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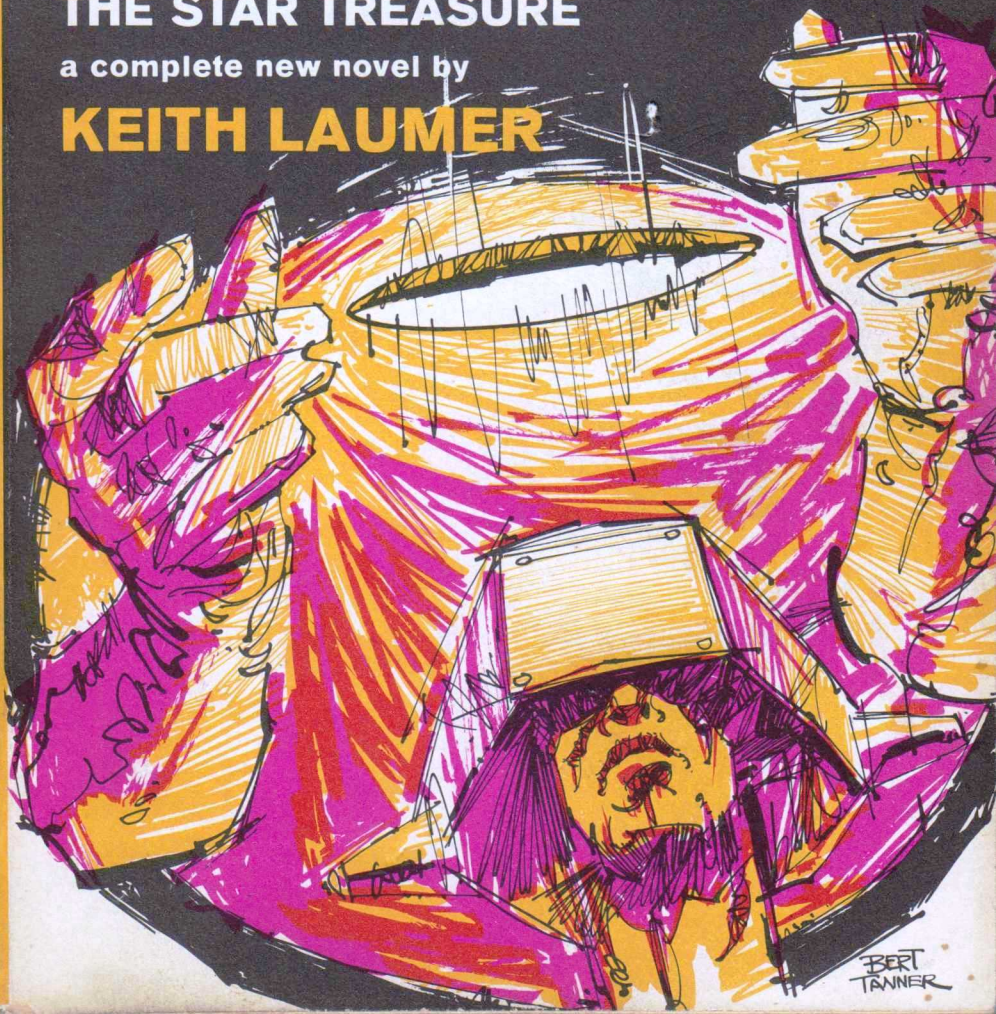
Venture

SCIENCE FICTION

THE STAR TREASURE

a complete new novel by

KEITH LAUMER



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SCIENCE FICTION

NEW NOVEL, COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

THE STAR TREASURE

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Earth was under the control of five men, with only a slender and ineffective thread of rebellion running through their net of power. Their power seemed absolute, but the source of it was a mystery—until one man witnesses a murder out among the rings of Saturn, the first of a strange and suspenseful tangle of events that lead him to the core of the mystery.

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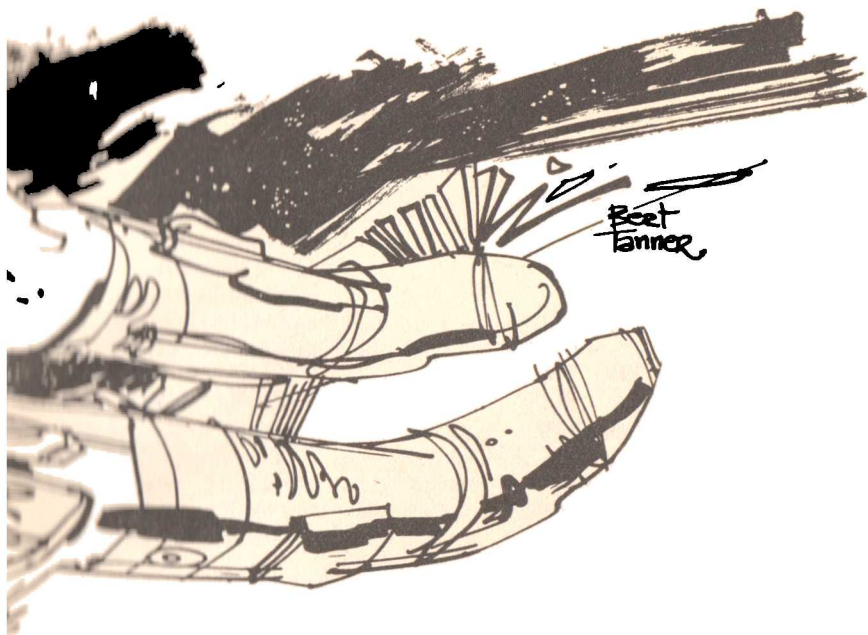
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THE STAR TREASURE

by Keith Laumer

PROLOGUE

THE WIDE DOORS SWUNG OPEN; THE ELDERLY MAN, TALL AND straight-backed in a braid- and decoration-heavy uniform, advanced across the room, halted, executed a formal salute.

"Good morning, Admiral," said the man who sat behind the immense, mirror-polished desk. "How pleasant to see you. It's been some time; not since your retirement, I believe." He smiled faintly, the intricate network of fine wrinkles around his eyes almost invisible against his dark skin. His small, round skull was entirely hairless. One large, pink-palmed hand toyed with a silver writing instrument. Except for that and a folded paper the desk was totally bare.

"I requested an interview two weeks ago," the old man said. His voice had lost its resonance, but still carried force. His face, hollow and sagging with advanced age, was set in a grim expression.

"Ah," the seated man said easily. "Unfortunately, I've been much occupied lately—"

"I know," his visitor said. "That's the reason for my coming here today."

The black man's smile faded by an almost imperceptible degree. "To be sure, Admiral. I've read your note; I understand your concern—"

"You're making a serious mistake, Lord Imbolo," the old man said. "I don't know the reasons for what's been happening—but whatever they are, they're in error."

The seated man placed the pen on the desk carefully, as if handling a rare and fragile object. He sighed.

"There's no error, Admiral," he started—

"The charges are fantastic!" the old man cut him off. "They're lying to you, Imbolo!"

"I think not, Admiral—"

"You have to call a halt to this pogrom, Imbolo. It can't go on!" The old man's voice shook, but his eyes glared fiercely.

"Admiral, you've served the Public long and well; you find it difficult to believe that changes are taking place—"

"I know all about the changes, Imbolo. I've heard the Hateniks ranting. I've seen the underground papers. I have nothing to do with that. It's the Navy I'm thinking of. Over three hundred years of tradition are being destroyed by this sneaking corps of informers, weasels,

worming their way into every level of command—"

"You're not in possession of all the facts, Admiral. Rest assured—"

"I'll not rest at all until I've heard your assurance that these cases will be reopened, your informers called off, and these men restored to duty!"

"Impossible," Imbolo said flatly.

The old man's hand slipped inside his silver-buttoned tunic, came out gripping a flat, snub-barreled power gun. Without a word he raised it, took aim at the still faintly smiling face before him, pressed the firing stud.

For a long moment he stood, his arm extended, sighting along the weapon, before his face reflected the realization that nothing had happened. Slowly his arm fell. He seemed to shrink; the rigidity went out of his face, his shoulders. Abruptly he was merely a withered figure in an ill-fitting costume. Languidly, Lord Imbolo tapped a spot on the desktop. Instantly, a pair of Marine guards were in the room.

"The Admiral is unwell," he said softly. "See that he's cared for."

The gun dropped to the floor with a soft thump as the impassive men took the would-be assassin's arms, turned him, walked him from the room. Lord Imbolo watched them go, then resumed his interrupted perusal of the latest list of officers and men suspected of unreliability and other crimes against the Companies and the Public.

ONE

MIDSHIPMAN BLANE WAS cashiered at 0800 hours on Sarday,

Ma 35, 2190, on the parade deck of the ship of the line *Tyrant*, fifty million tons, on station off Callisto, nine months out of Terra on the Trans-Jovian cruise.

Blane was a slim, sandy-haired lad only a year out of the Academy. He stood obediently at attention while the commodore read the findings of the court: guilty of attempted sabotage in that he did wilfully place and attempt to detonate an explosive device with the intention of destroying a capital Fleet vessel on active patrol in Deep Space.

"In an earlier age," the commodore went on, "a terrible vengeance would have been extracted from a man who undertook, however ineffectually, the destruction of his ship and the murder of eighteen thousand shipmates. Today the law holds that society may legitimately exact only those punishments commensurate with its ability to confer benefits.

"Charles Yates Blane, society has reposed confidence in your abilities and integrity; that confidence is now withdrawn. Society has conferred on you rank and responsibility; of that rank and those responsibilities you are now relieved. Society has endowed you with citizenship and the privileges of participating in her benefits; those privileges are now revoked. You are no longer a member of the United Planetary Navy, nor have you the right to wear the uniform."

At a command the drummers started the roll. The commodore grasped the insignia on the Midshipman's collar and ripped it away. He stripped the single gold stripe

from his cuffs. He snapped off the ornamental silver buttons with the Fleet eagle, one by one, and dropped them at his feet.

Blane didn't move, except to sway a little at each jerk, but tears were running down his face.

The drums halted. In the aching silence, the vice-commodore said, "Charles Blane, ex-officer, ex-citizen, you will now be removed to a place of security and held there until the arrival of a Fleet picket boat which will transport you to a designated location where you will be free to work out your destiny unassisted, and unimpeded, by the society which you have forfeited."

The drummers resumed the roll; the guard closed in, fore and aft, and walked him down the gauntlet of the men and women he'd tried to kill, and out of our lives.

Afterwards, Paul Danton—Commander Danton during duty hours—stopped to talk to me.

"What did you think of the ceremony, Ban?" he asked.

"Anachronistic," I said. "Somewhat self-consciously so. But effective. I gave up my plans for blowing up the ship when those buttons hit the deck."

"Why do you suppose he did it?"

"I can't conceive. He seems to have gone about it rather badly."

"I wonder if he really intended to succeed?"

"I assume so—unless it was all a trick to get himself marooned on a Class I world." I smiled at this whimsy, but Paul looked thoughtful, as if he were considering the possibility.

"Could he have had any legitimate motivation, Ban?"

"For killing us all off? We may not be the best company in the world, but that hardly justifies such sweeping measures."

"For a gesture of rebellion," Paul corrected.

"Paul, you haven't been reading Hatenik pamphlets, have you?" I said it jokingly, but somehow it didn't ring as humorously as I had intended.

"Perhaps even the Hateniks have their points," he said mildly.

"We hate hate, and we'll kill any dirty son of a slime culture who doesn't agree with us?" I suggested.

"They're fanatics, of course," Paul said. "But can we afford to ignore any voice of our times?"

"Are you trying to tell me something, Paul?"

"On the contrary," he said. "I'm looking for answers."

The routine of the ship went on. We moved on out to the vicinity of Saturn. There were four hours of watch to stand each day; there were dances and banquets and lectures and concerts and games. Among the ten thousand female crew members there were an adequate number of young and beautiful ones to make life entertaining. The weeks passed. I saw Paul now and then; we didn't discuss Hateniks and the basis of civilization. In fact I had almost forgotten our talk, until the night of my arrest.

It was just after oh three hundred hours when the deck police rapped at my door. They were very polite

about it: The captain's compliments, and would Mr. Tarleton report to the bridge as soon as convenient. Their hands never strayed near the guns at their hips, but I got the idea just the same.

It was a long walk back to the A deck lift, a long ride up to G territory. *Tyrant* wasn't one of these modern cybernetic jobs, manned by ten men and a switchboard. She had over a hundred miles of corridor in her. We couldn't have covered over one percent of that, all in a dead silence like the one before the casket slides into the converter.

Armed guards let us through a big armored door marked **COMMAND DECK—AUTH PERS ONLY**. Inside, a warrant with a face like a clenched fist looked me over and jabbed buttons on a panel. An inner door opened and I went through and the door closed softly behind me. I was standing on fine grey carpet, smelling a faint odor of Havana leaf and old brandy. Beyond a big curved quartz window that filled the far end of the room Saturn hung, half a million miles away, big enough to light the room like a stage. It was a view that almost, but not quite, took the show away from the man behind the desk.

He was all the things a Fleet Commodore ought to be: big, wide shouldered, square jawed, with recruiting poster features and iron grey temples, his shirt open at the neck to show the hair on his chest. The big Annapolis ring glinted on his finger in the dim light from the desk lamp that was set at just the proper angle to glare in the customer's eyes when he sat in the big

leather chair. I saluted and he motioned with a finger and I sat.

"You enjoy Navy life, Lieutenant?" His voice was like a boulder rolling over a deckplate.

"Well enough, sir," I said. I was feeling more baffled than worried.

He nodded as if I had made an illuminating remark. Perhaps I had.

"You come from a Navy family," he went on. "Admiral Tarleton was a distinguished officer. I had the honor of serving under him on more than one occasion. His death was a great loss to us all."

I didn't comment on that. Most of the Navy had served under my father at one time or another.

"We live in troubled times, Lieutenant," the commodore said, brisk now. "A time of conflicting loyalties." I had the feeling he wasn't talking just to me. There was a soft sound from the corner of the room behind me and I looked that way and saw the other man, standing with his arms folded beside a glass-doored bookcase. His name was Crowder; he was short, soft-necked, with a broad rump and a face to match. I knew him slightly as a civilian advisor on the commodore's staff. I wondered why he was here. He made a smile with his wide lips and looked at my chin. To my surprise he spoke:

"What Commodore Grayson means is that certain misguided individuals appear to see such a dichotomy," he said. "In actuality, of course, the interests of the Companies and the Navy are identical." He had a strange, uneven voice that seemed to be about to break into a falsetto.

I stood by and waited for the lightning bolt that would destroy the poor fellow who had been so naive as to interrupt the commodore—with a remark that was 180 degrees out of phase with what he'd been saying. But the commodore only frowned a little, in a well-bred way.

"You knew Commander Danton quite well—?" Crowder threw the question from behind me, cut it off suddenly, as if he'd said too much. I turned slowly and tried to see into his face.

"What do you mean, 'knew'?" I said.

"'Know him' I meant, of course." His voice was still as bland as his kind of voice could be.

"I've known the commander since I was a small boy." I said.

"What are Commander Danton's views on the matter of, ah, divided loyalties?" His tone was a few degrees crisper now.

"Commander Danton is the best man I know," I said. "Why do you ask?"

"Just answer my questions, Lieutenant," Crowder said.

"That'll do, Crowder," Grayson growled. But instead of fading back, Crowder pushed away from the wall and walked over into the light. He frowned at me, at the big man behind the desk.

"Perhaps you don't quite grasp the situation, Commodore," he said in a tone like a torn fingernail. "This is a security matter."

I looked at the little man's doughy face, at the fat neck where his collar had rubbed it pink. I looked at the commodore and waited for him

to squash this underling like a bug under his boot. The big man looked at the plump civilian and some of the color went out of his outdoor-man's tan. He cleared his throat and stared past me. His eyes looked blind. The silence was like an explosion.

"Now then, Tarleton," Crowder said in a saw-edged tone, "when was the last time you saw Danton?"

I kept my eyes on Grayson's face. His eyes stirred and moved to me. "Answer his questions," he said. His lips barely moved.

"I don't know," I said.

"What do you mean, you don't know?" Crowder rapped.

"I mean I didn't know it was the last time," I said, and pried into his face with my eyes, trying to dig some meaning out of it. A sick feeling was growing somewhere down under my ribs. *Paul, Paul, what have they done to you . . . ?*

"Are you being tricky, boy?" Crowder snarled, showing his teeth.

I stood up and faced him. "I'm not a boy, Mr. Crowder," I said. "I'm a line officer of the Navy. And if this is line-of-duty, I suggest we have it on tape." I reached for the record button on the commodore's desk, and Crowder shot out a hand and covered it.

"Mr. Tarleton. I suggest you start realizing the position you're in and begin giving me the kind of cooperation I expect." He let his eyes slide to Grayson. "That the commodore and I expect."

"Tell me what you want to hear," I said. "I'll see if I can say it."

"Has Danton spoken to you of anything—any, ah, discovery he

fancied he'd made, perhaps? Some supposed secret he pretended to have uncovered?"

I looked thoughtful. "He did comment . . ."

"Yes, yes?" Crowder glanced at Grayson triumphantly.

". . . that the Chambertin '78 in the Deck Officer's Mess was a trifle tannic," I said. "But I don't suppose that's any secret."

Crowder's undershot jaw dropped. His little pig eyes almost disappeared.

"A jokester, eh?" He spat out the words like a cockroach in the soup and reached for a desk button. Grayson moved then. He stood, looming over the security man like a djinn over Aladdin.

"That's enough," he said as softly as steel slicing cheese. "Nobody brigs my officers without a charge that sticks!"

"He's in it!" Crowder grated, but he pulled his hand back.

"Show me proof," Grayson said.

"Turn him over to me for an hour and I'll have all the proof you want!" Crowder's eyes licked over me like a blowtorch.

"Get out, Crowder," Grayson whispered. The civilian opened and closed his mouth, but he knew when to stand on a pat hand.

He stalked to the door, looked back from there, looked around at the rug and the paneled walls and the view behind the big desk. Then he looked at Grayson and smiled a knowing little smile.

"We'll see, Commodore," he said. His grin made it an insult.

When the door had closed behind him, Grayson looked at me. I

had the feeling there were things he wanted to say, but he didn't say them. It was just as well. I wouldn't have believed him.

"That will be all, Mr. Tarleton," he said in a dull voice. "Consider yourself under arrest in quarters until further notice." He sat back of the desk, just as he had when I came in; but it was different now. He didn't look like a symbol any more; just an old man in a trap.

Back in my suite, I called Paul's apartment, but there was no answer.

TWO

I STRIPPED AND STEPPED INTO the sonospray and then used the tingler, but I still felt soiled. As I pulled on fresh clothing, something crackled in the breast pocket.

It was a note on thin blue paper, folded and sealed with a blob of red contact-wax. It was brief and to the point:

Ban: This is ninety-second paper, so don't linger over it. I may be on the trail of something very disturbing. If I should drop out of sight, it will mean I was right. I don't want to involve you in this, but I ask you to convey a message to Trilia: *Confirmed*. Will you do this for your friend,

Paul

I read it three times, looking for the meaning that seemed to be eluding me, but it became no clearer. Then the paper turned to grey ash in my fingers and powdered into dust.

I wiped my hands and looked at

the blur that the wall had turned into, for as long as it takes hope to wither and die. Then the desk phone buzzed. I pressed the button.

"Lieutenant," a cautious voice said. I recognized it as MacDonald, boat deck NCOIC. "Look, maybe I'm out of line, sir," he said, "but—I just got a prelim code 78."

"So?"

"That's the change-station alert code, Lieutenant. *Tyrant's* going to pull out in a few hours—and we've got a couple of boats ex-hull."

"Go on."

"Commander Danton logged out at twenty hundred hours, ETR oh four thirty."

"Destination?"

"Phoebe Station."

I thought that over; there was nothing on Phoebe but a nav beacon and some standard emergency gear. Nothing to take a Section Commander out on a lone mission on off-watch time.

"You said 'boats', MacDonald."

"Hatcher took a cutter out half an hour behind the commander. A G-boat, one of the ones with the paired 20 mm's. And she carried full charges; the son of a bitch checked."

I chewed my lip and thought about that. I didn't like what I was thinking. Hatcher was a subordinate of Crowder's—a stupid, brutal man, capable of anything.

"Very well," I said. "Warm up nine-two. I'll be along in a few moments."

I dialled myself a drink and swallowed half of it, finished dressing. I eased the door open; the corridor was clear. I stepped out and started

toward Y deck, with the feeling that I was walking in an evil dream.

I was twenty miles out, with the mile-long city of lights that was *Tyrant* dwindling behind me, when I picked up the characteristic residuals from a fleet scout. It took a few moments for the course computer to take readings, analyze the data and produce an extrapolation that I liked no better than the other aspects of the situation.

Paul hadn't made for Phoebe Station after all. His track headed straight for the Rings; to be precise, for a point at the edge of Cassini's Division, the gap between the A and B rings. The fact that the spot in question was over the Interdict line and twelve thousand miles into off-limits territory was only a part of my aversion to it: a few million cubic miles of dust and ice scattered across a few billion cubic miles of space constituted a difficult obstacle course through which to take a boat roughly equivalent to strolling across the sighting-in range at Carswell on a busy afternoon. I was still contemplating that thought when the panel speaker came to life:

"Carrousel nine-two, code forty. Code forty. AK, nine-two!"

The voice was that of Walters, another of the civilian advisory staff. Code forty meant 'abort mission soonest'.

"In the case you've forgotten your manual, Tarleton, that's a recall order," he went on. *"You have exactly ten seconds to comply!"*

I had no adequate answer for that. I listened to the star static and watched the rings grow on the

screen, resolving into individual points of light and clots and streamers of dust, looming over me like an impending storm. Or possibly it was just my guilty conscience that made it look that way. It wasn't every day that a line officer of the Navy mutinied—even me.

An hour later my proximity alarms began emitting warning bursts: the garbage density ahead was reaching the limits of my D and D gear to handle. I punched in a deceleration and switched my forward screen to high magnification but saw nothing to explain what Paul had been doing here. The plane of the rings was about ten thousand miles ahead now, the Division a stark black swathe through the brightness that filled the screen. The boat bucked and yawed as the automatics made course corrections to avoid the occasional high velocity particle orbiting here.

I tuned up and down the band, searching for a transmission on the Section frequencies, to no effect. Paul had thought there was something here that was worth throwing away a career—and possibly a life—for. Something Crowder had sent a G-boat to prevent him from reaching. What difference my being here would make, I didn't really know; but as long as there was a chance that Paul needed my help I had to try. I had gotten that far with my inspirational talk when the matter was taken out of my hands by a blast from the alarms an instant before the panel swung up and smashed the world into rubble.

The light hurt my eyes. I fetched

a groan up from somewhere down around the planetary core and managed to raise an eyelid. The panel before me was atwinkle with pretty flashing colors, all signalling emergency. Beyond that the DV screen framed a golden glow that faded to cherry red and dimmed out. I dragged myself upright in the harness and swallowed a taste of blood and made an effort to focus in on the dials. What I saw was not encouraging. The cryston hull of the boat was intact, of course; but what was inside it hadn't fared so well: life support system inoperative, main drive inoperative, oxy tanks broached and leaking. I was still alive, but that was a mere detail, subject to change.

The boat was still moving along at a good clip, tumbling slowly. The braking tubes responded at about half power when I tried them. I had managed to reduce speed to 30 KPH relative before a long slab came sailing out of the dark at me, end over end, and caromed off my hull aft, putting a nice spin on her to go with the tumble. Two more solid impacts and half a dozen minor ones later I had averaged out to a matched course with the rest of the junk. I had time then to notice a cut on my jaw and a swollen eye and register a cabin pressure of .9 PSI at a temperature of - 56 K before I saw Paul Danton's boat drifting a thousand yards away with the hatch open.

