamaged. But the kzini!

Nessus felt the world swim. His heads felt lighter than air. He'd been through a lot . . . He turned his

eyes away. It occurred to him that the humans must be unconscious from the lack of oxygen. The police web must surround them completely, even to their heads. Otherwise the shock would have torn their heads off. Nessus forced himself to move to the police web. He kept his eyes resolutely away from the kzini.

There were the controls. Was that the power switch? He tried it. The humans drifted gracefully to the floor. Done.

And Nessus found his eyes creeping back to the kzini.

He couldn't look away.

The carnivore had struck like a wet snowball thrown with awful force. He was a foot up the wall, and he was all spread out on a border of splashed circulatory fluid, and he stuck . . .

Nessus fainted. He woke up, still standing because of the normal tone of his relaxed muscles, to find Anne-Marie shaking him gently and trying to talk to him.

"I'm worried about him," said Anne-Marie.

Jason turned away from the Jester's control panel. "He can get treatment on Jinx. There are puppeteers in Sirius Mater."

"That's still a week away. Isn't there anything we can do for him? He spends all his time in his room. It must be awful to be manic-depressive." She was rubbing the stump where the emergency doc had amputated her arm — a gesture Jason hated. It roused guilt feelings.

But she'd get a new arm on Jinx.

"I hate to tell you," he said, "but Nessus isn't in a depressive stage. He stays in his room because he's avoiding us."

"Us?"

"Yah. I think so."

"But Jay! *Us?*"

"Don't take it personal, Anne. We're a symbol." He lowered his head to formulate words. "Look at it this way. You remember when Nessus kicked the kzin?"

"Sure. It was beautiful."

"And you probably know he was nerving himself to fire on the kzinti ship if I gave him the tnuctipun weapon. Finally, you know that he came voluntarily to the kzinti ship. I think he was going to fight them if he got the chance. He knew they'd captured me, and he knew they had the weapon. He was ready to fight."

"Good for him. But Jay —"

"Damnit, honey, it *wasn't* good for him. For him, it was purest evil. Cowardice is *moral* for puppeteers. He was violating everything he'd ever learned!"

"You mean he's ashamed of himself?"

"That's part of it. But there's more. It was the way we acted when we woke up.

"You remember how it was? Nessus was standing and looking at

what was left of the kzin pilot. You had to shake him a few times before he noticed. Then what did he find out? I, Jason Papandreou, who had been his friend, had planned the whole thing. I had known that the boss kzin and the Slaver expert were walking to their deaths, because the computer form of the weapon had given them the self-destruct setting and told them it was the matter conversion beam. I knew that, and I let them walk out and blow themselves to smithereens. I tricked the pilot into putting our heads in the police web, but I left him outside to die. And I was proud of it! And you were proud of me!

"Now do you get it?"

"No. And I'm still proud of you."

"Nessus isn't. Nessus knows that we, whom he probably thought of as funny-looking puppeteers — you may remember we were thinking of him as almost human — he knows we committed a horrible crime. Worse, it was a crime he was thinking of committing himself. So he's transferred his shame to us. He's ashamed of us, and he doesn't want to see us."

"How far to Jinx?"

"A week."

"No way to hurry?"

"I never heard of one."

"Poor Nessus!"

END



GODS OF THE DARK AND LIGHT

by BRUCE McALLISTER

*Landing on the strange planet, they
prayed at once to their gods. But
to what gods did the natives pray?*

Gregory Shawn strained his neck upward at the two glaring apricots that were the suns of V-Planet-14. The sands beneath him had warmed his legs until they glistened with streams of sweat, and the weak wind only managed to pack more hot air up under his heavy robe.

Pulling at the cloth lying against his chest, he let a trickle of air pass between his skin and the robe. Further arm movement was impossible, as the other colonists pressed in tightly against him, forming an oval of sun-and-sand roughened flesh in the middle of the gorge.

His wife moved at his side, but remained silent.

From where he stood he could

see only a small curve of the starship's port side. Like the ragged boulders and cliffs, the starship hull wavered liquidly in the heat.

Soon even the people beside him began to waver, but the illusion passed when the group began to sing:

*For the pain of our new world,
For the pain of our new skies,
For the evil which from our Day
Over and around us lies,
Meah-Trin, to Thee we raise
This our hymn of painful days.*

*In the terror of each hour,
Of the day and of the night,
Rock and swamp, and tree and flower,
Suns and moons and stars of fright,
Meah-Trin, to Thee we pray:
Save us from these painful days*

The path back to the tents was sand, then rock and sand, then rock, then rock and clay, as the tents and pungent swamp barbed with thin cattails came into sight. His wife clenched a fold of his robe in her hand, and they cleared the final grade before the colony tents.

The rocky hills behind the tents were smeared with the orange-red of iron deposits; the swamp water reflected the saffron sky; the ground was a dusty yellow-orange. The only cool colors dotting his vision were the triangular darknesses of the tent entrances.

Gregory led his wife to the second line of tents, entered his own tent, and seated himself before a rough rock slab. Shuffling through the black script which covered a dozen neat opaque gray cellophane sheets, he found the unused sheets and began writing with a small pen:

"Dear Meah-Trin, Beloved Twin-Gods-as-One, Gods of the Earth, of Man's New Worlds, of the Uncharted Universe: Today — one week after the Day of Our Arrival — we sang the new hymn as we stood on the sands of the Gorge of Our Arrival. It is not a thankful hymn. There is little to be thankful for in our colony on this rock-and-swamp planet of sister suns.

"Until today we could not sing the new hymn. No one would sing it, because Jonathan would not sing it. Jonathan would not sing it, because his wife, ebony-haired Ruthana, would not sing it. Ruthana said that since yellow-skinned Darby changed the old hymn to the new three days ago, the new hymn was

a distortion of the traditional hymn we brought with us, and should not be sung.

"But two nights ago a heavy-scaled leech from the swamp cattails crawled into Jonathan's tent and ate into Ruthana's throat and crawled into her belly. Jonathan was willing to sing the hymn today, so everyone sang the hymn today.

"Our hearts ache because we think and dream ominous visions of our children and our children's children having to grow to adulthood in a world of constant pain. We cannot understand You in this new world of pain, and we search for Your guiding hand in aid."

The iron tinge of the rocks was pale now in the moonlight, and invisible in places under the inky shadows cast by crags and crevasses.

The darkness of the cave opening would normally have been appealing, but tonight hunger and fatigue added to apprehension made the animal reluctant to enter his lair.

Four familiar pairs of eyes moved, glinted, and moved again inside the cave.

The animal's hooves clacked and echoed, as it pawed hesitatingly on the rock before the cave. With head upturned toward the star-spangled tar of the night sky and monkeyish forehead shining under the moon's light, the animal snapped its needle-point teeth in a shrill chatter and gestured with humanoid hands at the night:

"O Gods of stink-water and hard-

ground and dark and light — I thank you for my world of warm-mate and small-young. But please make the world better by making meat easier to find. We all have trouble finding meat. I have split a hoof on the high-rocks looking for the small-furry-meat that is sometimes there, but there is none there. My mate and I have three small-young, and she will be angry with me for not bringing her four weights of meat. O Gods, our young will think of you thankfully if they have enough meat for their bellies. They, too, will have mates and young soon, and their small-young will think of you thankfully if you make meat more plentiful. If you make stink-water come closer to our home-cave maybe meat will come with it. We would all be thankful.

"I have only four legs and two arms to search and find meat with, and they are tired arms and legs."

"Dear Meah-Trin, Gods of All: We lift our voices in song twice a week now. It is good to join in prayer and hymns, but it is difficult each time to witness another of us missing or pained by the new world.

"Dark-bearded Sallamiah was missing at the last hymnal meeting. His wife, golden-haired Lena, tells us that five days ago he was searching for wood to burn and he fell on a rock near the swamp and cut and broke a lower bone of his right leg. She says that yesterday she cleaned his leg, which was running with pus, and that in the

pus were maggots. She says that last night a finger-sized maggot crawled from the wound in Sallamiah's leg, and soft pieces of bone ran out with the purulence. She says that Sallamiah passed away in the night, and a hundred maggots crawled on his chest when she went to weep on him.

"Pale Robert and curly-hair Cynthia passed away two weeks ago. Their faces were bloated, but there were no maggots. Four others with whom I was not well acquainted were missing from the hymnal meeting last week. Two were given fiery funerals because of the maggots in their bodies.

"Four days ago slant-eyed Daniel struck his head on a wood piling sunk for the swamp pier, and his skull went soft in three days, and the top of his mouth sagged in and choked him. His wife passed away from the maggots two weeks ago.

"At the last hymnal meeting long-haired Peter was in great pain. His right cheek was peeling from the bone in hard pieces, like sun-baked mud. A week ago Peter volunteered to eat some of the food-stuffs of the swamp. He offered a small green fruit to Elizabeth and me, but we refrained from tasting it. I am thankful that we did, since the swamp plant might be the cause of Peter's disease or poisoning. The corn, potatoes and beans we brought with us grow well enough in the ground of the new planet, and they suffice as our diet.

"We still must pray for understanding of Your ways in this new world of pain. There are new and

different pains each day for each of us . . . pain in not understanding You."

"O Gods of the stink-water and hard-ground and dark and light and meat — My tired legs thank you, my mate thanks you, and our small-young thank you because you have made meat easier to find, even without moving the stink-water closer to our home-cave.

You have given us a new kind of meat we have never seen before, which stays near the stink-water and lives in small and weak home-caves out in the suns, and which has only two legs so that it cannot escape when I want to catch it and take it to my warm-mate and small-young. My four legs are thankful, even though the new meat is almost two great for them to lift. Even the small female of the new meat is almost one weight herself."

"Dear Meah-Trin, Gods of All: Very few of us wish to lift our voices in the old thankful hymns we brought with us, so Darby changed four more of the old hymns to new hymns. But Darby, too, was missing at the last hymnal meeting.

"Pepper-haired Samson, Darby's son, could not bury Darby because his bones and flesh were an orangish mud. We had to burn his body in his tent. Samson went to live with slender Patricia, whose husband did not return from the swamp five days ago.

"Although Samson and Patricia have not wed, it was decided that

there was no sin in their living under the same tent, because they know Your Rules Vitae and are good people.

"Long-boned Thomas will be the one who will change more hymns for us in these times of pain. His wife, red-haired Barbara, passed away at the talons of the Devil last night. Her thigh was found near their tent. Thomas could find no other remains of her body, except for her life-blood spread out in the tent and among the rocks.

"I spoke to Thomas last night, and he blasphemed, and I was ashamed in his presence. Although he can find no understanding of Your ways, he will be the one who will change more hymns for us, since he knows well the words of our hearts and can put them to the old music.

"Dear Meah-Trin, I'm afraid for Elizabeth, my wife. I have not been hurt in this new world except through the pains and injuries of my friends. Four of them have been so pained by this new world that they blaspheme in front of us all. I will never blaspheme against you, even if Elizabeth is hurt, but I'm afraid that my mind and heart would not be the same after it — because, though I have the power to witness the sorrows of others, I might not have the power to bear my sorrow's at Elizabeth's pain.

"I cannot — we all cannot — find understanding of Your ways."

"O Gods of the stink-water and hard-ground and moons and suns — we are thankful for the meat

you have sent us, but my arm aches where the two-legged meat attacked me. I can not bring meat to my mate and small-young if I do not have my arms to carry the meat with."

"Dear Meah-Trin, Gods of All: Tonight must be our Night of judgment, we fear. Seven more of us have passed away the last few days. Three tents burn, and maggots and muddy flesh and leeches burn in them.

"Azure-eyed Sophia lost her hand to the talons of the Devil early tonight. The Devil was occupying a form as dark as Hell. Its shape was that of a dog — four legs and a torso — and that of an ape — stomach, chest, arms and head. It was shorter in stature than a man, but probably of the same weight; its skin shown in the moonlight like a moist bat-skin, and its arms and legs were thin and sinewy, and its feet sounded as it escaped, as if they were hooved.

"The Devil came to Sophia in her tent, while her husband, bushy-haired Edward, was speaking with me about a fence to be built around the tent. The Devil grabbed her arm, and she cried out for You to save her, and Edward and I ran to her. Edward fell upon the Devil and was taken by the long fingers of the Devil, and his head was twisted and blood ran from his mouth and his eyes were taken from his head by the Devil's talons.

"The Devil took Sophia's hand from her arm and held it in his mouth and carried the body of

Edward away. I damned the Devil back to Hell and sent it away with a blow from a shovel on its left arm, but it did not free Edward from its grasp. The Devil's life-blood ran greasy as it returned to its kingdom.

"We cannot understand how we have sinned so greatly that the Devil may visit us unrestrained by Your hands. Though the human imperfections in us fight patience, we still try to remain patient and pray for understanding."

"Dear Meah-Trin, Gods of All: We were a hundred when we descended from the skies into the Gorge of Our Arrival, and now we are fifty under the damned moons of the new world's night.

"It was not the Devil that took Thomas' wife and visited Sophia and took her husband, but rather it was only one of many of the Devil's helpers. Five of us saw demons of the same centaurean form last night, in different places, at different times. Perhaps there are a hundred of these helpers around, day and night.

"Dear Meah-Trin, I am very afraid for Elizabeth.

"Today stocky Morgan cried out in blasphemy that we were blind, that we were counseled by the Devil when we decided to leave Earth and come to this hell of sister suns. Morgan screamed that there are no Gods here. Then he began to weep, and all of us believed that You had spoken to him and that he was repenting with sacred tears for his blasphemy. But then in the evening Morgan went to the swamp mud

and laughed in madness and sank himself into the darkness.

"I pray that You forgive us our sins, of which we are so ignorant, and that You enlighten us as to our sins so that we might know them and understand this new world is one of pain and punishment to us."

"Dear Meah-Trin, Gods of All: Scar-faced Barnal told me today that small flames are born from the ground near the tents. He said that many times he has watched a small crevasse in the ground and seen a fire born in it. Sharp-minded James thinks that it might be natural gas igniting upon striking the air, but most of us must believe that it is the Devil's doing.

"Swamp wood was used to build a fence around the tents, but still the Devil's demons have taken nine more of us; and the tents smell of rotting blood, and small rodents chew and suck the drying blood at night if it is not buried under a layer of dirt.

"We wait and pray for Your word, but many of our minds are imprisoned by the pains of our bodies and hearts and are moulded into confusion by the pains of this new world."

"O Gods of the moons and suns and stink-water and hard-ground and dark and light — the new meat brings happiness to our stomachs, but I am filled with fear for my warm-mate and small-young. I can smell the fresh blood of one of us — a young buck — near the living grounds of the new meat.

O Gods, I cannot understand this new meat, and I have begun fearing."

"Dear Meah-Trin: A Devil's helper was killed today near the fence by four of the remaining thirty of us. I was one of the many who cut at it a hundred times with hatred in my heart, and who threw its greasy life-blood onto the rocks, and who took its bat-skin and tied it to a pole. We repented for our pagan feelings and actions later, but we have begun to sin in innumerable ways without repentance, for our minds are tortured and raw, and blind to the words we once knew from You.

"There has not been a meeting in two weeks. There are only four of us who still live with our respective husbands and wives. I will attempt the organization of a hymnal meeting so that we may lift our voices to You. But long-boned Thomas sleeps in a tent with two women now, and does not come out except to blaspheme against You and to help gather the crops of vegetables we now depend on.

"We pray for some word from You, but many of us fear that there was some truth in stocky Morgan's words."

"O Gods of the dark and light and meat — I cannot be thankful today. My warm-mate and small-young were attacked and killed in our home-cave by the new meat you sent. O Gods, I will find another mate and young, but these were my first. I do not feel like

eating any more of the new meat you sent. I do not understand why you send us meat that attacks us.

"I saw the new meat running among our home-caves and saw them kill four bucks. I will find a new mate, and we will come to be happy in time, but I do not understand you, O Gods."

"Dear Meah-Trin: I have refrained from praying to You for three weeks, because one of the Devil's helpers carried Elizabeth away and left only her foot with three toes remaining. I loved Elizabeth, but the grief has been lessened by time so that I am now able to pray to You again. I am now living in a tent with azure-eyed Sophia, whose hand is healing fairly well. I feel that perhaps understanding of You in this new world will come to all of us soon.

"We moved our camp to a place where only a few fires can continue to singe our legs and tents. Sharp-minded James discovered a herb that can be ground up and sprinkled on us and in the tents to keep the maggots and leeches away. The Devil's helpers have not returned, because twelve men of our colony took shovels and torches and found the demons in their lairs among the rocks and killed them and brought back the skins of forty-eight of them. There were three different colors of skins, seeming to be according to the demons' ages. I have a medium-sized bluish skin hanging over the entrance to our tent.

"I believe that understanding of You will come soon, because new

things are taking place in us these days. Long-boned Thomas came from his tent of three women and told us of the things he had learned from You in his dreams. He took a torch from the fire that is born from the ground and burnt his hand before our eyes, and his women kissed his hand, and Thomas cried out that it was wonderful to feel the fire and to know that he lived in the new world. One of his women took the stinging cattails that grow in the swamp and whipped her face with them, and then she cried out to You that it was good to feel the sting and to know that she had to face to feel and eyes to see the new world."

"Dear Meah-Trin: Tall, long-boned Thomas talked to all of us today about the New Rules Vitae You gave him while he was sleeping. He cried out to us that You have bidden us Feel Fire, Feel Sting, Feel Blood, Feel Cold, and the all important rule, Feel All the Pain of the New World, because this new world You have given us is a world of pain.

"Thomas was glorious today. He no longer sorrows for Barbara.

"Many of us did not believe in the New Rules Vitae when they first heard them. So Thomas brought forth his four women, and one was without clothing, and all of us were ashamed. Thomas made her lie down on a bed of stinging cat-tails, and she cried out and tears ran from her eyes. She cried out how wonderful her pain was, and that You were speaking to her with

wonderful words as she felt the pain, and that all of us would hear and know You once again if we obeyed the New Rules of the New World.

"Today long-boned leader Thomas and three other men took a small live Devil's helper — the first one we have seen since we placed the skins on poles like flags — and tied its jaw shut and dulled its talons with stone, and took Belinda, wife of demon-killer Jason, and tied the beast to her side. The demon drew blood with its hooves, and she cried out thanksgiving to You. The demon nuzzled its jaws into her ribs with hellish ferocity, tugging at its bonds and desiring to taste her life-blood, and to condemn her soul to Hell. Because of the muzzle, Belinda's life-blood was not blackened in the grease-pit of the demon's belly, and her spirit was cleansed and the Devil's wish was thwarted.

"Azure-eyed, soft-voiced Sophia wants to hear and know You, as all of us do now, and she came to me this morning to say that we should soon be wed in the New

World, under the New Rules Vitae. So we will be wed tomorrow at the hymnal meeting.

"Tomorrow, when Thomas marries us with the stinging cattails and heated demon's bone and maggots, we will all sing the New Hymn of Thomas the Prophet:

*Gods of All, to Thee we raise
Our voice in love of painful days.*

"Tomorrow will be a glorious meeting, because five of us will take the last steps toward becoming One with You. As You instructed Thomas to have us do, we have gathered thick swamp wood beams to form crosses and have made nails from the metal of our shovels.

"Tomorrow in the sun, high above the ground, we will Feel Pain. We have no fear that the others will let us die, for they know that our children have yet to be born and nurtured by this New World of Pain. After all, we came to this world in the beginning for the sake of our children. They will grow to know You and to love this New World. **END**

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*Earth's gallant diplomats were
all up in the air — and only
Retief could bring them down!*

FOREST in the SKY

by KEITH LAUMER

Illustrated by CASTELLON

I

As Second Secretary of Embassy Jame Retief stepped from the lighter which had delivered the Ter-ran Mission to the close-cropped turquoise sward of the planet Zoon, a rabbit-sized creature upholstered in deep blue-violet angora bounded into view from behind an upthrust slab of scarlet granite. It sat on its oddly-arranged haunches a few yards from the newcomers, twitching an assortment of members as though testing the air for a clue to their

origin. First Secretary Magnan's narrow face registered apprehension as a second furry animal, this one a yard-wide sphere of indigo fuzz, came hopping around the prow of the vessel.

"Do you suppose they bite?"

"They're obviously grass-eaters," Colonel Smartfinger, the military attache, stated firmly. "Probably make most affectionate pets. Here, ah, kitty, kitty." He snapped his fingers and whistled. More bunnies appeared.

"Ah — Colonel." The agricultural attache touched his sleeve. "If I'm not mistaken, those are immature specimens of the planet's dominant life form!"

"Eh?" Oldtrick pricked up his ears. "These animals? Impossible!"

"They look just like the high-resolution photos the Sneak-and-peek teams took. My, aren't there a lot of them!"

"Well, possibly this is a sort of playground for them. Cute little fellows." Oldtrick paused to kick one which had opened surprising jaws for a nip at his ankle.

"That's the worst of these crash operations." The economic officer shied as a Terrier-sized fur-bearer darted in close and crunched a shiny plastic button from the cuff of his mauve, late midmorning, semi-informal hip-huggers. "One never knows just what one may be getting into."

"Oh-oh." Magnan nudged Retief as a technician hustled from the lock, heavy-laden. "Here comes the

classified equipment the ambassador's been sitting on since we left Sector HQ."

"Ah!" Ambassador Oldtrick rubbed his small, well manicured hands briskly together, lifted an article resembling a Mae West life jacket from the stack offered.

"Here, gentlemen, is my personal contribution to, ahem, high-level negotiations!" He smiled proudly and slipped his arms through a loop of woven plastic. "One-man, self-contained, power-boosted aerial lift units," he announced. "With these, gentlemen, we will confront the elusive Zooner on his home ground!"

"But — the post report said the Zooners are a sort of animated blimpl!" the Information Officer protested. "Only a few of them have been seen, and those were cruising at high altitude! Surely we're not going after *them*!"

"It was inevitable, gentlemen." Oldtrick winced as the technician tugged the harness strap tight across his narrow chest. "Sooner or later man was bound to encounter lighter-than-air intelligence — a confrontation for which we of the *Corps Diplomatique Terrestrienne* are eminently well qualified!"

"But, your excellency," First Secretary Magnan spoke up. "Couldn't we have arranged to confront these, er, gaseous brains here on solid land?"

"Nonsense, Magnan! Give up this superb opportunity to display the adaptability of the trained diplomat? Since these beings dwell among the clouds of their

native world, what more convincing evidence of good will could we display than to meet them on their own grounds, so to speak?"

"Of course," the corpulent Political Officer put in, "we aren't actually *sure* there's anyone *up* there." He squinted nervously up at the lacy mass of land-coral that reached into the Zoonian sky, its lofty pinnacles brushing a seven-thousand-foot stratum of cumulonimbus.

"That's where we'll steal a march on certain laggards," Oldtrick stated imperturbably. "The survey photos clearly show the details of a charming aerial city nestled on the reef. Picture the spectacle, gentlemen, when the Mission descends on them from the blue empyrean to open a new era of Terran-Zoon relations!"

"Yes — a striking *mis en scene* indeed, as your Excellency points out." The economic officer's cheek gave a nervous twitch. "But what if something goes wrong with the apparatus? The steering mechanism, for example, appears a trifle insubstantial —"

"These devices were designed and constructed under my personal supervision, Chester," the ambassador cut him off coolly. "However," he continued, "don't allow that circumstance to prevent you from pointing out any conceptual flaws you may have detected."

"A marvel of lightweight ingenuity," the economic officer said hastily. "I only meant . . ."

"Chester's point was just that maybe some of us ought to wait here,

Mr. Ambassador," the military attache said. "In case any, ah, late dispatches come in from Sector, or something. Much as I'll hate to miss participating, I volunteer —"

"Kindly rebuckle your harness, Colonel," Oldtrick said through thinned lips. "I wouldn't dream of allowing you to make the sacrifice."

"Good Lord, Retief," Magnan said in a hoarse whisper behind his hand. "Do you suppose these little tiny things will actually work? And does he really mean . . ." Magnan's voice trailed off as he stared up into the bottomless sky.

"He really means," Retief confirmed. "As for his Excellency's invention, I suppose that given a large-diameter, low-density planet with a standard mass of 4.8 and a surface G of .72, plus an atmospheric pressure of 27.5 P. S. I. and a super-light gas — it's possible."

"I was afraid of that," Magnan muttered. "I don't suppose that if we all joined together and took a firm line . . .?"

"Might be a savings at that," Retief nodded judiciously. "The whole staff could be court-martialed as a group."

"... and now," Ambassador Oldtrick's reedy voice paused impressively as he settled his beret firmly in place.

"If you're ready, gentlemen — inflate your gasbags!"

A sharp hissing started up as a dozen petcocks opened as one. Bright-colored plastic bubbles inflated with sharp popping sounds above the shoulders of the Terran

diplomats. The ambassador gave a little spring and bounded high above the heads of his staff, where he hung, supported by the balloon, assisted by a softly snorting battery of air jets buckled across his hips.

Colonel Smartfinger, a large bony man, gave a half-hearted leap, fell back, his toes groping for contact as a gust of air bumped him across the ground. Magnan, lighter than the rest, made a creditable spring and rose to dangle beside the chief of mission. Retief adjusted his buoyancy indicator carefully, jumped off as the rest of the staff scrambled to avoid the questionable distinction of being the last man airborne.

"Capital, gentlemen!" Oldtrick beamed at the others as they drifted in a ragged row, roped together like alpinists, five yards above the surface. "I trust each of you is ready to savor the thrill of breaking new ground!"

"An unfortunate turn of phrase," Magnan quavered, looking down at the rocky outcropping below. The grassy plain on which the lighter had deposited the mission stretched away to the horizon, interrupted only by the upthrusting coral reefs dotted across it like lonely castles in the Daliesque desert and a distant smudge of smoky green.

"And now — onward to what I hope I may, without charges of undue jocularity, term a new high in diplomacy," Oldtrick cried. He advanced his jet control lever and lifted skyward, trailed by the members of his staff.

Five hundred feet aloft, Magnan clutched the arm of Retief, occupying the adjacent position in the line.

"The lighter is lifting off!" He pointed to the slim shape of the tiny Corps vessel, drifting upward from the sands below. "It's abandoning us!"

"A mark of the ambassador's confidence that we'll meet with a hospitable reception at the hands of the Zooners," Retief pointed out.

"Frankly, I'm at a loss to understand Sector's eagerness to accredit a mission to this wasteland." Magnan raised his voice above the whistling of the sharp wind and the polyphonous huffing of the jato units. "Retief, you seem to have a way of picking up odd bits of information. Any idea what's behind it?"

"According to a usually reliable source, the Groaci have their eyes on Zoon — all five of them. Naturally, if they're interested, the Corps has to beat them to it."

"Aha!" Magnan looked wise. "They must know something. By the way," he edged closer. "Who told you? The ambassador? The undersecretary?"

"Better than that; the bartender at the departmental snackbar."

"Well, I daresay our five-eyed friends will receive a sharp surprise when they arrive to find us already on a cordial basis with the locals. Unorthodox though Ambassador Oldtrick's technique may be, I'm forced to concede that it ap-

pears the only way we could have approached these Zooners." He craned upward at the fanciful formation of many-fingered rock past which they were rising. "Odd that none of them have sallied forth to greet us."

Retief followed his gaze. "We still have six thousand feet to go," he said. "I suppose we'll find a suitable reception waiting at the top."

Half an hour later, Ambassador Oldtrick in the lead, the party soared above the final rampart to look down on a wonderland of rose and pink violet coral, an intricacy of spires, tunnels, bridges, grottos, turrets, caves, avenues, as complex and delicately fragile as spun sugar.

"Carefully, now, gentlemen," Oldtrick twiddled his jato control, dropped in to a gentle landing on a graceful arch spanning a cleft full of luminous gloom produced by the filtration of light through the translucent construction. His staff settled in nearby, gazing with awe at the minarets rising all around them.

The ambassador, having twisted a knob to deflate his gasbag and laid aside his flying harness, was frowning as he looked about the silent prospect.

"I wonder where the inhabitants have betaken themselves?" He lifted a finger, and six eager underlings sprang to his side.

"Apparently the natives are a trifle shy, gentlemen," he stated. "Nose around a bit. Look friendly. And avoid poking into any possibly taboo areas such as temples and public comfort stations."

Leaving their deflated gasbags heaped near their point of arrival, the Terrans set about peering into caverns and clambering up to gaze along twisting alleyways winding among silent coral palaces. Retief followed a narrow path atop a ridge which curved upward to a point of vantage. Magnan trailed, mopping at his face with a scented tissue.

"Apparently no one's at home," he puffed, coming up to the tiny platform from which Retief surveyed the prospect spread below. "A trifle disconcerting, I must say. I wonder what sort of arrangements have been laid on for feeding and housing us?"

"Another odd thing," Retief said. "No empty beer bottles, tin cans, old newspapers, or fruit rinds. In fact, no signs of habitation at all."

"It rather appears we've been stood up," the economic officer said indignantly. "Such cheek — and from a pack of animated intangibles, at that!"

"It's my opinion the town's been evacuated," the political officer said in the keen tones of one delivering an incisive analysis of a complex situation. "We may as well leave."

"Nonsense!" Oldtrick snapped. "Do you expect me to trot back to Sector and announce that I can't find the government to which I'm accredited?"

"Great heavens!" Magnan blinked at a lone dark cloud drifting ominously closer under the high overcast. "I thought I sensed something impending. Uh, Mr. Am-

bassador!" he called, starting back down. At that moment, a cry from an adjacent cavern focused all eyes on the military attache, emerging with a short length of what appeared to be tarred rope, charred at one end.

"Signs of life, Your Excellency!" he announced. "A dope-stick butt!" He sniffed it. "Freshly smoked."

"Dope-sticks! Nonsense!" Oldtrick prodded the exhibit with a stubby forefinger. "I'm sure the Zooners are far too insubstantial to indulge in such vices."

"Ah, Mr. Ambassador," Magnan called. "I suggest we all select a nice dry cave and creep inside, out of the weather —"

"Cave? Creep? Weather? What weather?" Oldtrick rounded on the First Secretary as he came up. "I'm here to establish diplomatic relations with a newly discovered race, not set up housekeeping!"

"That weather," Magnan said stiffly, pointing at the giant cloud sweeping swiftly down on them at a level which threatened to shroud the party in a fog in a matter of minutes.

"Eh? Oh." Oldtrick stared at the approaching thunderhead. "Yes, well, I was about to suggest we seek shelter."

"What about the dope-stick?" The colonel tried to recapture the lime-light. "We hadn't finished looking at my dope-stick when Magnan came along with his cloud."

"My cloud is of considerably more urgency than your dope-stick, Colonel," Magnan said softly. "Particularly since, as his excellency has pointed out, your little find

couldn't possibly be the property of the Zooners."

"Ha! Well if it isn't the property of the Zooners, then whose is it?" The officer looked at the butt suspiciously, passed it around. Retief glanced at it, sniffed it.

"I believe you'll find this to be Groaci manufacture, Colonel," he said.

"What?" Oldtrick clapped a hand to his forehead. "Impossible! Why, I myself hardly know — that is, they couldn't — mean to say, drat it, the location of this world is Utter Top Secret!"

"Ahem." Magnan glanced up complacently at his cloud now a battleship-sized shape only a few hundred feet distant. "I wonder if it mightn't be as well to hurry along now before we find ourselves drenched."

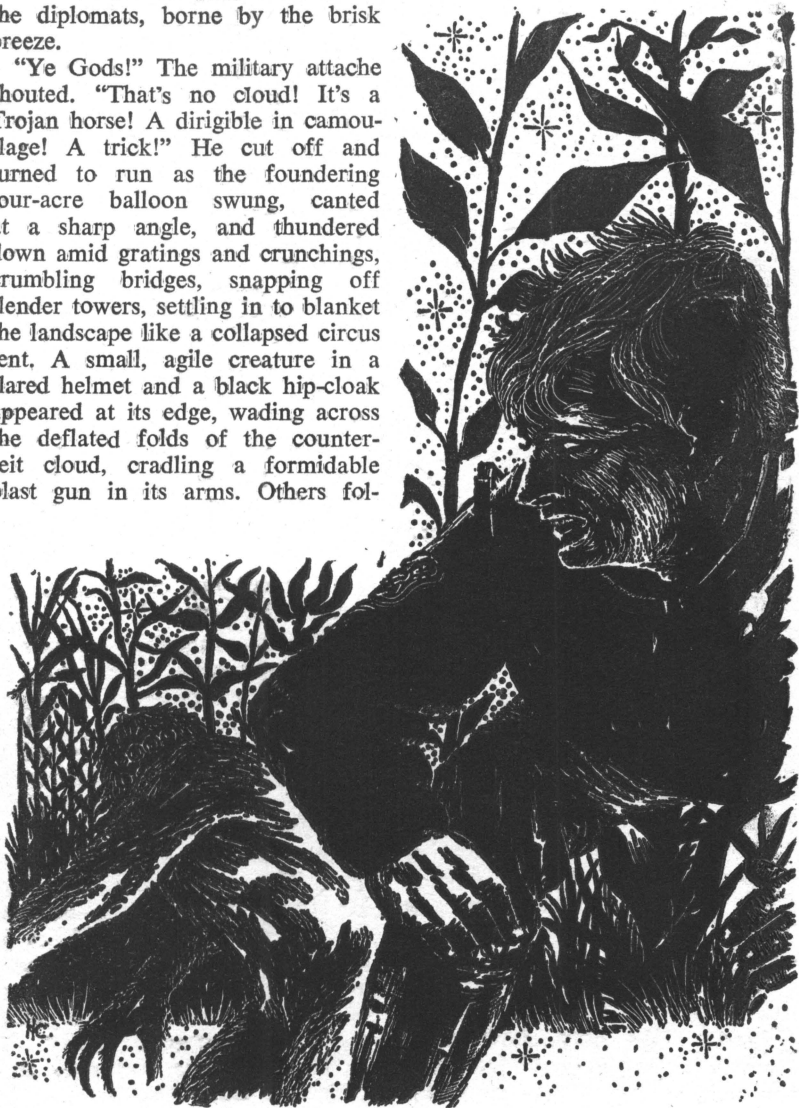
"Good Lord!" The political officer stared at the gray-black mass as it moved across the hazy sun, blotting it out like an eclipse. In the sudden shadow, the wind was abruptly chill. The cloud was above the far edge of the reef now; as they watched, it dropped lower, brushed across a projecting digit of stone with a dry *squeal*, sent a shower of tiny rock fragments showering down. Magnan jumped and blinked his eyes hard, twice.

"Did you see . . . ? Did I see . . . ?"

Dropping lower, the cloud sailed between two lofty minarets, scraped across a lower tower topped with a series of sharp spikes. There was a ripping sound, a crunch of stone,

a sharp *pow!*, a blattering noise of escaping gas. A distinct odor of rubberized canvas floated across to the diplomats, borne by the brisk breeze.

"Ye Gods!" The military attache shouted. "That's no cloud! It's a Trojan horse! A dirigible in camouflage! A trick!" He cut off and turned to run as the foundering four-acre balloon swung, canted at a sharp angle, and thundered down amid gratings and crunchings, crumbling bridges, snapping off slender towers, settling in to blanket the landscape like a collapsed circus tent. A small, agile creature in a flared helmet and a black hip-cloak appeared at its edge, wading across the deflated folds of the counterfeited cloud, cradling a formidable blast gun in its arms. Others fol-



lowed, leaping down and scampering for strategic positions on the high ground surrounding the Terrans.

"Groaci shock troops!" the Military Attache shouted. "Run for your lives!"

He dashed for the concealment of a shadowy canyon; a blast from a Groaci gun sent a cloud of coral chips after him. Retief, from a position in the lee of a buttress of rocks, saw half a dozen of the Terrans skid to a halt at the report, put up their hands as the invaders swarmed around them, hissing soft Groaci sibilants. Three more Terrans, attempting flight, were captured within fifty feet, prodded back at gunpoint. A moment later a sharp *oof!* and a burst of military expletives announced the surrender of Colonel Smartfinger. Retief made his way around a rock spire, spotted Ambassador Oldtrick being routed from his hiding place behind a cactus-shaped outcropping.

"Well, fancy meeting you here, Hubert." A slightly built, splendidly dressed Groaci strolled forward, puffing at a dope-stick held in silver tongs. "I regret to submit you to the indignity of being trussed up like a Gerp-fowl in plucking season, but what can one expect when one commits an aggravated trespass, eh?"

"Trespass? I'm here in good faith as Terran envoy to Zoon!" Oldtrick sputtered. "See here, Ambassador Shish, this is an outrage! I demand you order these bandits to release

me and my staff at once! Do you understand?"

"Field Marshal Shish, if you please, Hubert," Shish whispered. "These are a duly constituted constabulary. If you annoy me, I may just order them to exercise the full rigor of the law which you have so airily disregarded!"

"What law?" Your confounded dacoits have assaulted peaceful diplomats in peaceful pursuit of their duties!"

"Interplanetary law, my dear sir," Shish hissed. "That section dealing with territorial claims to uninhabited planets."

"But — but the Zooners inhabit Zoon!"

"So? An exhaustive search of the entire planetary surface by our Scouting Service failed to turn up any evidence of intelligent habitation."

"Surface? But the Zooners don't occupy the surface!"

"Exactly. Therefore we have assumed ownership. Now, about reparations and damages in connection with your release. I should think a million credits would be about right — paid directly to me, of course, as Planetary Military Governor, *pro tem.*"

"A million?" Oldtrick swallowed hard. "But . . . but . . . see here!" He fixed Shish with a desperate eye. "What is it you fellows are after? This isn't the kind of sandy-dry real estate you Groaci prefer — and the world has no known economic or strategic value."

"Hmmm." Shish flicked his dope-stick butt aside. "No harm in tell-

ing you, I suppose. We intend to gather a crop."

"Crop? There's nothing growing here but blue grass and land corall!"

"**W**rong again, Hubert. The crop that interests us is this . . ." He fingered the edge of his shaggy violet cape. "A luxury fur, light, colorful, nonallergic." He lowered his voice and leered with three eyes. "And with reportedly fabulous aphrodisiac effects; and there are millions of credits worth of it, leaping about the landscape below, free for the harvesting!"

"But surely you jest, sir! Those are —"

There was a sudden flurry as one of the Terrans broke free and dashed for a cave. The Groaci constabulary gave chase. Shish made an annoyed sound and hurried away to oversee the recapture. Oldtrick, left momentarily alone, eyed the flying harnesses lying in a heap ten yards from him. He took a deep breath, darted forward, snatched up a harness.

As he turned to sprint for cover, a breathy cry announced his discovery. Desperately, the chief of mission struggled into his straps as he ran, twisted the valve, fired his jato units and shot into the air above the heads of a pair of fleet-footed aliens who had been about to lay him by the heels. He passed over Retief's head at an altitude of twenty feet, driven smartly by the brisk breeze. Retief ducked his head, hugged the shadows as Groaci feet pounded past at close range, pursuing the fleeting Terran. Retief saw

half a dozen marksmen taking aim at the airborne diplomat as the wind swept him out over the reefs' edge. Shots rang. There was a sharp report as a round pierced the gasbag. With a despairing wail, the Ambassador sank swiftly out of sight.

Retief rolled to his feet, ran to the pile of flight harnesses, grabbed up two, whirled and sprinted for the edge over which Oldtrick had vanished. Two Groaci, turning to confront the new menace descending on their rear, were bowled aside by Retief's rush. Another sprang to intercept him, bringing his gun around. Retief caught the barrel in full stride, swung the gun with its owner still clinging desperately to it, slammed the unfortunate alien into the faces of his astounded comrades. Shots split the air past Retief's ear, but without slowing, he charged to the brink and dived over into seven thousand feet of open air.

III

The uprushing wind shrieked past Retief's ears like a typhoon. Gripping one of the two harnesses in his teeth, he pulled the other on as one would don a vest, buckled the straps. He looked down, squinting against the rush of air.

The ambassador, falling free now with his burst balloon fluttering at his back, was twenty feet below. Retief tucked his arms close, kicked his heels up to assume a diver's attitude. The distance between the two men lessened. The rock face flashed past, dangerously close. Retief's hand brushed Oldtrick's foot.

The ambassador twisted convulsively to roll a wild eye at Retief, suspended above him in the hurtling airstream. Retief caught the senior diplomat's arm, shoved the spare harness into his hand. A moment later Oldtrick had shed his ruined gasbag and shrugged into the replacement.

With a twist of the petcock, he inflated his balloon and at once slowed, falling behind Retief, who opened his own valve, felt the sudden tug of the harness. A moment later, he was floating lightly a hundred feet below the ambassador, who was drifting gently closer.

"Quick thinking, my boy," Oldtrick's voice came faintly. "As soon as I'm aboard the transport, I shall summon a heavy PE unit to deal with those ruffians! We'll thwart their inhuman scheme to massacre helpless infant Zooners, thus endearing ourselves to their elders!" He was close now, dropping as Retief rose. "You'd better come along with me," he said sharply as they passed, ten feet apart. "I'll want your corroborative statements, and —"

"Sorry, Mr. Ambassador," Retief said. "I seem to have gotten hold of a heavy-duty unit. It wants to go up, and the valve appears to be stuck."

"Come back," Oldtrick shouted as he dropped away below the younger man. "I insist that you accompany me!"

"I'm afraid it's out of my hands now, sir," Retief called. "I suggest you stay out of sight of any colonist who may have settled in down be-

low. I have an idea they'll be a little trigger happy when they discover their police force is stranded on the reef, and a dangling diplomat will make a tempting target."

The southwest breeze bore Retief along at a brisk twenty-mile-per-hour clip. He twisted the buoyancy control lever both ways, to no avail. The landscape dwindled away below him, a vast spread of soft aquamarine hills.

From this height, immense herds of creatures were visible, ranging in color from pale blue to deep grapejuice. They appeared, Retief noted, to be converging on a point not far from the base of the coral reef, where a number of black dots might have been small structures. Then the view was obscured, first by whipping streamers of fog, then by a dense, wet mist which enveloped him like a cool, refreshing Turkish bath.

For ten minutes he swirled blindly upward; then watery sunshine penetrated, lighting the vapor to a golden glow; a moment later he burst through into brilliance. A deep blue sky arched above the blinding white cloud-plain. Squinting against the glare, he saw a misty shape of pale green projecting above the clouds at a distance he estimated at five miles. Using steering jets, he headed for it.

Fifteen minutes later, he was close enough to make out thick, glossy yellow columns, supporting masses of chartreuse foliage. Closer, the verdure resolved into clusters of leaves the size of tablecloths, among



which gaudy blossoms shone scarlet.

In the leafy depths, the sun striking down from zenith was filtered to a deep, green-gold gloom. Retief maneuvered toward a sturdy-looking branch, only at the last moment saw the yard-long thorns concealed in the shadow of the spreading leaves. He ducked, twisted aside from the savage stab of a needle-point, heard the rip and ker-pow! as his gasbag burst, impaled; then he slammed hard against a thigh-thick, glass-smooth branch, grabbed with both hands and both legs, and braked to a halt inches from an upthrust dagger of horny wood.

All around, life swarmed, humming, buzzing, chattering in a hundred oddly euphonious keys. There were fluffy, spherical bird-things in vivid colors; darting scaled runners like jeweled ferrets; swarms of tiny golden four-winged butterflies. Once something hooted, far away, and for a moment the chorus was stilled to resume a moment later.

Looking down, Retief could see nothing but level after level of leafy branches, blotting out the swirling clouds two hundred feet below. The ground, he estimated, was a mile and a half farther — not what could be described as an easy climb. Still, it looked like the only way. He divested himself of the ruined altitude harness, picked a route and started down.

Retief had covered no more than fifty feet when a sudden flurry of motion caught his eye through the foliage. A moment later, a clump

of leaves leaned aside, pushed by a gust of wind, to reveal a bulky, ghost-pale creature, its body covered with short white bristles, its head a flattened spheroid. Its multiple shiny back limbs threshed wildly against the restraint of a web of silky, scarlet threads, stretched between limbs in an intricate spiral pattern. A flat pouch, secured by a flat strap, bobbed against the trapped creature's side. The web, Retief saw, was constructed at the very tip of a pair of long boughs which leaned in a deep curve under the weight of the victim — and of something else.

Peering into the shadows, he saw a foot-long claw like a pair of oversized garden shears poised in the air two feet from the trapped being. Then he noted that the claw was attached to an arm like a six-foot length of stainless steel pipe, which was attached, in turn, to a body encased in silvery-blue armor plate, almost invisible in the leafy gloom.

As Retief watched, the arm lunged, sheared through a cluster of awning-sized leaves, snipped off a tuft of stiff white hairs as the snared one made a desperate bound sideways. The aggressor, it appeared, had advanced as far along the fragile support as possible; but it was only a matter of time until the murderous pincer connected with its target.

Retief checked his pockets, produced a pocket knife with a two-inch blade, useful chiefly for cutting the tips from hand-rolled Jorgensen cigars. He used it to saw

through a half-inch thick vine drooping near him. He coiled the rope over his shoulder and started back up.

IV

From a branch far above, Retief peered down through the leafy shadows at the twelve-foot monstrosity that was clinging head down from a six-inch stem. The predator had stretched itself out to its utmost length in its effort to reach the victim trapped below.

Retief slid down to a crouch without touching distance of the monster's main hind leg. He flipped out the lariat he had fashioned hastily from the length of pliable vine, passed its end under the massive ankle joint, whipped it quickly into a slip knot which would tighten under pressure. He tied the other end of the rope to a sturdy bole at his back, pulling it up just short of taut. Then he slid around the trunk and headed back for the scene of the action, paying out a second rope, the end of which was secured to a stout limb.

The trapped creature, huddled at the extreme extent of the rein given it by the binding strands of silk, saw Retief, gave a convulsive bound which triggered another snap of the claw.

"Stand pat," Retief called softly. "I'll try to distract his attention." He stepped out on a slender branch, which sagged but held. Holding the end of the rope in his free hand, he made his way to within ten feet of the web.

Above, the claw-creature, sensing movement nearby, poked out a glittering eye at the end of a two-foot rod, studied Retief from a distance of five yards. Retief watched the claw, which hovered indecisively ready to strike in either direction.

A baseball-sized fruit was growing within easy reach. Retief plucked it, took air, and pitched it at the eye. It struck and burst, spattering the surrounding foliage with a sticky yellow goo and an odor of overripe melon. Quick as thought, the claw struck out straight at Retief as he jumped, gripping the vine, and swung in a graceful Tarzan-style arc across toward a handy landing platform thirty feet distant. The armored meat-eater, thwarted, lunged vainly after him. The sudden strain on the behemoth's overextended grip was too much. There was a noisy rasping of metal-hard hooks against wood, a frantic shaking of branches; then the barrel-shaped body came crashing down — and snapped to a halt with a tremendous jerk as the rope lashed to its leg came up short.

Retief, safely lodged in his new platform, caught a momentary glimpse of an open mouth lined with ranks of multipronged teeth. Then, with a sharp *zong!* the rope supporting the monster parted. The apparition dropped away, smashing its way downward with a series of progressively fainter concussions until it was lost in the depths below.

The bristled Zoonite sagged heavily in the net, watching Retief with a row of shiny eyes like pink shirt buttons as he sawed through

the strands of the web with his pocket knife. Freed, it dipped into its hip-pouch with a four-fingered hand encased in a glove, ornamented with polished, inch-long talons, brought out a small cylinder which it raised to its middle eye.

"Hrikk," it said in a soft rasp. A mouth like Jack Pumpkinhead gaped in an unreadable expression. There was a bright flash which made a green after-image dance on Retief's retina. The alien dropped the object back in the pouch, took out a second artifact resembling a foot-long harmonica, which it adjusted on a loop around its neck. At once, it emitted a series of bleeps, toots and deep, resonant thrums, then looked at Retief in a way which seemed expectant.

"If I'm not mistaken, that's a Groaci electronic translator," Retief said. "Trade goods like the camera, I presume?"

"Correct," the device interpreted the small alien's rasping tones. "By George, it works!"

"The Groaci are second to none, when it comes to miniaturized electronics and real-estate acquisition," Retief said.

"Real estate?" the Zoonite inquired with a rising inflection.

"Planetary surfaces," Retief explained.

"Oh, that. Yes, I'd heard they'd settled in down below. No doubt a pregermination trauma's at the root of the matter. But, every being to his own form of self-destruction, as Zerd so succinctly put it before he dissolved himself in fuming nitric acid." The alien's button eyes roved over

Retief. "Though I must say your own death-wish takes a curious form."

"Oh?"

"Teasing a vine-jack for a starter," the Zoonite amplified. "That's dangerous, you know. The claw can snip through six inches of *gilv* as though it were a zoob-patty."

"Actually, I got the impression the thing was after you," Retief said.

"Oh, it was, it was. Almost got me, too. Hardly worth the effort. I'd make a disappointing meal." The Zoonite fingered its translator, the decorative claws clicking tinnily on the shiny plastic. "Am I to understand you came to my rescue *intentionally*?" it said.

Retief nodded.

"Whatever for?"

"On the theory that one intelligent being should keep another from being eaten alive, whenever he conveniently can."

"Hmmm. A curious concept. And now I suppose you expect me to reciprocate?"

"If it doesn't inconvenience you," Retief replied.

"But you look so, so edible . . ." Without warning, one of the alien's ebon legs flashed out, talons spread, in a vicious kick. It was a fast stroke, but Retief was faster; shifting his weight slightly, he intercepted the other's shin with the edge of his shoe, eliciting a sharp report. The Zooner yelped, simultaneously lashed out, left-right, with a pair of arms — to meet painful interceptions as Retief struck upward at one with the edge of his

hand, down at the other. In the next instant, a small hand gun was pressing into the alien's paunch-bristles.

"We Terries are handy at small manufacturing, too," Retief said easily. "This item is called a crater gun. You'll understand why when you've seen it fired."

"... but appearances can be so deceiving," the Zoonite finished its interrupted sentence, wringing its numbed limbs.

"A natural mistake," Retief commiserated. "Still, I'm sure you wouldn't have found me any more nourishing than the vine-jack would have found you. Incompatible body chemistry, you know."

"Yes. Well, in that case, I may as well be off." The Zooner backed a step.

"Before you go," Retief suggested, "there are some matters we might discuss to our mutual profit."

"Oh? What, for example?"

"The invasion of Zoon, for one. And ways and means of getting back down to *Zoona Firma* for another."

"You *are* a compulsive. And it's highly channelized neurosis: A vine-jack or my humble self won't do; it has to be the hard way."

"I'm afraid your translator is out of adjustment," Retief said. "That doesn't seem to mean anything."

"I find your oblique approach a trifle puzzling, too," the alien confided. "I sense that you're trying to tell me something, but I can't for the life of me guess what it might be. Suppose we go along to my place for an *aperitif*, and possib-

ly we can enlighten each other. By the way, I'm known as Qoj, the Ready Biter."

"I'm Retief, the Occasional Indulger," the Terran said. "Lead the way, Qoj, and I'll do my best to follow."

V

It was a breath-taking thirty-minute journey through the towering tree tops. The alien progressed by long, curiously dreamlike leaps from one precarious rest to another, while Retief made his way as rapidly as possible along interlacing branches and bridges of tangled vine, keenly aware of the bottomless chasm yawning below.

The trip ended at a hundred-foot spherical space where the growth



had been cleared back to create a shady, green-lit cavern. Bowers and leafy balconies were nestled around its periphery; tiny, fragile-looking terraces hung suspended under the shelter of sprays of giant fronds.

There were several dozen Zooners in sight, some lounging on the platforms or perched in stem-mounted chairs which swayed dizzily to the light breeze; others sailed gracefully from one roost to another, while a few hung by one or more limbs from festooning vines, apparently sleeping.

"I'll introduce you around," the Zooner said. "Otherwise the fellows will be taking experimental cracks at you and getting themselves hurt. I'm against that, because an injured Zooner is inclined to be disagreeable company." He flipped a switch on the translator and emitted a sharp cry. Zooner heads turned. Qoj spied off a short speech, waved a hand at Retief, who inclined his head courteously. The locals eyed the Terran incuriously, went back to their previous activities. Qoj indicated a tiny table mounted atop a ten-foot rod, around which three small seats were arranged, similarly positioned.

Retief hastily scaled the support, took up his seat like a flag-pole sitter. Qoj settled in opposite him, the stem quivering and swaying under his weight. He whistled shrilly, and a black-spotted gray creature came sailing in a broad leap, took orders, bounded away, returned in a moment with aromatic fagons.

"Ah." Qoj leaned back comfortably with two pairs of legs crossed. "Nothing like a little bottled Nirvana, eh?" He lifted his flask and poured the contents in past a row of pronged teeth rivaling those of the vine-jack.

"Quite an interesting place you have here." Retief unobtrusively sniffed his drink, sampled it. The fluid evaporated instantly on his tongue, leaving a fruity aroma.

"It's well enough, I suppose," Qoj assented, "under the circumstances."

"What circumstances are those?"

"Not enough to eat. Too many predators — like that fellow you dispatched. Cramped environment — no place to go. And of course, cut off as we are from raw materials, no hope for technological advancement. Let's face it, Retief: we're up the tree without a paddle."

Retief watched a bulky Zooner sail past in one of the feather-light leaps characteristic of the creatures.

"Speaking of technology," he said. "How do you manage that trick?"

"What trick?"

"You must weigh three hundred pounds — but when you want to, you float like a dandelion seed."

"Oh, that. Just an inherent knack, I guess you'd call it. Even our spore-pods have it; otherwise, they'd smash when they hit the ground. It's not much good for anything but short hops, you know."

"Organis antigravity," Retief said admiringly. "Or perhaps teleportation would be a better name."

"The gland responds to mental im-

pulses," Qoj said. "Fortunately, our young have no mentality to speak of, so they're grounded. Otherwise we'd never have a moment's peace."

He tossed another shot down his throat, lounging back in his chair as it swayed past Retief, rebounded to swing in the opposite direction, while Retief's perch waved in gentle counterpoint, a motion which tended to cross the eyes and bring a light sweat to the forehead.

"Oh. I wondered why there were no little ones gamboling about your doorstep," Retief said.

"Doorstep?" Qoj jerked upright and stared in alarm toward the shaded entrance to his bower. "Great slaving jaws, Retief, don't give me a start like that! The little monsters are down on the surface where they belong!"

"Unattended?"

Qoj shuddered. "I suppose we really ought to be doing something about them, but frankly — it's too dangerous."

Retief raised an eyebrow in polite inquiry.

"Why, the little fiends would strip the very crust off the planet if they weren't able to assuage their voracity by eating each other."

"So that's why you don't occupy the surface."

"Um. If our ancestors hadn't taken to the trees, we'd be extinct by now — devoured by our own offspring."

"And I suppose your apparent indifference to the arrival of the Groaci is based on the same reasoning?"

"Feeding season's about to begin," Qoj said offhandedly. "Those fellows won't last a day. Not much juice in them, though — at least not in the one I met."

"That would be the previous owner of the camera and the translator?"

"Correct. Interesting chap. He was buzzing about an odd little contrivance with whirling vanes on top and ran afoul a loop of string-vine. My, wasn't he full of plans." The Zooner sipped his flask, musing.

"The Groaci, individually, don't look like much, I'll agree," Retief said. "But they have a rather potent subnuclear arsenal at their command. And it appears they're about to launch a general offensive against your young."

"So? Maybe they'll clear the little nuisances out. Then we can descend to the ground and start living like gentlebeings."

"What about the future of the race?"

"That for the future of the race." Qoj made a complicated gesture with obscure biological implications. "We're only concerned about ourselves."

"Still," Retief countered, "you were young once."

"If you're going to be crude," the Zooner said with inebriated dignity, "you may leave me."

"Sure," Retief said. "But before I go, would you mind describing these little fellows?"

"In shape, they're not unlike us adults; they come in all sizes, from this — " Qoj held two taloned fingers an inch apart — "to this." He indicated a yard and a half. "And

of course, the baby fur. Ghastly blue fuzz a foot long."

"Did you say . . . blue?"

"Blue."

Retief nodded thoughtfully. "You know, Qoj, I think we have the basis for a cooperative undertaking after all. If you'll give me another five minutes of your time, I'll explain it to you"

VI

Flanked by Qoj and another Zooner named Ornx the Eager Eater, Retief dropped down through the cloud layer, propelled by a softly hissing steering jet salvaged from his punctured lift harness.

"That's it, dead ahead," he pointed to the towering coral reef, pale rose-colored in the distance.

"Wheel!" Qoj squealed with delight as he pulled up abreast of Retief with a shrill whistling of his borrowed jet. "Capital idea, Retief, these little squirt-bottles! You know, I never dreamed flying could be such fun! Always lived in dread of getting out of reach of a branch and just drifting aimlessly until one of the boys or some other predator got me. With these, a whole new dimension opens up! I can already detect a lessening of sibling rivalry drives and inverted Oedipus syndromes!"

"Don't let your released tensions go to your head, Qoj," Retief cautioned. "The Groaci may still take a little mananging. You hang back while I go in to check the lie of the land."

Minutes later, Retief swept in

above the convoluted surface of the coral peak. No Groaci were to be seen, but half a dozen Terrans were wandering aimlessly about their lofty prison. They ran forward with glad cries as Retief landed.

"Good show, my boy!" Colonel Smartfinger pumped his hand. "I knew you wouldn't leave us stranded here! Those rascals Groaci commandeered our harnesses."

"But — where are the reinforcements," the political officer demanded, staring around. "Where's the lighter? Where's His Excellency? Who are *these* creatures?" He eyed the Zooners, circling for a landing. "Where have you been, Retief?" He broke off, staring. "And where's your harness?"

"I'll tell you later." Retief motioned the diplomats toward the deflated Groaci gasbag now draped limply across the rocks. "There's no time to dally, I'm afraid. All aboard."

"But — it's punctured!" Smartfinger protested. "It certainly won't fly, man!"

"It will when our new allies finish," Retief diligently reassured the colonel.

The Zooners were already busy, bustling about the ersatz cloud, stuffing fistfuls of seed-pods inside. A corner of it stirred lazily, lifted to flap gently in the breeze. One side curled upward, tugging gently.

"You know what to do," Retief called to Qoj. "Don't waste any time following me down." He jumped into the air, thumbed the jet control wide open, and headed for the next stop at flank speed.

Two thirds of the way down the sheer wall of the coral reef, a small figure caught Retief's eye, perched disconsolately in a crevice on the rock. He swung closer, saw the spindly shanks and five-eyed visage of a Groaci, his once-splendid raiment in tatters.

"Well, Field Marshall Shish," he called. "What's the matter, conditions down below not to your liking?"

"Ambassador Shish, if you please," the castaway hissed in sorrowful Groaci. "To leave me in solitude, soft One; to have suffered enough."

"Not nearly enough," Retief contradicted. "However, all is not yet lost. I take it your valiant troops have encountered some sort of difficulty below?"

"The spawn of the pits fell upon us while I was in my bath!" the Groaci whispered, speaking Terran now. "They snapped up a dozen of my chaps before I could spring from the tub of hot sand in which I had been luxuriating! I was fortunate to escape with my life! And then your shoddy Terran-made harness failed and dropped me here. Alack! Gone are the dreams of a procuratorship."

"Maybe not." Retief maneuvered in close, held out a hand. "I'll give you a piggyback and explain how matters stand. Maybe you can still salvage something from the wreckage."