My suit was still tight, of course, which accounted for my continued survival. I managed to open the hatch in spite of its battered condition and climbed out under all those

stars. I spent a few seconds re-acquainting myself with the size of infinity before kicking off toward Paul's boat.

It was standing on end, slowly falling over backward. At a hundred yards I could see that it was empty. There were no signs of external damage, which meant that Paul had come in more cautiously than I, under full control; which indicated in turn that this was indeed his chosen destination. And unless he had headed off into the haze in history's most elaborate suicide, he had to be within a few hundred yards of his boat. The only hiding places in sight were two boulders, one the size of a condominium apartment dead ahead, the other smaller and off to the left. I picked the more distant one on a hunch and headed for it.

I had covered about half the distance when my headset came to life and a voice said, "Hold it right where you are." It wasn't Paul's voice, which meant it was Hatcher.

Then I saw the stern of the G-boat peeping from behind the rock I had decided to by-pass. I was about a hundred feet from the other slab, closing fast. I didn't brake, didn't answer, didn't do anything.

"My cross-hairs are on you," Hatcher warned; but I was fifty feet from the rock now, and he hadn't fired yet. It came to me that he would hesitate to shoot. Crowder would prefer me alive so that he could dig my secrets from me with a blunt instrument. That thought helped me across the last few yards. Then I saw rock melt and spatter dead ahead. He fired again as I

slammed the boulder hard enough to give me a view of constellations that didn't show on the charts. But I grabbed and held on, clawed my way up and over—and was looking at a dead man.

Paul was drifting a few feet from the rock, his hands stretched out as if he were reaching for it. His faceplate was open, and a strange, crystalline flower grew out of his helmet, a branched spray of red-black frozen blood. The face behind it was swollen, the eyeballs bulged from their sockets. I held on and looked at what was left of my friend and the cold inside me spread until it filled me like fire fills a burning house.

"I was warned about you," Hatcher's voice grated at me like gravel in the gears. "Your being here tells us what we need to know, Tarleton. Now, come out of there with your hands back of your helmet."

I hugged the rock and pulled my eyes away from the corpse and pictured the situation: the position of my boat—smashed and useless; of Paul's boat, of the G-boat, the two rocks. As for Hatcher: I couldn't be sure. He might be in his boat, or he could be somewhere else, possibly miles away; the shot could have been telescopically sighted.

"I'm warning you for the last time, Tarleton, if I have to come out—" he cut himself off, but he'd said enough. Or perhaps he was trickier than I thought, and the slip had been intentional.

I moved up the rock far enough to allow me a glimpse of my boat. It was drifting slowly toward me. From

his vantage point, Hatcher would be unaware of that. I wondered how I could make use of the fact.

I made an effort to clear my mind and think analytically. It was difficult to understand Paul's death. Crowder would have wanted him alive, that seemed clear. Hatcher had blundered. He would be in an agitated state of mind, hoping to salvage something from the situation.

Quite suddenly I was certain that he intended to kill me. My interference could supply the excuse he needed—provided I weren't alive to testify. That was why he had waited here; to perfect his alibi.

I spoke for the first time: "You're an idiot, Hatcher," I said. "Why did you kill him? He wasn't armed. Or did he outwit you, open his faceplate before you could stop him?"

Hatcher swore in a manner suggesting my guesses were accurate. I laughed, a hearty chuckle, full of the rich amusement of life.

"I daresay you haven't yet gotten around to reporting your little slip, eh, Hatcher? You may even have given Crowder the impression you had him neatly bagged, ready for questioning."

"Shut up, damn you, Tarleton!"

"Crowder couldn't have monitored your intercom transmissions out here: too far, too much particle noise. So he didn't hear you hail Danton, and he can't hear us now. The fact is, he doesn't know what's happened out here, right, Hatcher? You're still working on your story, eh? And you've an idea I can help you."

"Tarleton—listen to me!" Hatch-

er sounded rather desperate now. "You know what Danton was up to; give me the answers, and we can both be in the clear."

"Don't be a fool," I said. "Commander Danton wouldn't involve himself in anything illegal—and if he had, he wouldn't involve a friend in it."

This time Hatcher just made noises. He was a man with a great deal of fury in him. While he raved I moved Paul's body into position.

"Hatcher, you poor simpleton," I cut into the tirade, "all I have to do is wait until the boat that's no doubt following me arrives; it will be my pleasure to tell Crowder how you had Danton in your fingers and let him slip away—and the secret with him."

"That cuts it, Tarleton!" Hatcher's voice slashed at me. "You just blew your only chance! You're dead, Tarleton! You're—"

The boat was close enough—and I had him mad enough. The time was now.

"You'll have to catch me first, Butterfingers!" I gripped the frozen body by the ankles, turned it, and gave it a hearty shove away from me. The corpse sailed out in a flat glide, arms outstretched. A quarter of a mile away, Hatcher scrambled into view, coming up over the curve of his rock, a blast rifle in his hands. Flame winked and molten rock flashed a few feet from me; Hatcher had fired at the decoy, but the rock partially blocked his field of fire.

"Hatcher, wait!" I shouted. "I didn't think you'd really shoot! I'll talk! I'll tell you everything you need to know!"

I hugged the rock and waited to see if Hatcher was taking the bait. He didn't fire again. Through the phones I heard a sharp hissing; he had activated his back-pack: he was giving chase. I risked another peek and saw him coming up fast, heading to intersect the body he thought was me. His course would bring him within a few yards of my shelter. I faded farther back and waited.

Suddenly he was there, sliding past ten feet away. I set myself to launch myself at his back just as he abruptly swore and braked, in the same motion twisting to face me. He fired from the hip and missed as I dived backwards.

"Clever," he said. "But not quite clever enough." I moved farther back, with the idea of keeping the rock between us. Beyond that, I had no more plans. The difficulty was in guessing just where he was.

I heard the back-pack again, briefly. Then silence. On instinct, I shifted position, keeping flat. I could hear his breathing in my ears.

"Look behind you," he said suddenly. I looked. He was there, hanging in space about twenty feet away, the gun aimed squarely at my face. There was something else there, too, something he hadn't noticed.

"If you have any last words," he said, "you'd better say them now."

"You want to know all about Danton, don't you?" I said quickly. "I—"

"You're bluffing," he cut me off. He moved the gun from my face down to my chest, drifting slowly closer. "You don't know anything, Tarleton. You're a fool, mixing in matters that don't concern you."

"Yes, but—"

At the last instant he sensed the silent boat sliding up so smoothly behind him. He half-turned as the battered prow struck him, held him spread-eagled across its scarred curve as it closed the last few feet and rammed the rock beside me with all the inertia of a hundred tons of metal.

Clipped to Paul's suit I found a small torch, set to a proper intensity for rock-cutting. It took me half an hour to find the place where Paul had been working: there was a neat, wedge-shaped cut in a surface of the type that represented a formal crustal layer. The exposed rock was greyish, striated, indicating that once, long ago, the slab I was riding had been part of a sea bottom.

I searched Paul for the piece that had been cut away, without success. But of course Hatcher had been there before me. I disliked touching what remained of him, but I overcame my aversion and found the wedge of rock in a belt.

It was smooth on the cut faces, rough on the other. There was a depression in the latter, as if an oversized thumb had been pressed into soft clay.

"What is it, Paul?" I asked the empty space around me. "What was it you died to protect?" I pushed Paul's body ahead of me back to his boat and maneuvered it inside. I was envisioning the expression on Crowder's face when I accused him of murder by proxy, when another thought intruded itself.

Crowder might quite logically accuse *me* of killing Hatcher.

And why stop there? If I had killed Hatcher, I might also have killed Paul Danton. And how could I prove I hadn't?

"Nonsense," I told myself. "What possible motive . . . ?"

But what motive had Hatcher had—or Crowder? What had they been trying to conceal? What was it that Paul had discovered, that he had hinted at in his note?

Abruptly, I understood.

Mutiny.

Unthinkable though it was, the ship was in the hands of Crowder and company. Everything fell into place at once: Paul's oblique hints, Crowder's strange ascendancy over the commodore, Hatcher's incredible arrogance, Paul's murder.

It was still unclear what Paul's errand had been in the Rings, what significance the bit of stone had; perhaps it had been nothing more than a red herring, a distraction for Hatcher to puzzle over.

I realized then that I could not return to the ship. If a man of Commodore Grayson's rank and experience had been unable to resist the mutiny—if Paul Danton had failed—what could a junior lieutenant hope to accomplish on board?

But I was not aboard. I was here, free, and with a boat at my disposal.

Two boats. Hatcher's G-boat was much the more spaworthy.

I realized then what it was I had to do.

It was a long run from Saturn's rings to Terra; a lonely ride for a man to make in a hundred-ton side-boat. There wasn't enough food, air, or water aboard—not enough of anything. But Captain Bligh had

sailed the Bounty's longboat from Tahiti to the Thames with nothing but a bad temper and a compass. I could try to do as well.

"Goodbye, Paul," I said to the corpse. "I'll do my best."

THREE

ADVENTURE HAS BEEN DEFINED as somebody else having a difficult time, a long way away. But this was me, and I was here. A hundred and eighteen days isn't forever; hardly long enough for a seed to sprout, grow into a vine, and give birth to a ripe tomato. Long enough for the bare branches of winter to turn to the leafy green of Spring. Long enough for an inch and a half of beard to grow, for the air to thicken and foul, for the water recycler to form a rime of green mould, for the last food canister from the last case to be scraped bare and then split open and licked clean. Long enough for the last paper garment to shred away to tatters to show the bones poking through skin a dirty shade of grey-green. Long enough for the brain to run a million circuits of the skull, like a squirrel in a treadmill, and end up a small, scared huddle of thwarted instincts, crouched in the farthest corner with blank eyes.

What is there to say? Even the fall of Rome only took three volumes. The time passed.

I came in past Luna at full interplanetary velocity, skimmed atmosphere a thousand miles out and watched the crystone hull glow cherry red. Something about that got through to me, wherever I had gone. I tried for a long time before I sat

up and poked keys, setting up an approach ellipse. I was cackling while I did it, about something that was very funny, but which I had temporarily mislaid. There was more waiting after that; and after a time the buffeting began. It was hot where I was, and the buffeting got worse, and then I was working hard, unstrapping, crawling forward into the small, dark space with the lid that closed down and left me just room enough to pull the lever that was nestled in my hand. That was hard to do, and once or twice I forgot it and almost went to sleep; but part of me seemed to think it was important. I got it pulled and heard sounds that might have been relays closing and automatics starting up. Or may be it was just the caretaker, trimming the lawn over my grave. Thinking about graves made me think of Earth, and for a second something almost popped into my mind. And then the big twenty-ton roller hit me and spread me out so thin the red sunlight shone through me until it faded out into a roaring darkness.

I came to consciousness with salt water the temperature of blood slapping at my face. I breathed some of the water and coughed, which helped. By the time I had cleared my lungs, I was sitting up looking over the side of a Mark XXI survival raft at a glassy green hill down the side of which I was sliding. I rode up the next one and caught just a glimpse of more of the same before another faceful of spume hit me. I was busy with that for a while, and afterwards was too weak to do

anything but lie the way the fit had left me, on my back, looking up at a sky the color of beaten lead. At about that time I noticed I was cold, but it was just a passing observation. The sky darkened, not gradually but in abrupt jumps. Suddenly it was twilight, and some innocent, maidenly little stars were peeping out, like the first flowers of April. That was a nice thought. I liked it. I held on to it and tried to build it into something, but nothing came, and it faded, and . . .

When I woke it was daylight; watery grey, but the wind felt a little warmer. I remembered the emergency ration kit that all Mark XXI's carried. It was somewhere only a few miles away, at the other end of the raft. I used a lot of very precious energy crawling there, got the flap open, pulled out the plastic box, and got the lid open.

It contained a card stating that it had been inspected 10/7/89, and found unsatisfactory.

I went along with that.

The sun had jumped to zenith while I wasn't looking. It gave about as much heat as a forty-watt glare strip.

The thought occurred to me that it was time to do a little reconnaissance: note my position, the wind direction and strength, the water temperature, respiration, and pulse.

I was sitting up, looking across restless water at a misty shore line. It was too far away to make out any detail, but somehow it looked to me like the shore of Africa. Or possibly New Jersey.

I lay down to think about it, and was doing rather well until the shelling got noisy. It was coming closer; the ground heaved with every detonation. The barrage had been going on for a long time, and pretty soon they'd be coming over the top and charging with fixed bayonets, but I wasn't ready, not nearly ready, and I couldn't find my rifle, and anyway, I was already wounded or possibly dead and where were the aid men, and—

The last burst picked me up and threw me a thousand miles into an open grave and the mud showered down on me and a giant tombstone fell out of the sky to mark the place, but I didn't care any more, because I was far away, in that place where the heroes and the cowards lie together with a fine impartiality, waiting for eternity to pass, slowly, like a procession of snails creeping across an endless desert toward a distant line of mountains.

Voices woke me.

I lay for a while and listened to them. They jabbered in a language that was all gobbles and grunts, like Hawaiian song lyrics. It was a novel kind of delusion; I held onto it; it was almost like company.

Something hard dug into my ribs. I opened my eyes and was looking up at the dirtiest human being on Earth. He was short, brown-skinned, wrinkled. He wore ragged khaki shorts, a felt hat that had once had a shape and color, tennis shoes with burst seams through which bony brown toes protruded. He was the best-looking man I'd ever seen.

I tried to tell him so; the words

were a little garbled perhaps, because of the excitement of the moment, and my voice wasn't quite its usual rich, well-modulated self. But I told him how glad I was to see him, how long it had been since my last full meal, and supplied other data of interest to heroic rescuers of deserving hardship cases like myself. Then I flopped back and waited for the nourishing soup and soothing balm that the script called for.

He brought a big knobbed stick out from behind him and hit me over the head with it.

Indignation has never been listed as one of the basic survival mechanisms, but I can't think of a better name for the fine, warm emotion that sent me up off the ground like the last kernel in the popper. I made a lunge for him, missed, and dived face-first into the dirt. He turned around and ran as if he'd just remembered his toast was burning.

In two minutes he was back, with friends. It took them thirty seconds to flush me out of the pile of dead leaves I'd burrowed into. There weren't any sticks this time. Two of them grabbed my arms and two more my legs, giving me a nice view of a pair of knobby knees, upside down, and off we went down the trail.

The quaint native village they took me to was built of brush, rusty oil drums, and wooden slats with words like AKAK and COCO stencilled on them. They put me on the floor in a hut with a native beauty who might have been any age from thirty-five to sixty. She had two

teeth strategically placed in a mouth that reminded me of an amateur short-stop I used to know, named Bad Bounce Feldman. But she gave me fish—fried whole—fruit, bread of a sort, and canned peaches. That made her beautiful.

Nobody in the village spoke English, French, German, Russian, or Cantonese. Nobody bothered me, nobody except old Gertie paid any attention to me.

I spent a week in the hut before I discovered I could crawl outside and sit in the sun.

I tried speaking sign language to Gertie, signalling "your pardon, ma'am, but would you be so good as to inform me of the name of this charming region, and its approximate location?" The only answer I got was a snicker. I drew a map of the world in the dirt and offered her my stylus, which she smelled and threw away.

There was no radio in the village, no power transport other than half a dozen much-battered boats rotting on the beach, none of which appeared capable of navigating across a reflecting pool.

When I was strong enough, I explored the island; it was about nine miles long by four wide. There were other islands visible from the low peak from which I did my exploring. None seemed to be inhabited.

I was filled with a fine fervor to rush to Washington and report mutiny and murder to the Chief of Naval Operations—as well as to receive official congratulations on my epoch-making navigational feat. But the days passed and nothing happened.

It was almost three weeks before company arrived.

The whole tribe—if they were a tribe—were gathered on the beach to watch the boat come in. It was a down-at-heels air-cushion launch, painted a milky grey and flying a Company ensign. It rode up on the beach—a stretch of grey sand like industrial waste—and squatted there in a cloud of dust while the spinners ran down. Two Polynesian-looking men in neat Company uniforms jumped down, then a brown-skinned, blue-eyed, bow-legged man in grey shorts and jacket with Principle Officer shoulder tabs. He mopped at his forehead with a big blue and white bandanna and came up the sand to where my crowd were waiting. No one rushed forward to exchange bananas for transistor triodes. They waited, with a certain amount of yawning and shifting from foot to foot. I was making my way forward when the bow-legged man called something in the native dialect. The old boy in the sneakers—the one who had greeted me that first day—his name was something like Tmbelee—edged forward a few feet. He wasn't carrying his stick today. I waited while they talked. I got the impression the bow-legged man was asking questions. Tmbelee pointed in my direction once, which seemed to irritate the visitor. After a while he turned away and started toward the boat.

I called after him. He halted and waited until I overtook him.

"I need transport to the mainland," I said. "Ah—you *do* speak English?"

"Um," he grunted. "Tmbelee say you were Englishman." He looked me up and down like a tailor disapproving of my clothes. I could hardly blame him; I was wearing nothing but a pair of flowered shorts Gertie must have salvaged from the local dump.

"I sail for Lahad Datu," he said. I had never heard of Lahad Datu.

"That's fine," I said. "Anywhere. I'm a Nav—"

"Damn goose chase," he said, talking to himself. "Couple million square miles bloody ocean to search. Bloody nonsense." He jerked a thumb at the villagers, who were wandering off now.

"I ask if they see man I'm looking for. Bloody fools."

I felt a stab of emotion. "You're looking for someone?"

"Naval deserter. Bad man. Orders to shoot to kill. Describe him to them: young fellow, twenty-five year, black hair, six-one, strong." He laughed sourly, rolled a small blue eye at me. "They say you might be chap I want." He frowned again.

"What's civilized man doing here 'mong aborigines?" He snorted that as if no matter what I said he wouldn't approve.

"Research," I said quickly, hoping the shock he'd given me didn't show. "In the beginning, anyway. Seem to have lost my drive somewhere along the way." I smiled a self-forgiving smile, soliciting his understanding of my human failings. "I got to drinking; and there was a woman. Usual story. But that's behind me now. Have to get back, pull myself together. Never too late."

"OK. You get kit and come 'long."

"My kit's already in my pocket," I said. I went back to my hut long enough to give my issue folding knife to Gertie with a little speech of gratitude. She looked at it and made noises like a Neapolitan heli-cab driver demanding a larger tip.

Back on the beach my benefactor looked at me and shook his head and laughed his sour laugh again.

I didn't understand the joke until I got a look in the mirror in the spare cabin he gave me.

FOUR

I TRIED TO ANALYZE THE SITUATION in the light of the latest development. I realized that I had been assuming that Crowder would cover up my absence from my post of duty if only to avoid having to make explanations. I had also assumed he'd assume I was dead. But he was ahead of me; he'd allowed for the off-chance that I would try for Terra in the G-boat, and prepared a story. There had probably been a cordon looking for me all the way in; only the needle-in-the-haystack principle had let me get through undetected—at least until the last few thousand miles, when the ground and satellite stations would have picked me up.

They'd no doubt tracked the boat in through the atmosphere, and then lost me. A life raft on the Pacific, contrary to Search-and-Rescue propaganda, is a hard target to spot. But they were still trying. Only the handy disguise that starvation had given me had saved me from walking into the net head-first.

Very well; my plan to report in to the first Naval Station or Public installation I could find would have to be modified. I'd have to remain inconspicuous, travel quietly, and turn myself in to one of my influential contacts in Washington with my side of the story. It shouldn't be too difficult. There were no national borders, no passports, no travel restrictions, no reason for anyone to look at me twice—provided I didn't call attention to myself. On that note, I turned in and slept in my first bed in over four months.

Lahad Datu was a concrete and aluminum port surrounded by basha huts and palm trees, on the north side of Darvel Bay in North Borneo. My friendly Company man—Superintendent Otaka—dropped me there with an old set of ducks and a hundred-credit chit as reward for my help with the navigation through seven hundred miles of tricky currents. I used it to buy myself a steak, a haircut, a suit of clothes, and a hotel room, in that order. The launch's salt-water shower had kept me clean, but there was nothing like plenty of hot, soapy *fresh* water for restoring the sizing to my soul—that and twelve hours' sleep in a good bed on solid land.

I had optimistically bought clothes a few sizes too large; they hung on me like Jack Pumpkinhead's vest. My skin was getting some color back in it, and my teeth were tightening up in their sockets, and my hair had pretty well stopped falling out; but I wouldn't have any trouble with anybody looking for a husky youngster. I looked like a fifty-year-old

invalid, and felt much the same. Climbing a flight of stairs winded me; I couldn't carry a cafeteria tray without spilling my coffee. I was safe from any casual lookers—but my fingerprints and retinal patterns hadn't changed.

There were jobs available in Lahad for an old beachcomber with an education, and few questions asked. I gave the name John Bann and took a post as a bookkeeper for a taro plantation and settled down to building up my health and a get-away stake. It was going to call for some nice calculating: the pleasure of eating balanced meals against the disguising emaciation that was fading more every day under my new regimen of food, sunshine, and a half mile walk every morning and evening from the bungalow to the office. The pay wasn't big—the bossman was taking advantage of me—but my expenses were even smaller. Food is never a problem out in the islands, if you're willing to settle for fish and fowl and fruit and native bread. My housing was provided; and two sets of white drills were my total wardrobe requirement.

In two weeks I had saved the price of a jet ticket to the other side of the world, and had gained another ten pounds. That put my weight at one-fifty and took ten years off my age, making me a tall, skinny middle-aged man with a permanent stoop.

There were a few decent restaurants in the town, which I visited in the company of a girl named Lacy, a rather pretty little thirty-year-old brunette of mixed French and Chinese ancestry. She confided

that she preferred the company of an older man. I didn't ask her what older man. She meant me.

My bungalow was two doors from hers. It wasn't long before she was dusting and straightening and putting flowers on the table. After dinner we would sit out on the raised verandah and drink tea and watch the spectacular sunsets and talk and listen to the taped symphonies from Radio Borneo at Brunei. When darkness fell and the stars came out I would sometimes find myself searching along the zodiac for the little point of light that was Saturn; but that part of life all seemed very remote and far away. It hadn't been I who had spent seven years in space, deserted my ship, killed a man in the dazzle-plain of the rings, rode a side-boat back eight hundred million miles to a miracle splash-down in the sea. That had been another fellow entirely, a hearty young daredevil full of inexperience and the fine and righteous fire of revenge. Later, when I was feeling better, when things had had time to blow over, I'd look into picking up some of the threads of that identity. But right now, life was sweet enough—and I'd earned the right to a little convalescent leave.

I went on feeling that way until the night the constabulary killed Lacy.

I had stayed an hour late at the office, running down a two-credit shortage in the LP account. Afterwards, instead of walking directly home, I had taken a stroll the long way around, up by the reservoir for a view of the valley and a little

fresh air to drive the eyestrain headache away. I got back to the compound just at dusk, approaching along the jungle road instead of coming in via the University Avenue gate.

I felt no alarm when I saw the two grey-painted cars parked across from my place, only wondered in an absent-minded way who was having trouble with their house energy-unit; the only time we saw a Company car here was on a service call. A stranger in slightly out-of-place-looking clothes gave me a sharp look as I ambled past. I was almost at my gate when I heard the sounds: scuffling, a slammed door, running feet, a terse masculine shout. Lacy whirled through the gate ten feet from me, a lock of hair curled down over her eye. She looked at me and opened her mouth and behind her someone hit a piece of iron with a hammer, hard, twice. The left side of Lacy's blouse jumped, as if a finger had poked it from the inside, and threads flew, and there was a blot of brilliantly crimson blood as big as my hand, as big as a plate, then covering her whole side—

"Johnny—they . . . waiting . . ." she said, quite clearly, and crumpled as if someone had cut the string that was holding her up. She fell to the sidewalk, her neat little legs curled under her. I saw the entry holes on her right side—just tiny burn marks against the white nylon—from the high-velocity needles that had gone clear through her. Her face looked perfectly composed, as if she were playing a little game of possum on the quiet street in the twilight. All this in the timeless half

second before feet pounded on the walk Lacy had come along a moment before.

Then I had turned and was running, straight-arming the stranger who had been just an instant late in getting his gun out, skidding in through Fan Shu's gate and sprinting across his garden patch and over the hedge and around the pond and through the trees and into the jungle, as if I'd planned the route in advance, learned it by heart, waiting for this moment.

By dawn I was twenty miles from Lahad, hidden out under a hibiscus hedge beside a vast pineapple field. I ate a pineapple and dozed. I could hear traffic passing along a road half a mile away; copters criss-crossed the sky, none very close. When it was dark I went on, keeping away from roads.

My feet blistered and swelled. My legs ached. Once an hour I stopped to rest. I saw no searching parties on foot, no packs of trained dogs. But why should they bother beating the brush for me? I would have to try to leave the island eventually. That was where they would be watching and waiting. How I would elude them I didn't know—but that was a problem I would consider later. At the moment it was sufficient that I was still alive and free.

I didn't understand their killing Lacy. It had been a brutal, senseless act, totally out of keeping with the tenor of the modern world. There was little crime on the planet, little need for cadres of efficient police.

Perhaps that was the explanation. Lacy had died because an over-ex-

cited amateur had panicked. Somehow it didn't make her death any more endurable. I hadn't loved her, but she had been my friend. She had died because of me.

There had been too many deaths. Something was very wrong with my peaceful world. I couldn't afford to be caught and shot—not until I had seen the people I had to see. There was more at stake than my life, or my career, or justice for Paul Danton, or revenge for Lacy. I wondered what it was.

The next six days were like the first. I walked, avoided towns, stole enough fruit to keep the pangs at bay. For all its intensive cultivation, Borneo was sparsely populated. It was like a deserted world, except for the air traffic: the high jets, the low-flying copters, none of which seemed to be looking for a man on foot. My feet stopped hurting. I caught a fish in a canal and built a fire and cooked it. My shoes began to come apart. I threw them away and went on barefooted.

On the morning of the eighth day I came up on a stand of imported cottonwoods the landscape designers had placed on a knoll as a backdrop to an Area Superintendent's villa. The Super—a little man, probably a Japanese—came out of the house for a pre-breakfast stroll in the garden. It was a very nice garden; green lawn, paths, a fountain, flower beds as neat as a jeweler's display window, and as colorful. The villa was well-designed, sturdily built, with a fine view down across a long slope to the highway that bisected the geometrically precise plantation. On the hillsides in the distance were

terraced vegetable farms, patterns of soft color in the dawn.

It was an orderly, productive world, with a place for everything and everything in its place—except me. I had gotten out of step with the system—and suddenly I wanted back in. I was a commissioned officer of the Navy, a superior human being. Why was I tired, dirty, dressed in rags, peeking out from the bushes at normal human life, envying the lucky ones who lived in houses, slept in beds, strolled in gardens? It was still a world of justice and order; all I had to do was make contact with the authorities, tell them what I knew and what I suspected, tear away the blindfold and let the light in.

There would be a phone in the house below; in seconds I could be face to face via screen with Admiral Harlowe or Senator Taine. They'd listen—and act.

I got to my feet and walked openly down to the house. At my ring, the door opened and I was looking at a man with a gun in his hands.

It was a twin-bore power gun, aimed at my chest. He held it very steadily, with a cool expression on his face as if he were lining up on an aphid with a spray-projector. I stood very still and wondered what a power bolt through the lungs would feel like.

He let me wonder for a while. Then he spoke sharply over his shoulder in Japanese. I understood enough to know he was telling someone to search me. A short, wide woman emerged from behind him and patted me from chest to ankles

in a business-like way, as if she frisked suspects before breakfast every morning. She told the man I was clean. Without lowering the gun he motioned me inside, closed the door behind me.

"Who are you?" he asked me. His voice was as light and crisp as dry toast, and about as emotional.

"I'm looking for work," I said. "I just—"

"You name," he interrupted.

"John Lacey," I said, not very smoothly. "Sorry if I startled you, but—"

"You're the man known as John Bann," he cut me off. "The constabulary seem most eager to find you. They've visited my farm twice in the past five days."

"You're crazy," I said in a voice that sounded as weak in my ears as a re-used tea-bag.

"Why do they want you?" he asked.

"They didn't say."

"Let me see your wrists."

I held my hands out; he told me to turn them over and I did.

"How did you get here? The roads are patrolled."

"I stayed off the roads."

"You walked one hundred and eighty miles?"

"I didn't know I'd come that far."

"We are eight miles from Taran-kun." He looked at me as if he was waiting for me to say something. "The port is under surveillance, of course."

"What are you going to do?" I asked him.

Instead of answering, he spoke to the woman again; he was telling her

to notify someone to come at once. Then he walked me through the house to the kitchen, a bright room full of sunshine.

"Why not let me go?" I said. "I'm not guilty of any crime."

"You would soon be apprehended," he said. "Kindly be seated and remain silent."

He sat with the gun held steadily on me, not moving, not talking, not even blinking. It was ten minutes before I heard a vehicle outside; I started to get up and he motioned me back.

"Please, Mr. Bann. Be patient."

The opening of a door; low voices; footsteps. Four men came into the room. They were not constabulary.

One was a big, blunt-handed fellow with a heavy, sagging face set in a permanent scowl. Another was small, too-thin, chestless, with arms like sticks of wood. The third was plump and pale, dead-faced, grey-skinned. The last of the quartet was a foxy fellow with a nose that looked as if it would drip. All were dressed in light coveralls, none too clean; they seemed to be field-hands. A faint odor of fertilizer followed them in.

My host said something and they all stared at me, spreading out for a better view. The woman was back, standing with arms folded.

The foxy man said something in Japanese that seemed to be "Is it certain?"

I didn't understand the reply. I listened hard to the conversation, picking up about half the words:

". . . be sure?"

". . . dangerous . . . live . . ."

"Why . . . purpose . . . long time."

"Who else . . . here . . . afoot."

". . . trap . . . death . . ."

"you . . . waiting (with contempt)."

"Not . . . decision . . ."

They stopped talking and looked at me.

"Would you mind telling me what's going on?" I said. "Who are these men?"

"My colleagues," my host said. "Shik . . . Freddy . . . Ba Way . . . Sharnhorst. My name, by the way, is Joto. And of course, Mrs. MacReady."

They looked at me. I looked back at them, trying to read something in their faces. All I seemed to see was a kind of dull animal curiosity, as if I were a mangled body.

"Fine," I said. "Have you decided what to do about me?"

"Indeed, yes," Mr. Joto said, and almost smiled. "First Mrs. MacReady will give you breakfast. Then we will smuggle you out of Borneo."

FIVE

THE BREAKFAST MRS. MAC-Ready put before me was magnificent. I hadn't realized how hungry I was until I smelled it cooking. While I ate, the men talked. I didn't try to follow their conversation; I had a feeling that I wouldn't have understood it even if I had known the words.

"Very well, you leave tonight," Mr. Joto announced.

"How?"

"You will be transported with the day's consignment of produce and loaded aboard an outward-bound ship."

"Won't anyone get curious when they see me riding down the conveyor belt among the pineapples?"

"You'll be quite hidden from view inside a ten-pack case."

"What about things like breathing and eating?"

"No difficulty at all. The cases are not air-tight. It will be delicately handled, of course, fruit being delicate cargo. It will be stowed in open stacks. Once underway you can emerge. You'll have the freedom of the barge; it's unmanned."

"How far will it take me?"

"What destination do you have in mind?"

"Washington, Northamerica."

He looked thoughtful. "Let me see . . . Flotilla 9, Convoy 344 . . . Tomorrow is Wednesday. Excellent. 344 it is. I can put you in a Barge coded for Philadelphia and Norfolk."

"Close enough," I said.

"The barges are unmanned, of course," he went on. "In the event of any problem, a maintenance crew may come aboard, but you'll have no difficulty in eluding observation if that should be the case."

"How long will the trip take?"

"In this season—seventy-two hours."

"What happens when I arrive?"

"You will be met."

"My I ask by whom?"

"By reliable persons."

"One more question," I said.

"Why are you doing this?"

"I think you can guess the answer to that, Mr. Bann."

"I'm a total stranger to you. You don't even know why the constabulary are chasing me."

He smiled a slight smile. "You killed two of the swine. That is sufficient credentials, Mr. Bann."

I opened my mouth, but changed what I was going to say in time.

"You approve of killing policemen?"

Mr. Joto made a spitting sound.

"You could turn me in and collect a handsome reward, I imagine." I pursued the point.

"You think I would take the money of the black-souled tyrants who grind the free spirit of man into the dust?" he hissed. "That I would abet the schemes of the jackals who have robbed us of all that gives life value?"

I looked around at his cheerful house with its sunny garden and the peaceful acres spreading away to the horizon and wondered what he was talking about.

"They think they are secure in their high seats of power," he orated. "But the spark of rebellion still lives. They have not yet stamped out the spirit of defiance."

"Defiance of what?" I asked him.

His head jerked as if I had hit him. Then he nodded; his long lips twitched.

"Yes," he said. "You're wise. Keep your own counsel. An excellent habit. What I know nothing of, I can not betray under torture."

He seemed to be speaking English, but on the wrong wave length. I let it go at that and turned in to get as much sleep as possible before fruit-packing time.

They woke me in pitch darkness, led me down to the kitchen, issued me a ceremonial cup of hot coffee,

and gave me a coverall very similar to a shipsuit that Mr. Joto said would keep me warm, dry, and vermin-free. It was a poor fit and smelled like stale crackers, but was still an improvement over what was left of my office suit after a week out of doors. Mrs. MacReady was very brisk and efficient about handing over a false ID, showing the name John Bann and registering a substantial credit balance. She added an aid kit, compass, pocket knife, hand light, and ball of twine. She didn't say what I should use them for. I stowed them solemnly in the pockets of my suit, like a Space Scout preparing for his first hike. Freddy and Ba Way hovered in the background looking tense and worried. There was a feeling of petty furtiveness about the proceedings, an adolescent solemnity; I had the feeling that at any moment someone would produce a dirty pocket knife and propose a blood-oath ceremony.

We left the house via the back door, crossed the rose garden, took a bricked foot-path back to a big equipment garage. A man I hadn't seen before was there, warming up a personnel carrier. We climbed aboard and drove off down one of the neat, tree-lined roads in the pre-dawn mist, turned off after half a mile, pulled up in front of one of a row of open-sided, metal-roofed packing sheds. Big green-painted cargo carriers as shiny as limousines were backed up to the ramp. There was a sweet odor of rotten fruit in the air. Joto and his minions hopped down and went briskly to work shifting the big six-sided anodized cases, using a monorail power hoist. It was

all done by the numbers, like something long rehearsed.

"Right, in you go," Mr. Joto said, and waved a hand at a case that looked like all the others except that a hinged panel in one end was standing open. I went over and looked in. There was a cylindrical nest in the center of the honeycomb that held the pineapples. It was big enough to lie down and turn over in, not much more.

"When you are ready to emerge, you simply depress the release with your toe," Mr. Joto told me, pointing out a small lever at the bottom of the door. Nobody else said anything; they stood there in the early morning gloom and looked at me, expressions of anxious expectation on their faces. They had spent a lot of time and effort on their invention, and now they were waiting for me to find out whether it would fly, or crunch in on the test-hop.

I had a sudden, graphic sense of the absurdity of the situation: I, Lieutenant Banastre Tarleton, an officer of the Regular Navy, shivering in a smelly set of cast-offs, about to be entombed alive by a gang of half-baked revolutionaries, dedicated to the overthrow of everything I believed in, assisting me in the misguided belief that I was a murderer.

But perhaps they had tricked me. Perhaps they meant to seal me in and call the constabulary, who would pull me out, blinking sheepishly and scratching my flea-bites, having fouled my nest in the meantime. I had my mouth open to tell them I'd changed my mind, that I'd take my chances on my own, that the whole thing had gotten out of

hand and that I'd decided to walk out to the highway and give myself up, explain that it was all a mistake . . .

But somehow it seemed to require too much effort. It was all so remote, so unreal.

"Good-bye, Mr. Bann, and good luck," Joto said, his voice echoing, and offered his hand. Automatically, I shook it, then Freddy's and Ba Way's. Mrs. MacReady sniffled and wiped at her eyes—as surprising as seeing a stone lion meow. Then I was crawling head-first into an overpowering odor of pineapples, turning over on the thin padding, looking back past my feet at the narrowing patch of watery daylight. The last thing I saw as the door closed was Joto's strained features staring in at me like the first arrival at the scene of an accident, peering into the wreckage, afraid of what he'll see but secretly hoping for the worst.

I lay on my back in the darkness, wondering vaguely if the ventilators worked, if the release lever would work, remembering all the questions I should have asked and hadn't. But it didn't really seem important. There were metallic clatterings, faint jarrings, a sensation of movement, dizzying, dreamlike. Deep vibrations started up, became a steady thrumming, accompanied by a swaying first to one side and then the other.

I found my thoughts flitting back over everything that had happened to me in the five months since my life had slipped out from under me like a roller-skate on a stair. Incidents jostled each other, searching for a pattern, a scale: the weeks in

the foul-smelling cockpit of the sideboat, fingering the piece of rock I had taken from Paul's body, wondering at its meaning; the commodore's look in the hooded light as Crowder rocked on his heels and smiled; Gertie, staring in dismay at my parting gift; Lacy's soft hands, soft lips; the stark clarity of the moment when I thought Mr. Joto would fire the power gun into my chest. But no pattern came, no meaning. This wasn't me; this was the kind of feckless, chaotic tangle that other, lesser people let their aimless lives fall into. I had an honorable place in a meaningful world, a framework of order that delineated the parameters of existence. My being here was a ghastly mistake, a fantastic misalliance of bad luck and foolish error.

The vibration had changed tone, was shifting down-scale. I tried to sit up and banged my head on the padded ceiling above me. The sound of the engine groaned down to an idle. More thumps and jarrings; a sharp jolt, then pressure under me, a sense of swooping, soaring, then dropping suddenly, braking with a jerk that snapped my head against the floor, another heavy shock, clattering, then stillness. No sound, no motion. Faint and far away a soft whirr started up. That would be the air pumps cycling. But they weren't working properly; it was stifling hot. I was suffocating, I needed air and light; There had been a mistake, and my case was stacked at the bottom of a solid heap of cases, end to end, and I was trapped! I tried to find the lever with my toe, but my foot was made of lead, my leg was

paralyzed. I was tied hand and foot on a runaway flatcar rolling down a hill, in a boat rushing toward a falls. I had lost my lifeline and was falling away from the hull of the ship, falling toward the sun, and it would be a hundred years before my frozen body plunged into the photosphere, but already I could feel the searing heat, slowly beginning to boil me in my own juices . . .

I woke up tasting a bitter coffee taste.

"Doped," I said aloud. "Joto's method of keeping me quiet and cooperative. Clever fellow, Mr. Joto." My voice sounded muffled. I groped with my foot and the panel sprung open. I hitched myself out and was standing in the hold of a freight barge, on a catwalk. Strips of glare lighting showed me thousands of cases like the one I had crawled out of, stacked solidly in long ranks, aisle after aisle, tier after tier.

I found a ladder and went up, out through a narrow door into cold wind and white sunlight. A narrow strip of deck ran beside the three hatches. The ship was double-hulled, shallow-draft, designed to run on the surface, or submerged in rough weather. Half a dozen other barges were in sight on either side, far away, grey blurs on the horizon. I was in the clear, on my way. Mr. Joto's crazy plan had worked. For a moment I envisioned the kind of organization that seemed to imply, but I pushed the thought away.

"Just luck," I told myself. "Crackpot luck."

I went forward, found the emergency personnel facility they had

told me about. There was a bunk, a radio sender, a tiny galley-bar with a supply of frozen rations. I made a sandwich and sat on deck and watched the grey ocean slide past. When I tired of that, I did a few turns around the deck. I took a nap. I woke up and ate again, walked more laps, watched the sun set. Saturn was an evening star, a faint glimmer in the dusty rose sky. I wondered if I had really been there. It seemed less real than the dope-dream about the grave.

SIX

THE THIRD NIGHTFALL CAME on the open sea. For another hour the barge ploughed steadily on to the northwest. Then quite suddenly there was a light off the port bow, then three lights, then an entire array of lights, spreading along the horizon. They closed in on each side; the barge slowed. We were entering a deep bay; whether New York harbor, Delaware Bay, Chesapeake or another I had no idea. I saw other barges lying at anchor on the black water; mine maneuvered along a channel among them. It halted; the sound of the engine dwindled away and died.

Waves slapped the hull and ran back along the side like miniature surf. I could dimly make out the shore, about a mile distant on either side—too far to swim in icy water.

A tug appeared, maneuvering between barges, coming alongside. I made a tentative move toward it, and saw a man standing on its deck. I backed quickly to the starboard scuppers, lay flat.

The tug bumped the side of the

barge; the man appeared over the rail, tall and wide in tight-fitting dark clothing. He climbed up on deck, stood looking around, then walked across to the cabin hatch. With no more warning than that, my mind was made up. I rolled my legs over the thick curve of the gunwale, lowered myself down the smooth, out-bulging side to arm's length, and let go.

I made very little splash going in; the water was bitter cold, but I felt it only on my hands and face; the suit's automatic seals snugged against my throat and wrists at the first pressure. I pushed away and swam forward past the barge's blunt bows. When I was clear, I looked back and saw the man on deck, silhouetted against the light, staring around him. He walked aft, out of sight. He'd know I'd been there, of course. I had made no effort to conceal the evidences of my stay. That seemed suddenly to be a serious error. I turned over and swam hard until I was well away from the barges, floated long enough to catch my breath, then settled down for the long haul to shore.

Fifteen minutes later I waded out on a stony beach, below dark, weed-topped dunes. I crossed them and walked quickly along in their shelter toward the lights of a town. There was a small pavilion above high tide; a bricked path led from it across a lawn, past free-form flower beds full of flowers that looked black in the moonlight, through an open gate into a circular plaza softly lit by shop windows where displays of resort wear and sports equipment and cameras floated in pooled light.

There were no people in sight. I caught my reflection in a window. My hair was wet and ruffled, but the waterproof suit still held its creases. I hoped I looked like any other waterfront roustabout out for an early morning walk.

A tubestop entry glowed halfway around the curve of the walk. Inside, I checked the big wallmap with its glowing lines and moving points of light, and deduced that I was on the outskirts of Baltimore, and that the next Washington car would be along in six minutes. I spent the time drinking a cup of cofty and eating a vitabun from a dispenser shaped like a miniature rose-covered cottage, listening to the airlocks thudding. There was a louder thud and the gate slid back on a cosy interior. I stepped inside. There were no other passengers in the car. The seats were soft. I coded instructions into mine and gave it my counterfeit card to nibble and leaned back and dozed off. I opened one eye the first time the chair was shunted forward and sideways into another car. It seemed only a few moments later that I was waking from a rosy dream with a soft voice in my ear telling me I would arrive at Washington Twenty-five in thirty seconds.

The Gonspart Tower was a two-thousand foot cylinder, pale blue, standing on a silver stem in the center of a circle of garden, not quite crowded by the other towers that spread out over the Virginia hills. I had been there before, in happier times. The cab whirled in under the overhang and waited while two plump, important-looking men

in grey clothes got into a car with the Great Seal blazoned in gold on its side. One of them looked vaguely familiar. He was talking into a phone as they pulled away. They hadn't looked at me.

I went in through the curved glass doors, studied the menu-board, found Trilia Danton listed as residing on the 118th level, Corridor 27, Apartment 61. I walked along the curve of the silver wall until I found lift 27, rode it up alone. The corridor where it deposited me was empty. I walked along the deep-pile passage to a driftwood-grey door with a gold number 61 on it.

I poked the ID end of my card in the slot and waited. Nothing happened for a minute or more; then the door slid back and I walked into a room full of dark fabrics and muted colors and complicated reflections from polished wood and metal furnishings and bric-a-brac. There was a window—not a DV, but one of the kind which pipes in the live view from the roof via a periscopic channel—but the heavy drapes were drawn almost closed.

"Ban—I'm so excited you're here," Trilia's voice said from the air, sounding brash and tinny. "I'll be out in a moment."

I said "fine" and stood by the window and watched the few cabs that were out crawling along the loops of road that were flung across the landscape. The sun was above the horizon, making miles-long shadows behind the towers. Something clicked behind me and I turned and Trilia was there, tall, golden-haired, elegantly groomed, closing the door behind her. She smiled, came across

toward me, but instead of coming up to me she slid aside and sat on a long, soft-cushioned couch, with the window at her back, patted the seat beside her.

"Ban, sit down, you look—you look fine," she changed whatever it was she had been about to say. "I haven't quite recovered from my astonishment yet," she went on, talking rapidly. "How in the world do you happen to be here in Washington? I thought *Tyrant* was still on the trans-Jovian. When did she get back? Why hasn't Paul called?" All this with the strained brightness of a hostess in an official reception line.

"*Tyrant* isn't back, Trilia," I said. "Just me."

She looked puzzled—or perhaps it was a look of sudden fright. I could see her trying to decide which question to ask first.

"I have a message from Paul for you," I said.

"Y . . . yes?"

"He said . . . '*confirmed*'."

Her face went as pale as the slice of sky behind her. Her hands tightened and moved together.

"Why, what a . . . a curious message," she said in a voice that sounded like the original Edison recording. Her smile was a jumble of tensed facial muscles.

"He seemed to think you'd understand," I said.

"Just . . . one of his little jokes, I suppose," she said. "You know how Paul was always joking."

I thought about it, but I couldn't remember Paul Danton in the role of prankster.

"But where *is* Paul?" she said. The question hung in the air.

"Paul is dead, Trilia. Didn't they tell you?"

She made a sound as if I had hit her in the stomach.

"Four months ago," I said. "It was painless, instantaneous. Are you saying the Navy hasn't notified you?"

Her hand clawed at her throat. I sat beside her and caught her hands, held them.

"What does the message mean, Trilia?"

"Nothing," she whispered. "It's a meaningless message. A joke, as I said."

"Trilia, I have to know. What connection does it have with Paul's death?"

She snatched her hands away. "Nonsense! Paul's not dead! He can't be!"

"I saw the body, Trilia. He was murdered. If you'd tell me what 'confirmed' means, I may be able to find out why he was murdered."

"You're insane! I don't believe any of it! You're trying to drag Paul down with you, but you can't! You won't!"

I caught her by the shoulders, not quite shaking her. "Listen to me, Trilia, I came a long way with that message. Paul wasn't playing tricks when he gave it to me. I want to know what's going on, what he meant, what he was involved in—"

"Nothing! Paul was involved in nothing! He was—he *is* a dedicated career officer—"

"He took a scoutboat out into the Rings, alone. He was looking for something, Trilia. What?"

"No! I won't listen to any more!" She leaned toward me as she shrilled

this. When her face was an inch from mine she hissed: "Ban—get out quickly! They're . . ." her voice died away. She was looking at something behind me. I looked that way; the door she had entered through was opening. A man slid through it, holding a gun in his hand. He was a tall man, dressed in black.