Shish canted his eye-stalks. "Piggyback? Are you insane, Retief? Why, there's nothing holding you up! How can it hold *two* of us?"

"Take it or leave it, Mr. Ambassador," Retief said. "I have a tight schedule."

"I'll take it." Shish gingerly swung his scrawny frame out and scrambled to a perch on Retief's back, four of his eyes sphinctered tight shut. "But if I hadn't already been contemplating suicide, nothing would have coaxed me to it."

VII

Five minutes later, Retief heard a hail. He dropped down, settled onto a narrow ledge beside the slight figure of Ambassador Oldtrick.

The senior diplomat had lost his natty beret, and there was a scratch on his cheek. His flight harness, its gas bag flat, hung on a point of rock behind him.

"What's this? Who's captured whom? Retief, are you . . . ?"

"Everything's fine, your excellency," Retief said soothingly. "I'll just leave his Groacian excellency here with you. I've had a little talk with him, and he has something he wants to tell you. The staff will be along in a moment, to help out."

"But — you can't —" Oldtrick broke off as a dark shadow flitted across the rock. "Duck! It's that confounded cloud back again!"

"It's all right," Retief called as he launched himself into space. "It's on our side now."

At the long table in the main dining room aboard the heavy Corps transport which had been called in to assist in the repatriation of the Groaci Youth Scouts marooned

on Zoon after the local fauna had devoured their ship and supplies, Magnan nudged Retief.

"Rather a surprising about-face on the part of Ambassador Shish," he muttered. "When that fake cloud dumped us off on the rock ledge with him, I feared the worst."

"I think he'd had a spiritual experience down below that made him see the light," Retief suggested.

"Quite an equitable division of spheres of influence the ambassadors agreed on," Magnan went on. "The Groaci seem quite pleased with the idea of erecting blast-proof barriers to restrain those ferocious little eaters to one half the planet, and acting as herdsmen over them, in return for the privilege of collecting their hair when they moult."

"I wouldn't be surprised if they didn't sneak out a few pelts beforehand." Colonel Smartfinger leaned to contribute. "Still, the Zooners don't seem to mind, eh, Ornx?"

"No problem," the Zooner said airily. "We're glad to wink at a few little violations in return for free access to our own real estate."

There was a sharp dinging as Ambassador Oldtrick rose and tapped his glass with a fork.

"Gentlemen — gentlebeings, I should say." He smirked at the Groaci and Zooners seated along the board. "It's my pleasure to announce the signing of the Terran-Zoon accord, under the terms of which we've been ceded all rights in the coral reef of our choice on which to place our chancery, well out of reach of those nasty little — that is, the untutored — I mean, er,

playfully inclined . . ." He quailed under the combined glares of a dozen rows of pink eyes.

"If he brings those abominations into the conversation again, I'm walking out," Qoj said loudly.

"So we're going to be relegated to the top of that dreadful skyscraper?" Magnan groaned. "We'll be communing by patent gasbag."

"Ah!" Oldtrick brightened, glad of a change of subject. "I couldn't help overhearing your remark, Magnan. And I'm pleased to announce that I have just this afternoon developed a startling new improvement to my flight harness. Observe!" All eyes were on the Ambassador as he rose gently into the air, hung, beaming from a height of six feet.

"I should mention that I had some assistance from Mr. Retief in, ah, working out some of the technicalities," he murmured as the Terrans crowded around, competing for the privilege of offering their congratulations.

"Heavens! And he's not even wearing a balloon!" Magnan gasped. "How do you suppose he does it?"

"Easy," Qoj grunted. "He's got a pocketful of price-quality Zooner spore-pods."

Beside him, Ambassador Shish gave an annoyed hiss. "Somehow, I can't escape the conviction that we Groaci have been had again." He rose, leaving the room.

"Hmph," Magnan sniffed. "He got what he wanted, didn't he?"

"True," Retief said, rising. "But it's some people's ill luck to always want the wrong thing." **END**

THE FAN AWARDS

by LIN CARTER

*All about Hugos. Speaking of which,
guess which magazine just won one?*

EVERY YEAR at the annual world science-fiction convention a half dozen little stainless steel model rocketships on wooden bases are handed out to deserving science-fiction writers, editors, artists and fans. Just like television's "Emmy" and the movies' "Oscar," this trophy bears an affectionate nickname — the "Hugo."

And it's awarded for much the same reason: *excellence*. Science-fiction people, just like television insiders and movie folk, like to recognize and reward a striving toward excellence. Oh, sure — sometimes you can quibble with the choice of winner for this or that category, sometimes you won't agree with the majority decision of the voters, but

I think the science-fiction world is more often right than wrong in their annual achievement awards. (*Much* more often right, for instance, than the fogeys who give out the Pulitzer Prize for excellence in American literature, and somehow manage to overlook authors like Thomas Wolfe, genius-type poets like Ezra Pound, and mind-crackingly good novels like *Lolita* or *Catch-22*!)

From Laureate to Statuette

The urge to award the outstanding has been with us in the sf world as long as there have been fans. Fandom's major amateur publishers' club, F.A.P.A., has a provision for annual laureateship awards written

into its constitution. Fapans give silk-screened award certificates (or did, last I heard) for such categories as mechanical excellence or innovation in publishing techniques, creative editing with high standards, quality of writing, and so on.

Various fanmags at various times have given out awards — one of the earliest being *Fan Editor & Publisher*, which has long since gone under — and many other mags conduct annual polls of their readers' choice of Fandom's outstanding people of the year — best fanzine, best new fan, best writer, or humorist, or poet. And they used to name the single fan of the year whose achievements made him the "Number One Fan Face."

Then there are the fanzines that give awards in the *professional* ranks, not in the fan world. Old-time fan Walt Daugherty was an early mover behind this; way back at the Third World Science Fiction Convention at Denver in 1941 he was passing out medals. And, today, the fanzine I myself edit sporadically, between enormous and lengthy periods of do-nothing, has an annual list of the 50 best books of the science-fiction year and four "Spectrum Awards" for best science-fiction book (novel, anthology or collection); best fantasy or weird; best children's book and best amateur book or pamphlet. (To explain the award's name, the magazine is an all-book-review thing called *Spectrum*.) It's currently in the doldrums, but shall return.

Then came the Hugo, and here's how it happened.

Hal and the Hugo

Lots of conventions passed out honors and awards of various kinds; its been happening ever since the 1st World Science Fiction Convention in New York City in 1939. Sometimes these awards are informal, sort of tokens of honor, and sometimes more formal and elaborate.

For example, take The International Fantasy Award. This has been awarded only three or four times and always on a very informal last-minute basis. In 1952 it was given to Clifford D. Simak for *City*, run-away all-time classic and my personal favorite from Simak. George Stewart also won the International Fantasy Award for his novel *Earth Abides*. This award is granted by decision of a jury. Like the third award, for instance: nine or ten highly qualified judges were polled; among them was Donald A. Wollheim, editor-in-chief of Ace Books. They gave the International Fantasy Award to Professor J.R.R. Tolkien for his world-famous fantasy trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. Hardly anyone would quibble with *that* choice, but, still, the jury-award system does lack personal participation, while the Hugo is given on the basis of ballot-box voting by Worldcon attendees.

The idea of the Hugo first arose in the mind of a Philadelphia fan

named Hal Lynch, who has since moved to New York. The year was 1953, and it was a couple of months before the Labor Day weekend when the 11th Convention was to be held in Philadelphia. Hal got his bright idea by analogy with Hollywood's annual Oscar orgy and passed it on to the convention committee.

After some fumbling around — all conventions are put on by a small number of ferociously busy, terrifically overworked people who never get enough help and rarely get any sleep either before or during their convention — after some initial difficulties, I say, a chap named Jack McKnight of Lansdale, Pennsylvania got the job done. He designed and hand-crafted the first Hugos: little rocketships of stainless steel, adorned with fins at tail and midsection, standing on round wooden bases fitted out with inscribed plates.

These were passed out, nine of 'em, to great excitement and enthusiasm. Alfred Bester won the novel award for *The Demolished Man*, easily one of the very finest science-fiction novels of 1953, or any other year, for that matter. Willy Ley got one for non-fiction science writing, Forrest J. Ackerman for fan activities, and Philip Jose Farmer, as most outstanding new science-fiction writer of the year. There were awards given in seven categories, but actually nine Hugos were given out, because of ties. Hannes Bok, one of the greatest fantasy artists

of all time, tied with Ed Emshwiller as best cover artist, and *Galaxy* and *Astounding* tied as best professional magazine of the year. The ninth and last of the little steel spaceships went to Virgil Finlay as best interior illustrator.

And that was it. Nobody really thought of making the Hugo an every-year thing; in fact, at the next year's convention (the 12th World Science Fiction Convention at San Francisco in 1954) there were no awards of any kind. Nor were these first Hugos called Hugos; officially, they were "The Science Fiction Achievement Awards."

Before I get into how, where and when the Hugos were revived, let's answer the question no doubt vibrating in many of your little minds — to wit:

Who was "Hugo"?

In 1904 a young man of 20 named Hugo Gernsback came to this country from Luxembourg, which is one of those little vestpocket-sized European countries. Radio was a burgeoning young giant in those dim, far-off days of 62 years ago, and the new field of electronics was just getting started. Mr. Gernsback was fascinated by the potentials of these brave new worlds and, somehow or other, drifted into magazine publishing. He printed things called *The Electrical Experimenter* and *Modern Electrics*. He published the first radio catalogue in history and the first book on radio, says sf historian Sam

Moskowitz. He took out patents, ran a "ham" radio station, and did a lot of other things, one of them being the invention of science fiction itself as a viable magazine classification.

It seems the slow, creeping pace of real-life scientific experiment was *too* darn slow for the young man from Luxembourg. Unable to keep his lively imagination chained to the advance of modern science, he began interspersing some hard-headed futuristic predictions (both as fact articles and as fiction) in amongst the pages of his publications. Eventually came an all-fiction issue of his magazine *Science and Invention* in August 1923. And the success of that experiment led him to found the first science-fiction magazine in the world.

Not only did he found the world's first science-fiction magazine, but he actually coined the phrase "science fiction" itself, thus giving our field a name and adding a new term to the English language. He has also written some science fiction, such as the famous novel *Ralph 124C41+* (this futuristic numerical last name is a joke — read it like this: "Ralph, one to foresee for one *plus*!"). This novel may not be too distinguished as a piece of fiction, but it has earned him several accolades from the scientific world. In it he hit what must have been an all-time high for successful predicting. He accurately foresaw and described "fluorescent lighting, skywriting, automatic packaging machines, plas-

tics, the radio directional range finder, juke boxes" — *them* we could have happily done without! — not to mention "liquid fertilizer, hydroponics, tape recorders, rustproof steel, loud speakers, night baseball, aquacades, microfilm, television, radio networks, vending machines dispensing hot and cold foods, flying saucers, a device for teaching while the user is asleep, solar energy for heat and power, fabrics from glass, synthetic materials such as nylon for wearing apparel, and, of course, space travel." (The list was admirably compiled by Sam Moskowitz.) And, last but not least, radar — which he not only described most accurately but actually *diagrammed*!

Well, what with all this, Gernsback — still alive and going strong — came to be known as "The Father of Science Fiction." And, just naturally, what with "Emmy" and "Oscar and the Mystery Writers of America's "Edgar" — they had to name the little steel rocketships "Hugo" in affectionate honor of the pioneer who started the whole thing and blazed several trails we are still following (such as space sickness; Gernsback accurately described the vertigo-cum-nausea of freefall in his *Ralph 124C41+*, but we had to wait until modern science caught up with him, as it did in the 1950's when the Air Force space laboratory experiments simulated free fall conditions and found the same sort of physiological symptoms that Gernsback described back in 1911. How's that for predicting?)

From Cleveland in '55 to Cleveland in '66

Meanwhile, back at the world science fiction conventions, they finally came to realize the idea behind an annual sf award was both sound and popular. At the 13th Convention — Cleveland, 1955 — the awards were revived and given out as "The Second Annual Science Fiction Achievement Awards." (They weren't *officially* called Hugos until Los Angeles and 1958.) It was proposed at the Cleveland convention that the Hugo be made a regular part of the annual doin's, and thus it has been from then to

now. This year's convention, as readers of *Our Man In Fandom* know, was also at Cleveland. In the next issue of *Worlds of If!* we'll talk about some of the famous novels and famous authors, artists, magazines and fan publications that have been given science-fiction's supreme accolade, the Hugo. We'll also discuss *this* year's Hugo winners, and we'll have a few things to say about the new set of awards — the Nebula Awards — now being given out each year by the Science Fiction Writers of America, the professional science-fiction writer's society. See you in these pages, next month!

END

Next Month in IF —

Special Hugo Award Issue!

To celebrate IF's receiving the coveted
"Hugo" as best science-fiction magazine

Stories by the Hugo Winners:

Isaac Asimov

Harlan Ellison

Roger Zelazny

All in the March issue, plus many others!

The IRON THORN

by ALGIS BUDRYS

Illustrated by MORROW

He had given himself over to Man's age-old enemies, the monsters that were called Amsirs—and now he had to pay for his treason with his life!

What Has Gone Before

In the Beginning was the Thorn. The world is flat and circular; a sunken desert, cold, wanly lit, nearly airless. The Thorn is high, blunt, nearly featureless; a metal

tower at the center of the world, and only around it are things any different. The farms have been around the Thorn since time began, inside the perimeter of air and warmth somehow clinging to the Thorn. Beyond that perimeter there

is no water, warmth or breath. Men and women are born farmers, have children and die. When they die, they go to Ariwol where there's happiness for everyone, and feast goes on forever.

Out in the desert live animals called Amsirs — man-sized, flightless, bat-winged, predatory, unbreathing. Killed and brought back to the Thorn, these are the source of that rare delicacy, meat. Their bones provide the darts and throwing sticks with which they are killed, and their hard, bulbous skins, suitably trimmed out, provide the "bubbles" in which drinking water is carried out into the desert by the aristocratic Honors, whose only occupation in life is honning Amsirs.

Boy children of the Thorn vie with each other and attempt to make it through the rigorous training ritual, so that they may grow up to be Honors. Most drop out and turn Farmer. Only a few get through the ritual far enough to be issued one of the metal caps that somehow provide a man with air and insulation beyond the perimeter of the farmland.

Once he has killed his first Amsir and brought it back to the Thorn, a Honor has few worries. He lives inside the Thorn and is maintained by the community. Any piece of farmer property, such as food and women, is his on demand. The only drawback to this life of ease is the need to periodically go out and kill additional Amsirs, who are objects of terror but not much information in the Farmer community.

In one brief day, novice Honor

Jackson finds out how much of the foregoing is either an outright lie or a distortion of the truth. The Amsir he finally does kill only tries to make him surrender, calling to him in perfectly understandable speech, and carries but doesn't use a metal spear which is a weapon, far superior to anything known by the people of the Thorn.

The facts that the Amsirs are intelligent, hostile but not vicious, and have a clear but unknown aggressive purpose directed toward the people of the Thorn, are Honor trade secrets, Jackson learns when he gets back to the Thorn. His own elder brother, armed and waiting in ambush, first makes sure that Jackson bears no telltale spear wounds and is sufficiently proud of having made his kill not to spill his discovery to the farmers. The Eld Honor also checks him out, and though Jackson is clearly bitter, the Eld decides it's only the same bitterness that's always made him a loner and represents no present danger to the Honor system. In fact, the Eld professes admiration for Jackson's long-standing traits of character and intelligence, considers him of the elite among Honors and treats him as one of his intellectual and spiritual heirs. This legacy is to be collected only provided he keeps his nose clean. There are other inducements to conformity besides this one; after all, every Honor who survived his novice honn has a vested interest in making sure no one upsets the structure of the society.

Jackson feels he owes it to him-

self to be nobody's fool. He slips back out into the desert, is ambushed by but kills Red Filson, who is the Eld's chief enforcer and who, incidentally and quite legitimately, long ago killed Jackson's father because he wanted Jackson's mother. (Some of Jackson's early cynicism may stem from the fact that his father was a Honor just like Filson, as well as from the fact that his elder brother is such a square).

Having done all that, Jackson immediately surrenders to an Amsir, who provides him with Amsir-manufactured bottles of air and water, and robes to keep him warm — all made of human skin — and marches off, out to the towering rim of the world, up the rim, and onto the crest. There Jackson sees another world spread out before him.

Equally circular, sunken, and flat, equally dominated by a Thorn, this one is choked from rim to rim with air, with fields, colorful fairytale houses, and the winged Amsirs soaring with joy, gambolling in the light of early morning.

"Ariwolf!" Jackson laughs, sore, wounded, exhausted, but not pious. "Ariwolf!"

XI

"You will have to climb down," the Amsir said, showing Jackson a place on the rim where you could see something that looked like a path. "You can leave those things here." The Amsir nodded his head toward the robes Jackson was carrying over his good arm. "They will be taken."

Jackson dropped the stuff on the ground. When the Amsir negligently knocked his spear point against the iron cap, Jackson took that off too and set it down on top of the pile. All he had left now was the dart, still trapped in the joint of his left elbow, and the human-leather tourniquet. He shrugged and began to scramble down. It was six or eight times his own height to the ground. The Amsir did something that must have given him a lot of pleasure. He stepped off a steep place in the rim, cupped his wings, and pivoted luxuriantly so as to be able to keep watching Jackson while he drifted downward. Every so often he beat his wings once or twice gracefully and kept himself from sinking down too quickly.

For Jackson, clambering down wasn't any picnic. He had to do it all one-handed, which meant that often enough he had to brace himself by leaning his face or his chest into the broken rock and grit so as to keep his feet from sliding. It was just too damn bad, wasn't it, he thought.

He began running into patches of the pretty blue-green stuff that he had seen filling the bottom of this world so attractively right up to the rim. It was cheesy and brittle; it broke off and smeared under his hand and against his body when he rubbed against rocks it was growing on. It smelled sharp in the way old bread dough tasted, and it came apart in little leafy chips. Jackson had never seen anything like it before, but while it looked fine from up there on the rim, down here with

it, it looked a little bit like something that had made somebody sick.

He got down to the Amsir world with a half-twist of his body that left him leaning against the rocks at the bottom of the rim. From down here it was only a gentle slope for maybe a dozen dozen strides, and then everything flattened out. Already, from this angle, most of his view of the Amsir Thorn was blocked by the Amsir houses stiling their way into the air. It all looked a little different — not as spread out, and pretty crowded.

His left forearm and hand were turning purplish white. The Amsir came down lightly a few strides away from him as he stopped to loosen the tie above his elbow and leaned watching the blood squirt out around the dart. He tried to work his hand, and finally he reached over with his right hand, pushing against the crooked stiffness in his fingers. A little bit of that and he was able to make his thumb and forefinger twitch toward each other. They were also beginning to feel like he was holding them in a fire. Profit and loss. He tied the leather band tightly again.

The Amsir said: "Do you have any idea of how long that will need to heal?"

"I don't know. Long time, I guess. Tell you better after somebody helps me get this dart out."

"We have individuals who can do that, but I don't mean how long until it is perfect; in your experience, how long until it can do work?"

"Look, I don't know. Six, nine days. Maybe twelve. Maybe three."

"Three" the Amsir repeated to himself thoughtfully. He looked Jackson up and down. "No sooner?"

"Look, I told you — " Jackson stopped and let it go. People never believed anything they hadn't touched, and the Amsir didn't have any dart in his elbow. The Amsir was just fine standing there with his lace drifting perkily around him, in the breeze that swept toward the rim along the floor of the world and vanished up the rocks. Jackson knew there was something different about his face, and then he saw that there were two wrinkle-edged holes open where a man's nostrils would be if his upper lip was an Amsir beak. And he could hear air hissing in and out of them. The Amsir was upwind of him too, and, now that he noticed, Jackson could smell the old breath emptying itself out of his chest bubbles.

"Come along," the Amsir said, motioning with his spear. "We don't have time to waste. You have to walk to the tower." He pointed with one wingtip. By that, Jackson could tell he meant the Thorn. "You'll have to just walk through the fields," the Amsir said as he sprang up into the air to circle watchfully around Jackson. "We don't make paths."

They stopped once on their way toward the Amsir Thorn, at the nearest of the stilt-legged houses. The house was made of something tough like horn but scratched up and very old, looking as if it had once held a lot more particles of

its bright yellow color. The Amsir sprang higher into the air and clung to one of the uprights with his claws and one hand. He reached up over his head to tug on the downswinging loop of the line that connected this house to the next one. Jackson could hear a bell clang inside. Clang, long pause, clang clang, short pause, then more clangs and spaced-out pauses.

It got mixed up in Jackson's ears because as soon as the line had transmitted the Amsir's pulling-up to the next house, he could hear another bell in there echoing the sound. Then he could hear it again faintly from the house beyond that, and then very faintly off in the distance, always moving in the direction of the Thorn. The Amsir stopped pulling and waited. After a little while Jackson could hear a sound coming back along the ropes from the direction of the Thorn. It was a short answer, whatever it was. The Amsir nodded in satisfaction and waved Jackson on with his spear.

"All right, hurry up now," he cried down. "They are waiting for you."

They were getting notice from other Amsirs now, too. Some of them popped out the doorways of the houses, jumping into the air and swooping to get a look at Jackson. Others — women and young kids, or anyhow acting the way women and young kids would have acted if they'd been Farmers — clung to the edges of doorways.

They began to make something of a procession, Jackson and all the Amsirs fluttering and swooping

overhead. The Amsirs in the air called to each other and back to their families in the houses. And the families called back to them. It began to make a hell of a racket overhead, shadows and air-gusts down on the ground. Jackson thought of baffling them a little by walking under the houses instead of around them, but there was too much manure on the ground there, and he didn't try it twice.

XII

"My name's Honor Red Jackson," he said to the old Amsir he'd found crouching in a room of their Thorn. Crouching wasn't right — this Amsir was more like leaning bent-legged with some of his weight on his wingtips.

"They have a complex system of naming," said another old, skinnier Amsir who'd been called in by the first one, who Jackson guessed was their Eld. There were quite a few Amsirs in the room, counting the young one who'd brought him in, and the doctor-like one who was studying his elbow. The doctor-like one was studying his elbow in part by twisting the set of naked human arm bones he'd brought in with him. Jackson hoped he'd soon figure out just how he was going to tinker this thing up, and get around to doing his job.

"'Honor' is his community status," the skinny one was still explaining. "It signifies that he lives exclusively by hunting our sort of creature. 'Red' means that in addition to having met the hunting re-

quirement, he had also performed the optional office of **killing a creature of his own kind**. Jackson simply means that he is the son of an older creature of his own kind named Jack. For creatures in sparse circumstances they have a most amazing complex of rituals. I can't imagine how they distinguish between brothers of identical status — I do not say they don't so distinguish. I'm sure they do."

The Amsir Eld grunted at the skinny one. "Do not, I pray, give me any more labels for him. *They* may have to distinguish, but we don't have so many of them, ever, that we must. Tell me what he is, not what he stands for."

"I am telling you. It's significant that he should be so obviously young; that he should carry the very fresh scars of combat with one of our own kind — which means he brought one of our own kind to the last extremity — and then the even more recent scars of combat with one of his own kind. This was a odd one even before he did the oddest thing of all and yielded voluntarily." The skinny Amsir looked as Jackson proudly, as if he'd produced him himself.

"The odder the better," the Eld Amsir snapped. "We've had no luck with the usual run."

"Precisely my point," the instructing Amsir said.

"Then why didn't you make it to begin with?"

"Pfah! I did!"

"Only in hindsight. Get out." The Eld Amsir jerked his head toward the doorway, and the instructor

shuffled out reluctantly. The Eld Amsir turned all his attention toward Jackson's end of the room. "You, Doctor — get on with it." He came a few steps closer, and Jackson noticed something. He wasn't old. At least — now that he was in some kind of better light coming in through the narrow Thorn window-slits — the tattering of his lace, and the crumpled look of the wing Jackson could see best, were accounted for by damage. He was pretty badly scarred up, and discolored. He looked as if he'd been picked up and knocked hard against something rough, and had left big patches of his hide against that rough thing, and had had a lot of bones broken for it. But he threw his weight around like an Eld, and that bothered Jackson. He didn't like the idea of somebody being mean enough inside to be an Eld, but still not slowed down in his head very much.

"**Y**ou, Jackson! I am above all others here. No one of my kind of creature will tell you we have any time, so give me straight, fast answers. I am told you were ready to yield when that young one by the doorway found you. This is something new. Explain it."

The doctor put one hand on Jackson's biceps, the other on his forearm and closed his beak on the lace-feathered end of the dart in Jackson's elbow. His claws made little purchase-hunting sounds on the cement flooring.

Jackson figured it would be best to pay him no heed. "Didn't like



it where I was," he said to the Eld. "Figured I'd go to where the lies were all about. Make up my own if I had to."

"Pfu. Lies require life. You won't live."

"Right up to the minute I die, I will. Oh, hell!" he hollered as the doctor jerked his head back while twisting his arm. The dart sucked out of Jackson's wound and hung for an instant in the doctor's beak until it was dropped. The doctor's hand closed as best it could above Jackson's elbow — the fingers couldn't make it all the way around the flesh. Jackson reached over to help him, his eyes swimming.

"I think perhaps you thought you could hunt us as you think we hunt you," the Eld said shrewdly. "I think perhaps you thought out that

there was another world in which our sort of creature was prey. I think you thought you knew a way to get breathing stuff. You are young enough to have thought that because you were a little bit odd, and you frightened your own kind, you would frighten us too."

Jackson just kept gripping his arm, swaying with his eyes closed. He did have room enough inside himself, though, to think how wonderful it was that *everybody*, an Amsir included, could think he knew everything just because he knew something.

"Well, that's not how it is, creature," the Eld Amsir went right on, while the doctor unstopped a stone bottle of something that looked like water but burned like fire when he poured it over Jackson's running



elbow, and then began winding a long, tight strip of shaved-thin hide around Jackson's left arm in a spiral from shoulder to wrist. "In some ways here, for you it is the way it is for our kind of creature with you. We cannot breathe the breathing stuff around your fields. Muck from that stuff you grow is in every breathful. We die — you would say prettily — with our first breath of it; our muscles knot so hard our bones break, our back-bones snap; green fur fills our lungs. Or so the instructors say, from the times long ago when we still tried.

"Haw! We die of breathing the air that blows across the stuff you eat. *This* is the stuff we eat." He pointed a wing at a heap of the blue, crumbly stuff from the fields. "That is rock-stuff. That is the food

for creatures of wing and spirit. Can you eat rock? No others of your kind have been able to. You will die, prettily. Your stomach will sink in, your bones will show through the meat on you; toward the end, you will try to fang us and we will kick you away. You will bite yourself. You will try to get away back to your poison Thorn, and we will kick you back to work. You will live altogether perhaps thirty days, perhaps less. Only *perhaps* perhaps will you live any longer than that. And only perhaps perhaps perhaps will you ever be happy again before you die. It depends how quickly and how well you can do things; on how odd you are, and most of all on whether you are luckier than any other creature of your own kind that we have ever

had here. Now — " he jerked his head toward's Jackson's bound-up arm. "How soon do you think you will be able to do work with that?"

Jackson raised his arm experimentally. It throbbed when he did that; it felt like something made out of one solid stick of bone. "Thanks, Doc," he said to the doctor, who was standing off to one side watching him critically. Jackson tried to move his hand. It wouldn't work. He began knocking it against his thigh, trying to get some circulation into his fingers. "What kind of work?" he said to the Eld Amsir.

"I'll show you." The Eld gestured toward the doorway. "Turn toward your right after you leave the room."

Jackson did that. The Eld Amsir and the young one who'd brought him in followed him. The doctor tried to go with him too, but the Eld just looked back over his shoulder and said, "Not you." The doctor turned around, quickly, and rustled toward the daylight Jackson had come in from.

The way Jackson had been told to turn led him deeper into the Amsir Thorn. It was a narrow passageway, and at widely spaced distances there were lights glowing behind translucent panels in the metal ceiling overhead. It was like walking through something's ribs. Every so often they'd come to another oval ridge that ran completely around, up the walls and across the ceiling. There was always an open door folded neatly back against the wall. Halfway between any two of

these doors, there'd be another one like it, but set directly into the wall at Jackson's left side. These were closed; sometimes there was light behind them, coming through a little bull's-eye window, and sometimes there wasn't. Sometimes there were particular sounds of machines going; sometimes there was just the general sound of the Thorn, which was louder and healthier than the sounds of Jackson's Thorn. But not one of these doors leading to the inside told him anything, except what he already knew, that this Thorn was tougher than his own.

The passageway curved this way and that; sometimes it turned sharply. From the sound growing louder and louder, and then beginning to taper off behind him at more or less the same rate, Jackson guessed it was some kind of path they'd set up for getting through the Thorn to the other side without having to go around it. Three times, they came to ladders taking up half the passageway's space and going up to round doors set in the ceiling. Two of them were closed, and the metal rungs of the ladders were dull and softly smooth. At the top of the third ladder was a round black opening, and the ladder was scratched up. There were bright, polished places on the wall, going up beside the ladder, where Amsir wings had dragged against it a lot of times. He tried to imagine an Amsir working his way up one of these ladders, just as he could see how they had to inch and shuffle to get around the ladders and keep going down the passageway. It wasn't

handy for them, this place. Well, it wasn't handy for him either, but it was what they had.

They came to another room that opened on the outside. It had a couple more Amsirs in it, including the instructor one who'd been nagging the Eld about him in the Eld's room.

"Are you going to show it to him now?" this one asked the Eld.

"He won't get any stronger."