"Lieutenant Tarleton," he said in a voice as flat as a millstone. "Sorry I missed you at the barge."

He looked at Trilia. Trilia looked at him. I looked at both of them. He put the gun away and smiled a rather cold smile. He went across to a chair and seated himself.

"Pleasant crossing?" he asked.

"Who's this?" I asked Trilia.

"He said . . . that he had news of Paul."

The man crossed his legs. It was an attitude of relaxation, but he did not appear relaxed. His eyes were sharp and restless.

"You were wise to come here," he said to me. "It might have been difficult to re-establish contact if you hadn't."

Trilia was staring at me. "Ban—what he told me true?"

"What did he tell you?"

"That—that you were being sought as a deserter. That you're a part of—"

"That's enough, Mrs. Danton," the stranger said sharply. His smile took none of the edge from his tone. He shifted his look back to me.

"Lieutenant, our organization has gone to no little trouble and expense to assist you in eluding arrest. I would now like to have a full report from you."

"A report of what?"

He seemed to think that over. "Of Commander Danton's findings," he said carefully.

"His findings with regard to what?"

"You may speak freely, Tarleton," he said. "I've checked the apartment thoroughly; we're not under surveillance."

"Maybe you'd better tell me who you are," I said.

"My knowing you is a sufficient credential, I think."

"I don't agree with you." I stood. "What is it you expect from me? I know nothing about Commander Danton's affairs."

"That doesn't agree with my information."

"Then your information is in error. Maybe you'd better go now."

He stood, faced me squarely. "Let's make the position quite clear, Tarleton. We've helped you. We expect help in return."

"Who is 'we'?"

"You're making a mistake, Tarleton. You can't turn your back on us now."

"Is that a threat?"

"Take it as you will."

Trilia was beside me, touching my arm. "Ban—is it true? Did they bring you here?"

"A little man named Joto put me aboard a barge," I said. "That's all I know."

Trilia made a distressed sound. "Ban—you have to . . ." her voice faltered.

"I have to what, Trilia?"

"Perhaps you're right," the man said. "We'd better be going. We're distressing Mrs. Danton."

"Go where?"

He pointed upward. "I have a cab waiting."

"All right," I said. "Let's go."

"No," Trilia said suddenly, harshly. "Don't go with him, Ban. It's time to end this . . . farce."

The man narrowed his eyes at her. Before he could speak she forestalled him.

"You have a gun," she told him flatly. "You can shoot both of us. Then you may as well shoot yourself. You can't leave this building without my cooperation."

"I can make it very painful for you—"

"Don't waste time bluffing. I have to be here—alive—holding down the lock release for you to pass out through any exterior door. A burglar precaution, you understand. The professional burglars are aware of the system. Perhaps you should have researched matters more completely before you came here."

"Tell me what's going on, Trilia," I said.

"This man is a member of an underground Hatenik organization. Their avowed objective is to overthrow the Companies."

"What connection does a crank organization have with you—or me?"

"Paul was . . . in communication with them. As his wife, I . . . went along. Now Paul's dead. *They* told me—weeks ago. I said I didn't believe them, but I was fooling myself." Her voice broke on the last word.

"Mrs. Danton, you are doing a very foolish thing," the man in black said.

"Oh, no. I'm doing what I should have done long ago. Now get out! I won't inform on you—out of respect for Paul's word, not from any compunction I might have about seeing you fanatics transported!"

"Wait, Trilia," I said. I turned to catch her eye; I winked. "I think we're safe in trusting him; it's not a trap." I turned back to him. "You can't blame us for wanting to be sure," I said. "This is a dangerous game we're playing. You *could* have been OSI."

"Very sensible," the man in black said tonelessly.

"Ban—don't! You don't have to! He can't force you—"

"No question of force," I said. "It's all right. I want to go with him."

"Let's be going," he said.

"Push the button, Trilia," I said. "Everything's going to be all right."

Her eyes searched mine; they looked desperate, haunted.

"All right, Ban—if that's what you want."

I followed my guide out into the silent corridor. We rose the lift in silence to the top, stepped out in a chilly vestibule. He pressed the door-release.

"Ban—are you all right?" Trilia's voice said from the grill above the door.

"I'm fine."

"It's not too late, Ban."

"I'm on my way, Trilia. You'll hear from me."

The lock clicked and we stepped out onto the windy terrace of the roof. The sun was up now, a platinum disk through the haze. The world looked big and very far below.

"You were wise, Lieutenant," the man in black said. "You saved the lady a great deal of unpleasantness."

"Leave her alone," I said. "She won't betray you—but you got her husband killed. You can't expect her to love you."

"She won't be molested—unless she sees fit to re-involve herself."

We stepped into the waiting cop-ter and lifted off into the low traffic lane.

The place to which he took me was an old-fashioned apartment building in the Alexandria section, shabby evidence of the fact that slum-dwellers make slums. We walked down concrete stairs, were met by a man of an indefinable scruffiness who stared and jerked his thumb along the passage.

We ended in a room that had once been painted brown; it was furnished with a long table lined with straight chairs; other chairs were against the walls. There was no carpeting, no curtains at the painted-out window, no decoration on the wall. Light came from a glare panel roughly bolted to the ceiling. There was an odor of dust and stale food. The man in black told me to sit, posted two sullen-looking ex-youths to watch me, and went away.

It was half an hour before the door rattled and swung in to admit a large, dark-haired man with small, pointed features, a massive belly which he seemed to guide ahead of him as he walked. Four other men and a woman followed him into the room, giving me quick, sharp looks before taking chairs behind the table. All of them seemed to vary

from the norm in some manner: too fat, too thin, too tall, too short. Their clothes were badly fitted, none too clean. Their expressions ranged from frowns to glowers. They looked like very unhappy people.

The big man took the center chair. He settled himself and moved a finger and another man noisily placed a chair across the table from him.

"Please sit there, Mr. Tarleton," the big man said to me. His voice surprised me: it was almost a squeak. I took the chair. He looked at me.

"Now you're wondering why we made the pick-up on you," he said. "Not here: at the Borneo end."

I waited.

"You were down in our records as a close acquaintance of Danton," he said. "We know Danton. Then we got the news you'd gone over the hill. We alerted our people. We've got lots of people. Joto got you before the Stabs. Clear?"

"Clear enough. But who do you mean by 'we'? Just who are you?"

"We're an organization, Mr. Tarleton. Individual names wouldn't interest you."

"What kind of organization?"

The big man had a disconcerting habit of looking at me as if waiting for the fatuousness of my own remarks to dawn on me. I countered it as well as I could by looking expectant.

"An organization that's not content with the scraps, Lieutenant," he said at last. "An organization that intends to do something about it."

I went on looking expectant.

"Some of us," he said carefully, "had an idea a man like you might be thinking along the same lines."

I wanted to shift position in my chair; I didn't. I thought of several things to say, and didn't say them.

"We could use an ex-Naval officer, Lieutenant. If he was anti-regime, that is."

That was the first time I'd heard the expression 'ex-officer' used in reference to me. I didn't like the sound of it.

"Use him in what way?"

The big man breathed in and exhaled slowly, not quite a sigh.

"But you're pretty well pleased with things in general, aren't you, Lieutenant?" he said at last. "Oh, I don't mean this little mess you've gotten yourself into; you're pretty sure you can square that, I think. I mean the overall picture: the Companies running the world in the name of the Public, the Navy enforcing their policies of Closed Space, private property, no trespassers. The well-fed, mindless mob at the bottom, the Starlords at the top."

"I wouldn't put it that way," I said.

"The Starlords." The big man used the nickname with a snicker, a sinister lift of his delicately shaped lip, two sizes too small for his head. "Lord Imbolo. Lord Catrice." He pronounced the words as if they were obscenities. "Lord Anse. Lord Banshire. Lord Uhan. Benevolent despots of the world."

"I suppose you have a right to your opinion—"

"You *suppose*; don't you know damned well we have a right?"

"Very well; you have a right; and so do I, of course."

"Uh-huh," he nodded and care-

fully picked at his left nostril. "What was it Danton turned up?" he asked casually.

"Nothing that I know of."

"Oh?" He nodded, pulled the corners of his mouth down. "You gave the Danton woman a message."

"Yes."

He hunched toward me, his hands folded on the tabletop. "Tell me about that message, Mr. Tarleton."

"The message was addressed to Mrs. Danton," I said.

He looked bleakly at me. They were all looking at me.

"Maybe we'll have to have another talk with the lady after all," the big man said.

"Leave Mrs. Danton out of this," I said. "She wants nothing to do with you, as I think you're aware. In any event, your man Tancey must have heard what I said."

The big man looked aslant at the men on his right, then those on the left. In the silence I heard a copter beating across the sky, sounding very far away, in another world.

"What did the message mean?" a thin man asked in a quiet voice.

"It meant that his suspicions were confirmed," I said.

"Suspicions of what?"

"Mutiny."

No one moved. No one spoke. I was still on stage, with my piece still to speak. It didn't seem to be going over well.

"The ringleader is a man named Crowder," I plowed on, "a member of the commodore's civilian staff. They were working through Grayson. I suppose they threatened to take reprisals against the ship's company if he didn't cooperate."

The big man's tongue came out and touched his upper lip and went back in.

"Danton managed to leave the ship; he was trying to hide a message when they caught him and killed him." I paused, but no one clapped.

"I discovered he was ex-hull and followed. I was too late: I found his body. One of Crowder's men was killed. I knew I couldn't go back. By luck there was a late-model G-boat on hand. I took it and made the run in."

"Is no surveillance maintained over the planetary approaches, Lieutenant?" a pale little man with uncombed, colorless hair asked, in a crisp voice.

"Certainly; but an object as small as an auxiliary boat is difficult to detect, even if you know where to look."

"So you just waltzed right through and soft-landed in the water, swam ashore, and walked in on Joto," the woman said in a soft voice.

"There was a little more to it than that, ma'am," I said.

"I'll bet there was, Lieutenant. I'll bet there was." The small man smiled a bright, tight smile.

The big man had tilted his head sideways, was studying me solemnly.

"Mutiny, you say," he said.

"That's right."

"With what object, Lieutenant?" He sounded genuinely puzzled.

"I'm afraid you'll have to ask the mutineers," I said.

"Your contention is that Commander Danton knew of this planned mutiny a year and more ago, before the vessel set out on the cruise?"

the woman queried. "And rather than initiating an official investigation, he confided his suspicions in his wife?"

"So it appears."

"And having had his fears confirmed, he entrusted you with the information, consigned again to the lady."

"All I can tell you is what happened. I leave the interpretation to you."

"It appears Commander Danton relied rather heavily on the element of luck, eh, Lieutenant?"

"I doubt if he planned for matters to turn out as they did. Crowder must have become suspicious of him and forced his hand. He did what he could under the circumstances."

"And on the strength of these conjectures, you deserted your post, and undertook what some might regard as an impossible voyage."

"At the time it seemed a logical decision," I said with less confidence than I felt.

The big man leaned back and put his plump, pale hands flat on the table.

"A man like you would like to be a hero, eh, Mr. Tarleton?"

"I was trying to save my skin, among other things," I said.

There were several moments of silence then. They looked at me and I looked back.

"Tell me, Mr. Tarleton," the big man said. "Just where would you have us believe you stand?"

"I should think that would be clear enough. I'm a Naval officer."

"You don't wish to make common cause with our organization?" the little man asked quizzically.

"I'm afraid our interests don't coincide."

The big man steepled his fingers. "What are your plans now, Mr. Tarleton?"

"To turn the matter over to the Chief of Naval Operations."

"Including yourself?"

"I hope that under the circumstances my actions will be vindicated. In any event I'm making a full report." I took a breath and said my next line: "Now, if you don't mind, I think I'd better be going."

"Oho," someone said inanely.

"And what do you intend to tell them about us, Lieutenant?"

"I don't think it will be necessary for me to mention you."

"How will you explain how you reached Washington?"

"I could have stowed away on the barge unassisted."

The big man's eyes lingered on me, then turned away. "Tancey," he spoke sharply across the room. The man in black rose and looked at me lazily.

"You can't simply walk out of here, of course," the big man said to me. "Tancey will drop you in a safe place."

Everyone was getting to their feet. Two of the men behind the table fell in behind me as I followed Tancey out into the hall.

The copter dropped into a landing among trees in a hollow a few miles out in the green Virginia countryside. The four of us climbed out. Tancey licked his lips and reached inside his coat and took out the gun he carried there.

"What's that for?" I asked, and

discovered my mouth was dry as a blotter.

"Just how stupid do you think we are, Tarleton?" one of the other men spoke up. I turned and looked at him. He was pointing a gun at me. So was the third man.

"The thing I can't figure," the same man said, "is why anybody thought we'd go for it." He was a rabbit-faced fellow with big, bony wrists and too much Adam's apple.

"Why'd you back out, fella?" the third man said. He was small and soft-looking, with nervous features. "The story start to sound too fishy even to you?"

"Why don't we ask him a few questions?" the rabbit one said. "I want to know how much he knows, what they were after."

"Waste of time," Tancey said. "He's conditioned; he can't talk if he wants to, right, Lieutenant?"

To my disgust, I discovered that I was shaking. My stomach felt light and fluttery, my knees wobbly. The sky seemed to glare down like massed searchlights. I had the feeling that time was rushing at me like a juggernaut, narrowing down, focussing in to an unbearable tension. In seconds, I'd be dead. It seemed so wrong, so ridiculously wrong, after I had been through so much, come so far . . .

"Walk over there, Lieutenant," Tancey said, and motioned toward a dense growth of brush. I backed a step. My legs didn't seem to be working properly. I wanted to say something, but there was no breath in my lungs. The three of them stood watching me, Tancey on the left, and a little apart, the other two close together. I watched the

guns in the way I imagine a mouse watches a rattlesnake.

"Hell," the rabbit man said. "He's—"

He had gotten that far when Fancey pivoted smoothly at the waist and fired once, twice, two soft *chuffs*. The rabbit man and the soft man fell down like empty bundles of clothes.

"Sorry to have put you through all this, Lieutenant," he said in an entirely different voice than he'd been using. "Krupp, Naval Intelligence. Too bad you ducked me at the barge; it could have saved us a great deal of melodramatics."

I sat in another chair, looked across another table. This time the men behind it wore the gold-braided blue of senior Naval officers. Two of them were strangers to me, but the other three were men I had known since childhood—not that their expressions reflected the fact. They listened in grave silence as I gave a full account of my activities from the moment of my interview with Commodore Grayson to my arrival at the Danton apartment.

"I hoped that Trilia Danton would be able to shed light on the situation," I finished. "Unfortunately, she wasn't able to tell me anything."

Admiral Stane made a note on the paper before him and looked at me with a neutral expression.

"It was your impression that Commander Danton had taken the boat into the Rings in order to secrete a message there?"

"That was just something I told the Hatenik council, sir. I don't know why he went there."

"You say he had cut a specimen from a fragment of crustal rock," Admiral Lightner said. "Where is this piece of material now?"

"I'm afraid I lost it somewhere along the way, sir."

"The man Hatcher was killed accidentally, according to your testimony, Tarleton," Admiral Wentworth said. "Crushed by your boat which was drifting in a derelict condition after being fired on by Hatcher."

"That's correct, sir."

"That strikes me as a rather curious accident, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

"You were aware that the area into which you took your boat was off-limits."

"Under the circumstances, sir, it seemed to me that I was justified in following Commander Danton."

"Just what were those circumstances, Lieutenant?"

"The circumstances that the commodore seemed to be acting under Crowder's orders, that Commander Danton was missing and Crowder seemed to be very eager to find him, and that the commander was in danger of being left behind when the ship changed station."

"If Crowder was, ah, in charge of the ship as you suggest, why did he permit you to leave the vessel?"

"I don't think he expected me to take any such action, sir. And possibly he had his hands full consolidating his position; he hadn't yet taken over complete control."

"What motive do you attribute to these alleged mutineers?"

"Sir, I haven't the faintest idea—unless they're in some way linked

with the Hatenik movement, which seems unlikely."

Admiral Stane hunched forward on his elbows, frowning. "Lieutenant, you paint a rather lurid picture of mutiny, treachery, murder and God knows what else. You tell us a story made up of wild conjectures, coincidences, inexplicable actions on the part of men of tested reliability. And as evidence, you offer—what?"

"It should be easy enough to check out my story," I said. "The major points, at least."

"Wouldn't it be better, Lieutenant, if you simply made a clean breast of it?"

"You think I'm lying to you, sir?"

"Isn't it true, Lieutenant," Admiral Lightner spoke up in a harsh voice, "that you were apprehended in a sabotage attempt by Mr. Hatcher—a Special Intelligence officer—and that you killed him? That you then fled the ship, were overtaken in the Rings where you attempted to hide, by Commander Danton—who mistakenly believed you to be innocent and hoped to convince you of the folly of desertion—and that you killed him there? That you then managed to return to Earth, either in the G-boat or with the revolutionary group known as the Hateniks, and—"

"No, sir," I cut in. "That's fantastic."

"More fantastic than this fabric of fantasies you've had the gall to present to this Board?" Wentworth barked.

"Gentlemen, I respectfully suggest you contact *Tyrant* at once; Commodore Grayson will confirm what I've told you—if he's still alive."

"Oh?" Wentworth said. It was hard to believe that stony face was the same one I remembered smiling over the problems I was having assembling my first model spaceship, twenty years earlier. He spoke into the whisperphone. A few silent seconds ticked by. The door opened and Commodore Grayson walked in, cool and immaculate.

"You've monitored the conversation, Grayson," Wentworth said. "Any comments?"

Grayson looked at me in the way one might look at something adhering to the sole of one's shoe.

"If a mutiny occurred aboard my command," he said, "it was never called to my attention."

The court-martial was a modest affair. The charge of murdering Paul Danton wasn't pressed; the prosecution confined the indictment to the contention that I had killed Hatcher, stolen his G-boat, and deserted my station. Inasmuch as the charges were entirely true—with the exception of a slight technical quibble in my mind as to the first point—my assigned defense counsel had very little to say. He made a half-hearted suggestion that I plead insanity, which I declined.

I raised the point of Paul's death. But without my mutiny theory, which had died without a murmur, I had nothing to offer in explanation of my accusation that Hatcher had killed him on Crowder's orders. My testimony sounded wild even to me. I requested that Crowder be called, but since even I couldn't make the claim that he had a direct connection with Hatcher's death or

my subsequent actions, the request was denied.

Commodore Grayson testified that I had served competently until the moment of my desertion; he sounded rather sad as he declined to suggest any explanation of my behavior.

The court declined to find me guilty of Hatcher's murder, which left only the charges of grand larceny of Fleet property, and desertion.

Of those offenses I was found guilty as charged.

Admiral Hence, the president of the court, called me forward and asked if I had anything to say before sentencing. He looked bewildered, as if things were happening a trifle too fast. I felt the same way.

It seemed to me that there were a great many things that needed saying about Paul's message, his death, the shot Hatcher had fired at me, about Crowder's behavior during the interview in Grayson's office, about whatever it was Paul had been seeking in the Rings.

But I had already said all that.

I wanted to say that I was a dedicated career officer, that the interests of the Navy were my interests, that it was all a huge mistake, and that my only wish now was to return to duty and forget the whole thing.

I said, "No, sir."

I stood at attention, feeling as unreal as a photograph pasted on a cardboard cutout while the sentence was read. The words seemed to apply to someone else, not to me:

... dismissed from the service
 ... forfeiture of pay and allowances
 ... abrogation of citizenship
 ... transportation for life . . ."

There was no colorful ceremony; no one plucked off my buttons or broke my sword over his knee. They drove me in a closed car to a large, grey building and led me along a bright-lit corridor to a neat little room with a bed, a desk, a private toilet, but no window. They gave me a physical examination, a variety of inoculations, and a plain grey suit, which I put on.

After that, time passed slowly.

There were meals, served in my room. I was allowed to watch Trideo, except that certain channels were blacked out from time to time; news broadcasts, I deduced. I slept, requested exercise equipment which was supplied. Lights out; lights on.

I estimated that nine days had passed when I was taken from the cell, driven to Andrews, placed aboard a shuttle, and flown west, accompanied by two armed Petty Officers who didn't talk much, even to each other.

At the staging base, I was told that I might have visitors. Since I lacked living relatives, I declined the opportunity, but was advised that a caller was waiting. They ushered Admiral Hence in, and left us alone together in a small room as cosy as a gas chamber.

He had a little trouble getting to the point; but eventually he came out with it plainly enough: in return for all I knew about the Hatenik organization, a high-level pitch for a reduction of sentence.

I told him I knew nothing about the Hatenik organization that Tancey/Krupp didn't already know. He had to let it go at that, of course, Navy anti-interrogation conditioning

was as effective against official inquiries as against anyone else.

Before he left, he paused long enough to give me a searching look and ask me the burning question:

— "Why, Ban?"

I didn't have an answer that didn't sound like the ravings of a lunatic.

The next day they loaded me aboard a stripped-down transport with twenty-one other prisoners, outward bound for a planet called Roseworld.

SEVEN

MY FIRST SIGHT OF MY NEW home was at dawn: pink light on a pink desert stretching to a line of pink mountains in the pink distance. We filed out of the ship into heat and dryness and a pervasive odor of hot iron, lined up in two ranks as directed, were counted off, right-faced and marched under armed guard across to a long, low shed flying a Fleet Station ensign.

Inside, a small, neat, tired-looking man in a plain coverall told us that we were free men. We would not be confined or coerced in any way. If we wished, we could walk out of the station and never come back.

He paused to let that sink in.

"However," he went on, "those of you who wish to remain here—for as long as you remain here—will abide by the rules set up for the conduct of this station. These rules are arbitrary and absolute. There is no appeal from them. The penalty for any infraction is forcible ejection from the station area, with no return."

There was a certain amount of

throat clearing and foot shuffling among my twenty-one fellow convicts, but no one spoke. I think we were all picturing the expanse of pink desert that surrounded the station.

"Nothing is free here," the lecturer went on. "If you choose to make use of the facilities of the station, you'll pay for what you use. The one exception is air. We make no attempt to control the use of air. This is not out of a spirit of generosity. The air is not supplied by the station, and thus is the property of all." He didn't say it as if it were a joke.

A middle-aged man with a narrow, lined face raised a hand. The lecturer nodded.

"Does that include, ah, food and so on?"

"It includes everything supplied by the station, including answers to redundant questions. You now have a one-credit charge against you."

"Well, how does one go about paying? You know we have no credit balances—"

"Two credits; that point is to be covered in my standard presentation. You work. How much you work is up to you. How much you're paid is up to your overseer."

"That's not really much of a choice, is it?" a tall, rangy, leathery fellow spoke up in a grating voice. "We can go out and starve in the desert, or stay here and work—on your terms."

"You're free to accept the terms, or reject them."

"What if I decide to reject them?" the rangy man stood suddenly and took a step forward. "What if I—"

That was as far as he got. There was a sharp click and a door slid open and two armed men in grey came through it.

"If you reject them, you leave the station—now."

The rangy man sat down.

"The choice of work is yours," the lecturer went on. The two guards stationed themselves against the wall, folded their arms, and looked at the rangy man.

"There's plenty of work for every man, here and elsewhere on-planet. If you choose you can leave this station for a contract at one of the outstations."

"What are these outstations?" the man who had asked about the food inquired.

"Three credits. They're industrial installations: mines, factories, processing plants and so on."

"What if you go to one of these places and find you don't like it? Are you free to leave again?"

"When you depart this station you're no longer under station jurisdiction. Enforcement of outstation rules is the responsibility of the individual overseer."

"Could you come back here if you don't like it out there?"

"Five credits. What you do after you leave this station is entirely your affair. So long as you break no rules of this station you may enter it and remain here."