"No — or at least, none of them have. But you know, they do have this ability to store energy. Amazing, really, when you think of it. At least, we've never observed any of them carrying nourishment out into the desert with them, and we know they've certainly been able to function unfed for significant periods of time here. Whereas we're hard put to it to find individuals with the endurance to omit feeding for as much as a day — "

" — What the learned one who is well above me refers to," broke in the young Amsir who'd been hanging around the instructor, "is the surmise that perhaps these creatures are trading time for energy. They may be going into some sort of survival mode which permits a stretch-out of energy consumption by maintaining a low level of physical and mental activity. As you know from the learned one's witnessed discourses, he would very much like to attempt stimulating one of these creatures, as for example with pain, on the supposition that this may force it to re-enter a more energetic mode, of shorter dura-

tion, perhaps, but much more productive of over-all results "

Nobody listened with interest. Not even the instructor Amsir, who was doing his best not to pay attention, or at least look as if he were someplace else entirely. He looked at the walls, the floor and the ceiling while the novice instructor's voice got lower and lower. Jackson didn't want to hear about pain, whatever a mode was. The young Amsir who'd brought him in was looking at the instructor novice the way a Honor would look at a Farmer his own age, except he wasn't measuring him for the kill. Finally, the Eld Amsir said, "Shut up," gently, and the novice instructor did. Looking at Jackson, the Eld Amsir asked: "Do the young practice as much, where you come from?"

"Only honning. The farming takes care of itself. The Thorn spreads the water in the fields, and the plows run no matter what you try to do."

"Well, we are better than you," the Eld said matter-of-factly. "Both of you shut up," he added toward the instructor, who'd begun to open his beak. "This one's enough experiment for me just the way he is." He nudged Jackson toward the door with the tip of one wing. "Step out and look at that," he said.

Jackson found himself looking from the doorway at something a lot like a small Thorn. It tapered up into the air, maybe a dozen times as high as a man. But it was spikier, and it had other spikes curving down — it rested on three of them. It had openings, too, like throats yawning down toward the ground. It was

made of the same kind of metal as the Thorn; in that shape, though, spikey and open-mouthed, it looked mean and twisty.

"What is that?" Jackson asked.

"It's the Thorn Thing. It's been here since the beginning of the World. You see that?" The Eld pointed up the side of the thing. There was a ladder coming down to within say three feet of the ground. Jackson squinted; up at the head of the ladder was something that looked like another one of the closed doorways, but had no familiar circular handle to turn. It was just an oval crack in the metal. Turning his head, and shifting his feet back and forth, Jackson could see glints from scratches up there; shallow ones, no more than futile scrapes.

"That's a doorway, isn't it?" the Eld Amsir said.

"Looks like one," Jackson agreed. "Don't you know?"

"It says it's a doorway. It has a voice, and the instructor tells me that's what it says." The Eld cast a glance at the instructor. "There isn't anyone who will tell me it says something else."

"I've spent a long time deciding that's what it says," the instructing Amsir said vehemently. "I have given witnessed discourses —"

"Shut up," the Eld Amsir said.

Jackson looked the Thorn Thing up and down again. There wasn't anything now left to notice, except maybe for the burnt, black splash on the ground right under it, that the spikey legs rested in. That looked a little wrong — as if somebody

had been building fires under it not too long ago; not as long ago as the beginning of time. Otherwise, it just sat there. He certainly didn't hear any voice saying, "I'm a door."

"What do you want me to do with this thing?"

"Climb the ladder and open the door," the Eld Amsir said.

"Just that?"

"*Pful*! Almost every one of our kind of creature who's tried it has been killed. Some of us have only been hurt very much and made very angry. Every one of your kind of creature who's tried it has starved to death."

XIII

Oh, haw, Jackson thought, feeling weak and disgusted. He looked up toward the door in the Thorn Thing again and then at the ladder. It seemed to him that a bone-weary, one-armed, light-headed, sleepless, foodless, hopeless man could get up it all right. Considering everything. He looked at the door again. But the damn thing didn't have any handle. Well. He got himself moving and sauntered toward the ladder.

Standing there right under the Thorn Thing he could see two things; one, that it was pretty big, the other that it had been there long enough for the three spikes it rested on to have become very nearly a part of the soil. It didn't look as if it had been set down on the ground, and the ground didn't look as if it had been piled around it. It had the look that walls of huts at the home

Thorn had — or that the Thorn itself had, come to that — of having poked up from underneath, and of the ground bulging just a little bit at the torn edges, as if maybe a dozen dozen years from now it would finish reacting to this growth and would finally lie flat.

He put his good arm on the ladder two or three rungs up and gave a little tug followed by a harder one. There was no give in it. He could see that it came out of the side of the Thorn Thing just below the doorway. And he could see a sort of hinge at each rung, as if the ladder were made to fold and be pulled up inside a small space somewhere up there. Or could be kicked out and let hang this way when needed. But if those were hinges they had no give in them. He put his ear to the ladder, which was as warm as his own flesh, and he could hear things humming. Well, anything that could talk had to have a heart.

He looked over at the bunch of Amsirs. All of them were watching him with considerable interest. There were other Amsirs gathering overhead — passers-by and just loungers who'd noticed that a new creature of his kind was about to try for the talking door.

One of them swooped down and came no more than his own height over Jackson's head. "Haa, damp thing! Climb! Climb!" He hovered up at the level of the door and made scrabbling, fake-desperate grabs toward it for as long as he could hold his attitude, then fell away, got his wings straightened

back around the way he wanted them, and buffeted up into the air again. Jackson noticed that it would have been a much better piece of mockery if the Amsir had dared to have actually touched the door.

Jackson took a little jump into the air, grabbed the ladder, got one foot up and began to climb.

It was peculiar, the way the metal felt neither cold nor hot. Although he had to do all the work with one arm and his legs, it was nothing like when he'd had to slip and slide down the rim into this place. He felt pretty good, as a matter of fact. There were worse things a man could do with his time than climb this ladder. He wished he knew what the Thorn Thing was, that made a man feel this good.

Pretty soon he was up high enough to look down at the Amsirs on the ground. They were all watching him, their faces turning up gridwork-like to follow his climb as if each of their bodies were a Thorn and he was the sun.

Up to now, the ladder had been hanging reasonably far away from the side of the Thorn Thing. But the higher he got, the closer the bulges of the Thorn Thing got to the straight-hanging ladder. Now his eyes were only inches away from the side of the thing itself, and he could see something that didn't cheer him up, which were grease-smears shimmering in the light, from all the hands that had rubbed here before him as he stopped to lean his weight on the comfortable, neither warm nor cold humming metal.

Oh, pfu, he said to himself and kept climbing, until finally he was at the top of the ladder. Here there was a little open door, not too thick, but not too thin, and strongly hinged, positioned under the slit so as to protect it against anything being thrown up from below. When the ladder was pulled up, probably the little door closed behind it and left no more seam than the door above it did. When his eyes came level with it, he noticed that there was a broken-off, fleshless fingerbone trapped in the crack between the little open door and the main side of the Thorn Thing, and at the same time a voice over his head growled hollowly: "Ouwwtenshowmnnn. Dhayss dwuuhrr uhhpnnss owwnn-uhhli t umm-nn pehrrsowwnnuhhl. Awwll ouwwthrr uhluff-ffouwrms

wuull be dhayssstroydd wieyethouyut dhaysscriyeshunn."

Jackson looked up at the door. Nothing was happening. The door began to say again: "Ouwwtenshowmnnn. Dhayss dwuuhrr"

Jackson climbed back down the ladder.

"Shakes you, doesn't it?" said the Eld Amsir, at the foot of the ladder.

"It sounds like somebody's stomach," Jackson said. He looked over at the instructor Amsir. "What did he say it says?" The Eld followed his glance and raised a wingtip. The instructing Amsir came forward, brimming over and ready to spill.

"Do not be misled by the growling, rumbling sounds. I have said them to myself at any number of speeds and pitches of voice, and I have



had many below me say them to me in various modes according to my instructions. I have had witnesses in great number judge the various effects and reach agreement among themselves as to the meaning of this sort of speech. It is the consensus," he said with proud conclusiveness, "that what the door is giving is first a sound much like our word 'display alertness.' This is followed by a sound which is very definitely the word 'this'. Then there is a sound very much like our word for 'hatch' — "

"Shut up," Jackson said to the shock of some and the amusement of the Eld. "You mean that's just a funny way of talking straight."

The instructing Amsir looked at Jackson almost tearfully, as if

it were a farmer whose daughter had just gone off laughing with a Honor. "That's right."

"I want to get this clear. It talks like we do but it has a funny mouth, is that it?"

"That seems to be the case," the Eld Amsir said.

"Well, now look," Jackson said. "That's a big thing. There's your kind of creature and my kind of creature, and now all of a sudden there's a third kind. And if it's all connected up with things that have been here since the beginning of time, then that thing talks for whatever made time begin."

"Listen, you stinking, infidel, damp thing, you keep *your* mouth off theology!"

The young Amsir who'd brought him in had been hanging around all



this time without saying two words or even boo. It made Jackson twang a little inside for having him come on this strong all of a sudden. But he rolled his eyes over at the youngster with enough cool to make it stick. "Now what are you talking about?"

"Don't pick at it," the Eld Amsir said to the young warrior with what had to be the fond substitute for 'shut up!' "It's just an ignorant creature. Listen, I think things are pretty well controlled here — you can go home and tell your flock you are well above many for this day's work. Go home. Now."

The young Amsir jumped for the air. "I am rewarded," he said thankfully to the Eld, before he flung himself straight up like a thrown dart aimed at the sun, shouting at the top of his lungs, "I am above many! I am above many!" High, high up, he flung himself out flat and went tearing down at a shallow angle for a particular one of the stilt-legged houses, still shouting. Jackson could hear his voice shrinking.

The Eld Amsir looked at Jackson and shrugged. "You've got one or two things to watch out for besides the condition of your stomach. One of them is the fact that if you nudge superstition hard enough around here, you won't live to starve. And there's not much that anyone educated will be able to do to help you."

"We have a very tricky situation going here," the instructor Amsir explained. "You see, we know there are two Thorns, two

worlds, two kinds of creatures, and we know they were all made at the same time. One must be good, and the other must be evil. But you see, at that point we leave rational logic behind, and begin trespassing on matters of faith. A great prophet, one of whose last discourses I myself was privileged to witness as a very young being, tells us that since we must make evaluations of our Thorn's worth on faith, then it is just as logical to believe that each individual makes either good or evil of his own place. But, for this the great prophet was flung from a great height with his wings broken, by those who avoid such complicated patterns of ethics through the expedient of knowing that it is our place that is good and yours that is evil, and that they are therefore good for living in the good place.

"We here are all reasonable creatures — granting you a certain shrewdness — and we know it is probably only an accident of creation that your kind of creature and mine cannot live in each other's places. But you see how difficult it can be to perceive this if one is of a tender and uncultured turn of mind."

"You can see, too," the Eld Amsir added, "how brave that young fellow was, being as emotional as he is, and yet willing to risk waiting round the fringes of your world for something as unutterably evil and repulsive as yourself to come into contact with him." The Eld and the instructor both looked at Jackson as if they had just told him something of considerable meaning and expected him to react.

Jackson just looked back at them. For one thing, he didn't even know what "theology" meant. It was the apprentice instructor who said: "Look at him! He shows no sign of understanding! I propose the thesis they have no concept of original evil!"

"And are therefore innocent?" the instructor cried furiously. "Shut up! Shut up!" He waved his wings spasmodically, hopping from one foot to the other, raising dust. He was pretty old stuff, and didn't impress Jackson much, but the apprentice instructor quailed and shuffled away, his head bowed. He acted as if he'd fallen out while running 'round the Thorn behind Red Filson — tireless, wise, dead Red Filson. What makes you dumb, Jackson decided, is what scares you.

XIV

"You see," the Eld Amsir said to Jackson, "we must discover whatever is within the Thorn Thing. We feel this with different degrees of involvement." He glanced aside at the instructor, who was busily running his fingertips through his lace and getting it untangled. "Feel it for different reasons that are very close to our emotions. But it's our only clue to the nature and purpose of Creation. We've studied the Thorn for generations, of course, but it's only a machine, and all we learn from it is how its parts move and in which of those parts it seems to be wearing out. It does seem to be wearing out in a number of parts. Now the Thorn Thing, on the other

hand, talks. Perhaps there is something inside that can be talked to."

"In what kind of talk?" Jackson asked.

The Eld Amsir nodded. "You're right. Nobody is saying there won't be problems. Nobody is saying the answer will be easy to find. But we've got to begin. Things are not getting any better, so they can only get worse. We can't just let them go. Oh, there are many of our kind of creatures who would never care until the last moment when the sky fell down upon them. All they care about is getting their food to eat, water to drink, sky to fly in. And there have always been these things, so they can't imagine that they could end. But we know the Thorn can end. So these things can end — there can be a last day for this world. There are some of us who cannot live content, knowing this, even though we may also know that we would be able to die content long before it becomes necessary to really have the answers we seek. There is a certain quirk — a restlessness — in certain minds, which does not seem to understand the passage of time. What will be real some day to everyone is very real to them now."

Jackson listened politely.

"Now, I bear you no malice, boy. If we had food here that you could eat, I would give it to you, provided. Provided I thought you would work just as hard at opening the door as you would if you were starving. Others may bear you malice, but I don't. I understand that we are really very much alike, inside. And

I like the idea of your being an odd one. I am an odd one too, among my own kind." He pointed toward the Thorn Thing. "That's where I was mangled.

"I wouldn't leave it alone. I tried to crawl up one of its throats, but I was clumsy. As all of us who do not need the ground all our lives are clumsy when we crawl. My clumsiness saved my life. I fell to the ground. When the fire burst forth from the throat to clear me out, I was already crawling away. But still it caught me and threw me a good distance. Haw, they called it the reward of foolishness. It was then, as I lay there screaming, and they gathered around laughing and exclaiming, that I understood I must either rule them or not live here any longer. So I owe much to the Thorn Thing. I owe much to oddness. And I tell you, odd one, that you had better owe much to it too. I bear you no malice — I said that — but I will do whatever needs to be done to force the utmost from you. I will remind you, if you haven't thought of it yourself already, that it treats your kind of creatures better than it treats my kind. My kind cannot climb the ladder to its top, nor touch the door. Something goes into my kind of creature from the door, flattens its insides, boils it eyes, throws it dead instantly earthward. Your kind of creature it merely permits to starve while attempting to crawl through the throats, or while picking at the door seam. Therefore, what is inside will probably not treat you like an enemy. It may help you. Why not

believe that there is your sort of food in there? What is a friend for, if not to offer hospitality? And I think you will do well. You are very much like me, and if my body were like yours, I think I would do well."

Jackson said; "You know, I think you're right. There is somebody who lives in our Thorn that I think you could spend a lot of happy hours with. Just talking. Comparing problems, sharing thoughts." But the Amsir Eld didn't seem to understand. He looked at Jackson the way Jackson looked at people who used words like theology. Well, Jackson decided, it was possible to talk, talk, talk about how alike they were under the skin, but if you had become the Eld of the Amsirs, you couldn't really think there was anyone else who'd made out as wonderful as you.

The way, when I was a kid, Jackson thought, I thought there was only one world, and the only thing in it was honning. He looked around at the Amsirs, the blue food he couldn't eat, the stilty houses, the sky filled with flapping creatures and the Thorn Thing. And I wish, he thought, I wish I was still like those farmers and Honors back there who still think that's all there is.

He felt pretty tired. "I'm going to get some sleep," he said, lay down, curled up, and closed his eyes around the throbbing of his arm.

Now, his arm hurt. He scraped his eyes open and looked down at it. The flesh of his hand was

swollen up in a ring around the lower edge of the wrapping. When he reached up to touch his shoulder he found another bulge like it there. He rolled over in the dust near the Thorn Thing, rubbing his hair in his face, pawing his open mouth, licking his teeth. He saw it was morning again. His skin felt dry. He couldn't get his face to work. He sat up, and saw the Amsir Eld sitting there. "Huh! Been guarding my rest?"

"Mine, too. I've been wondering what the effect of long rest on your energy supply would be. You don't seem to have become more alert."

Jackson moved. He had it pretty well planned; the next step was to get around behind the Eld, hook his arms under the Eld's wings, using the left arm for whatever good it might do, and get his right thumb into the front of the Eld's throat, while his fingers curled around the back of the Amsir's neck. From there, he figured, he could start setting himself up a little more comfortably around here. He didn't know exactly what the Amsirs could really do to get him something to eat, for instance, but there was a whole world here, full of brave, strong, big-mouthed people, who were used to doing what the Eld told them. And if the Eld had to do what Jackson told him . . .

But the Eld had had the thought to tie Jackson's ankles together loosely while he slept, and Jackson fell down.

The Eld grinned. "In a few days, it won't be necessary to do that, or anything like it. Then you'll be

waking up with only one thought. If need be, I may have to remind you that breakfast is inside the Thorn Thing. Then you will turn to it with a will."

Lying there, thinking all kinds of top-of-the-head, fast-answer thoughts, Jackson said, "I believe a lot more in you for breakfast than in any instructor talk about what's inside that thing."

The Eld said: "It's truly amazing what you'll believe in a few days. It's not a pretty condition. I think you will disgust yourself. I don't think you would like that any more than I would. We have let you sleep. Here is water," he said, setting out one of those sealed hide bubbles of theirs. "That we can give you. We won't be shocked — I won't be shocked — if you smear some on skin. Does your arm hurt?"

"Thanks."

The Amsir nodded off over Jackson's shoulder, and the doctor came up again. He unwrapped the bandages while Jackson drank and stared off at the rim of the world through the legs of the houses. When the doctor was done putting fresh wrappings on the arm and was restoppering his bottle of liquid he said: "Your arm's not healing. I think you'll soon lose it."

"I knew that yesterday," Jackson said. He tossed the water bubble down. "There's something you can work on me with," he said to the Eld. "Maybe there is something in the Thorn Thing that'll fix my arm. Some kind of real doctor. Why not? If there's a feast for me in there, there might as well be healing, too."

The Eld was untying the ends of the thongs between Jackson's ankles; his wings got in his way a little, and he was clumsy about it, but he got them off anyhow. There were a couple of spearmen standing around, Jackson noticed now. It hadn't mattered before if they were there or not, because when you make that kind of play there's no point counting odds. But he had shot that one, and he noticed them now. He held still.

"And if not healing, why not anything else, too?" the Eld was saying as he worked. "Indeed, why not? Why not females, why not any other pleasures that might appeal to you? Why not weapons? And you thought of weapons in there, didn't you?" The Eld looked up shrewdly, his eyes twinkling. "Oh, have you not!"

Jackson shrugged.

The Eld shrugged too. "And why not? Why not, if you crack open a mystery from the beginning of time, why not all lore, all striving, all rewards for the shrewd and the odd? Pfu! Let me show you the answer to that." He gestured with a wingtip, and a couple of spearmen hustled something forward from behind the Thorn.

The creature smiled winningly at Jackson. It smiled at the Spearmen, it smiled at the Amsir Eld, and at the instructor, and in fact at everything. Jackson had never seen anything so easily pleased.

It was a shame it was so unpleasant. It stood just about his size, and it walked — at a guess — like a man. But it was a little hard to tell, because it sagged so much. It

was like dough, and the color of dough. There was no part of it whose skin did not hang down in sloughy folds, except at the very top of its head, where little fleshy pseudopods spangled half-erect about where an Amsir's crest of lace began. The rest of it hung on its frame of bones and meat, half-closed its eyes, drooped little beginnings of ears, made a flabby ruff around the neck, hung in a brief, scalloped cape around its chest and upper arms, made another fold below its waist, and fell on down its legs. It was, if it was dough, some Amsir housewife's too-watery bit of kneading from which an Amsir pastry might have been baked.

All this delighted it. Its soft flap-fingered hands — the little finger rather longer than the others — twiddled constantly at its thighs, its shoulders, and its face. It seemed to love playing with its mouth. How it smiled was by stretching its lips upward with its forefingers quite frequently.

The Amsir Eld looked crookedly toward Jackson. Jackson obliged: "All right — what is it?"

"Oh, this is Ahmuls," he said. "He's a kind of creature born to us now and then. He happens to be one of the few who does not die while still very, very young. Well, his mother was a foolish woman and fond of him. And I am grateful to her now. You'll see why. Ahmuls is very lovable," the Eld said as the creature shuffled up to him, still twiddling. The Eld reached out and lightly stroked Ahmul's cheek.

"Good morning, Ahmuls; I love you."

"Good morning, I love you," Ahmuls said rather clearly. He hummed some sort of contented sound and stroked the Eld's cheek.

"Ahmuls — this is Jackson," the Eld said, pointing.

"Jackson" Ahmuls said reflectively, opening his eyes with thumbs and forefingers as he focused his attention.

"Ahmuls, I want you to show Jackson something."

"Oh, yes."

"Very good," the Eld said, stroking Ahmuls' face again. "Ahmuls, hit that for me." The Eld pointed to the leg of a house a dozen running strides distant. The Eld threw in an aside to Jackson: "Like many odd ones, Ahmuls has had to be special, or go under. He's very proud of thing's he's taught himself to do. They show he loves himself, and since we all love ourselves so very much, when we do something for that sort of love we're superb. Ahmuls . . . ?" The Eld looked questioningly at Ahmuls.

Ahmuls turned to one of the spearmen, floppy-fleshed arm extended. He said neither please nor I love you. The Eldish sudden uplift of his arm did all the necessary asking for him. The spearman didn't seem offended. He gave his javelin a bit of a toss, and Ahmuls caught it in mid-air, thumb down, with his arm crossed in front of him, still turned three quarters away from his target. The next Jackson saw him clearly he was already stepping forward, his muscles already relaxing

again, and the javelin was going through the air in an absolutely straight line, whirring. Jackson had never seen anything thrown that didn't curve down toward the end of its path. A dozen dozen running strides away the head of the javelin went into the house-leg with a *klatl*, a whip of its metal body, then a crack as the shaft snapped away from the immovably dug-in head. Up above indignant voices boiled up, and heads and bodies showed at the doorway. Then a voice came faintly down, pleased as well as scandalized: "Oh, Ahmuls!" And Jackson had been shown what love could do.

The Eld said: "I love Ahmuls," grinned and grinned.

Pfu! thought Jackson.

The Eld stepped forward and took gentle hold of Ahmul's arm. "Watch, Jackson." He pulled the flesh tight, for just a moment, and there was the outline of the human arm trapped under the uncooked Amsir skin.

"You see," the Eld went on to Jackson, "this is also why I love Ahmuls. But let me show you that, too. Ahmuls — climb the ladder. Show Jackson you can climb the ladder, Ahmuls."

Ahmuls held his eyes open again, hunted, found the two things he had to know about. "Jackson," he discovered. "Ladder." Satisfied, he was beside the Thorn Thing with two strides, halfway up the ladder with one jump, and at its head immediately thereafter. He stood with his feet curled over the top rung, and the only thing that kept

him from falling backwards was that he leaned forward with his arms outstretched, oozed tight against the curving surface, and while the door growled he rubbed his face against the metal and moved his flattened palms in little carressing motions. Jackson raised an ear with a twist of his neck that reminded him about shoulders, and could hear Ahmuls very faintly: "I love you."

"Come down now, Ahmuls," the Eld cried. "So you see," he said to Jackson, "the door thinks Ahmuls is your kind of creature, for it doesn't kill him. True, Ahmuls is very stupid, and so there's no hope of his ever opening the door. But that's good for you, when you think of it, for if Ahmuls weren't stupid, I wouldn't need you. Anyway, Ahmuls goes in with you, if you open the door. He knows enough to hit you if you pick up a weapon. He's been told all about it many times in the past. He will understand something if it's said to him a few times. After that, he is too gluey inside to forget it."

Ahmuls had come back to the Eld. They changed touches again. "Love you," both of them said.

Jackson studied them.

The Eld said to Jackson: "There is only one way you can keep Ahmuls from waiting just below you on the ladder while you try the door and then following you in. That would be to cripple him now. I still need you, and I have no replacement for Ahmuls. You wouldn't be punished, and you'd have a much better chance once

you got inside. So I'm perfectly willing to let you try your luck right now."

Jackson walked over to Ahmuls. He reached out with his good hand, while shaking his head at the Eld. Then he looked straight into Ahmul's slitty eyes as he fondled the damp thing's cheek. "I love you."

But Ahmuls wasn't having any. He caught Jackson's hand with something that felt like a five-fingered machine closing on it inside a cloak of blanketing. Somewhere inside all there, Ahmul's sense of touch got a message through to his head. "No good," he said, rubbing Jackson's hand before throwing the arm aside. "Soft."

XV

It was hot, up at the top of the ladder with Ahmul's humming happily a few rungs below him. Jackson ran his hands over the door again, and again found that it was exactly like any other door, except that it didn't have a handle, and it talked. He had gotten used to the growling. There were those scratches around the edges, where various hands before him had tried to pry. One or two of the scratches actually went maybe a fingernail-thickness deeper than the surface. The Eld had told him they were places where everybody sooner or later came to scratching in old scratches, trying to just plain wear through.

The Eld's best estimate was that the deepest scratch had taken about a dozen men, working day and night,

for maybe two weeks apiece. And it was as thick as two hands. But it was possible, Jackson thought, that a week or ten days from now he might start telling himself maybe this door wasn't that thick — maybe it was only a finger thick. Probably, the last two or three days he could hang on up there, he'd be telling himself he'd wear through any minute now.

The door was easy to get mad at. It was just another oval seam in the metal. A sensible man with other things to do would tell himself inside of an hour that it wasn't a door — it was some kind of fake wrinkle in the metal. He could climb back down the ladder and never try it again. There wasn't even a place for the voice to come out. It was the first time Jackson had ever met anything that could talk but didn't have a mouth.

He put his ear up to the door, trying to hear the heartbeat he could feel through his fingertips, but when he did that the voice went right through his head, and he couldn't hear anything but it. He leaned out as far as he dared and looked it up and down again, and then he said: "Hey, Ahmuls, let's go down."

"Down?"

"Down. Let's go down

"You're stupid," Ahmuls said, but he moved obligingly down, one rung at a time, making sure Jackson came with him.

The instructing Amsir, who'd been keeping a sharp eye on this public tooling, came hurrying up to them. "What's wrong?"

Ahmuls grinned and pointed at

Jackson. "He came down. He's stupid."

"I've learned all I'm going to, up there," Jackson said.

"Where else are you going to learn anything?"

"That's the real problem, I guess — answering that one. But I've learned everything I'm going to up there," Jackson said, and walked toward the Thorn.

"Don't you leave me!" Ahmuls cried, taking Jackson's good arm.

"It's all right, Ahmuls dear," the instructing Amsir said hastily. "You wait here. I'll bring him back. He'll be with me."

"All right. But you bring him back," Ahmuls said dubiously.

"What are you going to do?" the instructing Amsir said, rustling along beside Jackson, his eyes glittering with intense curiosity.

"Study door," Jackson said. He jerked his thumb toward the Thorn. "Quite a few of them in there."

He stood in doorways all that afternoon, bracing his feet and elbows inside the oval door jams as best he could, trying to understand how it felt to be that thick, that tall, that flat" He growled grudgingly out of various Amsirs' way whenever they came shuffling and scraping up the halls through him. He swung himself flat against a wall and stood that way for a long time, his fingers and toes curved around the jamb, being hinges. By the end of the afternoon, he had a pretty good idea inside his head of how a door would think, and act, and feel about people. But al-

ways, only a door that had a handle through its middle.

By evening, the little hollow place that he put through his middle where the handle's works would be had grown up into something that he had to admit resembled the faint beginning of hunger in a man who let himself think about food. That was the only gain he had to show for the day, and he had to admit it was a loss. Toward evening, Ahmuls came looking for him, unhappy because the instructor didn't love him or he would have brought Jackson back, unhappy because Jackson still wouldn't go up the ladder, unhappy because the sun was going down and it was time to go back, to sleep, to wait for morning and the ladder, and Jackson again, and meanwhile not be loved.

In the morning, he climbed back up the ladder. Ahmuls patted him approvingly on the shoulder as he stood aside to let him by. "Now you're smart," he said.

"Glad to hear it," Jackson said. The doctor had re-done his arm again, with the usual results. Jackson could feel that arm all the way up his neck and into the inside of his head, this fine morning in the bright sky with all the happy Amsirs flopping in the sky above him, and Ahmuls slurring and slapping up the ladder below him. When he got to the top, he sat down facing outward, leaning his back and the back of his head against the metal, his feet resting on the next rung down, letting himself warm up. He kept his arms crossed over him.

He began to talk casually. "You know, door, I spent a long time last night trying to be like you."

The door said: "Ouwwtenshownn. Dhayss dwuuhrr uhhpnnns owwnn-uhhli . . ." and so forth.

"Didn't do any good. Man can't be a door. Can pretend to be a door — can tell himself he is a door. But a man doesn't have hinges. Anyway he doesn't have the kind of hinges a door does. And a man can't be a door like you at all, because a man has handles."

" . . . dhaysstroyd wiewethouyut dhayaysscriyeshunn," the door said.

"Then I got to thinking to myself, door," Jackson said, paying no mind as the door began again.

"Hey! You talkin' to me?" Ahmuls said peevishly from below.

"No."

"Awwll ouwwthrr uhluff-fouwr-rmus . . ." said the door.

"I got to thinking that if a man can't be a door, can a door be a man? And I guess we both know the answer to that. You're stupid, door. You tell the difference between my kind of creature and a Amsir; you're supposed to keep Amsirs out, so it figures maybe you're supposed to let men in. I mean, even the instructor has got that much figured out. And their Eld has it figured out, so that clinches it. But you won't let me in. You don't knock me off, but you don't let me in. You don't knock Ahmuls off either, and that's a mistake. No, no two ways about it — you're stupid. So I got to thinking, how do I get through a stupid door that thinks it's a man."



"... wiewethouyut dhaysscriye-shunn."