"What kind of jobs are available?"

"Six credits. Manual labor requiring varying degrees of skill."

"Manual labor? I'm a . . . I was . . . That is, my training . . ."

He ran down and subsided. I was

wondering what use Roseworld would find for the kind of training I had.

"We waste nothing on this station, including time," the lecturer said. "You're free to go now. Those desiring job assignment may report to the employment office in the next bay. Outstation recruiters will be on-station from time to time." He pointed to the man who had asked the questions.

"You. You'll report to employment at once for six days' compulsory non-compensated labor."

"Eh! Six days—"

"Food and shelter will be provided during the work-off period. I suggest you learn to remain silent and listen. You'll be told as much as you need to know. No charge for that information."

At the employment office I was offered a choice of three jobs: cook's helper, vehicle maintenance helper, or common labor. I took the last, on a day-to-day basis. That way the pay was lower—one credit per six-hour day—but there was no obligation to stay if one received a better offer.

The work I was assigned to consisted of raking gravel, shoveling sand, breaking stones and loading them, scrubbing the station windows, floors, and kitchen. The work was heavy, and quotas were assigned, but were fairly light.

There were ninety-four inmates at the station, a dozen administrative personnel, some of whom were exiles, and twenty well-armed guards. None of us spoke to anyone unnecessarily. The station rules

turned out to be mild and reasonable. It would have been an idyllic existence for a lobotomy case.

A week passed. I seemed to be waiting for something to happen. I was neither depressed or elated. I worked, slept, ate, walked. I raked pale pink gravel and placed rose-pink stones and hosed the magenta dust from the buildings, making blood-colored mud. None of it seemed real.

On the tenth day—or possibly the eleventh: I had begun to lose count of the days—a recruiter arrived from a place called Llywarch Hen.

It was after the evening meal. I was on my bunk, reading a history of the Peloponnesian War when he came in, accompanied by two guards. They stood by looking watchful and bored as he posted himself in the center of the long room and started his spiel: his name was Cymraeg, he stated, and he was here to give us an opportunity at something a little more stimulating than Station life. He was a big fellow with bushy brown hair turning gray above the ears, a big, powerful body, thickening a little at the waist. There were a dozen or more small, puckered scars on his face and the backs of his hands. His voice was rasping, harsh as metal rubbing on stone; but his diction was that of an educated man.

"We conduct a mining operation at Llywarch," he said. "Your pay will be based on performance. You work long hours or short, as you elect. A four-hour day will cover your subsistence. Any time above that will buy a variety of items not

available here, including alcoholic beverages, fresh beef, tailored clothing, private quarters, manufactured articles of many kinds, and so on.

"In addition to the pay—one credit per hour after basic—bonuses are paid for certain classes of find, including gem stones, fossils, indications of various rare minerals, and other items."

He told us that Llywarch Hen was one hundred and twenty miles from Base Station. Any prospective employees would sign a five-year contract, cancellable by the contractor but not by the employee. In the event of cancellation, transport back to Base would be supplied free.

No one had any questions to ask. When he called for candidates, seventeen of the twenty-one men in the barracks stepped forward.

Mr. Cymraeg went along the line, carefully scrutinizing each man. He paused before a big fellow with pale, shifty eyes. He looked him up and down. He reached out to prod him in the ribs and the big man knocked his hand aside.

Mr. Cymraeg's mouth twitched at the corners. He nodded.

"You," he said. He stopped again before a wide, thick-shouldered man with coal black hair and grey-blue jaws.

"Turn your head," he said. The man turned his head.

"The other way."

He turned it the other way.

Mr. Cymraeg said, "You," and passed on.

He looked over a tall, narrow fellow with a face like a prematurely aged teenager. As they stared at

each other, tears started to run down the prospect's face. Cymraeg went on.

He didn't stop again until he reached me. He looked at me carefully. I looked back at him. At close range his skin was coarse, pocked with tiny scars. His eyes were yellowish green, slightly bloodshot, rheumy. His lips were faintly crooked, lumped with old scars. He was a man who had endured much battering.

"What's your name?" he said. His breath had a faint odor of rusted metal. It was the first time since I had arrived on Roseworld that anyone had asked me that question. I had almost forgotten I had a name.

"Jones," I said. "Jonah for short."

He hesitated and I thought he was about to turn away. Then he nodded and said, "You."

It was a five-hour run to Llywarch Hen across sand and rock, through ranges of dusty-rose hills, without a sight of life or water. In spite of the closed body of the vehicle, dust filtered in, coated everything including the lining of my throat. Cymraeg stopped every hour and allowed us to stretch our legs in the shimmering heat. We were issued water and food, not enough of either.

It was late afternoon when we came down a winding track through eroded red hills into a hollow which by comparison with Base Station looked almost civilized. There were houses in neat rows, surrounded by gardens of an impossible, vivid green, walks lined with growing

things, a shopping area, and beyond that a complex of large gray-painted buildings with tall stacks from which black smoke wisped.

Unfortunately, our vehicle didn't stop there. It swung off on a perimeter road, passed a factory surrounded by a high wire fence, followed a twisting track up into broken country cut by arroyos and canyons, emerged in a level area blasted from the rock. There were low sheds in sight, a rank of dust-coated vehicles, pieces of heavy rolling stock. A dozen or so men in shapeless coveralls stood watching as we pulled to a stop.

Cymraeg ordered us out of the carrier and turned us over to a big bald neckless man with a round head and a seamed dark face, who led us off to a small open space between huts. He lined us up in a row and walked past the row, came back behind us, then posted himself front and center.

"Is there a man here who thinks he can run this squad?" he asked. His voice seemed to come from somewhere down around his ankles.

A lean, sandy-haired man with a tight mouth and quick eyes, standing on my left, stepped forward. The bald man sauntered over to him.

"What makes you think you can run a squad?" he asked softly.

The lean man's mouth twitched. "I'm accustomed to command," he said, not very loudly. "I'm a, ah, former—"

A large black hand caught the front of the lean man's coverall, lifted him to his toes.

"You're a former nothing," he

said. "You've got no past and damned little future. Get me?"

The thin man made sounds. The bald man dropped him; he staggered and recovered his footing.

"Still think you can run this squad?" the bald man asked him.

The thin man shook his head, backed into line. He stood there, staring at the bald man.

"You have no right," he said quickly as the bald man turned away.

The bald man turned back.

"Grab my shirt," he said. The lean man stared at him.

"Grab it," the bald man said softly. "Right here." He pointed to his chest, just below his throat.

The lean man reached out cautiously and gripped the cloth.

"Now pick me up."

The lean man swallowed hard. He crouched a little, and his shoulder went down. His face turned red; he grimaced; his arm tensed, trembling. He let his breath out explosively and dropped his hand. The bald man hadn't budged.

"Still think you can run my squad?" he said.

"I . . . I," the lean man said.

The bald man walked back to his front-and-center position.

"Count off," he said.

We counted off.

"Ones, left face; two's, right face."

I was facing the lean man. The corner of his eye was twitching with a fine tremor. He looked past my left ear.

"You've heard of the buddy system," the bald man said.

The lean man's eyes flicked to my chin, flicked away again.

"Well, we don't use it here," the bald man said, sounding savage. "The man you're looking at is your enemy. He's your opposition. He's the fellow that can keep you from collecting the bonuses; he's the one that runs the quota up. Anything he gets comes out of your hide, understand me?"

No one answered the question.

"All right—fight," the bald man said.

The man facing me frowned and stole another glimpse at my chin. I heard a meaty impact and a grunt and from the corner of my eye saw a man fall out of ranks.

"Hit him, damn you!" the bald man yelled. The lean man gave a jump and brought his fists up; he feinted a left jab at my face and crossed with a right that grazed my chin as I leaned back. I hit him in the stomach; he leaned on me and I pushed him away and he went to his knees. There was scuffling all around. A man staggered back and fell over my man.

"All right!" Baldy barked. "You four pair off."

I found myself facing the wide, thick man who had been recruited from my barracks. His eyes were glassy; blood was running from the corner of his mouth. He swung a wobbly left hook that missed, and went to his knees. I hadn't touched him. Another man fell. There was one other man on his feet, a barrel-chested chap with hair like brass wire. He looked around, saw me, shot a fist out—

The sun exploded. I was sitting on the ground, with a throbbing head, tasting blood in my mouth.

The blonde bruiser was rubbing his fist and looking pleased with himself. The bald man was yelling an order. The other men were getting to their feet. I found mine and stood on them.

"Anybody want to challenge the winner?" Baldy said. No takers. Baldy turned and almost casually slammed a right into Blondie's midriff, uppercut him as he doubled over, caught him with a round-house right as he toppled backward.

Baldy flexed his pink-palmed hands.

"Anybody else think they can run my squad?" he asked.

He listened to a few seconds of silence, then jerked a thumb at the man at his feet.

"Get him on his feet," he said. "We're moving out now."

It was a twenty-minute hike over rough ground to a big pit like a meteor crater, wreathed in dust. Three openings were visible in the sides near the bottom, shored up with steel bracing. Tracks ran from each to a platform at the center of the excavation, from which a conveyor belt rattled endlessly upward to a loading platform at the opposite side. Men in coveralls moved in the dust clouds.

Four of us were ordered into number two shaft, four into number three. I was in the latter group with the lean man, Blondie, and a young fellow who hardly looked old enough to have died and gone to hell. We followed a man in a coverall and mask along the passage; a glare strip hung along the ceiling shed enough light to follow the twists and turns.

He halted us in a hollowed-out chamber with branching tunnels, a turntable at the center. Men appeared from the side branches trundling loaded barrows which they upended into the waiting ore cars. The air was clearer here; water sprayed at intervals from a pipe running around the walls. There was mud and rock underfoot. A steady rumbling filled the air.

Another man appeared, detailed a man to pick up spilled ore, which was loaded in a special car; another was assigned to manhandle cars onto the turntable. He motioned to the lean man and me to follow him into a side tunnel.

There was no glare strip here; our guide led the way with a torch. The passage ended against a broken rockface. In the artificial light, dark strata in the rock glistened like black glass. An empty ore car waited.

It was quieter here; the lean man was having trouble with his breathing. My neck ached from bending under the low ceiling.

"You birds ever operated a rock cutter?" the miner asked. We hadn't. He swore a little and picked up a heavy apparatus from the floor, slung a strap over his shoulder, thumbed a lever. A clatter started up. He held the chisel-end of the jack-hammer against the rock and cut a horizontal groove an inch wide and four feet long, at waist height. He cut another groove a foot lower, shut down the tool. He picked up a short, thick chisel and a rock hammer, set the chisel in the upper groove, and gave it a blow with the hammer. A flat slab of rock

a distasteful look and punched a hole in my blue ticket, after which I was free to take my choice from eight items ranging from cold hot-cakes to something that appeared to be oatmeal with chopped mushrooms. Another man was waiting at the far end of the line. He held out a large, callused hand. Like everybody else I met here, he seemed to be bigger, stronger, and in better shape than I was.

"A chit, sport," he said cheerfully. I walked through him and took a table near Cymraeg. The hot-cakes weren't bad, if you like yeast. The oatmeal was disappointing. When I finished, I dumped the tray in a slot as I had seen others do, and left the building. The fellow with the outstretched hand was waiting. This time the hand was in the shape of a fist like a knuckly sledge hammer.

"A chit for what?" I said before he could speak.

"Tax," he said.

"Is this supposed to be official, or are you in business for yourself?" I asked, backing away.

"What's official?" He looked reproachful. "Look, pal, why make it tough? Pay up and eat in peace. I keep the scroungers off, right?"

I tried a dodge around right end, but he caught me by the arm, stopped short of breaking it. I kicked him in the left shin. He frowned and didn't break the other arm.

"You guys," he said sadly. "You got to have it the hard way."

He was wearing a nicely fitted, new-looking coverall, cut from a soft, tan material. It had ducky little

tabs on the shoulders, and flaps on the pockets with shiny brass buttons. He bent my arms back into shape and released me.

"Come on, give," he said.

I feinted a move toward my pocket and instead swung at him, on the theory that the best way to discourage bullying is to make it more trouble that it's worth. I missed, snagged his pocket flap and ripped it half off. The button went flying. He staggered back, clapped a hand to his chest, swore, and began scanning the ground. He saw the button and put a foot on it, said "Hold it!" as I slid toward the corner of the building.

I held it.

"You're one of them kind, hah?" He sounded more disappointed than angry. "You know what this outfit cost me? Nine creds. Yeah. Nine creds. And you tore it. All for a lousy chit."

"Hardly worth it, eh?" I said, and made a yard sideways. "Maybe you'd better forget this particular chit."

"What you figure—you can make it solo?" He looked me over. "Forget it, chum. You ain't got the built for it."

"I plan to live by my wits."

He rubbed his chin. It looked like a boulder weathering out of a cliff. "Look, sport, you need protection, see?"

"They need me to dig," I said. "They won't let you kill me."

"Right." He stabbed a finger at me. "Or maim you—that means break you up to where you can't load rock—or lose you too much sleep or eats so you get sick. But

that still leaves me plenty of operating space. You like having your arm bent? How's about half a hour a day of it, guaranteed no sprains? Just for openers."

"Have you got half an hour a day to put on it?"

He looked disgusted. "That's the weak point," he said. "But you're the first to spot it."

He frowned and moved toward me, stopped dead as the door of the mess hall opened; Cymraeg stepped out, holding a smoking cigar between his thick fingers. He looked at Heavy.

"I've been watching you operate your tax service," he said. "I've decided I don't like it." He jammed the cigar in his mouth and walked on.

When he was gone, Heavy looked at me unhappily.

"There goes the tax business," he said. "Well, it was soft while it lasted."

"Just how does Cymraeg fit into the picture here?" I asked. "A Company man?"

Heavy looked at me with mild disgust. "He's a con, Slim, just like the rest of us. No Company man ever puts a foot outside Base Station. If he does, he's had it. He stays. Anyway that's what they say."

"You could take him," I said.

"Yeah—but I can't take the Syndicate."

"Wait a minute," I said as he turned away. "What's the Syndicate?"

"Nothing," he said.

"Maybe I'd better ask Cymraeg," I said.

He stood there looking over his

shoulder at me. He looked around as if checking for eavesdroppers, hitched up his belt, moved closer to me.

"Look, Greenie," he said earnestly. "Just cut your rock and pay your tabs and keep breathing, OK?"

"Oh, that," I said, a trifle more loudly than was strictly necessary.

He nodded, almost eagerly. "Sure. You're pretty low. You just got here. A couple months ago you were a gung ho Navy type, honor and duty and a fat retirement plan. Officer, maybe a light commander. All of a sudden here you are: eating pink dirt." His finger poked me in the chest. "Listen," he said. "Eating dirt's better'n not eating at all, right? You got a long time to be dead in. And what the hell: a guy might even have a few laughs before then, who knows?"

"I'm laughing all the time, Heavy," I said.

"I guess you're one o' them linen cases," he said. "Them are the worst. They keep asking why, and there ain't no answer. But look at it like this: a guy can cop it anytime, anyplace. A accident in the Power Room; a little flaw in the LS system; hell, a busted flutter fan back home on leave. So what happened to you was like that. It don't mean nothing. It's like a rock falls out of the sky and hits you. But you're still alive, see? You can still smell and taste and breathe. You can get a few kicks, even. I mean, it ain't all over. Not yet."

"What's your interest in the matter?"

"Nothing, Slim. Just . . ." He held out a hand and looked up as

fell. He picked it up and tossed it into the car.

"That's the way we do it," he said. "One little chip at a time. If you see anything—*anything* except red rock and black glass, hold it as you were and fetch me. Clear?"

The lean man and I experimented with the power hammer, threw a lot of chips, eventually made a wavering cut of uneven depth. We took turns pounding at it, managed to knock off some small fragments.

"There seems to be a knack to it," my partner said.

"There is to most things," I agreed. We kept at it. The material was a kind of hard chalk, apparently identical with the hundred and twenty miles of surface we had driven across to reach Llywarch Hen. I wondered why we were digging fifty feet underground for more of the same, but my curiosity was a mild and transient thing, soon forgotten in the absorbing business of pounding rock. After an hour both of us were bleeding from half a dozen small cuts from flying chips. It was hot and stuffy in the dead-end passage. In the light of the torch that had been left to illuminate our labors everything looked gray now; the rods and cones had tired of registering pink.

After a while the bottom of the car was covered. The lean man asked me how long I thought we'd been at it. I didn't know. We gave ourselves a break, sat on the stone floor in the dusty heat and looked at nothing. After a while we went back to work. The level in the cart rose slowly.

The light startled me, flashing on the rockface and glinted on the glassy black striations. A man came up, looked at the scene of our labors, flashed the light in the ore car.

"Shift over," he said, "let's go," and turned away. The lean man dropped the hammer and started after him.

"What about the cart?" I said. "Are we supposed to bring it along?"

"Forget it. I'll take care of it."

"We don't want to impose," I said. "Come on, partner, let's push it."

"Why? He said—"

"Let's get in the habit of doing things for ourselves. Nothing's free, remember?"

The man with the light snorted and went on ahead.

Back in the main cavern, a man with a clipboard watched as we maneuvered the cart on to the scale. He punched a dispenser at his belt and handed each of us a chip of blue plastic. The lean man took his and scurried for daylight.

"This covers the time, I take it," I said. "I'd like a receipt for the rock, too."

The tally-man stared at me. "A receipt, he says."

"How else do I have proof of what I've dug?"

"You put in your time, you get your bed and a meal. What more you want, Greenie?"

"I heard something about quotas."

He lifted his face mask and wiped his face with his hand and spat. "You get no chits for anything less than a full cart, Greenie. Now beat it—"

"Suppose I fill it next shift."

He looked at the cart disparagingly. "You haven't got enough there to cover demurrage."

"What does that mean?"

"You tie up a cart, you pay for it. You dig hard for four hours and have a little luck and you can load enough to cover tool and cart rent and enough over for a couple chits. Ten chits make a credit. You drag your feet and half load and you get basic time: bed and breakfast. That's you, Greenie. Now beat it before—"

"What happens to my rock?"

"It'll get it taken care of."

"I see." I went around the cart and started pushing it back up the track. He acted as though he would block my way, but at the last moment he stepped aside.

"A wise one, eh?" he said as I went past. "OK, brother, I got ways of evening it up."

I dug for a few more hours. I filled the cart level, then added a few more chunks just to be on the safe side. I had to lie on the floor and rest before I felt equal to pushing the cart back up the tunnel.

There was a different man on duty with the clipboard.

"Let's get that cart on the scales," he said.

"Your predecessor didn't seem so interested in production."

"If he could con you out of a half-load he'd come out ahead." He pulled a lever; there was a clinkety-clack and four pale yellow rectangular plastic tabs clattered from a dispenser on the scale into a cup. He scooped them up, handed me three.

"What are you waiting for?" he barked. "Shove off, you."

"I'm waiting for my other chit."

He looked outraged. "You think I work for free, Cull?"

He was a big man, healthier than I, not nearly so tired as I. It depressed me to look at him. I started toward him; he palmed me off.

"Wise up, Greenie; it's a fair shake."

I swung and missed and almost fell down. He grabbed my sleeves below the elbows and rammed my funny bones together.

"I don't need trouble," he said in a conversational tone. "You be nice and I'll give you a tip: those tabs are seven-day board—and they've got two days on 'em already." He pushed me away. "I leave it to you, Greenie: is it worth a chit?"

I thought about the ache in my empty stomach and the drought in my throat and decided it was.

I found my own way back out of the pit and along the path to the camp. A sign on one of the sheds indicated that it was the mess hall. I was surprised. No one gave away information for nothing around here.

Inside, there were tables, an eating ledge along one wall under the windows for those who preferred to eat standing up, a stainless steel serving line at the far end. A dozen or so men sat at the tables, no two at the same table. I saw Cymraeg over by the windows, brooding over a cut of something that steamed.

As I reached for a tray, a man appeared out of nowhere, gave me

if he were checking for rain. He closed his fist. "A guy got to fight back, some way. You know?"

"You know something, Heavy?" I said. "I have a hunch you're a linen case too—whatever that is."

He looked at me, a rather wild look. "Get yourself a breather, Greenie," he snarled. "You look lousy. And slow down. You can't do it all in a day." He walked away slowly, rubbing his knuckles. I went into the nearest barracks and gave the blue tab to a fellow who sneered and pointed to an empty bunk. I don't remember lying down on it.

I worked alone the next shift. The cutting seemed to go a little faster. No rocks fell from my cart. The tally-man paid off in full with no argument other than a resentful look. I passed Heavy leaving the mess hall. He grinned and wagged his head ruefully.

At the end of five days I had collected thirteen chits which were redeemed by an official in the camp at the rate of eleven for a one-credit chip. The latter was stamped from one-year plastic to discourage hoarding. I used it to buy a second-hand breathing rig from a tally-man.

I didn't form any friendships. Heavy was the only man at Llywarch Hen who knew how to smile, but we never talked. Occasionally I saw one or another of the men who had arrived with me, but they didn't appear eager to form an alumni association. Little by little I came to know the system of bribes and fees, learned when and how to resist the squeeze, when to pay up docilely. The system was administered by

self-appointed beadles, old-timers with the muscle to make argument painful, but it was made possible only by a common disinclination to let anyone get by with anything.

I went from chipping to cart-maintenance, which was paid by contributions from the membership, collection being the business of the receiver. With my slightly enlarged earnings, I bought my own hammer and chisel and went back to rock cutting. That was where the bonuses were. My skill improved. I learned the precise angle at which to hold the chisel, the precise force of the blow required to scale away a ten-pound flake of stone. I searched diligently for signs of some substance other than pink chalk and black glass.

And one day I made my find.

It was a lumpy, porous chunk of blackish metal about the size of an inch-thick dinner plate. I cut it free and cleaned the adhering chalk away. It had the general appearance of meteoric iron, but was much heavier and harder than iron. I left my half-filled cart and carried my trophy back out to the tally-man.

He saw me coming from fifty feet away and whirled and poked a button I hadn't seen poked before. A whooping siren went into action. Men came swarming out of the side passages, were immediately shunted out the mine entrance by the shapers-up who posted themselves in strategic positions, fending the crowd away from the weighing-table. Two of them took up stances flanking the tunnel I had been working in.

I dumped my trophy down on the scale and watched the tally-man make notes in a pad. He twiddled his change-maker and handed over a black bonus tab as if he hated to part with it. It was stamped with numbers which established its value. I had been around long enough now to know this wasn't an item he could chance cheating me on. He handed over a blue tab as well, although I had not completed four hours.

"The find covers shift credit," he said. "Report to Admin on the double."

In the Admin hut, a solemn, clerkly little man clucked over my tab and made entries in a computer-input console, then played a tune on a coding panel which caused a small package to drop into a hopper with a pleasantly heavy *thunk*. He handed it over the counter to me.

"One hundred credits," he said in an envious tone. "Thumb-print here." He pushed a form toward me. I opened the packet and counted the chips: one hundred of them, all of a healthy golden color. I tucked them away in a pocket.

"What makes a piece of metal so valuable?" I asked.

He gave me a severe look. "Take your bonus and move along," he ordered. I had an urge to reach across and squeeze his neck a trifle, but I knew the rules about man-handling office personnel. I left quietly.

Four men were waiting in the space between huts. They moved out to surround me.

"You got lucky, eh, Greenie?" one of them said. He was a long-

faced, chinless, sallow-looking fellow, six-six, wide and bony. His three friends were equally wholesome types.

"It's all in knowing where to look," I said.

Their heads jerked as if they were all attached to the same rope. Two of them said, "Hah?"

"Don't talk smart, Greenie," the chinless man said. "That kind of talk can get a man a trip." He looked at me from under his tangled eyebrows, a quizzical look. "We had an idea you might be planning to drop down to Hen, is all," he went on. "A Greenie like you won't know the ropes. You'll want somebody to keep you out of the hot fat."

"I'll manage, thanks." I started around them and the spokesman put out a hand.

"Do yourself a favor," he said softly. "We walk behind you. No trouble, no pay. Fair?"

"It's your turn to be smart," I said, and started on; I was counting on the fact that I hadn't seen open robbery committed. It seemed to be about to work, but apparently the sight of all those credits walking away was too much for the small-headed fat-necked member of the quartet. He muttered, "Cover me," and moved in. I side-stepped with the idea of beating a hasty retreat to the Admin building, and someone wrapped his arms around me from behind. I tramped on his in-step and yelled—the loudest sound I'd heard in weeks. It jarred them; the man behind me loosed his grip far enough for me to ram an elbow into him, but before I could pursue the advantage the others had

grabbed me and were hustling me into the nook they had emerged from.

There was a sound like a boot kicking a ripe melon and suddenly my arms were free. I turned in time to see the man I called Heavy step in close to the chinless man and sink a fist into his stomach. The chap with the chins was in an awkward position against the building, having difficulty with his breathing. The remaining members of the quartet were backing away. Heavy made a shooing motion and they turned and darted off. He gave me a broad wink.

"Maybe it's time to reopen our business discussion, Slim," he said. "Before you fall in with evil companions."

I worked the kinks out of my shoulder. "I was thinking of paying a visit to town," I said. "If you'd like to come along, possibly we could work out something."

EIGHT

PREPARATIONS FOR MY FIRST venture away from camp were simple: my blue tab gave me barracks-entry; I stripped, and tossed the suit into the vibrator which cleaned it of foreign particles while the sonspray booth performed the same service for my body. I donned the same garment and we walked out of camp along the road by which I had arrived three weeks earlier. There was no signing in or out, no guard, no password. I was as free as a bird—except that I didn't eat or sleep until I had put in my shift time. Even my new-won wealth

wouldn't change that; only the perishable, non-transferable blue tabs were negotiable in the barracks and the mess. It was a system that insured steady production.

It was late afternoon. The pink sun glared on the dusty road. Pink dust motes danced in the air.

"Tell me a few things, Heavy," I said when we were a hundred yards past the last hut. "If Cymraeg is a prisoner like the rest of us, who really runs the camp?"

"Why ask me? Nobody told me any more than they told you, Slim."

"How long have you been here?"

"I dunno. A year, maybe a little more. What's it matter?"

"You've had time to find out a few things."

"All I know is what I see. The cons run the camp. The best man appoints himself boss and makes the rules. Guys that break 'em find out about it the hard way and don't break 'em again."

"You're a husky fellow. Why haven't you pounded your way to the top?"

"A smart boss-man like Cymraeg knows enough to discourage any rising young talent. If I got ideas and started pounding too many heads, building up a take-over cadre, his boys would move in."

"How did he establish himself?"

"The last boss got old. He'll get old some day too, and a younger dog will eat him. Meantime, he's in charge."

"Why do they have us mining material that's no different than what's on the surface? Why do they place such a value on a lump of slag?"

"The bonus junk is the money crop. We're not mining rock, Slim. We're just looking for stuff like what you found."

"Why? What's it good for?"

"Dunno."

"All right, we have a loose social order based on prior claim, plus superior ability, plus muscle, held in restraint by the fact that production pays the bills and men make production. But what about the equipment: the huts and the weighing scales and the chit-vendors, and the ground-car—"

"All bought out of production. This place was built by a Company originally, over a hundred years ago, the operation didn't pay. Then Pink Hell was picked as a dumping ground for trouble-makers. With convict labor available, the picture changed; the Company offered to pay subsistence for men to work the mines, and bonuses for any finds—such as lumps of fused metal. The men could spend their earnings any way they wanted; they ordered off-planet merchandise and paid good negotiable cash for it. They built the town, stocked it, improved the camp, worked out the chit system. They can't go home again, but there's no reason for them not to live as well as possible."

"You say 'they' as if you weren't one of us," I said.

"Yeah," he said, and laughed, not very humorously. "Maybe I like to kid myself a little, Slim."

"And for a moment, your fo'castle dialect slipped a trifle, Heavy."

He was silent for ten paces. Then he said, "Rule one: don't let your curiosity show, Slim."

"We can talk here," I said. "No one's listening."

"How do you know there's not an induction ear trained on us?"

"An ear can't function through solid rock."

He turned and gave me a hard-eyed look that was as different from his usual expression as a rapier is from a banana.

"Safer if you just chip your rock and spend your creds," he said.

I laughed. I shouldn't have started. I couldn't stop. I fell down, and on all fours. I laughed until I realized that the line between laughter and sobs is a fine technical distinction, easily lost, and with it the whole careful structure of the defensive shell that had kept me walking and talking, if not thinking and feeling, since the moment I had seen Paul Danton's dead and ruined face.

Heavy saved me. He hauled me to my feet and slapped me across the jaw with a hand like a canoe paddle, backhanded me on the return stroke, shoved me against a looming pink rock slab.

"As you were, Mister," he growled, and suddenly I was seeing a face I remembered from long ago, from my late teens, when I had paid my first visit to the Academy. The face had been younger then, but no prettier, and there had been a captain's braid on the cap that went with it. He had been Commandant of Cadets, and his name was . . .

"Look, Slim," he said, "if you're gonna throw fits, maybe I make Hen solo after all, hey?"

I got my feet under me and pushed his hand away.

"I'm all right," I said. "It was just something I remembered. A joke. An old, old joke."

"Sure," he said. "We're all laughing."

We finished the twenty-minute walk with no conversation.

The hamlet called Llywarch Hen consisted of a brick-paved central square lined with small shops, from which radiated a network of crowded streets which spread to the factories at the north, and on the south opened into winding residential avenues adorned with imported trees, flowers, grass. Heavy led the way down one of the narrow avenues to a grog shop under a hanging sign with a sun-faded device of a pink devil with a pointed tail. We took a table in a corner and an old man with gritty, pink-rimmed eyes took our orders for brandy—after I showed him my cash. There were a few other customers in the house, all elderly men, plus a one-legged man.

"Who are they?" I asked. "Why aren't they chipping rock?"

"There's like a retirement plan," Heavy told me. "You buy into it, draw your basic plus a little extra when the medics say you can't dig any more. Or you can ship back to Base Station. They're supposed to run some kind of old mens' home somewhere up north. Only not many take that route, because the story is, you get a fast euthy shot and a cheap funeral."

The brandy was drinkable. We drank two, at a credit a shot. By then the sun was setting. We strolled along to a chop house and

dined on real meat and vegetables. That cost another ten credits. Back in the street, a small man with half his face missing hooked his fingers in my sleeve and offered me a chance at gambling, dope, and women.

"How about it, Slim," Heavy said. "You could maybe run that stack up to double, enough for a real blow-out."

"We can spend it fast enough eating and drinking."

"You better come on anyways, you," the shill said in a damaged voice. "A big man wants a couple words with you."

Heavy and I looked at each other.

"Does this big man have a name?" I asked.

"You'll find out," the runner predicted. "Not him." He jerked a thumb at Heavy. "Just you, is all."

"Maybe you better go at that," Heavy said. "I got stuff to do anyway." He turned and walked away.

"Let's go, you," my new friend gobbled. "He don't like to wait around."

Heavy had told me violence was taboo in town. There seemed to be no reason not to indulge my curiosity.

"Very well," I said. "Lead on."

He slid off along the walk, ducked down a side street, squeezed through a narrow doorway. Steps led down. At the bottom he opened a heavy door onto a bright-lit room where two men sat at a table covered with papers. One of the men was a stranger. The other was Cymraeg.

They looked at me, then at each other. Cymraeg raised his eyebrows; the stranger frowned. He started to

speak, then jerked his head around and stared at me again. He grunted. Cymraeg seemed to relax a trifle. It seemed to be a rather elaborate conversation conducted without words.

"I've been watching how you handled things, Jonah," Cymraeg said. "You've worked out some answers for yourself. Now you're wondering about some of the less obvious questions." He looked at his thumb. "I wouldn't want to see you go astray; I called you down here to give you the information you'll need to reach the correct conclusions."

"You did say 'give'?"

"No charge this time," he said flatly. "Jonah, you're one of two hundred and twenty-nine men and five women, current census, dumped down in a desert with no laws, police, no courts of justice—or whatever it is courts dispense. Just a mob of condemned criminals and a world that wouldn't support human life for a day without artificial aids. What would you say holds Llywarch Hen together? What makes it work?"

"Government by the consent of the governed," I said. "With the added incentive of death by starvation if you can't fit in."

"Don't overlook the positive side. A clever man who accommodates himself to the system can become wealthy enough to live in luxury, even here."

"In an economy based on an artificial value assigned to a worthless commodity?"

"What do you suppose is behind it, Jonah?"

"It keeps the men busy."

"Why should anyone care whether we're busy or not? Why not let us all kill each other?"

"We were sentenced to exile, not death."

Cymraeg smiled a little. "You got a raw deal, didn't you, Jonah?"

"I was guilty," I said.

Cymraeg's expression indicated that I had departed from the script.

"Why?" Cymraeg said. "Why did you do it—whatever you did?"

"I don't care to discuss it," I said. "Thanks for inviting me down—"

"Don't talk like a damned fool, Jonah," Cymraeg said. "You'll leave when I'm ready for you to leave."

"He testified that a civilian staffer killed an officer and tried to kill *him* when he appeared on the scene," the other man said. "That the civilian died by misadventure, possibly with a bit of help. That he was convinced a mutiny had occurred, and for this reason he abandoned his ship and returned to Earth. On arrival, he was surprised to learn that there had been no mutiny, and that the dead officer was apparently involved in treasonous activities. His defense was, shall we say, half-hearted."

"You're satisfied with the Navy's handling of the case?" Cymraeg asked me. "You agree you belong here?"

"I believe in an orderly world, Mr. Cymraeg. I broke the rules. I knew the penalty."

"You *thought* you were acting in the best interests of the Navy, didn't you?" he shot back.

"I think so," I said. I was aware of my pulse pounding in my head. My stomach felt queasy.

"And how did they repay you? Were you given the benefit of the doubt? Did your old friends rally round? Was any consideration given to your prior service?"

"That wasn't the point—"

"One-way loyalty," Cymraeg growled.

"What sort of medical attention did you receive during the time you were in Naval custody, prior to trial?" the thin man asked.

"I was well cared for."

"Indeed? You came very close to death from starvation, Lieu—Jonah. This is a shock from which the unassisted body recovers slowly and incompletely. Using modern medical techniques, you could have been restored to full health in a matter of weeks. You received no such treatment. Instead, you were sent here, assigned to hard labor." He turned to Cymraeg. "How old would you say the lieu—Jonah appears to be?"

"Late thirties."

He looked back at me. "What's your age, Jonah?"

"Twenty-eight."

Cymraeg grunted.

"They made an old man of you, Jonah," the thin man said. "Now how do you feel about the benignity of the authorities?"

"Come to the point," I said.

"We were dumped here," Cymraeg said tightly. "Like broken tools that weren't needed any more. They would have preferred to kill us outright, but this method salves their consciences. But conscience is a luxury they might have done better to manage without." He leaned forward and stared into my face.

"They consider us helpless, Jonah—*but we're not.*"

"I see."

"No, you don't. You think I'm a raving maniac. You think we're so many ants under the heels of the Companies. But they blundered, Jonah. They underestimated us badly. They shipped us here—brought us together, all their enemies in one convenient group. That was stupid, Jonah. But that's not their crowning idiocy. They picked Pink Hell as their dumping ground, their concentration camp. *Pink Hell*, of all the planets in the Sector!"

"Why do you bring the Companies into the matter?" I asked. "It was Navy business."

Cymraeg nodded, looking at me with a pitying expression. "Navy business, Jonah. And who do you suppose gives the Navy its orders?"

"The Public Executive, of course."

"Jonah, you were taught some history at the Academy. It was essentially accurate, as far as it went. But some important items were left out. Have you ever heard of a man named Imbolo?"

"He's a wealthy shipowner, isn't he?"

"Among other things. What about Catrice?"

"Lunar mining," I said. "He donated an opera house to my home town."

"A very generous man, Lord Catrice. Does the name Banshire mean anything to you?"

"There's a building of that name in Boston."

"Lord Uhlan? Lord Anse?"

"I knew the Public Legislature

had awarded courtesy titles to a number of important industrialists. I'd forgotten their names. What are you getting at?"

"The five men I named control the Five Companies, Jonah. And the Five Companies control the world—including the Navy."

"I've heard the theory before, Mr. Cymraeg," I said. "I was never impressed by it."

"Just Cymraeg, forget the Mister. And I'm not discussing theories, Jonah. I'm giving you facts. The Companies hold Earth in a total economic stranglehold. Among them, they control every prime industry and service on the planet—and through the Navy, they control explored Space. The Public is a facade, nothing more. The Executive takes his orders from the Five."

"If you invited me here to hear a political lecture, you're wasting your time, Cymraeg."

"Just listen, Jonah. You doubt what I'm telling you? Consider the facts: what kind of motive power drives a Deepspace Ship of the Line?"

"Is that a rhetorical question? All ships use the bevadrive, regardless of size."

"How are our cities heated and lighted?"

"By tapping the regional power-net."

"And the power-net draws energy from a cyclodyne—which is a modification of the bevadrive."

"I suppose—"

"You haven't heard it all, Jonah. I think about our society, our planet-wide culture. Vehicles, appliances, tools, communications systems—

everything is based on artificially generated power."

"I know all this."

"Jonah, have you ever heard of a device called a Starcore?"

"Never."

"What's the principle behind the bevadrive, Jonah?"

"Nuclear fusion, I suppose."

"You're not sure? You, a Naval officer?"

"I was a communications specialist, not a Powerman."

"Ever know a Powerman?"

"Certainly."

"Did he ever show you his engines? Ever talk about tearing down the drive for overhaul?"

"No, not that I recall—"

"The fact is, the Power Section of every vessel in the Fleet is sealed, Jonah. Did you know that?"

"I never had occasion—"

"The same is true of our regional generator stations. Sealed, off-limits to all personnel. You know why?"

"Since I wasn't aware they were sealed, if they are, I can hardly—"

"Because they're empty, Jonah. There's nothing inside. No mighty turbines turning giant shafts. No massively shielded piles pouring out the gigawatts. It's all window dressing, designed to conceal a secret."

"I see."

"You don't see anything. Not yet. As I said, the power chambers are empty—almost. They contain one small item: a Starcore. A thing you could hold in your hand. That's all, Jonah. That's where the power comes from. That's their secret. That's what they're protecting."

"Assuming this is all true—what does it have to do with me?"

"Jonah, you know what brainwashing is?" Cymraeg's tone was a whipcrack. He didn't wait for an answer. "Any man can be brainwashed. Any man. I want you to consider the possibility that you've been given the treatment."

He seemed quite serious about this. And in a sense it was a legitimate question. I considered it.

"Brainwashed by whom? When? For what purpose?"

"Our so-called society was designed for the benefit of five men. They've arranged the world for their own pleasures. The rest of us are just house-servants, Jonah, fetching and carrying for them. How do you like that idea?"

"We seem to be quite comfortable in our slavery. The world is a better place than ever before in history."

"Is it?" He wiped his finger on the arm of his chair, showed me the pink dust.

"You weren't sent here because you committed a crime. You were sent here because you were a threat to the system."

"I'm afraid that's too obscure for me—"

"Your friend Danton poked his nose in, Jonah. He was getting close to something. That's why he was killed. And they thought you might have known what it was . . ." He was looking at me expectantly.

"So that's what you're after," I said. I almost laughed.

"Jonah, we need that information!"

"You're wasting your time, Cymraeg. Paul told me nothing—"

"You were met by representatives of an organization—"

"Hateniks. They had the same idea you did."

"We don't call them Haténiks, Jonah. That's a loaded term—part of the brainwashing."

"Are you telling me you're tied in with—"

"The organization is a lot bigger than you think, Tarleton—"

"I thought we were calling me Jonah. And how do you know so much about me?"

"As I said—we're a lot bigger than you know. We have members everywhere. And some of us—" he nodded toward the thin man—"can move freely—unlike you and me, Jonah. They think they have the cancer isolated, but they're wrong. Information comes in—and goes out. And the information you have could be what we've been waiting for."

"What is it you expect me to tell you? You have all the answers, haven't you? The Companies run the world as a private club on the basis of their control of power sources, which you've assured me are not what they seem. The picture seems quite complete. What can I add?"

"Try to get this through your head, Jonah: They're *frightened*! That means they're vulnerable! We know they protect the secret of the Starcore in a way that goes far beyond mere technical secrecy. Why? That's what we need to know! Now speak up, man! Give us what you have!"

"I'm sorry I can't oblige you."

"You're content to let *them* go on holding the world in the palm of their hands? To own you and

every other man living, to use them like so many cattle?"

"Put it this way," I said. "They invented the Starcore, as you call it. They used the product of their ingenuity—their genius—to transform the world into a garden for men to live in. If they also established themselves in comfort—to my way of thinking they deserve it. I haven't the faintest desire to tear them down. I wish them luck."

They stared at me across the table.

"Cymraeg, Paul Danton told me nothing," I said. "And even if he had . . ."

"Go on," Cymraeg grunted.

"Try to grasp something," I said. "I'm not a rebel against society. I liked the world I was born into; I believed in the system. I still do. Certainly, it can be improved. And it's being improved—by evolution, not revolution. I'm not interested in wild-eyed saviors who're going to Fix Everything Instantly—mostly by tearing down what five thousand years of cultural evolution have built up. I'm not a Hatenik, Cymraeg. I don't sympathize with the Hatenik mentality."

"You're a fool, Jonah! You could be a part of the new power structure, recover all you've lost, and more—"

"After you've thrown the rascals out," I said. "I assume a certain party discipline will be necessary, to maintain order. And for a time the old apparatus of control will have to continue—temporarily of course. And who better than the Faithful to fill the jobs the blood-suckers were booted out of? And naturally

you'll have to tolerate a certain amount of pomp and ceremony about your persons in order to satisfy the public—in their own interest, of course. But even though you'll be living like kings in the palaces formerly occupied by the tyrants, with your police busy day and night rooting out the potential counter-revolutionaries, you'll still be natural democrats at heart, concerned only with the blissful contentment of the peasantry. And what would my reward be? An admiral's star in the New Revolutionary Navy? An empty rank in a meaningless organization made up of party hacks and the politically reliable?"

"You prefer life on Pink Hell?" Cymraeg ground out the words like a rock crusher grinding boulders into gravel.

"That's really all it amounts to with you, isn't it, Cymraeg? Revenge. You want to get your fingers on the necks of the men who sent you here, and you'll tear the world down to accomplish it. Luckily, it's all talk. You're stuck here, Cymraeg. Go ahead with your plots. But count me out."

"You're making a mistake, Jonah," the thin man said.

"Get out of my way, Cymraeg," I said. He didn't move. He looked past me at the thin man. His expression was that of a man facing a disagreeable task—but quite prepared to carry it out. I doubled my fist and swung at his belt buckle. He grunted and grabbed my arms, threw me back against the table. The thin man caught me from behind.

"You're going to tell me what you know, Jonah—" Cymraeg started, and paused, listening. I could hear breaking sounds from outside; there was a thud of feet, a crash of breaking wood as the door burst open. Heavy slammed halfway across the room and came to a halt facing Cymraeg. His sleeve was torn and there was a small cut on his scalp. He licked his lips and looked brightly around the room.

"Come on, Jonah," he said. "I guess it's time you and me was getting back to camp."

"I was just leaving," I said.

Cymraeg and the thin man watched us silently as we departed.

NINE

IT'S BAD BUSINESS," HEAVY said, after I had told him the gist of my interview with Cymraeg. "I thought he'd just offer you a slot in the local set-up. This other stuff is a surprise to me." He rubbed his chin and frowned at the barracks floor;

"I think 'stir-crazy' is the old term for it," I said. "Forget it."

"He won't let it ride there. He can't. You watch yourself, Jonah."

"You know the rules, Heavy. No violence."

"Don't count on it." He flexed his shoulders and breathed deep as if he were getting ready to come out for the third round. "Well, I got to get back to the rockface," he said. Under his breath, he added, "I got a few ideas; take a day or two to check 'em out."

After he was gone, I lay on my rented bunk and looked at the ceil-

ing and let the thoughts inside my skull bump gently against each other like gas-filled balloons drifting in an empty ballroom. There seemed to be some connections that wanted to be made, but I couldn't seem to make them.

The next day I was back to work as usual. The shaft where I had made my find was still under guard. The men on duty were strangers to me, possibly new prisoners. I didn't see Heavy. I brought in my usual load, accepted my chits, dined in the mess hall. The men in the barracks were no more silent than usual. The sonospray cleaned without refreshing, also as usual. I had just composed myself for the night's sleep when they came for me.

There were four men, all strangers all husky, all grim-faced, like men assigned a dirty job but determined to see it through. They switched on the overhead lights and posted themselves in the central aisle.

"On your feet, you men," one of them called down the barracks. I considered ignoring the order, but it would merely have made things less dignified. I got up, along with the rest.

One of the four men made a little speech to the effect that they'd had a report that there'd been some thievery going on, and they were here to check it out.

"The missing items are a rock hammer, fittings for a power chisel, and spare respirator filters," he finished. "The owner is here; he can identify them." He indicated a member of the vigilante quartet.

"I want two men to make the search," another of the men announced. "You, and you." The second you was me.

We started at the far end and worked our way down, bunk by bunk, with the men standing silent and watching, the foursome keeping eagle eyes on the proceedings. There wasn't a great deal to the search: we peeked under the bunks, felt around under the blankets, looked at the bare walls and floor. There was no place to hide anything, but all of us went through the motions of looking just as seriously as if there were. I stooped, patted, gazed around, went on to the next bunk, stooped, patted . . .

I patted something hard and lumpy jammed between the foot of the bunk and the frame. I pulled back the blanket and saw an almost new rock hammer, a sealed package of filters, and a plastic valve assembly nestled snugly against the mattress.

"All right," the man who seemed to be in charge of the proceedings said. "Who holds bunk number 24?"

I was looking around for a glimpse of the man who had been silly enough to stuff his loot away in such an obvious spot when it dawned on me that I had bunk 24.

The rest of the charade was acted out with a minimum of violence. My arm was twisted a little while the 'owner' made his identification. To no one's surprise he declared firmly that these items were, indeed, his very own property. The court considered the evidence, and reached the conclusion that some-

one had taken them and hidden them with the intention of selling them, and the man in whose bunk they were found was the guilty party. Each time I tried to speak, my arm was rotated a little closer to dislocation.

"You all know the punishment for theft," the president of the court stated. He gave me a solemn judicial look. "If you have anything to say, speak up now," he said.

"I suppose I could claim the loot was planted on me," I said. "But the fact is, I sneaked in here early and tucked it away for safe keeping because it never occurred to me you fellows would be shrewd enough to look in such a cleverly selected spot."

The chief executioner looked a bit startled, but not too startled to declare the case solved. He ordered me to get my clothes on; then he and his men formed up around me and walked me out into the dark street. Instead of hitting me over the head, they conducted me to the mess hall and called for five day's iron rations and a gallon of water to go. One of them produced a pack and told me to strap it on. The food and water were loaded and paid for out of my remaining credits; oddly enough, the funds just covered my purchases.