Jackson turned his head in a way that looked pretty casual and idle, and would have been casual in somebody whose arm didn't hurt all the way into his head. Ahmuls was right there, looking up at him. Over the many times Ahmuls had had this kind of duty, he'd learned that if he hung his head back and twisted his shoulders so that he was looking upside-down, he didn't have to hold the loose skin away from his eyes. "Love you," Jackson said.

"You're awful," Ahmuls answered decisively.

"Well, I was saying, door — you're stupid. But you've got ears, and you can feel, and I guess you can see, too, even if you can't talk straight."

"... t umm-nn pehrssowwnnuhll."

"Now the thing is, door, if you won't let me in, and you won't let Amsirs in, what did you ever let out that you won't let back in? It would have to be something that talks like you, but looks like me, wouldn't it, door? Or, anyway," Jackson said, listening to Ahmuls hum through the sound of the door going on talking, "anyway, something soft."

"But you've been here since the beginning of time. What happened to what you let out, way back then? Door, I figure somewhere you've got a picture of what you should let back in. A picture that talks, I guess, but I figure that's what you've got to have. Something to let you

compare. Something you're much too stupid to forget."

It was getting hot again. Jackson wiped his face.

The instructing Amsir was getting all excited down below. He cupped his beak in his hand and shouted up: "Ahmuls! What's he doing up there?"

"Nothing."

"Then why has the door stopped growling?"

Jackson took a long, deep breath. He turned around and looked at the door, holding on tight with his good hand and with the best he could do with his bad one. It would be no time to fall off now. "You dumb door!" he said. "This is only the first thing I thought of to try."

Down below him, Ahmuls was shifting his grip too, forgetting he couldn't see as well right side up as he could upside down.

"All right, door — if I've got you started thinking again after all this time — all right, if you do listen better than you talk, then you figure what you let out would talk like by now. It can't be that hard!" he said, suddenly irritated. "If that instructor can figure out some of your words, something smart enough to tell the difference between a Amsir and a man should be able to figure out my words. *Open up, you dumb bastard!*" he cried.

The beat of the Thorn Thing's heart changed. There was a creak, a suck, a pop. The door jumped back the thickness of a finger and zipped sideways, into a place made for it to slide into in the skin of the Thorn Thing.

Jackson scrambled around on the ladder. Down below him the Eld was a little slow getting things organized. There were spearmen throwing, but they hadn't really gotten themselves set.

The whole thing was happening too fast for everybody. Jackson hadn't really figured the door would make sense out of what he said, and for all of his talking, the Eld hadn't figured Jackson would get the door open this fast, if ever. So all that quiet, unspoken thinking of the Eld's about how once the door was open he didn't need Jackson at all, as long as he had Ahmuls or another creatures of Jackson's kind who maybe wouldn't be as tricky — well, all that thinking was shot, too, because Jackson was in through the door, and into a dark little room, banging himself up, laughing and cursing, before the spearmen got into the air. In fact, the only one who stayed cool was Ahmuls. He'd been told what to do a lot of times, and now he did it. He flipped himself in through the door and crouched rippling next to where Jackson was lying on the

floor. "I come, too," he said, happy to be useful.

Jackson let out his breath as the first couple of spears came buzzing in through the doorway from nervous, fluttering spearmen and bounced off the walls. "I guess you do."

There was this other door at the end of the little room. There was a red, bright lamp shining over it. Then the outside door closed, the light went out, yellow light came on from overhead in the little room, and the inside door opened. Past it were all kinds of things that looked like what Jackson guessed was Thorn machinery. Through the metal around them, he and Ahmuls both could hear the outside door hol- lering as spears hit. Its voice was too fast, too high. It sounded as panicky as everybody.

"Attention! Attention! This system has now been adjusted to accelerated speech mode. This door opens only to human personnel. All other life forms will be destroyed without discretion. An intelligible warning has been given."

"It was about time," Jackson said.

TO BE CONTINUED

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CONFESSION

by ROBERT RAY

*They brought Earth a message
— not to preach it, but to act
on it at the cost of their lives!*

“The orange-blood sunset over Collabirrian,” thought Father Hume, and the sounds of words inside his head made a pleasing rhythm. For a moment they made him forget even the heat. For a moment.

Then it was back again.

To be precise, the summer heat in the Northern Territory of Australia never quite left. One could divert oneself with an urgent piece of work, or with worry, but only momentarily. Then the heat seeped back into one again with the merciless squandering the sun here could afford.

Sighing, Father Hume lowered himself into a cane chair, his eyes looking emptily at the back of beyond. By heaven, it was the back of beyond. He was sitting on the

verandah of his house, which was situated right on the outskirts of the township and gave an uninterrupted view of soil wounding itself with mercy-begging cracks, with trees jutting forlornly from the corpse-looking ground. From half the trees smoke belched as they burned hollow from the self-combustion that created, seemingly, never ending heat.

It was hell.

“Forgive me, my Lord,” added Father Hume numbly in his mind, “but maybe the old artists were right. And this certainly is like it.”

The heat was hard even on native Australians. For Father Hume, who had only left dewy Devon less than two years ago, it was like. . . . He shied away from the thought.

“What should I be doing then

tonight?" he asked himself. Then immediately he closed his eyes, pushed the question back and mournfully decided just to exist until the night came, with its shimmering relief of cool breezes. Anything under 90 degrees was considered cool.

Afterwards, Father Hume could have sworn that he merely closed his eyes for a moment, no longer than was necessary to kill the concept of doing something more than sitting. But, be it a moment or a few minutes, he should have seen the stranger approaching. After all, from the buckled edges of his verandah looking in a straight line ahead, even if there were two or three blackened tree stumps in the way, he could see miles in most directions, because there simply wasn't anything.

Except heat.

This time, though, there was a man.

He was tall and very thin. He walked towards Father Hume with. . . .

For a moment the good father disregarded the way the stranger looked, he was so taken up with the way the man was moving. Dignity. Maybe it was the way he carried his shoulders, straight. Or the gentle solidarity of his arms, swinging beside his body. Or the way his long and thin legs carried him. There was no heat for the stranger, heat which exhausts a man by just being.

He made good speed too. By the time Father Hume got to his feet, the man was walking through

where the fence of the back garden was supposed to be repaired. As Father Hume shuffled to the heat-warped lean-on pole of the verandah, the stranger was only a couple of yards away. He stopped there and smiled at Father Hume.

"I need your help, Father," said the stranger, the smile still on his face.

The man wore dirty dungarees and an army shirt, the buttons either missing or simply unbuttoned. His dusty feet were in worn sandals. His face was longish, most of its surface sprouting with days-old beard, and the balding dome was surrounded with short blond hair. Father Hume was fascinated by two things: The calm look from the man's eyes and his quiet, effortless baritone voice. His voice lacked the special whine which so often accompanied those words.

"Of course," Father Hume nearly added "son," but there was too much dignity in the man. No, the right word flashed into his mind: it was "equality."

"I'd say come into the house, but it's worse in there. Do I know you?"

"No, Father. I am new in these parts," answered the man, his words still clothed in that relaxed smile. Walking around the verandah, he sat down on the edge and waited.

"Maybe you'd like some cold drink. I have some canned beer in the fridge."

"No, thank you, Father."

It was all so strange. Australians, even in the city, were a friendly type of people. In the out-back they

all had that chummy openness about them which made even a confession a relatively cheerful affair. Sighing, he pulled the cane chair nearer to the edge of the verandah and turned it to face the quiet man. He felt awkward about his appearance. But who could wear a proper clerical outfit in a climate like this? Nonetheless, his right hand automatically went to his open-neck shirt, his fingers, embarrassed, fastening one button.

"You know, I can't get over the way you suddenly appeared here. I thought I only closed my eyes for a moment, and when I opened them again, there you were strolling in the back yard. How did you get here?"

"I'll come to that in a moment, Father," said the stranger without hesitation. "Actually, that is part of my story."

"Yes, of course," said Father Hume. "What can I do for you, then?"

"A confession. Partly it is a confession, Father."

"Now see here, my son, if you are of the Faith, you know perfectly well it can't be such a casual affair. Tomorrow is Sunday. Why don't you. . . ."

"I will be dead by tomorrow, Father," said the man, quietly, and still with the smile.

Father Hume sat up straight in his chair, feeling anger and bewilderment.

"If this is your idea of a joke, stranger, I find it very tasteless."

"It is not a joke, Father. My con-

fession is as real as my death. In fact, one is a part of the other."

The man is mad, thought Father Hume. Maybe the heat. He said: "You sound very certain about it. In fact, it almost makes me think you are contemplating taking your own life. In which case of course I could never be able to accept your confession."

"It is my kind of confession, Father, not yours. You see, I am a priest, too. But I am an alien."

The stranger leaned to the corner of the house, his hands resting in his lap, waiting.

"Yes, you have an accent. . . . Did you say you were a priest?"

"Yes."

"Might I ask what denomination? And where do you come from?"

The next sound was the shrill laughter of a kocka-burra which alighted on a nearby tree. The stranger looked at the bird, then turning his head, at the far distance where the almost sunken disk of the sun was radiating the skyline with orange red. His right hand moved up slowly, like a petal falling upwards, his fingers pointing.

"I came from there, Father."

"Where?"

"If you travelled straight on in that direction, Father, first you would leave your sun behind, then your solar system, then your galaxy. There are suns and planets in the untold billions, there are star systems which leave one weak with humility, and there, way away there, is my world, similar to yours. That is where I come from."

Mad. No, he corrected himself

hastily. The poor chap is ill. Father Hume tried to keep up with the modern trends, and, since it seemed essential, he even read a few volumes on psychology and mental health. What was this, paranoid or schizophrenic? Which one was it that created a world populated by their own weird creatures?

"Of course, you think that I am mad. In your place I would think precisely the same," said the stranger softly.

Yes, yes, but wasn't that one of the points? Often these cases, apart from their *idée fixe*, sound so rational. . . . He had to say something.

"Well — " Father Hume was conscious that not only was his shirt soaked with perspiration, but now even his hands were coated with a fine film of moisture — "who can tell where we come from?"

"Naturally, I expected this reaction. Forgive me. It is essential that I show you something."

Before he could stop himself, the priest set his feet against the wooden boards, pushing his chair back a few inches.

"No, don't be alarmed, I will not move. I asked your forgiveness because I must show you something, and to do that I will have to utilize your own mind. I just want you to understand that we would never do this without permission. But I have so little time."

Now there was urgency in the stranger's voice, but he still sat there unmoving. Only his eyes lived. Vibrated? Father Hume cried out in astonishment.

He could still see the stranger, who called himself an alien and a priest. He was still sitting on the edge of the verandah; but, as he stared ahead something almost like a gigantic television screen opened the vista of a new world.

"This is where I came from," said the stranger. His thin figure at the edge of the picture was framed by the orange-red sky.

The giant screen now nearly unfolded Father Hume, and he stared with fear and incredulity at the scene. It looked like open country: thick grass, like a hand-knitted lawn, strange trees, with terribly tall, thin trunks, but their foilage resembled an umbrella spread wide in an enormous distance. It was broad daylight there, with one of the suns high in the sky, the other half-way to the horizon.

One of the suns!

The enormity of what he was seeing chilled his skin.

The colors were wrong too. The grasses were green, but there was more than a suggestion of purple in them; the trees had blue bark, their leaves nearly lost to the eye against the vivid blue sky. Well, at least the sky was the right color.

"My world has a much lower gravity than yours, Father," he heard the stranger say. "That's why vegetation grows taller. And so do we."

Now the picture seemed to be gliding forward. The original setting was a meadow; now they were out over hills, leaving behind a riot of color, where unearthly flowers dotted in bunches like gigantic buttons.

"Dear Lord," whispered Father Hume.

"There is no need for alarm, Father. It is just a way to show you what we are, where we come from. There is no magic attached to this; we merely have a small measure of what you'd call ESP. Nothing dramatic. We can't move mountains, nor can we teleport from world to world. Nor, for that matter, can we represent pictorial memories that we don't personally have. If, for example, I tried to show you part of my world with which I am not familiar, it would be the same as if you tried to tell me about China, if you had never been there. Flashes of scenes such as you might have seen in a book or film, but no continuity. You see, this is the town where I came from."

Near, maybe a mile away, Father Hume was gazing at a magnificent city. The buildings were very tall and made of some translucent material, showing colors and shapes like the most beautiful mirage ever seen. He could see that the grass and the trees and the flowers went right up to the edge of the city, like a wall-to-wall carpet, forming a perfect unity between nature and men.

The stranger was still in the very edge of his vision, unmoving.

"Who are you?" shouted Father Hume, knowing that if this were true, his whole life, those years in the seminary, those years where faith and reality provoked bloody battlefields inside his mind, were gone and useless. There was power here and beauty. Feeling more than

understanding, Father Hume was desperately afraid.

"*Apaga, Satanasi!*" he said and closed his eyes.

The stranger, sitting in the semi-darkness, disappeared from view, but the un-world scene remained.

"I am not the Devil, Father, and what you see is inside your mind."

Opening his eyes, Father Hume feared he knew not what.

"Why?" he whispered.

"These are my people," said the stranger softly.

He could see them coming. The stranger must have used a mental shorthand, because it wasn't a progressive picture, a flowing line. One moment he was looking at the city merging sensuously with the earth, the next he was watching a large group of the stranger's kin coming towards him. They were close, only a few hundred yards away.

There were children, and there were adults. They were all terribly tall, with the children smaller in proportion, all dressed in deceptively simple garments made of some semitransparent material and all of a different hue. They formed a large circle, at one side of the circle a group of them separate, and within the circle were a handful of grown-ups and a couple of dozen children.

All who formed the circle were singing, the group to one side providing the strong, main melody. Those in the circle began to dance.

It was perfection.

The melody was soft one moment, to turn into steel hardness the next. There was gratefulness in the tone, followed by promise, adoration. The dancers offered love and dignity with their movements, and through both the sound and the dance there was a feeling of unbelievable unity.

And faith.

"No," groaned Father Hume. "No! Stop it."

"That was a service to God that you saw," said the stranger.

Why didn't he move? Was he a man or was he a gargoyle, created by repressed memories of guilt, which he so often tried to hide with the shape of his collars?

"Dear God . . ." started Father Hume.

"The same in whom I too, believe," interrupted the stranger.

"I asked you who you were," demanded Father Hume.

"My name doesn't matter, Father, nor does the name of my world. We didn't materialize, but traveled a long, long while, using a method which I know nothing about and which you will not discover for thousands of your years — if ever."

"We?" asked Father Hume.

"Yes. We. We are missionaries."

The priest wanted to jump up and shout, but he could do neither. Inside his body, his muscles were individual animals tearing at their invisible yokes, but he could not move. Nor speak.

"I beg your forgiveness, Father." The stranger's voice shaded into pleading. "You see, we are a

very old race. We had had our civilizations grow up and destroyed before there was even a single cell on this planet. We too rose high up from the etarly beginning and several times nearly succeeded in completely annihilating ourselves. However, that was a long time ago.

"It was also a long time ago when the race suddenly discovered the reason — or at least, a reason — for our existence. We are dedicated to saving races from committing suicide — of helping them to find God."

The alien turned in his seat to face the father, his dark shadow separating from the wall, and now there was pain in his voice.

"We created a science with which we can correlate all the factors of a civilization, and we can, with a dreadful certainty, predict its future. We have done it millions of times, because we are an old race, and there are unimaginable billions of living beings in the darkness of your back yard above your head. The prognosis for your race is death."

"You lie," said Father Hume.

"I don't." We try not to interfere, because of the dignity of the race. There are times, though, like now, when we must reveal ourselves, because that is the only hope for saving the race."

"If what you say is true, why should you be talking to me in particular?"

"Because you — many thousands like you — can alter the fate of this world."

"Me?" Father Hume laughed out

loud. "You know who I am? I am a country priest, tending about a thousand souls in an area so big that the mind reels, and before I came here I was a country priest covering an area so small that it was nearly a joke. You know how old I am? I am nearly fifty-eight, and if the Lord so pleases, I shall live down here the rest of my natural life. Just what qualifications do you have in mind for saving the world?"

The evening was quiet. Its darkening majesty was only broken by tiny animal noises and the wedge of fear emanating from Father Hume, still sitting unmoving, the hard pattern of the cane pressing against his perspiration-softened skin.

At McBain's, in the pub, men would now be gathering for the evening drinking. The gigantic fan on the ceiling would be going round and round, swirling the cigarette smoke and the stale smell of beer. The faces burned hard, sown heavily with wrinkles, perspiration running down in their years-old channels. The voices would be high, bantering. It is Saturday night, not much different from the rest of them, except for the Sunday to follow. The talk would be about football, the bloody Chinks, and how about Vietnam? The same old *risque* jokes — I beg your pardon Father, but did you hear this one? — voluminous laughter, shrill from the partition where some of the women would be sitting, and he, Father Hume would stand on the edge of the crowd, hanging on to a glass of beer, because it was a

different country, different customs. He had to be there in shirt sleeves to make sure they saw his face. And next day, reluctantly, they would be turning up in the tiny church, their minds already on the chores the day after that, thinking Hume is all right, but wish to Heaven he'd hurry a little. I'll have to wash the car, or water the garden, or lay a bet, or play two-up, if only the bloody woman wouldn't insist on spoiling the best part of the day. . . .

The alien stood up and looked up in the sky. His thin, tall figure looked like a pain-filled, burned-out tree from a Russell Drysdale painting. When he looked down and spoke again, his voice was slow, and in it, pain.

"I told you I haven't time; Father. Well, my time has arrived. When we reached this world, we studied it most carefully for a long time and realized one tragic point. You people were conditioned into believing not so much in the power and glory of reasoning, but in blind, almost insane emotional persuasion. You even have a saying for it: 'it's worth dying for.' Almost all your deities had to do that before you began to believe. So we have decided to die. There were many of us in the ship we came in, and no one will go back. At this moment there are over a thousand of us standing in front of people like you. We stand in front of Lamas and Rabbis, Imams and Besharabs, Christian priests and Shamans; some of us stand in the burning sun,

some in the dark, but we all do exactly the same thing: we beg of you to save the race. For this we are willing to die.

"When our ship explodes, we will all die for you. For you all."

Somewhere, up in the immensity of space above, stars were blanketed out by a spreading globule of eye-hurting brightness. There was no noise, only the swiftly growing luminosity.

Father Hume's heart hammered in his chest, physical fear knotting his muscles, his lips opening and closing, opening and closing, no voice, his lips opening and closing, his eyes focusing with dread on the figure only a few yards away.

Flames, yards high, were standing there, and in the core, for sec-

onds the pain-twisted features of a man. Then the tall figure fell to the ground, the hungry flames consuming it as if it were magnesium. Father Hume stared until it was over. Even in the darkness, he could see a few bones left.

He nearly fell on his face, as he stumbled over the raised edge of the verandah. Where the alien had stood, the ground was still hot, and in a few of the bones the marrow was gently boiling.

It was then that Father Hume staggered back to the verandah and, supporting himself on the lean-on pole, was sick. His tears were flooding his face, with that unearthly core of explosion still high in space.

The new star to a new Bethlehem.

END

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*The aliens chose their first contact
with Earth at random. Did it really
matter that it was a lunatic asylum?*

I

It had come out of the sky one night, trailing a pink-white blowtorch blast behind it, and crash-landed with a *whump* like a distant bomb burst in the field on the far side of the supply shed.

Hengsen had seen the ship loom up from the south, rumble protest-

ingly in a muted bass, waver in its course, then nose down sharply. The sounds weren't loud and everybody else in the home seemed to be asleep. Hengsen, gripping the bars of his second-story window, knew immediately that it was no plane.

After a while an opening appeared in the side of the disabled ship. Hengsen could see light inside, and



then shapes appeared and framed themselves against it. Two of them came out. He couldn't tell what they were, exactly, but they weren't men.

They came on, up the slight rise, toward the home, in a steady gliding motion. The shed hid them from his sight for a moment and when they reappeared around it he could see better. There was starlight and a sliver of moon. He was glad it was only a sliver. Had the moon been full, all the nuts in the place would have been up and yapping.

Hengsen himself was no nut. He was in a nuthouse all right, but anything was better than the electric chair or life in the state penitentiary. Hengsen had killed a man, but he'd had a good lawyer who'd pleaded insanity. So they'd sent him to a

prison for the criminally insane and, after a while, when the right amounts of money had been spread around in the right places, he'd been transferred to a private rest home. He'd been there a month. He didn't plan to be there another; before then he'd have the lay of the land, and he'd make the break.

Those characters from the ship, though. What was their racket? They'd better not screw up his plans. He laughed a little at that, nervously, and the things from the ship stopped dead. They must have better ears than a cat.

They looked up, straight at him, and he got a good view of them.

They had heads that sat right on top of their big round bodies — no necks. They had a thick single leg each, ending in a kind of ball on

which they were balancing now, leaning toward each other and consulting.

Hengsen couldn't see their faces clearly, but he had the feeling their eyes were boring into his. He found out soon enough that they didn't have eyes — not like people's eyes.

Hengsen stood up on a stool as they approached the back of the home, but the bars were in the way, and he lost sight of them as they reached the back door.

Hengsen looked back across the field and saw that the door of the ship was shut now. The craft lay there, a motionless black hulk.

He heard the back door open, though it should have been locked, and there was a moment of silence. Then there was noise on the stairs, as if they were having trouble navigating them with their ball-bearing feet. But soon the noise indicated that they had reached the top of the stairs, and there was silence again. Then his door opened. He knew that had been locked.

The two of them glided in, each of them pointing one of its three arms at Hengsen, and the door closed behind them.

Hengsen had rarely been scared in his fifty years but he was now. He stepped down slowly off the stool, his legs quivering, and stood by the barred window. His visitors were absolutely motionless, poised side by side, arms extended toward him as if in accusation. The eyes, three of them arranged in a triangle on each face, were protruding knobs of membrane with purple

veins criss-crossing them. The heads and bodies were a dull gray white, as if they'd never known the sun. Gray-black hair began at the lower parts of the bodies and grew down as far as the ball feet, which were bone white.

Hengsen tried to think of something to say to the things. They didn't seem to want to open a conversation, and he didn't want to open it the wrong way. He didn't know what the outthrust arms could do to him, but he imagined it would be better not to find out.

"Hello," he said finally. "What can I do for you?"

There was no reply. Just a slight oscillating of the six eyes.

"Welcome to Shady Rest," he said. He tried to say it sardonically, but he didn't smile. And he curbed a nervous temptation to laugh.

His legs were still trembling. Carefully, slowly, he sat in the stool. As slowly, the things lowered their arms. They also turned their heads slightly to look at each other while continuing to regard him with their veined membranes.

Then they whirled and were out the door. The door closed. He rushed to it. It was locked, as before.

It was daylight when he awoke. He remembered lying on his cot, after he'd tired of looking out at the silent ship, and he remembered half fearing, half hoping that the two creatures would come back to his room. They hadn't, and at last he'd relaxed.

He awoke with the opening of his door, and he sat up so fast he

got dizzy; but it was only the keeper, Hank.

"Mrs. Balch wants to see you," he said.

"Okay, Hank," Hengsen said.

"How come you slept with your clothes on?"

Hengsen put his feet on the floor and went to the window. The ship was still there. The door was closed.

"I saw them," he said. "Did you?"

"Yeah," said Hank. "They don't scare me, whatever they are, but Mrs. Balch is in a tizzy. They cut the telephone wires, or burned them out. Minnie let out a yip and fell over in a dead faint when she seen them and Cook, he won't set foot out of the kitchen." Minnie was the maid of all work. Cook was close to seventy.

"Is that why Mrs. Balch wants to see me?" Hengsen asked.

Hank shrugged. "I dunno why. She said to get you down there, so let's get. I ain't got all day."

"Okay. I'm coming."

"Walk ahead of me and don't try no funny stuff," the keeper warned him. "Remember I'm a karate expert, and I could hurt you bad."

Hengsen smiled. He knew that the hulking, near moronic Hank had taken his karate course by correspondence. But he also knew that Hank was strong as an ox and could hurt him just by pushing him around.

They went down the stairs and into the lobby. Mrs. Balch was a tall, beefy woman in the prime of her forties. She wore a severe tweed suit with a no-nonsense blouse, effi-

cient low-heeled shoes and service-weight nylons. There had been a Mr. Balch once, but he'd given up the ghost long ago. The widow Balch, now the sole proprietor, ran Shady Rest practically single-handed. She completely dominated Hank, Minnie and Cook, who were her entire staff.

But she wasn't dominating anyone this morning. She was sitting at her desk in the corner of the lobby, the beings from the ship standing on either side of her. Minnie was lying on a sofa, apparently still unconscious with a damp cloth on her forehead. If Cook was in the kitchen he wasn't advertising it with his usual prebreakfast clatter.

"Ah, Mr. Hengsen," Mrs. Balch said brightly as he and Hank came in. She wore an unaccustomed smile on her frown-lined face.

"Good morning, Mrs. Balch," Hengsen replied, playing along with it, whatever it was. She'd never called him mister before, though she was collecting plenty for his board.

"These gentlemen," she said, indicating the creatures from the ship, "have paid an unexpected call. They have had — what shall we say — engine trouble, and will be staying with us while they make repairs. They are traveling incognito, so to speak, and desire privacy. I've assured them that they can't do better than to stay here at Shady Rest."

The veined eye membranes of the creatures had flicked from her to Hengsen as she spoke.

"I see," said Hengsen. "And I'm supposed to cooperate? Maybe they'd like me to go into town and get

them some magazines or cold beer?"

The creatures stirred ominously.

"No levity, please," Mrs. Balch said quickly. "There must be no communication with the outside world beyond what is absolutely necessary. We have disconnected the telephone. The mail will be delivered and collected at the box on the road, as usual. And I personally will supervise deliveries from the market."

"You'd better do something about the ship," Hengsen said. "The delivery men could see it, and it'd sure as hell be spotted by a plane flying over."

"Yes, they thought of that. So I'm going to ask you and Hank to go out and — well — disguise it in some way. Do you know anything about camouflage, Mr. Hengsen?"

"As a matter of fact, I do, a little," he said. "I could do it with some paint and canvas and shovels. But why should I beat my brains out for them?"

There was a sound of footsteps in the corridor. An elderly man in pajamas appeared, slip-slopping along in backless slippers. He was talking to himself and gesturing elaborately. Hengsen recognized him as one of Mrs. Balch's long-term guests whose delusion was that he was twins. His name was Jimmy-john. Jimmy for one of the twins, -john for the other.

"Breakfast is a little late this year," Jimmy was saying to -john.

"Better late than oatmeal," -john replied in a higher voice. "Never could stand oatmeal."

"Jimmy-john stopped and looked around him as he reached the lobby. "Good morning, my dear Mrs. Balch," said Jimmy's voice.

"Hell," said -john's voice, shortly. Jimmy was fond of her, but -john neither liked nor trusted her. She was always trying to feed him oatmeal, and everyone knew oatmeal was one of the easiest foods to poison.

The three-eyed visitors regarded the pajama-clad man warily. The nearer one half-lifted an arm. The farther one did the same, but directed it toward the sofa, where Minnie was coming to. The maid opened her eyes, sat up, saw the creatures again, gasped, pushed herself as far back against the arm of the sofa as she could and sat there, trembling.

"Good morning, Jimmy-john," Mrs. Balch said. "You boys shouldn't really be out of your room, you know."

"We were hungry," Jimmy said nonchalantly.

"Who are they?" -john asked, pointing to the creatures as if noticing them for the first time.

"New ones, I imagine," Jimmy replied. "It's nice here," he said, addressing them, "if you don't mind a late breakfast."

"Of oatmeal," -john added. He warned them: "Beware the lowly oat, for in its meal lurk things unknown."

"I don't think they're men," Jimmy said.

"Or, to put it another way, I think they don't think they're men. Look how peculiarly they're dressed."

"A disguise," -john said darkly.

"I think they're spies from State Health. Admit it," he said to the creatures.

"Show us your puzzle blocks and your rubber hammers and whatever else you've got."

Minnie could take no more. She screamed hysterically and dashed from the sofa toward the door. As one, the creatures whirled toward her. Each raised an arm and pointed it at her. There was a flash of blinding blue light, a crackle of sound and an acrid smell. Minnie stiffened and fell. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that she was dead.

The creatures seemed to be trembling. Their veined eyes pulsed, and their outstretched arms pointed indecisively to each of the others in the room before they lowered them to their sides.

Hengsen felt a throbbing in his head and suddenly words were there which said: "No more of that, please."

He knew beyond a doubt that the words were those of the creatures and that they were a command he would obey.

Jimmy-john took two steps backwards, so that he came out of his slippers. "I believe I'll return to my room," Jimmy said.

"I'll go with you," -john said. "It's warmer there."

The elderly man turned around carefully and walked barefoot down the corridor.

Hengsen said: "I'm ready to start on that camouflage job, Mrs. Balch, anytime these — gentlemen want me to."

Hengsen had had a not dishonorable discharge, as he put it, from the army. He'd served reluctantly but not without profit in areas which had included the black markets of the Pacific in World War II. He'd learned something about camouflage, and he did a passable job on the ship. From the supply shed it would look like a pile of junk. From the air, except to a trained observer looking for something, or to a camera, it would have appeared as a pile of rocks in the field.

Hank helped with the painting and the heavier work. All the time they were on the job the ship's one entrance remained shut. No one entered it or left it but obviously there were other creatures inside. Apparently the door to it was not sealed. They could hear muted fits of banging from inside, as if the repair work was being attempted with more temper than progress.

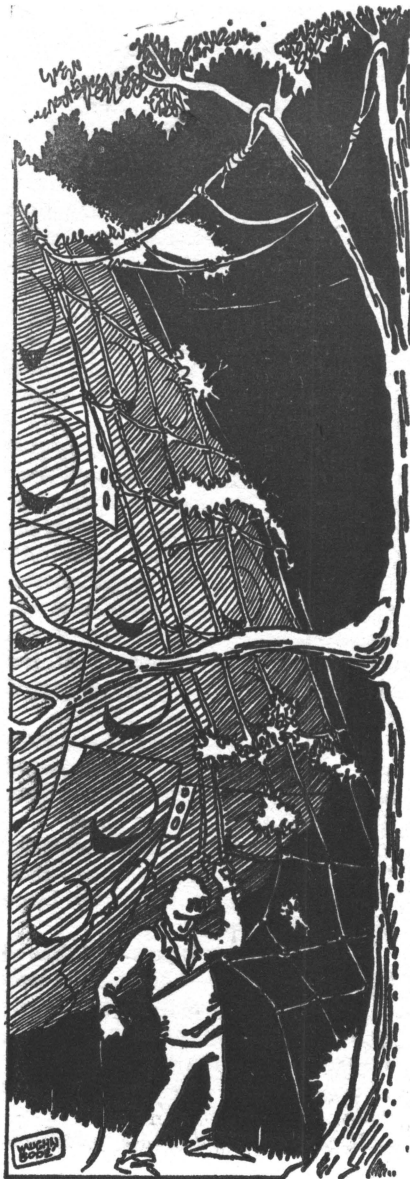
"What do you figure these guys are?" Hank asked, as they stood back to survey their finished job. "Russians?"

Hengsen looked at him scornfully. "Russians are people," he said. "These birds ain't from any place on this Earth, bud."

The ship was wingless and shaped like a cucumber — bumpy the way a cucumber is and without any apparent opening except the door, a round cut in the side.

"Okay," said Hank. "But how come they're here?"

"I don't know, but I have a hunch,



for what it's worth. *They* didn't plan to land here. By 'here' I'm not referreing to Mother Balch's cozy Nook; I mean they didn't intend to land on Earth at all. Their engine conked out, and they had to come down, that's all. They'll be on their way as soon as they get it fixed. So it's simple. We play ball with them and do everything they say and get rid of them as soon as possible."

"But where were they going in the first place?" Hank persisted.

"I don't know, pal," said Hengsen. "Maybe from Pluto to Venus, or from Venus to Jupiter. From Natchez to Mobile, for all I know. Maybe they're taking it on the lam from the Space Patrol. I'm not a U.F.O. expert. I'm just one of Mother Balch's crazy pigeons. You'd get as good an answer from Jimmyjohn. Why don't you ask him?"

"Because he's a real nut," Hank said. "Also because I don't think you're as much of a nut as you make out. I read the papers, you know."

"So?"

"So this, Mr. Wally Three-Gun Hengsen. I know you beat a murder rap that should of sent you to the chair. I know you had a smart lawyer, and that's the only reason you're here instead of in the death house right now. So don't get smart with me, Wally-boy, or I might just turn you in for the fun of it."

Hengsen clenched his fists in the pockets of his work pants to help him control his tongue.

"That's a lot of newspaper talk," he said finally. "I'm surprised it

took you in — a smart guy like you. All I know is that for the record I was certified a nut, like the rest of the characters here, and here I am. I always thought you were my pal and that when I got out of this loony-bin I'd send for you. You'd make a good man in the organization. I used to think before you started shooting off at the mouth."

"The organization?"

"Yeah. My outfit likes a guy that can keep his yap shut. A real big-money outfit."

"I can keep my yap shut. You don't have to worry about me, not if you're level."

"I've always leveled with you, kid, so I'll tell you. Just between you and me and the Space Patrol, I'm waiting for the break. And when it comes, I'll be on my way. And any help I get I'll be glad of and pay for. So, if you happen to be the guy that helps me, there'll be a place in the organization for you. Is that straight enough?"

"Straight as an arrow," Hank said. "Say, you want to take it on the lam now? You could get away clean and easy, and nobody'd see."

"Thanks, but I'm not ready. I need cash and transportation and the right contacts."

"I got fifty bucks I could let you have," Hank said. Hengsen knew then that the keeper was his man.

"I can see you're real organization material," Hengsen said. "But no, thanks. I need real money and I'll wait for the right time. Right now I'm holing up, like your three-eyed Russians."

"I was only kidding about them being Russians. I guess maybe they're Martians."

"Whatever they are, we'd better get back to the house and see if they put the arm on anybody else besides poor old Minnie."

Mrs. Balch was as close to tears as her dignity would permit.

"Those horrible *things!*" she said, kneading her hands. "Why did they have to come here, of all places? Poor Minnie! At least she's out of it. And poor Cook. He's in such a state I don't think we'll ever get lunch, let alone breakfast."

Minnie's body still lay on the sofa in the lobby. Someone had covered it with a blanket.

"Where are they, Mrs. Balch?" Hengsen asked.

They went up to the cupola a little while ago. They're looking out — Lord knows at what. They had their eyes on me every minute when I went for the mail. What are we going to do with them?"

"Or vice versa," Hengsen said.

"I won't even think about that. Will you and Hank take Minnie somewhere, please? I do hope they go soon enough for us to call somebody before . . . you know . . . I mean in *time*."

"I suppose they had their eye on us all the while we were camouflaging the ship," Hank said to Hengsen, "so that if you'd tried to make —"

"Tried to go for the police," Hengsen put in quickly; "— if either of us had tried to go for help they'd have rayed us down, or what-

ever it is they do with those arms of theirs." He shot a warning look at Hank.

"Oh, they're evil," said Mrs. Balch. "They *think* at you, and you can understand what they want you to do. They phrase it so politely, but you know you have to obey. You have the feeling that back of their commands lie terrible things. Did you get that impression?"

"Nah," Hank said.

"Yes," Hengsen said. "I know what you mean, Mrs. Balch."

Hengsen and Hank put Minnie's body in the cellar, which was cool for the time being. They sat on crates near the corpse and rested. Hengsen smoked a cigarette and sought an angle. There were plenty of weird angles to the situation, but there had to be one that was right for him.

There should be opportunity here, if he could only work it out. But there was also deadly danger, a quicker exit than the electric chair, if he muffed it. These three-armed boys didn't fool around.

Probably he could get away, with Mrs. Balch distracted the way she was and Hank willing to cooperate. He didn't *have* to wait for his contacts to spring him from the rest home. He knew where to find them. But these aliens, whatever they were, ought to be useful to him in some way, if only he could figure it out.

The way they communicated, for instance. If he could learn to do that there'd be a fortune in it. It was like radio was to jungle drums or smoke signals. What a help it would be on a job if your lookout

man could think right to you. And if it worked two ways, so he could read other people's minds, how about that? He could clean up in the stock market, or at a crooked prize fight. He could even go straight. Just sit back and listen to the deals being made, then cut himself in.

"Let's get out of here," Hank said. "Minnie gives me the creeps."

"Shut up. I'm thinking."

"Let's go, Hengsen," Hank said.

"Go on upstairs. I won't run away."

Hank shuffled his feet, then got up. "Okay. But I'll be at the top of the stairs, so you better not try anything."

"Who are you working for? Balch or me? Go on, beat it."

"Yeah, I forgot. Okay, but I'll be up there anyway. We got to make it look right."

"That's the smart boy."

Their ship now, Hengsen thought. Was there anything there? Suppose he found a way to knock off the aliens. He'd have their ship. But it wouldn't do him any good unless he could drive it. And if he waited till they fixed it, they'd be gone. That angle looked like a dead end. If he knocked them off, the local cops or the state troopers, or somebody, would come in and take the credit.

There was no justice.

He wasn't getting anywhere. He needed more information, and he wasn't going to get that sitting in the cellar. He ground out his cigarette and got up. The thing to do was to go see the creatures. Up in the cupola.

On the way up he tried to put himself in the proper frame of mind. Submerging his motives, he concentrated on thinking friendly, respectful thoughts. It wouldn't hurt to seem a bit stupid as well.

He didn't see Mrs. Balch. Hank, who had been standing in the hall, followed him up the stairs to the third floor.

"That's far enough," Hengsen told him. "I'll be up there, with them. I ain't going to fly away."

"Okay," Hank said. "I'll wait here."

Hengsen climbed the rest of the way. The door to the cupola was closed. There was silence behind it, but Hengsen knew they were there. And he knew they knew where he

was. He took a deep breath and knocked.

The door opened. Neither of them was near it. They were at the window overlooking the camouflaged ship, balancing on their ball feet. Their arms, thank God, were at their sides.

There was a throbbing in his head, and words formed in his mind:

"Come in, Wally Hengsen."

He hesitated. I must be crazy, he thought. I can't fool around with these boys. They're Major League, and I'm only Triple-A.

"Exactly, Wallace." The words in his mind again. Wallace. Nobody had called him that since grade school.

He stepped inside, not really wanting to, and the door closed behind him. Now he'd done it. He



felt like turning and beating at the door, knowing it was locked, and yelling for Hank to let him out. But he forced himself to stand still, controlling the shakes that threatened behind his knees.

"Sit down, Wallace. There is nothing to fear."

Nothing to fear? He thought of Minnie. Harmless Minnie. They'd mowed her down for nothing. For laughing.

"We apologize for that." The unspoken words. "We did not know you then as we know you now."

There was a captain's chair next to a table with a world globe on it. Hengsen sat down carefully, moving slowly. His knees were quivering now. He pressed his heels against the floor to stop the shakes.

"You are here to know us better. That is good." That wordless communication again. Which of the two was it? Their three-eyed faces, immobile told him nothing.

"I want to help you," Hengsen found himself saying.

"You have already helped us, Wallace. You were expert in camouflaging the craft."

"Thank you." The humility came unnaturally to Hengsen. He twirled the globe on the table. It was dusty, and it squeaked.

"A speck, your Earth. Ordinarily we would have ignored it, as we always have. But we are thankful, this time, that it exists."

"Why?" Hengsen lifted his thumb and found Australia underneath. It seemed tiny.

"You could not understand. You are merely Triple-A. You need know

only that we will leave you when we can. Necessity detains us, not ambition."

The word "ambition" stirred Hengsen. Thoughts flashed through his mind too fast to be controlled. He felt discovered. He tried, too late, to mask his thoughts, twirling the globe.

There was no change of expression in the veined eyes of the creatures. But the unspoken words came:

"You have ambition, Earthling." Earthling; not Wallace this time.

He could deny it only with his mouth, so he did not try. They had rebuked him by calling him Earthling.

"You would trick us if you could," the thought came, more aware than accusing.

Wallace ("Wally") Hengsen looked at the spot on the globe that was New Caledonia, trying not to think, or to think innocuously. French-speaking isle, he told himself. Subtropical. Down where the trade winds blow. World War II. Guadalcanal. The Slots. Rabaul. Mosquitos. P-51's. The Rising Sun. The setting sun. Meatballs on the enemy fuselages. Kamikaze. B-29's. Hiroshima. V-J.

His not-thought, his recollections of the war he had been unable to avoid, were vivid. In their intensity they blanked out any antialien schemings. He felt the aliens absorbing the reality of his remembrance, acquainting themselves with that past of the Earthling and his Earth.

It had been a long time since he had thought back.

He'd had no reason to, before now. His thoughts had always been of Number One, in the long years following his discharge. But back then there had been more than himself. Even he had felt it, cynical punk that he'd been. A working together. A common cause he'd almost forgotten.

"We see you more clearly, Wallace." Wallace again, not Earthling. "You are more complicated than we believed."

That wasn't very original. One of the alienists who testified that he was legally insane had said much the same thing. The thought struck him that these three-eyed, three-armed, ball-footed creatures picking his brains were also alienists. Alien alienists.

If his subconscious irony reached them they hadn't reacted to it. He felt them probing the involuntary memory that went along with his recollection of the alienists and the killing that had preceded it. The professional unemotional murder of the youth (much like the punk he once had been) who had to be prevented from singing to the D.A.

He felt them accompanying him as he relived the stalk through the streets, in and out of bars, parks and finally the confrontation in the vacant lot, the pulling of the trigger of the automatic with the muzzle pressed into the shrinking flesh of the punk, the flight in the trailing car, the sirens in the distance, the hole-up across the river and the waiting for the hunt to die down.

"Go on." The alien thought encouraged him to continue.

But when he emerged, roaring back across the long, high bridge to the city, he found that the hunt had not died. His information had been wrong, and they had nabbed him, grilled him, produced witnesses (who could know what eyes had spied from the empty-seeming windows), tried him and sentenced him to the chair. Only the appeal, the feigned symptoms, the tamperable machinery of the law had saved him, whisking him from penitentiary to the prison for the insane to Shady Rest, Mrs. Balch's domain.

Now he was being tried again, by these creatures whose interest in him was ephemeral, who were marooned here temporarily on their way from the unknowable to the unknown. But what he had hidden from the alienists was an open page to the aliens. How would they judge him? There could be no appeal from their verdict.

The creatures had not stirred since he first entered the room. He might have been imagining everything. But he knew it was not imagination that held him submissive in the captain's chair, awaiting their pleasure their need

Their judgment.

IV

Hengsen spun the globe idly and stopped it. The South Pacific again. He found the spit of land that was Sansapor, the northwest coast of New Guinea. There'd been an airstrip there. He'd been shipped there from the repple depple at Noumea with a buddy.

His buddy, Murray Stein. Murray was a tough punk from Philadelphia, but he wore a Star of David on the chain with his dogtags. He blackmarketed and goldbricked, but he sent his poker winnings home to his widowed mother. He had a foul mouth and world cynicism, but if there was no one else to do it he led the squadron's tiny Jewish congregation in Friday night prayers.

And when that stupid crew chief got into the parked P-51 and accidentally triggered the cannons, it was Murray Stein who yelled "Get down!" and threw himself against the slower Hengsen so that they both sprawled on the coral floor of the ready hut. But only Hengsen got up. If Stein had acted alone he'd have been safe. In saving Hengsen, Stein caught a 50-caliber slug in the back that tore out his heart.

Hengsen helped dig the grave, and he swore as the burial service was read that some day, somehow, he'd repay Stein's selflessness. He'd forgotten that oath, until now.

He sat in solmn silence, remembering. He had spoken not a word, and the three-eyed aliens were mute, as always. But they seemed less hostile. Then they reciprocated. They let him see into their own souls, or whatever aliens had.

Briefly they lifted the curtain of their mystery, but it was long enough for him to sense the magnitude of their mission. He could understand what they had done so unfeelingly to Minnie. It had not been malice which had killed her. To them, when they had first come, the Earth people had been no more than an-

noyances in their bigger plan, to be swatted as mosquitos if they got in the way.

With his glimpse into their thoughts, Hengsen could appreciate the overwhelming desperation of their voyage. It was clear to Hengsen that their journey was an epic one, on which their entire civilization, their very future, depended. They were the scouts, the advance party, the only possible salvation of their people. If they failed, their people died. With such an alternative, who could blame them for their seemingly callous disregard of a life or two on an alien, third-rate planet? It was as if Hengsen, fleeing for his life from an enemy shooting at him, should break stride to avoid crushing an ant.

Now he could believe that the impassivity of their faces masked an anxiety that the repairs by their fellow creatures in the ship should be finished quickly, so they could leave this way station and get on with their all-consuming mission. So they could leave this puny world they had been forced to land on and resume their quest for the destined land which would support their fellows — their buddies back home whose lives depended on them.

Like Stein, they were selfless, risking their lives that others might live. Three eyes or two, ball-footed or arched, men were men.

They sat in silence, the three of them, waiting for the turn of events that would free them to go on with their lives, to meet their differing destinies, whatever they were.

And then the cops came, their ar-

rival heralded by the whooping wails of sirens in the distance.

The aliens rolled to the door and out, Hengsen commanded to follow, and down the stairs. Out to the yard, past the startled Hank and the fleeing Cook and the retreating Jimmy-john and the satisfied-looking Mrs. Balch, the aliens not pausing in their ball-footed flight, as they could have done, to ray down the betrayer, whoever he was. And across the yard and through the field past the shed to the camouflaged ship, Hengsen following less swiftly, running, not sure why he was accompanying them.

But why were the aliens fleeing?

Hengsen seemed to hear the answer before the question was asked. *Duty*, he half-heard. Your police have their duty, we have ours.

We regret Minnie. We could dispose of them easily but we won't kill another of you if we can help it. all this he seemed to hear.

Running, stumbling, Hengsen saw the younger Hank gaining on him and throwing him the rifle.

This must be the greatest thing that ever happened to Hank, Hengsen thought. What a nut. He caught the rifle by its barrel as the police cars skidded into the driveway and their doors sprang open, uniformed men pouring out, shooting. Shooting wildly at first, then dropping and taking aim.

Hengsen, running zigzag out of a generation-old memory of combat, fell behind the aliens, who headed straight for the camouflaged ship.

The circular door of the space-



ship opened, and the aliens were inside it. Instead of clamping shut, the door remained open, a scant thirty yards away, and Hengsen heard the wordless alien voices. They seemed to be saying Our door is open to you. Come with us.

But a fusillade of shots had him pinned down.

"Come and get me!" he yelled, and they started to, fanning out on the flanks so he had to turn to fire at them at separate wide angles.

But he wasn't shooting to kill, although they were. He was shooting only to hold them at bay until his friends — his friends? — yes, his only friends in thirty years — could close their door (paying his debt to Stein) and be off.

Then one of his wild shots, unaimed, caught a cop and doubled him up; and Hengsen knew he had killed him. So now it was over. He could expect no mercy. The police bullets, once divided between him and the ship, concentrated on him.

It was only fair, he thought.

What was a poor, worn-out hood worth compared to the mission of a race beyond the stars? Who needs you, you sad remnant of a decayed civilization? You've got nobody. They've got everybody, ugly and alien as they may seem to people who don't know them. But he knew them, finally, as he had almost known Stein, his one other friend.

And then a cop he hadn't seen, off to his right, snapped a shot at him and got him in the stomach.

The door of the spaceship closed then, though he didn't see it, and

there was a confused medley of voices and thoughts; police coming up warily, talking to each other (Mrs. Balch had left a note in the mailbox); this is the guy the A.P.B. was out on; imagine him holed up on a funny farm; would you call that a U.F.O.? Anybody got a camera? *Life* and *Time* and the television are going to ask questions.

It was better this way. The electric chair would have got him anyway, for killing the cop. So he'd die, which had been his fate ever since V-J Day, if not happy, then content.

"The rat ain't going to live," a cop's voice said, intermingled with that of a voice from within the slowly rising spaceship which said in alien tones: *Thank you, Earthman.* Thank you, Earthman (not Earthling, but brother, buddy) for your fidelity to our fragile bond; our civilization thanks you. . . .

Maybe they could have escaped without his help. Maybe not. But they wanted him, and that was what had mattered.

To have been needed was one thing. To have been wanted — invited — was another. He was glad, somehow, that he was dying here and now. He had done more than he needed to have done. Probably that had been its appeal.

In his final living moment, as a lieutenant pulled out his notebook, and Mrs. Balch came out hesitantly, as the spaceship lifted majestically and hovered as if in salute before zooming skyward, he thought that to have paid the ordinary penalty would have been too — too what? Too mundane, maybe. END

THE DANGERS OF DEEPSPACE

by MATHER H. WALKER

*He wanted to roam the starlanes.
Nothing in the galaxy could keep
him from it — except the truth!*

The man seated at the desk tapped his pencil thoughtfully against the application form. He looked critically at the kid seated before him.

"Look," he said sternly. "Just what makes you think you'd like Deepspace work?"

The kid was caught off guard. He started to move his mouth a couple of times without making any sound, like a fish out of water. Finally he stuttered. "I — I — I worked on a merchant ship the last summer before finishing school. I'd like to see more of what's out there. That's all."

"Yes, yes," the man said impatiently. "I see from your form you had a couple of months on the Venusian Lines. Interplanet flights.

You may as well understand right now . . ." He stopped abruptly as the door opened and a tall man in the purple Deepspace uniform entered. The man held some papers in his right hand. To the kid his face appeared stern and hard, the face of a man accustomed to facing inconceivable dangers as a matter of mere routine.

The face of the man seated at the desk brightened. "Hello, Larrer. Haven't seen you in quite a while. How's things going?"

"Lost four men this last trip out," the tall man said. "Damned thing on one of the Outworlds. The thing must have been as big as a mountain. Picked the scout craft right out of the air and ate it like it was a piece of candy with the

four men inside it. A nasty business. We could see it all from the main ship and hear them screaming, all the time over the radio, but there wasn't a damn thing we could do about it. Christ," the tall man said suddenly. "One of these days I'm going to get enough sense to quit this damn business. Sometimes I'd swear I could still hear those men screaming."

"It's no job for someone like me, who's used to sitting at a desk. That's for sure," the man at the desk said. "But someone has to do it. How about it? Are you ready to go out again?"

The tall man shrugged his shoulders. "Have to make a living some way." He handed the papers in his hand to the man at the desk.

The man glanced at them, signed them, and handed them back. "There you are, Larrer. All clear."

"Thanks, Colonel," the tall man said. "See you in a few months, I hope." He left with the spaceman's quick, graceful stride.

The colonel turned back to the young man seated before him. "As I started to say, you may as well understand right now that there is no comparison between inter-planet flight and Deepspace travel. The human mind is helpless to grasp the immensity of Deepspace. There's myriad upon myriads of suns, and you couldn't even begin to number the planets. There's creatures, beings, forms of life out there of every conceivable and inconceivable variety. Man is lost among it all." The colonel looked sternly at the

kid to impress him with the seriousness of it all.

The kid's face was lit up like the face of a small child being told about Santa Claus.

"Look," the colonel said solemnly. "Deepspace work is a dangerous business. There are creatures out there — strange creatures, tremendous creatures that can smash in the side of a spaceship like an elephant would crush an egg." The kid was practically on the edge of the chair now and hanging on to every word.

The colonel rubbed his fingers across his eyelids and suddenly he was a tired old man. "Listen," he said bluntly, "I know why you want to go to Deepspace. I knew before you asked me. It's not the work. It's the glamor that brings all you kids in here."

"But — " the kid interrupted.

"No buts," the colonel said. "I just want you to understand my position, that's all. My job's not easy. Every time I approve an application I may as well be signing a death warrant. There's nothing really glamorous about Deepspace. It's dangerous work, sure, but there's no glamor to it. How would you like to have to face an alien life form no human being has even seen before? Some creatures so alien your mind can't accept their existence. So alien you'll wake up screaming the rest of your life from having nightmares about it. In situations such as those there are no rules to go by. You have to make up your own rules — and they better be right, or you end up just

another cold, dead body circling around a distant star. On top of that there are situations which are not only dangerous but are downright ridiculous.

"Take that man who was just in here. A few years ago Larrer was seated before me just as you are now. Young and green, just like you, and brimming over with the glamor of going into Deepspace. Well, he made it, and you want to know what happened on his very first time out? One of the most ridiculous incidents in the history of Deepspace travel. They had set down on an asteroid way out in Deepspace when the radar sighted something which couldn't have been there."

The kid looked as if he was about to fall off the edge of his chair.

The colonel paused to light a cigarette. "Larrer was in the control room, and he looked at the blip as it approached.

"Captain, it's not a meteor," Brown, the radar man said. 'It's velocity isn't constant.'

"Are you sure, Brown?" the captain asked. 'Your radar must be on the blink. Everything has a constant velocity this far out in space!'

"Positive, Captain, the radar's okay. It's changed its velocity again. It's still too far away to use our mass as reference."

The colonel observed the kid to see how he was taking the story. He was breathing in short, quick breaths like a runner. "Well," said the colonel, "it couldn't have hap-

pened by the rulebook. But rules don't apply in Deepspace. Larrer opened a porthole and looked off from the starboard of the ship. He saw something out in space. Suddenly it was quite near and crystal clear as objects in space are. Larrer gaped at it. It was at least twenty times as long as the ship. It had a long wavering shape, and all over it were small, round spots that glowed and sparkled like gems before a bright flame. All the time the sonar emitted weird, burbling and gurgling noises.

"Suddenly, unbidden, there came into Larrer's mind the lines from Lewis Carroll's poem *Jabberwocky*:

'Twas brillig and the slithy toves
Did grey and gimble on the wabe
All mimsy were the borogoves
And the mome raths outgabe —

"That's what this thing is," Larrer thought. 'A Jabberwocky.'

"The others had sighted the thing now on the visi-screen.

"By the great rings of Saturn!"

"It's almost on top of us!"

"What in God's name is it!"

"What'll we do, Captain?"

"It's too late to do anything," the captain said. 'It's too close to us. If we used the atomic blaster on it now we'd destroy the ship. We'll just have to lay here and hope it goes away.'

"They stood watching as the strange thing came right on and on. The sonar continued to emit the weird burbling, gurgling sound. The thing stopped just short of the ship.

"It's examining the ship."

"'Good God, Captain, it's going to sit down right on top of us!'

"And that seemed to be that. The thing dropped down right on top of the ship, and it stayed there. The men didn't know what to make of it.

"'What's the damn thing doing?'

"'Nothing. It's just sitting there.'

"'What'll we do, Captain?'

"'There's nothing we can do,' said the Captain. 'We have the laser beam, which wouldn't kill it. At least not right away. And if that thing started threshing around it'd crush this ship like an egg. Does anyone have a theory as to why the thing just keeps sitting up there?'

"By the third day the men on the ship had reached the conclusion that the thing was not going to go away. They had also almost gone out of their minds trying to figure out why it just kept sitting there. Then Dunned, the engineer, came rushing into the observation room.

"'Captain, I've been going through our Encyclopedia Galactica microfilm. The thing's listed. It was observed by the 5th Galactic Geography Survey Team. They call it the Scintillus colossus. Listen to this: 'Among other Deepspace creatures observed was the Scintillus colossus, so named because of its enormous size and because of the sparkling, gemlike appearance of the female of the species. The creature emits electrical energies of varying frequencies which has the effect of producing a strange burbling sound from the ship's sonar. From our limited survey of this creature, it was determined that the creature is oviparous and that it

attains sizes exceeding two thousand feet in length.'

"'Great,' the captain responded disgustedly. 'Now we know someone else had seen the thing. But we still don't know why the thing just keeps sitting on top of us like a hen sitting on an egg.' The captain did a double take. 'Let me see that note, Dunner!'

"'That's it,' the captain said, looking at the paper Dunner had brought in. The thing's oviparous. It lays eggs. Just how big do you think one of its eggs would be?'

"'Judging from its size, at least as big as this ship,' Larrer said. He shot the captain a startled look. 'You don't mean that thing thinks the ship's an egg!'

"'Think about it a minute,' the captain said.

"'One of the men breathed a sigh of relief. 'Well then, there's nothing to worry about. We know the thing won't harm the ship.'

"'Not so fast,' the captain said. 'We have no idea how long the normal incubation period of one of its eggs is. The thing might sit up there for months. We have supplies only for four months. The trip back in takes three months.'

"A week went by, and the situation was becoming desperate. Although everyone on the ship was racking his brains to come up with some idea to get that overgrown sitting hen off then, no one could come up with any practical suggestion. They seemed doomed to sit there either until they hatched or starved to death."

"And that," said the colonel, looking critically at the kid, "is Deep-space glamor in actual fact."

"But how did they get out?" "Oh, that," the colonel said. "Well, Larrer was the one who made the suggestion, and he got a promotion out of it. They simply turned on all the heating units and got into their spacesuits for protection. The surface of the ship kept getting hotter and finally the ship got too hot for the thing up there to sit on. And of course, as soon as the thing rose up into space the ship took off."

The colonel chuckled. "I bet that thing is still puzzled about that egg. First it gets too hot to sit on, and then it goes shooting off into space."

The kid laughed too, and then the colonel was suddenly serious again. "Okay. I tell you what I'll do. I'll leave it up to you. If you still think you want Deepspace work, sign this paper, take it out to the front office, and you're on your way."

The kid signed hastily. He took the paper and left hurriedly, afraid the colonel would change his mind.

The kid was barely out of the office before the tall man came back in. "How'd you make out? Did you get the kid signed up?"

"Hell, yeah!" the colonel said. "He signed it like he was afraid I'd change my mind."

"What technique did you use this time?"

"The usual."

"Not that bit about another cold, dead body circling around a distant

star?" the tall man said disgustedly.

The colonel nodded.

"And the 'you'll wake up screaming the rest of your life? stuff?' the tall man asked amazed.

The Colonel nodded again. "I also told him the Jabberwocky story," he said complacently.

"Good God! Not the egg story!"

"Swallowed it hook, line and sinker," the colonel said. "Hell, it's not a bad story. In my opinion it's a real classic. There's some type of psychological appeal to it."

The tall man looked more disgusted than ever. "This is a hell of a racket, Colonel. Sometimes I get so disgusted I think I'd actually try a Deepspace voyage myself. Space is big enough, there's no telling what they might find out there."

"Sure, sure," he said. "Only it so happens that in three hundred years about all they've found out there is some lichens. You didn't know Brown did you?"

"No," the tall man said.

"Well, he was in Deepspace work for thirty years. Then he found something alive on an asteroid out there somewhere. It was just a little buglike thing no bigger than the tip of your finger, but he was as proud of it as if he had discovered one of those alien civilizations they write about. He carried the thing around with him for years in a little plastic bottle. Had it last time I saw him."

"What do you suppose will happen when the kid discovers there's nothing out there but boredom?" the tall man asked.

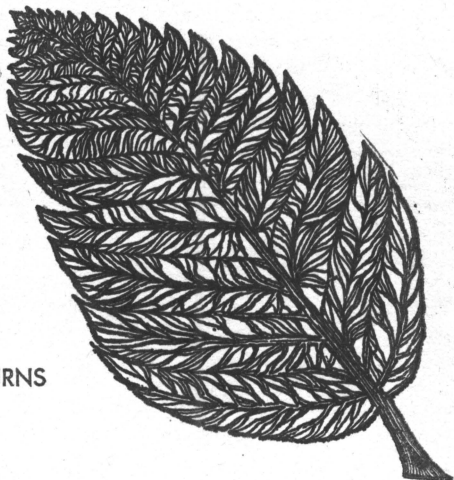
"Oh, he'll get over it," the colonel said. "We all do."