They conducted me to a vehicle then—probably the same one in which I had arrived. I sat on the floor in back and braced myself against the swaying and the bumping for a period I estimated at half an hour—long enough to cover perhaps thirty miles, and for cold to seep through my bones—before we

bumped to a halt and the turbine whined down to idle. The back doors opened and I was invited to climb out. I did, jumping down into soft sand from which the day's heat was still rising, in spite of the cold. One of the two men who were giving the orders pointed out into the night and said, "Base Station is that way."

The other one said, "Start walking, you."

I started walking. I had covered about fifty feet when the turbines revved up and I turned to watch the car's lights swing around and speed away across the flats. That left just me and all that desert.

"Quite right," I said aloud. "Give the victim a fair chance. It's only a few hundred miles to food and water. Who knows? I might even make it."

The days on Pink Hell were about twenty-nine hours long, I had been told, and during the daylight hours the temperature in the lowlands rose to 130°. The sun had been down for a couple of hours, which gave me twelve hours or more of darkness in which to begin my epic trek. If I covered three miles per hour, I'd be thirty-six miles closer to safety by dawn.

Somehow the thought failed to inspire me.

The sand was loose; it slipped back underfoot. The pack was heavy. I quickly discovered that my few weeks of work in the mine hadn't built back the strength and endurance I had lost in three months of enforced inactivity and starvation.

I turned my suit's temperature control up another notch. The shivering didn't stop. A brief investigation revealed the absence of a power unit. It fitted the pattern: they weren't exactly killing me, but they weren't giving me any help, either. Curiously, the discovery didn't depress me. I would do the best I could. If I froze, I froze. And if I broke a leg, I would walk on my knees. If they wanted me dead, I'd stay alive just to spite them. I took a bearing on a star and set off again.

In minutes my mouth was dry, tasting of chalk from the unseen dust. In an hour my legs ached and my lungs burned and my mind was beginning to crawl up the sides of its cage, looking for a way out. But there wasn't any way out.

I gave myself a break, sipped some water, got back on my sore feet, and went on. One foot after the other, one step at a time, ignoring the pain from the pack straps and the ache in my legs and the flame in my throat. Walking shouldn't be so hard to do. After all, man had been evolving for a million years as a walker. Walking should be as easy as swimming was to a fish. I thought about fish, cool and green and scaled, sliding effortlessly through the deep and silent waters, basking in the shallows, goggling mindlessly at a universe a few feet in diameter. That would be true happiness: to live in health, responding to the primal urges to feed and mate and die, untroubled by the complications arising from excessive electrical activity in the convolutions of a few ounces of grey

matter. Never to fear, because fear implies anticipation; never to regret, because without memory the past is non-existent. Never to yearn for the unattainable, never to question, never to despair . . .

I didn't realize I had fallen until I was spitting dust from my mouth. I had the feeling I'd been there for some time. It occurred to me that somewhere along the way I'd lost something valuable. I began feeling over the sand, looking for it, but there was nothing there but powdery chalk and broken pebbles. And I realized then that what I'd lost was no trinket that could be tucked away in a pocket, something I could replace for a few credits the first time I happened on a shop selling the proper line of merchandise. What I'd left behind in my adventures was youth and health and hope for the future. Those are the treasures that you hold for just a little while at the beginning of life before you lose them once and forever. And mine had gone a bit more quickly than most.

And yet to lie here on my face and wait for my heart to stop seemed even more fantastic than getting up and going on toward a destination I couldn't reach; which, even if I reached it, was as barren and empty as any cell in any dungeon ever cut into the rock of a prison world.

And so I found my feet and stood on them; and I put one before the other. And I walked.

I saw the line of the cliff-face as soon as the first faint dawn-glow lightened the sky behind me. Fire

glared on the highest rock spires and flowed out to form a burning line that crept down over the shear-face of the old fault; and abruptly heat was searing my back.

A man—even a healthy man—couldn't last an hour exposed to Roseworld's raw sun. The same obscure instinct that had kept me walking through the night sent me tottering for the black refuge of a shallow ravine that cut the plain ahead. It was cooler there, among the tumbled rocks, if not particularly comfortable. I issued myself another ration of water, estimating that at my present rate of consumption the supply would last two days at the most.

For a few hours I slept. The sun woke me, baking my feet. Retreating into the deepest cranny available gave me another hour or two of respite. The sun was almost overhead when I faced the fact that I had made a serious error—if I really intended to keep fighting. From now until late afternoon, my hideaway would be in full sunlight. Long before the sun sank low enough for the slanting rim of the crevice to offer any protection I'd be dead of heatstroke.

The only possibility for me was to reach the cliffs. In another hour there'd be shadow at the foot of the vertical escarpment. It was hard to estimate distance through the heat shimmer, but it couldn't be much more than a mile. I could do a mile in twenty minutes, provided I didn't spend too much time falling down. I took another ration of water, crawled up out of what had almost been my grave, and started off.

The night had been bad, but this was ridiculous. I could feel the heat through my boots before I had covered a dozen yards. The high sun seared the top of my head like an arctorch. The air was like poisonous gas. Suddenly it was a joke. They were using a battery of power cannon to kill a fly. Poor little fly, crawling over a red-hot griddle to reach the flames—and someone swats him with a sledge hammer. The whole thing was overdone.

I clawed at some of the cobwebs that had accumulated in my mind, and took a fix on reality:

I wasn't on the beach. I was in a desert. I was on my way toward the cliffs, where I could lie in the shade and soak myself in the delectable coolth.

But I couldn't go any farther, because of the wall.

I opened my eyes and looked at rubble, boulders, a fractured plane of rock, rising up, dazzling in the sunshine.

What do you know? I made it. The cliffs. But there was a joker. No shade. Not for a while yet.

Well, I'd told myself a man couldn't live an hour in this sunlight. But maybe I was wrong. Maybe what I'd meant was that a man *could* live an hour in this sunlight.

I would soon know.

Soon? Eternity passes so slowly.

But when it's over, it seems so brief in retrospect. The shade lapped at me like cool water. I crept into it and felt the darkness close over me like an anesthetic, and I slept.

When I woke this time, I lay and

looked out at the expanse of black shadow that ended in a dazzle of glare-haze spreading out toward the dusty distances. With no intermediate intellectual exercises, I was remembering the trip out from Base Station, with the early sun casting its black shadow behind the car.

Behind the car.

Llywarch Hen was east of the Station.

I'd been walking east all night.

I may have covered twenty miles or more—getting farther from my destination with every painful step.

A sledge hammer? Nothing so trivial. A hundred-ton highway roller. And all for a wounded fly. I laughed and enjoyed the joke for a while, until a question intruded.

What made a single wounded fly so important, worth so much effort?

Admiral Hence had thought I knew something. So had the Hate-niks. So had Cymraeg. It seemed to be a popular idea.

Perhaps there was something in it.

But if there was, it didn't jump into my mind, full-blown like Athena from the forehead of Zeus.

But wouldn't it be funny if it did—out here—at the end of the line—too late—too late for me or anyone. . . ?

I slept, and when I woke it was dark.

The cliff was steep, but not too steep to climb. I was going in the wrong direction, but the idea of turning back didn't appeal to me. I'd started in this direction; I'd keep on as long as I could. I asked myself why, but I had no answer.

Then I saw the footprint.

It was in loose dust in the shelter of a niche in the rock, deep enough for the light of the two nearby planets to cast a shadow line along the edge where the sole and heel had rested. It looked fresh—but that might mean nothing. Protected from the wind, and with no rain to wash it out, it might have been made a day ago or a week—or longer. Years, possibly.

But the sight of it was curiously comforting. Someone else had made the same trek I was making, had found the same path to the top of the cliff. I was no longer completely alone in an empty world.

I climbed on, looking for more footprints. I found them. They led me to the top, but above, on the exposed sand-drift, the trail disappeared. I paused for a drink—two swallows—a bite of food, and a five-minute break, then pressed on.

In half an hour I knew I wouldn't last the night. Curiously enough, I was quite comfortable. My feet and legs felt numb and swollen, but were no longer painful. I had become accustomed to the rasping and blood-taste of my breath in my throat. I fell often, but softly, stumbling face-forward against the strangely soft ground. Once I got to my feet and was making good time until I realized I was still lying on my face, dreaming I was walking. That frightened me a little. I was careful to be certain I was awake as I got to my hands and knees and tried to stand. But there was no strength left in my legs.

I thought I was doing quite well until I tasted sand in my mouth.

This time my arms wouldn't work. I thought of my water bottle, still half full, but the idea seemed remote and academic, like those ephemeral plans to master obscure languages and take up the violin.

My last clear thought as the darkness swelled, and the little patch of inner light dwindled, was one of relief that I would no longer have to pretend not to grieve for the life I had had, and had lost, and would never know again.

I listened to the soft sound of air being inhaled and exhaled for quite some time before I became aware that it was my own breathing I was hearing. That seemed rather odd—as did the comfortable coolness around me, and the sensation of something soft under me. And something else. Faint mutterings.

Human voices.

I opened my eyes and saw flickering warm light across a curve of uneven ceiling. By turning my head, I enlarged my field of vision to include a stretch of floor disappearing around a bend in what appeared to be a spacious, water-carved tunnel. The voice and the light were coming from beyond the angle of the cave.

I opened my mouth and yelled.

The results were inconclusive. The sound I produced was a weak croak; but it *was* a sound. Shadows moved on the ceiling, falling toward me. A man appeared at the bend, silhouetted against the glow. He came toward me, swelling as he came. He leaned over me, and his face was as big as a melon, as big as a moon, as big as the Universe.

"Feeling better?" a voice said. It echoed and rang down long alleyways of space and time. I made an effort and focussed in on it and shaped my mouth and managed a grunt.

"Good," he said. There was another man there then, kneeling beside me, putting a hand on my forehead, pressing a thumb into my wrist. Both men had shaggy hair, bushy beards.

"Dehydration and exhaustion," he said. "Rest and food will fix you up again."

This time I managed words: "I know it's banal—but . . . where am I?"

The first man smiled. "We call our little hideaway the Zephyrs," he said. "A little sanctuary for the outcasts of Hell."

They brought me a bowl of rather slimy, dark brown soup which tasted like water chestnuts, and a not-quite crisp wafer with no taste at all. More men gathered around to watch me. They all looked gaunt, hairy, but healthy. Their clothes were issue suits in various stages of disrepair. After I had eaten, things began to seem a bit more real.

"I'm strong enough to listen now," I said. "My last recollection is of walking and then not walking. I thought it was all over."

"Don't sound so regretful," the man who had first spoken to me said. "You're alive when you weren't supposed to be. That's something."

"How?"

"They're creatures of habit, not very imaginative. The same joke seems to amuse them over and over. We watch the trail, check it at

night. Sometimes we're lucky. Last night was one of the times."

"Why?"

"Why not? We have shelter, water, food of a sort, enough to sustain life, plenty for all. The more the merrier, you know."

I looked at them, hollow-eyed, unwashed, half of them in rags, looking avidly at me as though any moment now I'd tell them something astonishing and marvelous. I laughed, a weak snicker.

"The rejects of the rejects," I said. "A select company. It's been a long slide, but I've hit the bottom at last."

"No," my sponsor said. "That was last night. The turning point. From here there's only one way to go: up."

That seemed rather amusing. I was still chuckling over it as sleep returned.

TEN

THE CAVE WAS A NATURAL one, so I was told, cut in a dry arroyo by long, vanished tides, suppling, against all probability, all life's essentials. The temperature held at a steady seventy-odd near the entrance, dropping as one went deeper into the rock. The water came from a spring: warm water, forced up from far below. The food supply consisted solely of the edible lichens which grew in near total darkness far back in the cave system. They were versatile, lending themselves to reasonable facsimiles of salads, soups, nuts, even pseudo-steaks, when prepared by Tank, our cook, a formerly plump little man

whose hobby, I suspected, had once been gourmet cookery.

I rested and ate and after a while—hours, days—I felt well enough to get up from my pallet of lichen-like moss and take a few steps. The men of the Zephyrs were friendly enough, if disinterested. Only my first acquaintance—they called him Georgie—seemed to have a sense of high purpose. He gave me an arm to lean on and told me his plans.

"We're under obvious disadvantages, certainly," he conceded. "But there are factors operating in our favor, too. First, they don't know we're here. We're a secret force; we represent an element of surprise. Secondly, we have a powerful motivation . . ."

"And thirdly?"

"Our numbers are increasing steadily. We have eleven men now. Twelve, if the other chap survives."

"What other chap?"

"We brought him in two days before you. He'd been badly beaten. But he may make it; he looks tough—or as if he had once been tough."

"I want to see him."

"Certainly—but it's not a very pleasant sight."

He led the way across the main cavern and down a smaller side passage. On a pallet by the wall a man lay on his back; his breathing was audible from twenty feet distant. I squatted beside him and looked at a face battered and bruised into a mass of purple welts, swollen to double the size it had been when I saw it last.

"You know him?" Georgie asked.

"He was my friend. Is my friend."

"Ah. Possibly that's why you're here."

"That—and other things. How badly hurt is he?"

"Tiger—our doctor—says he has broken ribs, possible internal injuries. The smashed nose is rather serious. He's having trouble breathing. It's a wonder he walked thirty miles in his condition."

I felt the first small flicker of what might some day grow up to be a flame stirring down somewhere in the depths where I had buried my emotions.

With Georgie's help, I moved my bedding in beside Heavy's. The effort made me feel sick and dizzy. I lay in the near darkness and listened to his breathing. At times, he would groan, and I would talk to him until he sank back into whatever place it was where he was fighting his lonely fight. As the hours passed, the sound of his breathing changed—not for the better. Tiger came in from time to time to listen, shake his head, and go away.

I woke from a feverish nap to hear a particularly bad groaning fit, cut off suddenly. I looked at Heavy; his eyes were still swollen shut, but I sensed that he was conscious.

"Heavy, how is it?" I whispered.

He made a faint mumbling sound, moved his head from side to side. The swelling was worse than ever. His face looked as though it would burst at any moment. I went into the outer cave looking for Tiger. He was sitting by the fire, patting out lichen wafers to dry on a smooth rock.

"You've got to do something," I said. "He can't go on like this."

"My God, man, do you think I want him to suffer?" his snarl told me how he had earned his name.

"You're a medical doctor, aren't you?"

"Look here, Jonah—I need instruments, equipment—everything I don't have! The man needs surgery, you understand? To remove the bone splinters. What do you expect me to do, operate with my bare hands?"

"There must be a piece of metal here you could use to make a scalpel. Or you can chip one from a stone. Anything would be better than letting him die in agony."

"And sutures? Forceps? Bandages? Disinfectants? To say nothing of anesthetic!"

"You can improvise something."

Tiger stared at me, threw down the wad of lichen paste and walked past me back into the sickroom. The rest of us followed. Tiger bared his teeth and frowned ferociously at the patient. The other men gathered around and stared.

"This man needs the facilities of a Fleet hospital," Tiger said between his teeth. "If I touch him I'll kill him."

Heavy made a sound. He made it again. It sounded like: "Do something."

Tiger cracked the knuckles of his fist against the palm of his other hand. "The old Navy dictum," he said. "Even if it's wrong—do something." He turned suddenly.

"Grift, get me an assortment of stone slivers—the hard ones," he barked. "You, Dancer, shred out some lichen fibres. Toad, boil water. Grinchy, you and Tank carry him

in beside the fire." He gave me a hot stare. "And if he dies—by God, you can sign the death certificate —Jonah!"

Tiger's hand was as steady as a microtome as he made his incision along the line where the bridge of his patient's nose had once been. That was as much as I waited to see. I leaned against the wall at the far side of the room and listened to the sound effects: the surgeon's muttering, interspersed with curt demands for a new blade or more light; the sympathetic grunts of the men watching; Heavy's ragged breathing. It seemed to go on for a very long time.

Then it was over. Tiger went off into a side passage where the wash trough was and made splashing sounds. The others carried Heavy back to his bed. His breathing was easier now. Tiger came back in, came over to me.

"Thanks for getting me off dead-center," he said in a mumble. "Win or lose, I'm glad I went in. Passages plugged with bone splinters and clots. Sinuses blocked. Hell of a mess. Better now, I think. Less pain, at a minimum. It's open now, draining."

The swelling began to reduce at once; by evening he could talk a little. The first thing he said was, "You ought to see the other guy . . ." Pause, ghastly grin. "Not a mark on him. . . ."

Heavy mended rapidly; in two days he was sitting up and eating with good appetite. On the fourth day he took a walk, leaning on me,

but not very heavily; I still felt very fragile.

I related the story of my conviction for theft. His own was even simpler. They had waylaid him, told him he had flunked out of camp, and invited him to climb aboard the one-way bus to nowhere. Instead he had tackled them.

"I had the naive idea that the sounds of struggle might bring an aroused citizenry out of the woodwork," he explained. "Camp rules, and all that. But nothing happened, of course. So much for camp rules."

"It doesn't fit," I said. "How can a man who's organizing a rebel underground afford to attract that kind of attention to himself?"

Heavy looked at me in silence for a few seconds. Then he grunted.

"Maybe I have the wrong idea," I said. "I was under the impression the Companies kept a close eye on camp affairs. There were Company men who appeared on the scene to seal off the tunnel where I found my prize-winning nugget, for example. How does that fit in with a Hatenik running camp discipline?"

"Cymraeg's no rebel, Jonah," Heavy said flatly. "He's a Company spy, of course. He was after information."

"That's not what he said. He told me he was a Hatenik—or a Hatenik sympathizer—"

"He was lying."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I'm a Hatenik," Heavy said.

"The word," Heavy said, "is an epithet applied by the establishment to anyone suspected of dissatisfaction with the status quo. You're a

Hatenik yourself, Jonah—by their definition. That's the real reason you're here, of course." He held up a hand to forestall my contradiction. "I don't deny that technically you're guilty: you deserted your post. But there were circumstances that drove you to take the course you did, and I think you'll agree you were less than satisfied with the situation aboard *Tyrant*."

"Try to understand me, Heavy. I didn't like what was happening, true. But I would have sought a remedy within the framework of Naval law. I'm not interested in anarchy."

He studied me thoughtfully, two sombre dark eyes in a Hallowe'en mask.

"The Companies—the Starlords—have had matters their own way for a long time, Jonah. The end is closer than they think. We're almost ready. We're waiting for . . . something. There's a missing piece, Jonah. As soon as it falls in place, we move."

"You surprise me, Heavy. You're a Navy man. You know where the power is. Aside from a few hand guns issued to the constabulary, the only weapons systems in existence are the Fleet."

"We have a wide membership in the Fleet. Commander Paul Danton, for one."

"I don't think so. Paul was a man who took an oath seriously. Nothing could have made him betray the trust—"

"But something did, Jonah. Don't you see? If a man like Danton believed in the revolution, there must be something to it, eh?"

"Let me try again, Heavy. It's not really complicated. I believe in peace and order. I believe in laws, regulations, a structure of society—even an imperfect structure. I caught an arm in the gears and the machine chewed me up and spat me out—but that's a personal grievance. It's not a legitimate reason to wreck the machine."

"And if the machine is producing power and luxury for a few Masters—at your expense—"

"I don't resent the fact that the men who built modern technology benefit from it—"

"Doesn't nature's bounty belong to everyone?"

"Nature provides the ocean, Heavy. The fish I catch are mine."

"Suppose someone's robbing your nets? Or scuttling your boat?"

"I haven't seen the evidence of it."

"What if I showed you evidence?"

"I'd look at it, at least."

"Come with me." He led me across the cavern to where Georgie was busy feeding a small fire with briquettes of the ever versatile lichen, over which water was steaming in a stone vessel.

"Georgie, tell him your story," Heavy said. Georgie looked at us in turn and tugged at his tangled beard.

"I was a junior Gunnery Officer aboard a battlewagon," he said. "I took an emergency call one night from my Chief Gunnery Sergeant; a power drop to the static banks. We checked it back to Power Section. I tried to raise a Powerman, but no answer. We went back; there

was smoke, high temperatures. A lot of activity. A squad of Special Constabulary was out, staking off the area. One of them spotted my NCO, and while he was busy with him, I got past the cordon. The smoke was coming from the Transfer Room. A lot of excitement there, powermen running around in the smog, no one seemed to know which end was up. No one paid any attention to me. I was looking for someone to give me orders: whether to pull my battery off the line. I went through an open door—massive damned hatch over a foot thick—and was in an empty room. Or almost empty. There was a squat-looking apparatus in the center of the floor, linked up with a maze of duct-work and piping. Half a dozen men around it. They had pulled a drawer out of the mechanism, and were looking at something inside it, suspended by fine wires. It looked like an egg. A bit long and slender, a glossy white, almost waxy looking. Various color coded leads were attached at one end." Georgie paused to lift off his pot of water and begin splashing it on his face.

"I saw that much before what felt like an entire platoon of 'stabs landed on me. I woke up in sick bay with four guards posted at the corners of my bunk. As soon as I was able to walk, I was conducted to the ballroom, where a ceremony was in progress."

He picked up a sliver of stone from an array laid out beside him, and began scraping at his beard.

"Got the idea when I saw Tiger slicing on you, Heavy," he said. "Painful, but it works."

"Tell the rest," Heavy said.

"Nothing much to tell. I listened to the proceedings and discovered I was in the midst of being cashiered from the Navy. I tried to speak up, but someone had thoughtfully doped me. One of the selective hypnotics, I suppose. I couldn't speak, couldn't move. I tried, I can tell you. All I managed was a few tears of frustration as some old fool popped the buttons off my tunic. They'd been cut off earlier and stitched back with light thread, I realized later. All part of the show. Ouch." Georgie had scraped most of one side of his face. He paused to sluice water over it, and in so doing turned the clean-shaven side toward me. The shock as I recognized him was like a blow with a club.

"I remember, Mr. Midshipman Blane," I said. "I was there."

"Our plan is simple enough," Blane said. "We make the march by night, are in position around Hen before dawn, move in on signal and kill or capture Cymraeg and his cadre. The inmates will join us, and in half an hour we'll be in charge."

"I agree it's simple," I said.

"We don't waste any time then, hitting Base Station. It will be a three day march, but we have men who can man communications at Hen. There's no reason for Base to suspect anything's wrong. The car will go in first, and a picked commando team will take the 'stab barracks; then the rest arrive on foot, and mop up."

"What about the power gun I seem to recall perched on the roof of the Admin shack?" I asked.

"There'll be casualties—but they can't stop us."

"And after you hold Base Station—then what?"

"We decoy the supply ship down. Then we're off and running."

"Running is right, Georgie," I said. "You amaze me. This scheme would be funny if it weren't so tragic. You haven't a hope in the world."

"We aren't alone, Tarleton," Heavy said. "When word gets out—"

"They'll come with butterfly nets and put everything back where it was," I said. "Except for the men killed in the process. But perhaps you feel they'll be well out of it."

Neither of them spoke for a few moments. Blane sighed and resumed scraping at his chin.

"We know it's a long shot," Heavy said. "But we'll never have a better opportunity than now. We may be discovered at any time; there may be a decision to reinforce the guard garrison at Base, or to increase armaments to keep pace with the rising exile rate. We have to move now, while the population is high and the opposition is still weak."

"That's why your coming along just now is so important," Blane said. "You can give us the extra spark we need—"

Heavy silenced him with a curt sweep of his hand, but the message had been transmitted.

"So that's it," I said. "You, too: you want my great secret." I looked at Heavy. "I wondered why you took the chance of befriending me. Thanks for clearing it up—"

"Don't jump to conclusions, Jonah," Heavy said quickly. "It wasn't—"

"Sorry," I said, standing. "I don't know anything that would be useful to you." I walked away, feeling their eyes on my back.