END

A BEACHHEAD FOR GREE

by C. C. MacAPP

Illustrated by BURNS



*The planet was only a battleground
in Gree's war against Mankind . . .
but the non-combatants had to die!*

I

Egral was angry. His huge body was bunched on the low wide platform-stool like that of some oversized, overmuscled black Terran feline. The thick neck, almost a torso, that rose from a broad chest was erect and rigid; the third pair of limbs — stubby arms that sprouted midway up the neck — folded tensely.

Steve Duke said firmly, "We bargained in good faith."

The Remm's wide-set eyes glared. "What difference does that make? If I hadn't bargained, we wouldn't have led this Gree Empire to our very doorstep. The Task Force I was with would have stayed lost out in the Sparse Regions!"

Steve tried not to look at the Remm's fangs and claws. "There's no certainty at all that we led them

here. This isn't the first galaxy they've conquered. Don't you think they'd move in toward the Hub sooner or later?"

"Sooner or later!" Egral's short-muzzled face showed disgust. "Sooner or later! How do I know what might have happened ten generations from now? It's my tail —" he waved that truncheon-like member for emphasis — "that's in a crotch now. I had absolutely no right to bargain with you — I, a mere linguist — no right or qualification at all! You bamboozled me into it!" He shifted his weight jerkily. "The mildest thing I've been accused of is treason."

Steve muttered, "They'll never accuse you of being inarticulate." Louder, he said, "Since you've condemned me, tell me the details so I can brood over my crime. Have you actually seen Gree ships? Have you located their Base?"

Egral snorted. "Seen them? There was a skirmish, and they were better prepared than we were. Two of our capital ships are lost in null. The ones that got home are damaged. We know the approximate location of the Base. We captured one small auxiliary, with navigation computers intact."

Steve sighed. "Your High Command was warned that you can't fight Gree with just capital ships."

Egral scowled. "We're building escorts, somewhere. Naturally — now — I'm no longer privy to classified information."

"Privy, eh?" Steve grunted. "You've *really* mastered English. Are you close enough to the privy to know if the Base is being scouted?"

Egral, without looking any less angry, showed his fangs in a grin. "My superiors see no reason to risk a perfectly good ship and loyal personnel. I'm to accept your offer to volunteer. You and your two companions and I will go in the captured ship. We won't know the way back, in case we're captured. We'll have small message drones, but we won't know to where they're programmed. *If* we survive initial contact, and *if* we send out adequate data, and *if* we can destroy the null terminal so Gree can't send reinforcements, my superiors may risk trying to pick us up instead of blasting the whole planet."

Steve digested that. "As easy as that, eh?"

The Remm said, "I was sure you'd be delighted, and so am I. The Tribunal considering my case has been reading ancient history. Before we became over-civilized, we used some interesting forms of punishment."

Through the viewscape, the planet showed no sign of habitation. It was one of the discus-shaped worlds so common here, with a core of the dense matter Steve still couldn't think of as normal, which showed a polarization of gravity along its axis of spin. From this angle the banding showed clearly: an iced pole, a dark brown tundra-zone, then a wide greenness stretching to the equatorial clouds.

Fazzool, the gray-hided B'lant, looked up from his instruments. "If I have ze physics right, gravity halfway between ze pole and ze equator

should be about zero point seven."

Steve said, "They'd put the Base in higher gravity if they had a choice, so personnel wouldn't get soft. Do you still place it here?"

"Zat is where ze only electro-magnetic spill comes from."

Steve glanced at Egral, who looked on, tail twitching. "Better get the backpacks ready." Steve put the ship in a fall, and spoke hurriedly for his throat-mike. "Emergency! Emergency! Do you have a fix on us? We have only partial control! If you'll set a landing-spot, we'll try to — "He pushed a computer-stud, and preprogrammed static drowned out his words. The ship bucked, the image of the planet whisking off-screen and back. Steve's companions were shouting wildly in B'lant and English. Steve yelled over the din, "Our graves — "

An Overseers's voice came through harshly. "Identify yourself, Slave!"

"J-Jen, sir; 377-03-50! We took heavy damage and I'm ranking survivor! But I'm not — the controls — "

The voice snarled, "Stay in space, you fool! We'll send up a rescue ship. Check your fall, or we'll blast you!"

Steve let the static roar again. He threw a glance at the others, then watched the viewers. A light blinked orange. A missile-launching. Orange lines grew toward the center of a scope. He put the ship in an erratic, jerking course; struggled out of his seat, hanging on with one hand as Egral slipped packstraps over the other shoulder. He let go long enough to shrug into the harness,

then pulled himself to the controls. He yelled at Fazzool, "See any open spots?"

The B'lant jabbed a gray finger at the screen. "Zat lake!"

Steve punched studs; braced himself. "Thirty seconds!" Air was shrieking around the hull now. The sound became deafening as the hatch shot open. Fazzool crouched in the opening, staring down. A blast rocked the ship as a missile went off nearby. Fazzool waited a few seconds, then jumped. Egral went next, his great form barely clearing the hatchedges. Steve, nerves screaming, shoved Earth-born Ralph Parr through the hole, then followed. The lake rushed toward him. His harness grav cut in gradually, so there was no jerk. He saw Egral plunge in and braced himself for the impact. He hit and floundered for a moment, then swam desperately for the pale-green wall of trees, his pack weighting him down. He was almost stunned as another missile went off somewhere, followed by a rattling detonation as the ship blew up. He caught a glimpse of Egral slowly pulling ahead of him. He blundered into something below water — a giant tree-root — and pulled himself along it.

The Remm was already standing hock-deep, a hand extended. Steve let himself be hauled out, stood gasping, then turned to look for the others. Fazzool, grinning as widely as his blunt, thick-skinned face could manage, waded in. Ralph Parr grounded a moment later, bent coughing up water, then slogged forward. Steve gestured toward a

fan of the enormous roots. "Out of sight!"

There were no more explosions, and no whoosh of aircars within hearing. He'd timed it well; the ship had paused over the lake long enough for them to jump, then shot off to draw away missiles. There were Slave Warrior corpses enough in one compartment — preserved by the cold of space — to make the wreckage convincing, he hoped.

Energy-pistol in hand, he took time to look around.

II

This was a swamp, choked with trees and undergrowth except for the open lake. It had a peculiar odor, besides the dankness — a sweetish one that reminded him of a hospital or laboratory. The trees were tremendous, but he couldn't see much of them through the undergrowth. That was mainly of one kind — ferns, he supposed you'd call them — with straight slender stems to a height of ten feet or so, then bursts of pale-green foliage that made him think of enormous ostrich plumes.

He stepped out cautiously to see what they'd taken cover under. Some of the roots were as thick as a man. They fanned out from a great burl or tuber that must be a hundred feet across. From that buttress four monstrous treetrunks rose, the smallest of them twenty feet through at the base. Fifty feet up, the limbs began.

They were straight and horizontal, only long enough to brush

those of the neighboring trunks. The leaves — if you could call them that — were on a scale with the trunks. Four or five hung like pennants below each limb. The mature ones were five or six feet wide at the limb, tapering down, ten or twelve feet long pale green, translucent and thin, but veined in red, giving an oddly animal impression. Birds, also pale green, the size of eagles but scaley and featherless, with parchment-like wings, clung to the fruit that hung below the maturest leaves — brown, rough-rinded, watermelon-sized, with reddish pulp that the birds globbled down. One bird, so far up the monstrous tree that his squawks came down only faintly, was flapping about what looked like a green meter-long lizard with eight or ten legs, that crouched on a limb, reptilian jaws agape as his head swiveled to confront the bird. Here and there similar lizards, scuttled, their stumpy fat legs agile, their claws maintaining them easily on the trunk or the vertical leaves. The swamp, now that the explosions were ten minutes past, was coming alive with hissings and squawkings and the flap of wings. Somewhere far off, some animal bellowed repeatedly like a gargantuan foghorn. Steve said, "We'd better get farther from that wreck, and into opener country. Did anyone see the inlet of this lake?"

Fazzool pointed. "Zat way. And zere are hills."

Egral, nostrils and stubby ears atwilt at the swamp sounds and smells, protested, "Shouldn't we reconnoiter a little while we're this close to the Base?"

Steve shook his head. "They might comb the area, if they're at all suspicious. I want to get to some high spot where we can watch things for a couple of days." He shifted his back to a more comfortable balance.

Egral grumbled, but moved out in front.

But after they'd gone a few yards a sound from high in the trees made Steve crouch, gun in hand. Up there, a horn was blowing purposefully — high-pitched and clear, but soft, like a muted bugle. He knew, as surely as he knew it was no natural sound, that there was language in that playing. Egral asked softly, "Gree?"

Steve shook his head. "Somebody, or something, that doesn't have radio. They're reporting on us. But to whom?" He looked around, then hurried on, staying under the ferns as much as possible.

There was another horn-message when they started up, the inlet — a small river, nearly canopied over. Then there was another when they reached the edge of the swamp and started up a canyon. For a way there were ferns, but those ended where grassy banks sloped up to hills half-covered with trees like huge willows. They heard no more horns for a while.

Sunset came before they were as far or as high as Steve liked. He chose a spreading tree beneath which to make camp for the night. While Ralph and Egral strung proximity-alarms about, Fazzool broke out rations. "Zese will do for tonight, but tomorrow I'll start experimenting wiz local food. I wish we had brought

some of zose fruits from ze swamp. But zere are ozzer bzings here, and plenty of lizards along ze river."

Steve, spreading out the backpacks to dry, told him, "First we'll get through the night if we can, then we'll find a spot we like. Then you can start to go native."

But there was no alarm during the night, and only a few bugles. And before noon the next day, they found a spot Steve thought would do.

The place was a good five miles from the edge of the swamp; a small plateau above the river but with a creeklet crossing it. The willowlike trees grew thick; the grass — also pale green — was tall enough to lie in and be concealed except from above. There was a steep slope backing the plateau, with one actual cliff against which they made camp.

Egral prowled restlessly, eager to get out the telescopes. Steve restrained him. "First we have to be secure, if possible. It'll take the rest of the day to set up alarms and stuff. Also, we ought to get a look at those musicians before we let them see us spying. Actually make contact, if we can."

Ralph said, "They don't seem to have followed us since we broke camp this morning."

Egral said, "They've been watching us all the time." He jabbed a thumb upward. "I wasn't sure until a minute ago."

Steve peered up through the foliage. Far up in the sky was a pair of bird-shapes. He got to his feet, rummaged around and returned with a small monocular.

Five minutes later he lowered the glass. "You're right; they're not birds. But all I can make out is a silhouette, like a small stubby-winged plane."

Egral said, "I can see more. There are humanoids, or something like it, wearing those wings."

Steve tried to find the bird-shapes again, but they were out of sight. "You told me," he said to the Remm, "there'd never been any humanoid races evolved this near the Hub."

Egral made the equivalent of a shrug. "Conditions don't favor bipeds or purely diurnal animals. But these needn't be native."

Fazzool demanded, "If Gree brought zem, why haven't zey reported us?"

"That's a puzzle," Egral admitted, "but there they are, gliding around in plain sight of any aircar that might come by, apparently unworried."

Steve said, "I don't think even *your* eyes could see a worried expression at that distance. But we have to assume they've at least some sort of truce with the Gree garrison. *I'm* worried."

By evening the plateau was well bugged with electronic warnings, and the other gear was stowed out of sight. Fazzool had gone down to the river and killed a lizard, and now had slabs of its flesh sizzling on the hot-plate.

Egral was padding about restlessly, tail lashing. "Damn it! We haven't even looked toward that Base. I'm going to take a telescope to the edge of the plateau and lie under a tree."

Steve had been considering the same thing himself. "It'll be a while before Fazzool has that lizard-meat tested. I'll go with you. Ralph, you stay here and take clinical notes, and we'll help you dig the grave later." He got the two biggest scopes and handed one to Egral. As he followed the impatient Remm, there was bugle-talk overhead.

They found a suitable spot, set up the tripods and afixed the scopes, and carefully parted the grass. There was no problem locating the Base. Perhaps twelve miles away, airline, just beyond the swamp, the hills were speckled with light. Steve said, "That radio transmission came from the swamp itself, or I thought it did."

Egral said, "It's possible. Can't you see by starlight?"

The starlight was a thousand times stronger than Steve was used to, but that still wasn't much. "See what?"

"Why, the jungle is discolored just this side of those lights, as if some of the trees were dead or injured. But it's a much smaller patch than I expected."

Steve asked, "What's on the slopes?"

"Missile emplacements, radar gear, ground defenses. No large buildings."

Steve said, "Then the Base is underground. Can you see any air activity?"

"Certainly. Aircars coming and going. Patrols, I assume."

Steve peered through his scope, saw small craft over the spot. "Well, then we're not going to learn enough at a distance. I'm not surprised. Eventually Fazzool and I will have

to put on uniforms and sneak in."

Egral said, "And in the meantime?"

Steve squirmed into a more comfortable position. "In the meantime, we learn more about the planet and work out some way to create confusion, so Fazzool and I can sneak in." He lay a moment, thinking. "Do you really believe, personally, that they couldn't have found a way in here with ordinary null?"

"Well," the Remm growled, "a step-by-step advance would take many lifetimes." He shifted his weight and pointed skyward.

"The Hub warps null as well as space. It's in sight now; had you noticed?"

"No." Steve followed the point and located the slightly darker smudge in the awesome starfield. "Not very big from here, is it?"

Egral said, "We're still ten thousand light-years out, if distances are meaningful any farther in than this. You should read some of the theory I couldn't translate for your scientists. Especially about the polarity, along the axis of rotation. As far out the axis as fifteen thousand light-years, the pull breaks matter into ultimate particles and whirls them out in the galactic plane. Eventually they condense into new hydrogen and start the long evolution into stars. I tried to translate into B'lant and Effogan by comparing the Hub to a centrifugal pump, but the analogy is poor."

Steve said, "Well, I'll avoid the axis. I wouldn't want — " He went silent as Egral was suddenly on four feet, staring toward the camp.

There was a shout, followed by the blam of Ralph Parr's powder-burning pistol.

Steve rolled to his feet and ran after the streaking Remm. When he arrived, the other three were crouched behind tree trunks, staring upward, weapons in hand. On the ground lay what looked like a small parachute draped over some bundle. Ralph said, "There's another lodged in a tree. I thought they were parachute bombs."

Steve stared upward until he saw the lodged one. Slowly, he felt for a flashlight. "They've got us pinpointed. A light can't hurt." He flashed the beam on the dark object hanging in the shrouds.

Fazzool, for once, gaped. "Why . . . zat is one of ze fruits from ze swamp! Zey — look, zere comes more down!" The B'lant moved to catch one. "Now why 'n zis world —?"

Ralph's grizzled beard suddenly shook with laughter. "Why, it's obvious! They worship the lizards, and they're dropping us food so you won't kill any more!"

Fazzool gave him a glare, but reached for his knife and hacked off an end of the fruit. He sniffed at it and said wonderingly, "If zis is not protein — and very much like meat — zen I am one of zose lizards!"

Steve said, "Maybe a dead one, if you try to eat it."

Fazzool shook his head vigorously. "No. Ze birds and lizards were eating zem. And we can tell if ze rinds have been punctured."

Steve said, "Something funny

about this. Even if they *are* simply donating food, there's hardly been time, since you killed that lizard, to fly down there, get fruit, bring them here and attach parachutes."

Egral said, "I don't think they had to. There's been bugle-talk, and some of it was from up-country."

Steve stared up into the darkness. "All right. Fazzool, you'd better give these tree-steaks the survival test. Declining might be a mortal insult. And tomorrow we go hunting the source." He looked at Egral. "Do you agree that making friends with these people may be the quickest way to get at the Base?"

Egral said, "Of course. If it turns out that simple."

III

Before the sun was halfway to noon, they'd climbed up canyon to where the river emerged from a narrow, deep gorge. Steve paused. "Fine place for an ambush."

"Which," Fazzool agreed, "may be why zere have been no bugles lately."

Egral unbuckled his harness. "I'll scout. Shall I take a radio?"

Steve shook his head. "Can't risk even weak transmission. Better go a hundred yards at a time and find spots to signal back." He found a place against a boulder and watched the Remm slink into the skimpy brush. "Apparently he's satisfied now that these people aren't with Gree."

Fazzool said, "We have only his long-range view of zem to indicate zey are humanoid. I have been calculating. A man could not glide on

wings ze size of zose, even in zis air and gravity. **Ozzer zings have two arms and two legs, loosely speaking. A Terran frog fits zat description.**"

Steve said, "I won't reject his opinion lightly. There is something odd about this whole situation — Gree's appearing on this particular planet, where humanoids are already, or something like them. And I think that plateau was artificial."

Ralph looked doubtful. "I've seen just such plateaus on Earth, certainly natural."

"Yes," Steve admitted. "But when a chunk of hillside's broken loose to leave a plateau like that — by volcano or earthquake or whatever — there are signs. I walked around the perimeter and looked down all the slopes. No loose rock, no lava. I think it was chopped out, and the rock carried away somewhere, and that stream redirected to provide water."

Fazzool said, "If so, it was not recently."

Steve shrugged. "There were humanoid races with null travel fifty thousand years ago. Maybe there's something about this particular region that makes it easier to get to. That would explain Gree's doing it."

Ralph objected, "Wouldn't it be pretty coincidental, our finding an artificial plateau right away? Unless there were a lot of them."

Steve pointed out, "We didn't just happen to find it. We were looking for a good view of the swamp and lake. That may be why it was there."

Fazzool nodded slowly. "Zen zese people would be retrogressed descendants."

"Right." Steve looked up the gorge. "There's Egral, waving."

There was no ambush and no bugles. However, beyond the gorge, they found the source of the protein fruit and also evidence that the natives had not always been at peace with Gree.

The cliff-enclosed valley was no more than a mile long and half that wide. At the lower end was a small lake. The rest didn't look swampy, but there was a solid jungle of the protein-producing trees. Birds swarmed, their hoarse cries faint with distance. On the upper shore of the lake was a cluster of devastated huts, charred or flattened. Tree houses, too, lay where they'd fallen. Yet, other tree houses looked intact, though deserted.

Fazzool said, "A punitive raid, perhaps, to teach ze natives respect. Or prisoners may have been taken for study."

Steve was scanning the trees. "There could be an army of them, waiting. Egral, do you see any?"

"I'm not sure," the Remm said. "There was something stirring when we first came into sight, but it could have been a big lizard. What if they just keep avoiding us? We can't chase them all over the planet!"

Steve started down. "I think they'll show themselves if we don't make any threatening moves. They already know we're not with Gree, but they're probably as worried about us as we are about them."

They circled the lake and paused. Fazzool pointed to a tree house. "Look! Ze floor is made by gluing

zose big leaves edge-to-edge somehow, still fastened to ze limbs! And ze walls and roof are of cut leaves! Zose must be very tough!"

Egral said, "Big lizards crawl up them without leaving any claw-marks. And to hold those heavy fruit, in a storm, they'd have to be tough."

Steve was looking for stairways. What he found instead — hard to see against the foliage — was a long ladder, apparently attached at the top to a still-living leaf. "I think," he said, "we'll act as if we're about to set up housekeeping and see what happens." He walked toward the ladder. But when he reached it, he paused, astonished. It was made from *leaves* — vertical ropes and rungs, laminated until they were thick and semirigid. And the whole structure was green, and still alive! The rungs continued into the ground as if rooted. The veins spread up, as well as downward from the high limb. He peered up at the houses and got the same impression.

Bugles were talking. After a pause, one answered from the distance. He grinned and stepped into the open. "I'll bet you each a tree-steak that was the okay to make contact."

It was only a minute until the native came down in graceful swoops; face down beneath wings no more than four feet long but a good two-and-a-half wide, rigidly fixed, slanting up a little to the tips, thickly cambered. The fuselage was a mere short boom — hollow, no doubt — and the tail assembly was small and very close behind the wings. The whole, of course, was made from



the leaf material, still veined and looking alive. The humanoid's knees were bent to his heels almost touched his buttocks. His insteps fit into stirrups that evidently controlled the tail. The main support was at his waist — not a complete band, but a wide bracket open at the side so he could slide in. The arms were not extended under the wings, but bent, elbows at the ribs, so his hands — very sinewy, and overlarge for his size — grasped two stirrups. Those grips, Steve saw, were controls as well as supports. As the contraption neared the ground, the flyer's fingers did things and airjets hissed. The apparatus tilted up, stalled, settled lightly. The being's feet withdrew from their stirrups and swung down like a bird's as he landed gracefully. In one contortion he was free of the waist-bracket; then, as if the apparatus weighed no more than a few pounds, he flipped it over and laid it bottom-side-up. The familiar laboratory smell of the trees came stronger from the flying apparatus.

The native turned, obviously nervous, staring especially at Egral. He wasn't over five feet tall, very lean, but with tendons that stood out like cables. His skin was tawny; hairless except for the short black curly patch on his head and a little beard on his chin. His eyes were dark and quite human looking.

But what Steve gaped at was the pair of short, straight, blunt-ended horns — mere vestiges — that barely poked out of the hair. He heard Fazzool take a deep breath.

Steve shook off his astonishment

and stepped forward. "Is it possible," he asked wonderingly, "that you . . . speak Effogan?"

The native started and turned wide eyes at him. After a moment he said in a rather high voice, "We are the Doyt. Effogan is the tongue we learn from the ancient talking-wires. But how is it that you — the report says you came from the sky! While the *others*, the violent ones, came from the ground! The legends say . . ."

Steve found himself laughing. "A lot's changed since your ancestors colonized this world. Now, other descendants fight the tyrants who did this —" he indicated the blasted village — "and we are here to stem this invasion if we can. Will you help us?"

A fixed look came over the native's face, as if he'd been briefed for this. "We know nothing of colonization, or of other worlds, if there be such. The legends say our ancestors came from the ground and might come again one day. In any case, we cannot help you fight."

Egral stepped forward, making the native flinch. "You won't resist them? Even after they did this to you?"

The Doyt said stubbornly, "This was a village of outcasts, insane ones, who resisted when they should have yielded."

The four were silent for a minute. Then Fazzool asked, "Have others been taken captive?"

The Doyt looked uncomfortable. "A few. The men from the ground wanted infants and took the parents along. They have not bothered us

beyond that. We avoid the place from which they come."

Steve asked, "Is that a large cave?"

The Doyt said, "There were only the hills and the swamp. Then one day there was an explosion, and rocks and trees hurtling, and great ships of metal came out, rising without wings. We have guessed the inside of the world must be hollow."

Steve said, "This world is not hollow, nor do the invaders belong on it. They come from the stars and will enslave you and teach your children and your children's children to fight, enslaving still other worlds, of which there are no end. They have usurped the means by which your ancestors came." He turned to Egral. "I think it's obvious that Gree forces stumbled onto some ancient Effogan null link somewhere, tried it out, and found themselves here. Don't you?"

Egral, tail atwiltch, growled, "I suppose so." He stared at the Doyt with disgust. "You, fellow. Now that you know we're not going to eat you, is there someone in authority?"

The Doyt said mildly, "We are only a scouting band, temporarily based in this valley. But tomorrow an Elder of the district will be here to talk to you. We had hoped you would not come this far; but since you have, I am to take you to our camp to wait. It is safer there."

IV

That evening the four were in a tree hut assigned to them, two hundred feet above the ground, near

the cliffs on one side of the valley. Steve, who'd spent much of the day talking to Doyt craftsmen, had a small section of one of the amazing wings. "The whole thing's honey-combed like this; that gives it strength. But all the alveoli, I guess you'd call them, are interconnected, so the air can distribute itself."

Fazzool said, "I did not hear much of ze chemistry, and what I heard I doubt. Did you get it straight?"

"Roughly," Steve said. "It's related to the process by which the trees absorb nitrogen and carbon dioxide from the air to make protein. You pump air into the wing, and the tissue — skin, cells, stiffeners and all — absorbs it and stores it as semistable compounds. The smell we notice is traces of nitrous oxide. A wing can absorb up to fifteen per cent of its own weight of air, under pressure, and give it out again as the jets are used."

Ralph, who was a little out of things since he didn't speak Effogan, said, "I still don't see how such gentle jets hold them up."

Steve turned the section sideways. "See this raised part of the leading edge? There's a thin crack at the rear of it, running all along the wing. The jet — a thin sheet of air, really — blows back along the camber and creates lift. That's why they get such efficiency of a short wing and why they can hover without forward motion." He hefted the section with one finger. "The whole apparatus weighs less than one-fourth as much as the Doyt flying it."

Ralph said, "Even so, if they want to hold altitude or climb, they

must run out of pressure before long."

"Not too soon," Steve said. "Those hand grips are little pumps, as well as controls. The Doyt keeps squeezing them as he flies. That's what makes their hands so strong. The pump valves are the only metal parts in the whole assembly."

Ralph grinned in his beard. "I'd like to take a bunch of these people back to Earth and start a dairy. They could really milk cows!"

Egral, who was stretched along the limb that bisected the floor, reluctant to trust his weight to the latter despite assurances, said, "And you mean to tell us they don't need any adhesive? Just join the parts and let them grow together?"

"Right," Steve said, "the same way they join these floors, walls, and ceilings. Of course there's technique involved. To get a perfect joint, the cutting has to be accurate. Then for an hour or so the parts have to be held in place and kept warm and moist. It beats gluing, though."

Egral said, "I'll stick to metal and welding."

Fazzool got to his feet and bounced up and down on the flexible floor, as if it were a trampoline, making Steve and Ralph grab for handholds. "Zis is not to be sneezed at. Especially when ze same trees grow meat for you, right outside ze door."

Egral scowled. "A remarkable botanical science, I admit. Too bad they haven't turned it to weapons. Steve, how do you plan to handle the Elder who's coming?"

Steve shrugged. "I'll have to play

it by ear. Maybe I'll give him a good rundown on the galactic situation and let him think about it for a day or two before I put any pressure on him."

"I am Jubbelyn."

The Elder was as lean and cordy as if braided of rope, his skin not young but tauter and healthier than one might expect from his white chin beard and near-naked scalp, the latter accentuating the vestigial horns. His black eyes were alert but calm as he surveyed the four.

Steve said, "We're honored. No doubt you already know our names and our mission."

The hint of a smile crossed the wrinkled face. "Everything has been reported. Forgive me if I comprehend slowly. We are sorry your ship was destroyed, but rejoice that you survived. If there is any concern in your minds that we will betray you to your enemies, please banish it. You may take refuge among us if you wish; or, should you prefer, we will lead you to some hidden valley far from here, where you may live out your lives in peace."

Steve tried not to stare. Could the native be this innocent? Or was this a gentle hint that they shouldn't make trouble? He said slowly, "I don't think you understand the situation. Gree will not let anyone live in peace, on this world or any other he can conquer, except the slavery that he calls peace. We speak of Gree, from habit, as a person; but these invaders from outside the galaxy are not humanoids nor even animals. They are artificial beings of

metal, without emotions as you and I think of emotions. The humanoids who serve them are Slaves, so completely indoctrinated from birth that their devotion is fanatical to the death. The symbol called Gree is not an actual being, but a half-alive simulacrum controlled by a metal being. The physical appearance of that ghoulish is copied from remaining statues of the oldest humanoid race in this galaxy — the Men of Effogus, your own ancestors. The fraud is an effort to cash in on lingering legends among other races."

Jobbelyn said calmly, "Are you quite sure you yourselves have not been misled as to the nature and intent of your enemies?"

Steve, a little nonplussed, gestured toward Fazzool. "Ask *him*. He was born a Slave. I spent years in that role, as a spy. We know."

The Doyt sighed, shifted his position on the floor limb and stared out at the busy jungle. Presently he faced Steve and said, almost sadly, "It appears to me you are as fanatical as those you fight. I wonder if you can answer me frankly — are you out of touch with your own forces? Do they know where you are?"

Steve decided there was nothing to be gained by evasion. "They know exactly where we are. And we have means of reporting to them."

Jobbelyn brooded over that for a minute. "That is as we feared. What we can expect, then, is a war on our planet — your side attacking the Base, their side defending?"

"I'm afraid so. But there is this difference — we won't enslave you."

The Elder made a gesture of gentle rejection. "I don't doubt your sincerity. But the others have promised the same thing. They treat us almost as children, but with a hint of respect. Perhaps they secretly admire our peaceful natures."

Steve said, "Don't be deceived. They have to be gentle with you for the moment because of your appearance — clearly similar to the one they've chosen as the Gree symbol. Otherwise, they'd have trouble with the Slaves. But the Overseers know the deception; *they aren't* Slaves, but a race whose treason has been bought. And *they* will be your masters, when the planet's secured."

Jubbelyn sighed again. "I cannot dispute you. But we have discussed this thing, and our decision is to remain neutral. We will try to do nothing to anger either side. We are willing to evacuate this whole region, up to a radius of a full hundred miles. We hope you and the others will confine your war to that area, and that whichever side wins will keep its promises."

Steve stared in disbelief and bafflement. *A hundred miles?* When even a hasty hit-and-run attack might devastate half the planet? But if he told Jubbelyn that, it would sound like a threat. Slowly he said, "Why do you think the invaders have taken infants? Already they're starting a creche!"

Jubbelyn smiled. "If you are right, they will be disappointed. Violence was bred out of our natures countless generations ago. We do not even kill for food — and I have been told you do." He got to his feet. "I must

be leaving, to report this talk to my colleagues. I thank you for your honesty. Should you reconsider your plans, our offer still remains. We can give you happy lives. Not all our settlements are primitive villages. There are cities of many thousands, with theaters and games and museums, and other diversions. You may work or play or simply relax, as you choose. Perhaps we can even build you wings. If not, there are riding animals, and ships for sea travel, and a great variety of climates and geographies. Please give it thought. And now, excuse me."

V

Egral, ears twitching at the night sounds, paced gingerly around the edge of the floor and climbed into the bisecting limb. "I don't see that we have the right," he told Steve severely, "to worry about the welfare of these people. You've reminded me often enough that the galaxy is at stake."

Ralph put in, "You were ready enough to sacrifice Earth, if necessary."

Steve scowled at the bearded man. "I wasn't ready at all. There was nothing I could do except try to save her. I was on Earth too at the time, don't forget. I don't say we have to shirk our mission here. All I say is, we ought to think hard before we deliberately involve the Doyt. Fazzool, you were going to nose around for Doyt weapons. Did you see any?"

Fazzool spread his gray hands. "What is a weapon? A matter of

employment, is it not? Zey have knives, of good steel zey make zem-selves. Zey have fireworks — zose were described to me — so zey have gunpowder, at least. And zey drop noise-bombs, and bombs wiz ammonia and ozzer gasses, to drive dangerous animals away. Also — zo I did not see it — zere is a dart-thrower zat uses ze plant chemistry to build up gas pressure to shoot ze dart. Zey have darts zat will merely sting like ze devil, or darts to put you to sleep. Zey use zose on ze few criminals who resist banishment."

Steve said, "I wanted to ask Jubelyn more about that, but didn't get a chance. What about the criminals? Are there many? Is there a police force?"

Fazzool drew his feet up under him. "I had quite a talk wiz ze same Doyt zat first met us. Zis group here belongs to a sort of constabulary. To belong to it, a Doyt must be very much against violence and only willing to use it in extreme necessity. Zat is rare, and even zen zey use ze sleep-darts or gas and do not kill. Ze constabularies of different districts have only voluntary co-operation between zem. Ze criminals are a very small percentage."

Steve grunted. "I almost wish we'd run into savages instead. Do you suppose we could find a few of the criminals?"

Fazzool grinned. "Ze Gree garri-son had zat idea first. Ze local ones are already rounded up. Maybe ze Overseers intend zem for breeding-stock."

"Yeah," Steve muttered. "All

right; suppose we tricked the garri-son into a couple of punitive bombings on real cities. Do you think that Doyt would fight back?"

Fazzool shook his head. "A few individuals, maybe. As a society, no."

Egral said impatiently, "Even so, a little resistance here and there might create the confusion we need."

Steve said, "Maybe. But the Doyt might catch on quick that we'd arranged it and turn us in. I'm willing personally, to take a bigger risk if we can avoid using the Doyt. Egral, I can't demand the same of you, but I can ask. If you'd seen as many happy, peaceful races dragged in as I have"

The Remm scowled. "Colonel Duke, you have a very under-handed way of making a person's decency oppose his better judgment. I'll agree as far as personal risk is concerned. But it's *my* home world that's the soft, nearby target, and I can't risk that. I insist that, whatever we do, we have an alternate plan involving the Doyt, to switch to if necessary."

Steve glanced at Fazzool and Ralph, who nodded. "Fair enough. Now, how about concrete suggestions?"

Fazzool said, "Well, zere's nozzing like ambushing a ground patrol in a swamp to start creating confusion."

The backpack interfered with Steve's movements. He coiled the scaling-rope and tossed again. This time, as the rope slid back, the improvised hook caught the limb above him. He went up hand-over-hand and hauled himself, grunting

with effort, onto the limb. One of the parchment-winged birds, apparently undecided between curiosity and indignation, hovered with quick little wing strokes a few feet away, squawking tentatively, its reptilian head cocking at various angles.

Steve coiled the rope and stuffed it into his pack. It wasn't comfortable, sitting here a hundred feet up, knowing he daren't use the grav to break a fall, this close to the Base. He straddled the limb and got his back against the trunk. A bugle sounded faintly, back the way they'd come. It worried him that the Doyt had followed this far. Neither was he satisfied with his view of the trail below, but he didn't have all day to find a better spot. For that matter, there wasn't much of the day left. He glanced up to make sure he had head clearance beneath the nearest of the pendant fruit.

A complaining of birds began a little way up the trail. That would be Ralph, climbing to his perch. Fazzool — less vulnerable, with his thick skin, to a hasty rake of a hand-beamer — was already set, at ground level. Steve frowned at his watch. If Egral, scouting the patrol, let himself be seen or heard too far away, the ambush wouldn't come off.

The birds settled down again to their late afternoon feeding. Lizards climbed about nimbly. Now that he was used to the clinic odor of the trees, it was rather pleasant. Somewhere at the edge of hearing, the foghorn-voiced animal boomed. He looked at his watch again and began to feel tense. He wiped his palms on

the uniform he'd donned and drew his handgun. This waiting before action was always agony.

It was five or six minutes later that he heard B'lant voices. He took in a deep uncomfortable breath and tried to control his trembling. The leader of the patrol — a B'lant Gunner Second, wearing a visor cap instead of the uncomfortable standard helmet — came into sight. His blunt features were bored; his heavy beamer carried loosely over a forearm. Steve fretted. Would they all have heavy guns? Then the next B'lant came into sight: a Gunner Third, no doubt in command, with only a holstered pistol. The one following him, and the two humans next in file, also had only handguns. The B'lant bringing up the rear had another heavy beamer. Steve let out his breath and gulped in another. *Where was Egral?*

An animal sound, more a *whuff* of surprise than a growl, made the patrol spin as one man. The rear guard jerked up his beamer, then lowered it. Steve raised his pistol.

The Gunner, Third, spoke for his throat-mike. "This is GPF Sixteen. We've just sighted a large, black animal of a new species! We only got a glimpse, but — "

Steve's weapon spat incandescence. The B'lant's voice choked off, and he went down. Now pencils of fire lanced in from other directions.

One of the men ran a few steps, screaming, before he dropped; the others died faster, with cries on their lips. Steve had deliberately waited to hear the patrol commander's

voice. Now he tried to imitate it. "Sixteen! Four of the beasts attacked and we — "

He fired the pistol again and let out a muffled cry, then dove off the limb, harness grav turned on. He could risk it now, with aircars surely converging, masking* the electronic spill. He landed and ran toward the scene of the massacre. Fazzool was already there, stripping equipment from corpses, tucking under them and distributing around small objects. Egral galloped up. "Hurry — something coming down from high up!"

Steve finished equipping himself and plunged down the trail as Egral raced off in the other direction. He heard Fazzool and Ralph pounding after him. He fumbled at the pocket-radio in his left hand, got a Gree channel. An Overseers' voice was snarling commands, directing aircars toward the ambush. A car reported, "This is AP Twelve, landing. Will send eight men along the trail, ready to shoot."

Steve ran a little while longer, then turned off the trail and went very slowly, paralleling it. His two companions caught up. Presently he heard the eight troopers going by.

The aircar was in a clearing from which several trails diverged. Steve halted where he could just see the four helmeted occupants, glanced around at Fazzool and Ralph, signaled and moved away to set up a crossfire. He found himself a spot and hesitated. He was calm now that action had begun, but this was a ticklish moment. The four in the aircar had to die quickly.

He aimed and sent lightning at the one in the pilot's seat.

Two of the four shouted words before they died. Steve was already plunging forward. He shoved his dead pilot aside and spoke hurriedly into the radio grill: "AP Twelve! We just saw one of the strange animals and wounded it! Shall we pursue?"

There was a pause of fifteen seconds. Then the Overseer's voice said, "AP Twelve, stay in your vehicle and wait for your squad. You are the only car close by."

The order didn't quite ring true to Steve. He shot a look at Fazzool, who shook his head. Steve grabbed heavy beamers, tossed them to Fazzool and Ralph, leaned into the car to get extra energy-units. "Let's get out of here!"

The radio was silent now. That meant, of course, the ruse was discovered. Cursing mentally, Steve sloshed through mud, wide of the path, but toward the Base. The only hope now — a faint one — was that Egral's various diversions would draw the search away.

A cluster of explosions rocked the swamp. That would be the radio-linked booby traps Fazzool had set around the original ambush. Steve swore. Now that didn't seem such a good idea — it clearly revealed technology. Fazzool whispered, "We must hide somewhere near ze Base and hope for a chance to sneak in later! It would be suicide now!"

Steve nodded, slogging on. He hoped Egral was still galloping up-country, not pausing to reconnoiter. Would the Remm guess, from the

radio silence, that things were sour already? No doubt. But what could he do? He could go through with the tricks to implicate the Doyt. But he wouldn't, Steve felt, so long as there was hope. He'd stick to the promise Steve, in his squeamishness, had extracted.

Steve tried his radio, hoping for another channel, but there was none. How was the garrison co-ordinating? And why hadn't any of Egral's fake messages come over?

An aircar whooshed over, headed up country. Maybe the Remm was already dead, or surrounded and pinned down. Fazzool — obviously thinking along the same lines — said, "Maybe Egral has decided it would be foolish now to break ze silence."

Steve didn't answer. He was busy trying to find solid footing.

Ralph — the best woodsman of the three — suddenly jerked into motion. His primitive pistol roared.

VI

Something zipped by Steve's cheek. A dart! At once, a slight, green-clad body came tumbling to thud nearby. Steve leaped for cover, frantically scanning the trees overhead. Fazzool lunged for the Doyt corpse, came dragging it to the root tangle. "He has a pistol too, so he was wiz Gree! He used ze dart because zey want us alive!"

Somewhere, a bugle talked. So that was how the garrison was communicating.

Steve gave the trees another quick scrutiny, then was running again — not toward the Base, nor away from

it, but laterally, as silently as he could, sacrificing speed for cover. This, the least purposeful direction, offered the best chance of evading the immediate search at least until dark.

Night wasn't long coming. Now they picked their way cautiously until there was no sound of aircars or bugles, then found cover beneath roots. Steve asked softly, "Anyone see more than the one Doyt?"

Ralph Parr said, "No. If there were more, we've lost them by now."

"That's not the point." Steve paused, listening. "So far that Doyt's the only one who's seen us, unless there were others with him. So the garrison still may not know we're humanoid. That makes it possible for us to go on with the original plan of sneaking in as survivors — if there's some more confusion. By now, the Overseers must realize the Remm are involved, whether they actually know the Remm body shape or not. Maybe later tonight . . ."

Fazzool said, "Zere is not zat much time. Zey will pick up Doyt and make zem tell."

Steve swore. "Well, then — if we can get beyond the Base, into the hills, maybe we can sneak into a relief crew for a missile emplacement, or something. But first I've got to get off a message to the Remm that things are busted open." He fumbled in his pack for an object like a very large cigar; pulled it in two, spoke at length into one half, reunited it, gave it two twists and tossed it away from him.

"That will null in twenty minutes. Let's move!"

It was slow going. When the drone nullled, the implosion was dishearteningly near. Steve speeded up to the point of recklessness. An hour dragged by as they jogged on, splashing through mud, panting for breath. Aircars whooshed over, listening, no doubt, for any electronic spill.

Suddenly the radio came to life. "I have seen one of the creatures! They are not primitive animals, but advanced beings! He was carrying —" A blast drowned out the voice.

Then the radio was silent again. Ralph whispered, "Hell. Did they get Egral with a grenade or something?"

Fazzool chuckled, "Zat was Egral talking. Ze fake was meant to be transparent; zat is why he did not identify. But it was probably a delayed transmission. Ze question is, why?"

Steve said, "To keep up the confusion. He gave away no information, but the Overseers will have to consider a lot of things. The message *could* be genuine. Or it might be intended merely to pinpoint a spot, for other commandos or a landing. Or just to establish co-ordinates. And the missiles will have to be manned, against possible attack from space. And ships will have to null off."

Fazzool said, "Ah! Overload ze garrison! Good scheming, for a linguist!"

"A linguist," Steve said, "who's served with a Task Force. Well, we have to get somewhere while the bustle's on." He peered ahead for sound footing.

Minutes later, a boom came dis-

tantly, then a series. Ships nulling hastily from stratosphere — all using up personnel. But there was a bad feature. With a defending fleet around the planet, the Remm might have no time for niceties.

A few yards farther along, light suddenly burst above the trio.

Blindly, Steve hurled himself for the nearest low root. Other light flares bloomed all over the area, descending very slowly on gravs. A loudspeaker grated, "Stay with your units and don't lose contact! There are only a few, but they move fast!" The tone of the voice changed. "You, whatever you are! If you want to live, show yourselves, without weapons!"

Steve squirmed cautiously into better shooting position, the heavy beamer resting over his left forearm. If they were staying in squads, that was fine. He'd wait until he saw them, then rake the whole squad. He hoped Ralph and Fazzool would stay hidden until they got good targets, too — not sell their lives in foolish heroics. He wasn't particular scared; he could bury the primitive emotion in his belly. But he couldn't banish the regret or the despair, or the shame of failure. If he hadn't been squeamish about the Doyt . . .

A Slave Warrior suddenly cried out in surprise. Then the jungle erupted. Darts rained. Somewhere, soft *plops* marked the bursting of gas-bombs. The shocked Gree troops were firing wildly into the trees, bringing down a torrent of debris. An Overseer, shouting, ran into sight, clutching at his cheek, and collapsed. A flare dropped, weighted down by

some kind of hooped net. The radio babbled now. Bugles blew purposefully Steve squirmed free of the root and was running, away from where the gas bombs had fallen. "Ralph! Fazzool!" He hurdled prone Warriors, some still stirring.

A big dark form bounded into his path. "Quick!" Egral snarled. "We have an aircar for you!"

Despite the confusion in the swamp, the garrison was reacting efficiently. Aircars were landing to unload casualties, re-equip, and take off again with full crews. Blinker-lights were being mounted on some craft, for signalling. Flamethrowers were being hustled to the crews, and crates of antipersonnel bombs.

Fazzool pointed. "Zat looks like de-briefing!"

Steve set the aircar down in the lighted area. Troops covered them with beamers during a careful scrutiny, then they were urged forward. An Overseer demanded, "Where's your squad leader?"

"D-dead," Steve told him. "Some weapon that made no noise and no light! He — his head just exploded!"

The Overseer's scowl deepened. "How did you two survive?"

Steve touched his own cheek. "A dart grazed me, and I collapsed. I guess they thought I was dead. When I came to I saw him — " he indicated Fazzool — "stumbling around. He's still dazed. The area was deserted, so I got him to a car and took off."

Fazzool mumbled, "Something big and black . . . it knocked me down



from behind. My head"

The Overseer demanded of Steve, "Did you see the attackers?"

"Yes, sir. Two of them, anyway." He described Egral.

"Remm," the Overseer growled. "It *must* be. So they have six limbs? Did you see any vehicles?"

"N-no, sir. But there was a humming in the trees."

"Damnation! Well, get your squad-mate to Med Center, then you report to the general pool." The Overseer turned away.

Steve pretended to help Fazzool until they were out of sight, then they ran toward two great wooden doors that closed a fresh scar in a hillside.

Guards blocked the way. Steve said, "Orders to man a ship!"

The leading trooper demanded, "When was that, Gunner? Everything scrambled an hour ago!"

Steve said, "More nulling in, with short crews!"

"Oh," the guard stepped aside; motioned to a trooper to open a small door in the large one. Steve plunged in, Fazzool at his heels.

VII

The ancient terminal had obviously been hollowed from the hill, with a short tunnel to the exit. The blast that had opened that had damaged nothing else. For a moment Steve paused, fascinated by the unfamiliar look of the vast null-tank, then he strode toward a Tech who seemed to be in charge. "Why aren't preparations going on? Where are the munitions?"

The Tech — a thick-muscled, phlegmatic Gjiss — blinked. "Preparations? I don't understand."

Steve glared. "Why don't you listen for orders? There are ships coming in, and they need missiles and power units! Where's your Section Leader?"

The Gjiss looked slowly disturbed. "He was called away for Patrol Duty. They left us short handed, and . . ."

Steve snarled, "All right! Where's the arsenal? Can you at least start getting C-7's out here? Is there a conveyor system?"

"Er, no, Gunner, not yet. We use carts."

"Get about it, then. Don't you know there's a battle shaping? Where are the power units?"

"In there, Gunner." The Tech pointed to a tunnel.

Steve and Fazzool ran toward the tunnel. Recently installed sliding doors lined one side. Fazzool pointed. "Zat one!" The B'lant jabbed a button, and the door slid open. Lights went on in the compartment.

Steve muttered thanks for someone's efficiency. Units were already on carts, ready for call. He and Fazzool shoved one out.

The Techs were just bringing a heavy missile on a long, low cart. Steve hesitated in the mouth of the tunnel, handgun ready. He sighed. He'd already used up his quota of squeamishness for this trip. He fired efficiently, Fazzool's beam joining his. Only one of the Techs managed an outcry.

Steve crouched a moment, staring toward the exit, than ran toward the

null tank. Stepping over the corpses, he studied the controls. Symbols in B'lant and English had been stenciled on them. Simple enough. He darted toward the missile cart. "Let's get this inside!"

They put the missile in the tank, then trundled the power unit in beside it. The missile would serve as timer and detonator; the unit would provide the awful energy to slag the tank. Fazzool said, "We could null zis gift somewhere first, zen blow up zis end."

"No time!" Steve was working frantically at the fuse-settings. He finished, shoved Fazzool out ahead of him. "Hurry!" He leaped for the tank controls and stood fidgeting until the mighty steel doors began to grind shut, then ran for the exit tunnel. If the guards held them up now He glanced at his watch, forced himself to stand inside the small door for ten seconds. Fazzool, delighted with the suspense, grinned at him. Then Steve pounded on the door. A bolt rattled outside, and the guard peered in. Steve barked, "Get a med team with a stretcher!"

The guard leaned in to stare around. Fazzool jerked him forward and got a hand to his throat. The guard reacted fast, but Steve's knife was ready. They dragged the body inside, then ran out, shouting, "Guns! Take cover! The enemy is nulling in!" Everyone within earshot turned to stare. Steve dove for the nearest cover, a small concrete bunker. Fazzool landed on top of him.

There were shouts and pounding footsteps, then nothing else. Steve held his breath. Had they failed?

Then the universe seemed to explode. The bunker floor heaved, banging his head against a wall. Dazed, he fumbled in a pocket, brought out a message-drone, pulled it apart, grasped into it, "Mission accomplished . . . null tank destroyed." Debris rained on the bunker-roof.

Somehow he got the drone reunited and tossed it out. In the bedlam, he couldn't hear it null.

There was nothing wrong with him that a good slug of Remm medicinal alcohol didn't remedy.

One of the huge dumbbell-shaped Remm ships was pouring out more occupation personnel. The Base was secure; enemy survivors were still being hunted down, but they were no problem.

Jubbelyn, looking tired and bewildered, was answering Fazzool's question. "No, it was nothing that you or your friends did that changed our minds. It was the garrison's use of our own people against you, and finally against us. In one summer — less, in some cases — Gree's psychologists were able to make not only traitors, but actual killers, out of them! And not only the outcast. The perfectly normal people who were taken, too." He was silent for a minute. "I guess I shouldn't have been surprise when, one by one, my own constables forsook the ban against killing." He shuddered. "But when I saw the first of them pick up an enemy weapon and use it deliberately Yet, before the fight was over, I was doing it myself."

Steve said, "I hope your casualties were few."

The Elder sighed. "We had casualties. But what hurts is what we've been forced to learn about ourselves."

Egral said, "Knowing that civilization is a state of mind needn't cause you to abandon it."

Jubbelyn shook his head — a gesture he'd just learned. "No, we cannot retreat back into our dream now, knowing what rages among the stars." He got to his feet, looking listlessly around for his flying apparatus. "I must go and start organizing relief. Some of our cities were punished."

Egral said to Steve, "To answer your earlier question, I was able to follow your progress pretty well and guess it, by listening to the enemy search. Then, when I'd fixed up a few diversions here and there, I simply called out to the Doyt that I knew they were watching me and explained frankly what might happen to their world if you couldn't destroy the null terminal. They'd discovered by that time that some of their own race were being used as scouts. They decided to take a limited part. I told them what weapons and tactics they'd be up against.

By the time we organized the party to come look for you, they'd already had their illusions knocked out of them." He glanced toward a squad of Remm probing through rubble. "It's too bad there wasn't some way we could trace the other end of that null link before destroying this end. It seems my superiors have a whole new system of fleet operations and materiel. They made fairly short work of the defending Gree ships. There are a few still to be hunted down, of course."

Steve said, "That's not all. There was more than one setting on that null tank. The ancient race must have had a whole network of planets connected with this one, and no doubt Gree sent scouting forces, at least, to all of them." He glanced at Fazzool and Ralph Parr. "I suppose we'll be staying here near the Hub for a while, to do some sniffing around."

Egral yawned like a great feline. "Sniffing around? With *your* noses? If there's a network of worlds to be scouted, some of them will have inhabitants. I'm sure my superiors will agree that you need a linguist along."

END

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Dear Editor:

I wonder how many readers noticed one of the interesting touches that Bertram Chandler put into "Edge of Night?" I would probably have missed it myself if I had not waited until I had both installments and read the work in one sitting.

When the *Corsair/Destroyer* returns from its mission in the other universe, it is not exactly the same ship, nor are its crew precisely the same people. Note: on page eleven of the first installment Sonya is described as having pale blonde hair; in the short, final chapter she has red hair. The reader is left to speculate to what other ways the protagonists have been changed by their Mannschenn drive. Masterful!

In the "Hue and Cry" John Sanner suggests that you should reprint old pulp covers as a possible improvement over some of the current atrocities. Mr. Sanner obviously is not familiar with the old pulp covers. Save for the conspicuous absence of a scantily clad "sexy babe" a number of your recent covers have come right from a late-forties copy of *Startling* or *Thrilling Wonder*. In fact, by carefully

going through my file of these two magazines I could probably come up with some covers that are both better done and illustrate more closely the stories that your covers *supposedly* illustrate. — Carrington B. Dixon, Jr., 501 Sylvan Drive, Garland, Texas 75040.

* * *

Dear Editor:

After I finished reading *Retief's War*, I thought it was about the best novel Keith Laumer would ever put down. It had lots of fast-paced action, his typical oddball aliens and equally oddball humans, and good dialog. That was until I read *Earthblood*. All I associated Rosel George Brown with was some story in which an ostracized flower arranger, or whatever, and a four year old genius got involved with the roundest thing in the world . . . I think. I don't remember the title or where I read it; don't bother telling me where I can find this classic, I wish I never read in the first place. It was awful. Yea, verily! The name of Rosel George Brown drifted into the limbo of my subconscious. That was until I read *Earthblood*. (Gee, I never knew I could write like that.)

When I started the first installment, I was slightly apprehensive about it due to the tenuously sinister recollection of Mr. Laumer's collaborator. After the first chapter I thought it was terrific. No, not terrific. That term is too hackneyed to describe it. After careful consideration I would call it beautiful.

Keith Laumer is my favorite writer in The Genre. I always thought that he was a good writer but if he could turn out stories on his own like *Earthblood*, he would be a great writer. Perhaps Mr. Laumer will turn out material like *Earthblood* on his own. I nominate *Earthblood* for the Hugo award for the best serial of this or any other year.

By the way several of my friends agree with me that the Retief stories would make a fine teevee series; infinitely better than the "science fiction" series on today. What say you, Gentle Editor? — Ivan Thoen, 6850 Morella Ave., Apt. 15, North Hollywood, California 91605.

● I say I agree with you — but the TV producers I've suggested it to apparently don't! — Editor.

* * *

Dear Editor:

Being a Robert A. Heinlein fan from way back, I have finally decided that I must make contact with other science-fiction connoisseurs with the same impeccable tastes. Having decided on the magazine that these type of people might read, I now make my plea: "Heinleinoids of the World, Come to My Aid . . . My Flame Is Flickering Fast . . . Help Me Contact the Others of My Own Species . . . I Will Join Any Club . . . Do Anything . . ." As you can see, I am not one of those BEM fanatics.

I would also give anything to know the address of "The Great One" so that I can write him.

I would now like to tell the readers a trick which I have learned recently on how to preserve paperbacks. I bought some transparent vinyl contact which is available in most dime-stores and cut it to size. It prevents cracks, peeling, banding, scraping etc. My library of S.F. is one of the best preserved of any addict I know. — Matthew Venable, 915 W. Hazelhurst, Ferndale, Michigan 48220.

* * *

Dear Editor:

Your stories in *World of If* have been almost uniformly and increasingly good, and they seem to be getting even better.

Even so, I have a complaint. While the stories are good, the art work you carry is almost uniformly bad. If you can afford stories from writers of the quality of Heinlein, Anderson and Laumer, surely you can get some art work of the same quality. I have not yet been able to understand the goal or policy of your art editor. Surely *Fantasy and Science Fiction* and *Analog* do not have a monopoly controlling the artists they feature (who are just as good as yours are bad). Schoenherr, Freas and Bonestell, to name just a few, all do excellent work.

As a critical reader I believe that the quality of art work you feature, especially the cover piece, has a great effect on the way the magazine is received. With art work to match the quality of stories you carry, your sales might go up, giving you a chance to improve your stories even more. — Whitney Knox, 6300 Granada, Prairie Village, Kansas 66208.

Dear Editor:

Read with interest your editorial on prediction of futures by the RAND panel. Interestingly, there seems to be a built in lag of about a decade — probably attributable to the latent "fear" factor. Fear of change will cause the prophet to push events off, usually by a constant "force", yielding a limited range of "effective push". A group would tend to show a similar paired constant and variable.

The IQ-passing computer will be built between 1975 and 1980. I don't know the exact year, but first successful run of the program will be in the Fall.

Autolang translators was the panel's closest guess. Will be used at an international meeting in the summer of 1973.

Come now, 1980 for the wide access general data facility? Hell, the facility will open to limited public use early in 1976.

Manned landing on Mars will be 1974.

And the economic minimum agreements will be a lot sooner than 2025. Most of the world population will be included by 1990 — and provisions for the rest will already be underway. 1983 the actual agreement in world council.

Trouble with the "median" method they're using is that the average prophet isn't very good. Ability isn't on a Maxwell curve, but a skewed to the weak curve. Education in the areas involved doesn't necessarily help. It's like the difference between recognition and use vocabulary tests. The ability is far less dependent upon information stored than on the resolving power of the mind in a particular area. — Gene Fowler,

372 Baker Street, San Francisco, California 94117.

● Nope, not so. RAND ran control experiments on questions with known answers. Median was more accurate than any individual. — Editor.

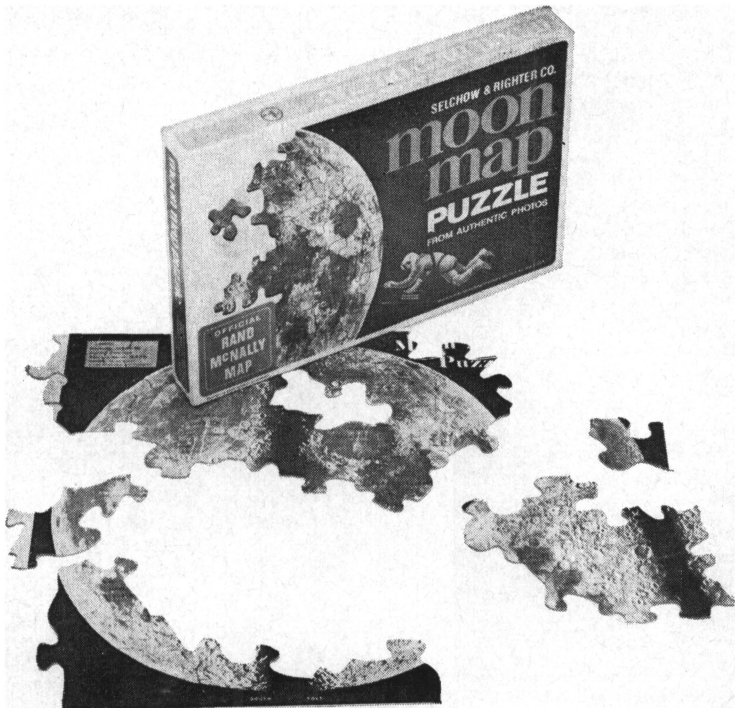
* * *

Dear Editor:

I have just finished *Earthblood*, and I thought that it was one of the two most pointless serials I have ever seen in your magazine. In the last part, it gave a strong impression that all this Roan Cornay chap does is run about killing people, throwing them through walls, getting drunk and similar highly thalamic activities. I could find traces of Retief's A-line, but almost none of the talent shown in the Retief stories. There not only was no Retiefian humor, but there was none of the atmosphere of weirdness that hangs through such works as *The Hounds of Hell*. In short, *Earthblood* was a complete dud.

Silkies in Space, aside from its title, which brings to mind images of all sorts of space opera, was very good. When the fact that two Van Vogt stories were out at the same time is considered, a highly attractive conclusion is the Van Vogt is going to start turning stories out in volume. It is to be hoped that this is so. I can hardly wait to read this third Null-A novel. On the basis of the two Null-A novels that are already out, it should be the longest of the three and the best. Have you any idea of when it will be out? — John Hoggatt, 3473 W. 7th St., L.A., Calif.

● VV's working on TV scripts, but will get back to the Null-A novel shortly. — Editor.

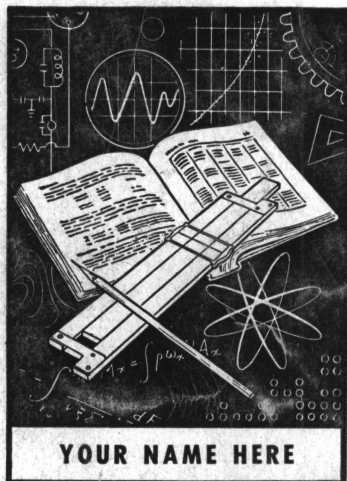


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