Lichen, soaked and pounded and formed into a club shape and allowed to dry, made a long-lasting, nearly smokeless torch. I used one to explore the maze of caverns, leaving frequent blaze-marks to lead me back to daylight. Many of the rooms were wide and low, with gullied floors over which I had to pick my way with care. Others, usually cutting the wider chambers at an angle, were mere pot-holed tunnels which twisted and turned, with sudden dips and unexpected reversals and abrupt drops. Only a tiny percentage of the space was in use. I wandered into the grotto where the lichen grew in beds that stretched back and back into darkness. The spring was here, too; the water clucked and gurgled as it gushed from an aperture in the wall to fill a wide basin in the rock before flowing away through a deep-incised runnel between the lichen beds. I followed it back to a point where the cavern narrowed abruptly, the floor falling away steeply underfoot. The stream made a soft sighing sound as it poured over into the depths.

As I turned to go back, my eye was caught by an illusion of symmetry in the lines of the lichen cavern. I saw the walls as slightly in-slanting plants, their regularity obscured by adhering clumps of

stalactite; the floor, except where scored by erosion and stalagmites, seemed almost flat.

Almost artificial.

I studied the lichen beds, realized that rather than growing in irregular patches, they too were essentially rectilinear, camouflaged by barren patches that disguised their outlines.

I blinked hard and the illusion vanished, as illusions will. It was merely a cave where a weed grew wild, nothing more. Man was alone in his corner of the Universe. Two hundred years of space exploration had turned up no life form more complex than the finger-sized half-grasshopper, half-salamander creature that was lord of beasts on Rigel IV, a planet of mindless, creeping things.

I picked my way back toward the light, ignoring my mind's attempts to trick me into perceiving patterns in the jumble of passages, evidences of intelligent planning in the intersection of tunnel with cavern. And when I reached the main chamber, all pseudo-archaeological musings were driven from my mind by the reception committee that waited for me there.

All eleven of my fellow outcasts stood in a group by the fire. They came to the alert and deployed in a loose ring that closed around me as I came up. Blane faced me, looking determined; Heavy stood to the side, wearing what seemed to be a sheepish expression.

"We've discussed your case, Jonah," Blane said. He didn't look like a Georgie now. "We've decided that under the circumstances a man has to be with us—or against us."

"At least you don't bother trying to make it sound noble," I said. I felt quite calm. The disasters I had already been through had exhausted my capacity for excitement.

"Our objective is victory. We'll do what we have to to gain it."

"If that's a recruiting speech, you've taken the wrong line."

"Make up your mind."

I walked toward them and they parted, fell in beside me, trailed me across toward the entrance. Beyond it, crimson twilight stained the rocks.

"We need you, Tarleton," Heavy said. "We need what Danton found! If he were alive today, he'd want us to have it."

"You can't afford to let me stay here," I said, not looking at him. "I might listen in on your war councils, then hot-foot it across the sands to spill the beans to Cymraeg and company. And you can't afford to merely throw me out, for the same reason . . ." As I spoke, I took another casual step or two toward the outer air; Blane kept pace with me. I had no conscious plan of action; it was no more than an instinct, perhaps, to move toward space and freedom.

"Don't talk nonsense, Tarleton," Heavy said sharply from behind me. "We don't intend—"

"Perhaps you don't," I cut in. "But I think Blane is prepared to do what has to be done." On the last word I caught his arm as it reached out suddenly toward me, jerked him unexpectedly toward me, ducked past him and was running down across the tallus slope, jumping the scattered rocks. There were

yells and feet were pounding close behind me. In seconds, my wind was gone. I ducked aside, caught a glimpse from the corner of my eye of Blane, wild-eyed closing fast, Heavy a pace or two behind. A dark crevice loomed between upslanted rocks; I sprinted for it, stumbled on loose pebbles, almost caught myself, stumbled again, went down hard and rolled. Blane's hand grazed my foot as he skidded, checking his dash, and dived for me. But a larger body hurtled across his path, slammed against him. Heavy and Blane went down together, and I was back on my feet, limping on a twisted ankle. I reached the open fissure I had seen, squeezed inside, forced my way back between close walls. Another cleft opened to my left; I took it, climbed up to reach a higher transverse crack, kept going. There were shouts behind me, to my left, then to the right. I eased under an overhanging lip of rock and wedged myself as far back under it as possible, and breathed as silently as I could, with my mouth wide open. It was almost cool here. I lay for a while, and heard the shouts gradually recede as they worked past me. I think I dozed. The color was gone from the air. I waited until the chill had begun to seep through my bones; then I crept out, made my way up to the top of the great fractured slab.

A few hundred yards distant, cheery light glowed from the cavern mouth. A bulky silhouette paced there, pausing to stare out into the darkness. Heavy—had he intentionally blocked Blane? I tried to believe he had.

It wasn't too late for me to go back, express contrition, and join the Grand Army of the Revolution. The end might be the same, but at least it would be deferred. But the price of membership was a secret I didn't have, that they would never believe I didn't have.

"And if I did . . ." I started to mutter, and checked myself. I wasn't sure any longer. All the simple, clear answers seemed to have gone the way of the clear, simple life.

I tried again: "I'm a refugee from the outcasts of the exiles," I told the empty desert. "But I'm not a traitor."

"Well, good for you," another part of me answered. "Remember to apply for your Eagle Badge for riding the wreckage down in flames."

Above, Roseworld's sister planets winked, shedding pale light on gray rock and sand. I took a bearing on the same constellation that had guided me on my last trek and set off, not very rapidly, favoring my ankle.

ELEVEN

BITTER COLD; SUNRISE ON Roseworld.

And still alive.

It all seemed rather silly. I enjoyed a brief chuckle which began to sound like a woman's sobbing. I cut it off and twitched various bruised muscles and was sitting up. Tall rocks loomed around me like weathered tombstones. The Devil's graveyard. What was one more corpse, more or less? Not worth the effort. I lay back and was dreaming:

Paul Danton climbed up from a

hole in the ground, holding something in his hands. I craned my neck to see what it was, but he moved away, concealing it with his body. I tried to call to him to show it to me, but my voice wouldn't work. Suddenly I was burning with thirst. The fire licked up around my face. I inhaled to breathe in the flames and end the farce, but that made me cough. I coughed until the tears ran from my eyes. I wiped them away and squinted against the scarlet glare of the sunlight reflecting from the rocks. A fine system for roasting a fowl evenly on all sides. There was a velvet-soft slab of deep purple shadow not far away. I used the stumps of amputated limbs to crawl there before I collapsed again.

The sun made a jump and sliced away half my pool of shade. I pulled my legs up. Barely room to lie now, huddled against the base of the slab. Very hot now. Difficult to breathe. I was looking down a slope between rocks. Deeper shadows there; they flickered and moved, like rock-sprites, beckoning. I wasn't aware of making a momentous policy decision, but I found myself half crawling, half sliding down the slope. The shadow I had seen was a deep, narrow cut. It wasn't necessary for me to consider what I would do about that. I slid over the edge and fell a yard or two onto a drift of rubble. Coolness washed over me, and I took a deep breath so as to drown quickly, and was surprised to find that I could breathe shadow just as if it were air. It seemed a remarkable discovery, one which I should report as

soon as possible to the scientists in charge of the experiment.

"Man can live and breathe in shadow," I announced. Someone nearby made a weak croaking sound. Always a skeptic in the crowd. But it was true. And if I could breathe, perhaps I could also swim; glide like a fish in the deep darkness, effortless, mindless. . . .

I swam toward it, having a certain amount of difficulty due to the fact that my ventral side was still dragging bottom. I reached the hole and swam through.

I was in a cave.

Where there were caves there were lichens.

"Where there are caves," I said aloud, speaking carefully so as to get it just right, "there are lichens."

No one answered. At least no one contradicted me. That was a good sign. And somewhere nearby there were lichens; I knew this because someone had just said so. Later I would have to thank whoever it was for the information, but at the moment the steak dinner was more important. In fact, it wasn't even necessary that I have steak. Hot sausage and mustard would do. Oliver Twist had liked hot sausage and mustard. Fat, tender, juicy sausages, spread with sharp, acidulous, aromatic mustard. . . .

Needles jabbed into the sides of my jaws and I started chewing, but discovered I hadn't yet bitten into the sausage. In fact, I hadn't yet reached the sausages. But they were *that way*; I could smell them. I went toward the source of the aroma. . . .

It seemed to take a long time to reach the place where the food

waited. But the odor grew stronger, more compelling, urging me on.

"How much farther?" I asked.

"Not far, sir," the waiter said. He was a small man, not over two feet tall, with a smooth head like a turnip, and an odd way of walking. "Just a little farther," he said, backing away before me. I wanted to ask him why a table couldn't be set up right here, but I needed all my breath to keep up. Terrible service. Plenty of empty tables here, but, no, this dining room is not open, sir. Just a little farther, sir. This way, sir. . . .

My hands touched something yielding, and I seized it and broke off a wad and put it in my mouth. It was magnificently seasoned, lovingly smoked, juicy and succulent. I had never before had sausage in precisely this form, but that was one of the secrets of the old sausage maker. I wouldn't pry. And the mustard—ah, there it was! Not too sharp, not too bland, just right. Oliver Twist was on to something. And there was lots more. But mustn't eat it all at once, somebody cautioned me. Damned impertinence on the part of the waiter, but couldn't afford to offend. After all, he *had* led me to a table. To a bed. I was lying in a bed, wide, soft, smooth, with silken sheets, a fleecy blanket against the cool. Could do with a nap. Tired. So tired. . . .

My last thought was of a dream I had had about a fish. Silly dream. Odd I had had it while I was awake. But it was too hard to think about that now. I moved my fins gently in the dark current and let it carry me away into peaceful depths.

I woke clear-headed, aching all over, but more especially on my knees and the palms of my hands. Sitting up was an undertaking to rank with the construction of the Gibraltar Dam, but I managed it.

Faint light glowed along the cavern wall, showing me a low, lime-encrusted ceiling, fissured walls, the bare, runneled floor on which I lay. The palms of my hands were slashed and scraped raw. The knees of my suit were intact, but inside it the knees themselves felt like hamburger. It seemed I had come a considerable distance on all fours. My chin hurt, too, and the end of my nose. I must have walked part of the way on my face. And here I was.

The Zephyrs would be scouting the desert for me now, wondering if the cat was out of the bag and all their world-beating plans brought to naught. I grinned foolishly and then stopped grinning. Perhaps they were right to take up arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them—in the only way they could end.

My thoughts swung in toward my own situation, and veered away again, like the man in the graveyard who won't look back because he knows that close behind a fearful fiend doth tread. I didn't have to think about that, didn't have to think about anything.

Outside, in the big world, men would be killing each other, battling for their various ideas of how things ought to be. But not me. I was retired.

Curious that I wasn't hungry at the moment. I thought about sau-

sage and felt a mild revulsion. I had had enough sausage to last me . . .

"Correction," I said aloud. "There's no sausage within several light-years of this spot."

But I had eaten something. My stomach told me that. I had fed full, and not very long ago. I looked around, not really expecting to see scraped plates and licked spoons, or even small waiters with heads like turnips.

What I saw was a mound of lichen.

I looked at it and thought. I looked at the bare floor, the bare walls. No lichen grew here. So how had it gotten here? Simple. I had gathered it somewhere else and brought it here. It was the only logical thought, and I tried hard to believe in it.

"Fine," I said. Talking aloud to myself could easily become a habit, I realized, but I went right on: "You walked in out of the hot sun, explored a cave system on all fours, located a convenient supply of crunchies, and carried them back to this cosy patch of rock to consume them."

"Not likely," the other half of my rapidly splitting personality came back sharply. "In your condition, you couldn't have gone six inches farther than you had to."

"The alternative," I pointed out, "is that you're going off your rocker."

"Either that—or someone brought the lichen to me."

"You're talking to yourself."

"It's all right. I'm not listening."

"Let's get out of here. It's spooky."

"For once we agree. On your feet."

Getting up wasn't impossible, or so I kept telling myself. On the third try I made it. I took a tottery step, then another.

"Look, ma, no hands," I said.

Nobody answered. Even my alter-ego had deserted me. How sad. Poor young Banastre Tarleton, once so full of promise and high ideals, all alone with the bats in his belfry.

Then I saw the footprint.

It was clearly printed in a patch of smooth dust drifted behind a ridge in the floor. It was three inches long, two inches wide at the toe end, and half an inch wide at the heel. It might have been made by a splay-footed monkey, except that such were not known to inhabit these environs. It might have been my imagination. But it wasn't.

"It's about the right size for the waiter," I told myself, and sneered, and shivered halfway through the sneer.

My desire for a glimpse of the outer air—red-hot sun, pink dust and all—had suddenly become more urgent. It was fifty feet to the curve in the passage from which the dim light came. I made it, with only two falls, rounded the turn. The light came from a fissure in the roof. No way out there.

I went on. The passage twisted and turned, dipped, rose. The light faded. I turned back, found another branch. It ended in darkness. I retraced my steps, but the light was gone now. For another hour I searched for the route, before I fell for the last time. Lying in the total

darkness, I could hear my heart thump. I could hear ghosts whispering in the wings. I could hear the patter of little feet. I could hear myself starting to snicker.

"You need rest, Ban. Lie here a while, and sleep. You're in bad shape, Ban. Your body is nearly dead."

For a moment it seemed to me that I was lying on my bunk in my suite aboard *Tyrant*, but I made an effort and got back to reality—my slightly edited version of reality. Imaginary voices that seemed to be speaking between my ears were all right under the circumstances, but imaginary bunks were too much.

"A few harmless delusions, for medicinal purposes only," I laid down the law severely. "Otherwise, I'd be imagining myself lying on the beach at Monte Bello Island with a shapely girl named Janet-Anne beside me, quaffing iced champagne and contemplating another dip in the surf . . ."

White light burned through my eyelids; coarse sand creaked under my hand. Lively music sang from the portable tridoe. I could smell the sea-water, hear the boom of the lazy surf. I turned my head and opened one eye and saw the curve of a long, smooth thigh—

"No!" I yelled, and sat up. "Leave my brain alone!"

"We mean you no harm, Ban," someone answered in my head. I clamped my hands over my ears and scuttled backwards, came up sharp against a rough-surfaced wall of cold stone.

"Stay out of my head," I said. It was hard to talk because my teeth

wanted to chatter. It wasn't a joke any more. I was afraid—more afraid than I had ever been.

"Don't be afraid, Ban," the voice said.

"I am afraid, damn you!" I yelled, and scrubbed my hands harder against my ears, not that that would help, because the voice wasn't coming through my auditory system; it was *there*, inside. . .

And the sand grains adhering to my cut palms raked my skin. Coarse sand. Sand of a kind that couldn't be here. The cave floor was water-worn stone, with some scattered dust. No sand. Especially no sharp-edged, silicon sand. Sand such as made up the beach at Monte Bello.

I whimpered.

"I'm going to die, I know that," I pleaded with someone, something. "But not insane. Just let me fade out in my right mind. Let me die knowing who I am and where I am, not with a handful of imaginary sand from a beach ten light-years away. That isn't too much to ask, is it?"

"Do you want to die, Ban?" Paul asked me. "But no, I see you don't . . ."

"Go away," I said. "Leave me alone!"

"Why are you afraid, Ban?"

"I'm afraid of things I can't see that talk inside my head," I yelled. "I'm afraid of going crazy, of not being *me* any more! I'm afraid of the dark!" I had to stop shouting then, because the mental picture of myself, wild-eyed, screaming to myself in an underground cell paralyzed my vocal organs. It was like coming into a dark room and con-

fronting your reflection in a mirror, and for a moment, before you know it's a mirror, you freeze in nameless terror, staring into those alien eyes.

"Be soothed, Ban," the voice said. And as suddenly as that, the fear was gone.

I sat in a tense crouch, my eyes shut tight, hands clenched around the impossible grit, and waited.

"We're sorry we frightened you, Ban," the voice said. It was different now, and yet it was the same voice. "We want to help you."

I became aware that a faint light was shining; I could sense it through my closed eyelids. I opened them. A pearly light like dawn in a sea-cave shone from nowhere on three small creatures with turnip heads who squatted in a row with their blind faces turned toward me.

It took them a long time to convince me that they were real, and harmless, and helpful. They were the Ancil, they said, but seemed unsure whether this was a generic term or the name of a Special Committee for the Rescue of Distressed Spacemen. They had always lived in the caves, they said, tending their lichen crops and listening to the voices of the past while the ages rolled by overhead. They told me all this in familiar, friendly voices that came into being somewhere behind my eyes, as if there were a small radio receiver buried there, tuned to their special wave length.

There were a thousand questions I should have asked, but I was suddenly very tired. . . .

". . . Ban!" I became aware that

one of them was calling me. "*Ban, your lifelight grows dim! You must mend yourself now, quickly, before it flickers out!*"

I'm fine, I said, not in words, but the other way, the easy, mind-to-mind way. *I feel better than I have for a long time. The aches and pains are gone. I'll just rest here a while and then we'll talk some more . . .*

"*He fades, he fades,*" one of the others said. "*Hold him, each and all!*"

I felt cool fingers of thought slide into my brain, probing, touching, exploring. Many voices were clamoring together:

... a strange configuration . . . and yet, not without logic . . .

... massive damage to this system . . . and to this. These organs fail, the level falls . . .

... breakdown . . . extensive deterioration of function . . . the linkage fails . . .

Ban! Listen to me!" Paul's voice came through loud and clear. "*We can help—but you must join with us! Wake up, Ban! Join with us! Fight!*"

The voice led. I followed, among abstract shapes of thought, bodiless relationships that loomed up, shifting, changing, in a dimming glow of dying life. Energy flowed, weaving intangible patterns, fading and incomplete. I saw the dark places, the broken webs and shattered mosaics. And following the guiding hand and the urging voice, I touched, lifted up, restored, rebuilt. At last the glow held steady, then began to rise. I felt the stir of renewed function, the building flow

of currents in the immaterial structures of mind-stuff.

"The lifelight steadies, Ban! Now come! We must rebuild!"

Together we swept on, deep, deep into blinding intricacies, incomprehensible complexities. Directed by the small voices, I moved among them, restoring, repairing, reassembling. There was no time, no space, no substance. Only patterns; patterns broken and now renewed. Patterns within patterns, patterns that interlocked and became greater patterns. Patterns of thought, impressed on patterns of energy.

Then it was finished, and I drifted in the center of a structure of light and form and flow that filled infinity, vibrating in symphonic resonance with the beat of eternity.

"*It's done, Ban,*" the voices called; small voices, far away, dwarfed by the immensity around me. "*Come away now, Ban. Come back, rest, sleep, renew . . .*"

They touched me, guiding me back out, away from the glory I had erected around me, back into comforting narrowness, soothing darkness, easeful emptiness. They dwindled, receded, were gone.

I slept.

I woke remembering a strange dream. And I was hungry. And then the Ancils were there, and they were not a dream. They led me back along the dark passages, into a wide cavern where water poured from an opening in the wall, where lichens grew in rectilinear beds. I drank. They watched from shadowy corners, averting their eyeless faces

from the light that glowed from the walls.

It wasn't until then that I remembered my aches and pains and weaknesses. Remembered them by their absence. My hands were healed. My knees were whole again. I drew a deep breath, tried my arms and legs, sensed the well-being of a healthy body, a feeling I had almost forgotten.

"How?" I asked them. "How did you do it?"

"You did it, Ban," the voices answered. The words were like those a man enunciates silently in his mind when he thinks to himself in words: clear, precise, unvoiced.

"Any living creature has within himself the ability to mend himself. We had merely showed you the way," they said. "It was necessary to borrow molecules from where they could best be spared to place them where they were most needed. But now you must eat well, grow strong again."

I rested, ate, explored the cave system. Wherever we went, the walls glowed softly ahead, lighting my way. I saw miles of passages, hundreds of chambers. Some of them were clearly artificially cut from the pink stone.

"Long ago we made them, Ban," the Ancils told me. "Once there were many of us. Now we grow old, Ban. One by one we dim and wink out. The great blackness reclaims us. But you are young, Ban, so young. The history of your race stretches before you into unthinkable dimensions."

I didn't argue the point. I lived in a strange half-dreaming state of

mind, drugged with the sense of physical well-being, of total divorce-ment from the entanglements of a life I had failed at long ago. My strength returned; my arms and body filled out, my appetite was healthy, I slept deep and dreamlessly. My teeth, I discovered, had regenerated completely: no cavities, no fillings. My hair felt thick and vigorous; my eyesight was as keen as it had been when I had fired on the Academy handgun team, an eternity ago.

One day I felt an urge to see the sunlight and smell the outer air. They led me to the surface, and hung back while I walked out into the pink glare of late afternoon. The sunlight hurt my eyes; I opaqued the corneas to a comfortable level and strolled for a while across the desert. I found myself thinking of the Zephyrs, wondering what they were doing now. Had young Blane led his foolish little attack on Llywarch Hen? How many of them had lived through it? Or were they still hiding in their caves, holding insanity at bay by spinning long schemes that would never come to pass? But there was no urgency in it. It was like thinking of the Punic Wars, or the building of the pyramids, musing over the motives and feelings of men long dead, in another world.

I stood on a shelf of rock and watched the sun slide behind the peaks half a mile away. It was time to go back. The sand was midnight purple below me. Halfway down the giant's staircase I had climbed to reach my perch, a slash of vivid light spilled across the dull stone.

I looked back. The sun had found a chink through the multiple barrier of ringwall and earthquake-spilled rockslabs. It bored like a spotlight through the circular opening formed by a notch in a seaside spire. It was as perfect a bore as if it had been cut by a half-mile-long, forty-foot-diameter drill.

I turned and looked down along the path of light. The beam fell along a weathered, rubble-filled groove that ended in a ragged, forty-foot cave mouth at the base of a rock ridge.

I finished the descent to the desert floor, walked across in deepening darkness to the scored cut, followed along its edge to the cave. The rock around the entry was fused. Erosion had cut at it, crumbled the regular outline; but it was still obvious that the tunnel mouth had once been perfectly round.

But that had been a very long time ago.

"Simple," I told myself. "The Ancils cut it, way back when."

"But their tunnels are smaller, rectangular," I objected. "What would they make a forty-foot tunnel for? And why cut through the reef walls?"

"Ask them."

That seemed to be a reasonable suggestion. I sensitized my retinas to the infra-red emitted by the sun-warmed rocks and by their eerie light made my way back to the Home Cavern.

The Ancils seemed not much interested in my questions. No, they knew nothing of the round-mouthed

cave. They had seen it, perhaps, long ago, venturing out by night, but it was a dead thing, of no interest.

"It looks as if something hit there, some projectile," I said. "Not a meteorite; the cut's too regular. Something artificial."

"Yes, perhaps, Ban," they said. "Once we knew, perhaps, but we have forgotten."

"From the angle at which it struck, it must have buried itself near the southern end of the cave system," I said. "Have you seen anything underground there?"

"Yes, yes, perhaps, Ban."

"Show me."

They led me through the twisting, time-eroded tunnels to a smaller opening cut in the side wall of a dead-end spur, choked with broken rock. It appeared to have been blocked intentionally. They complained when I started in to clear it, but couldn't explain why.

It took many hours of hard labor to remove the rubble and open a route in to the cave at the far end. I pushed the last stone aside and crawled through and was in a high, wide chamber almost filled by a pitted, scarred, and tarnished shape of crystalline mineral. It was nothing that had ever been built by the hand of man, but there was no faintest doubt as to what it was.

A spaceship.

TWELVE

THERE WAS JUST ROOM IN THE cavern for a man to walk beside the hundred and fifty-foot tapered conic shape, to round the blunt

prow, to come back along the other side. There were markings on the hull, curious-shaped projections, a circular port high on one side, standing half open. The Ancils followed me, stood in a group beside me as I looked up over the curve of blackened metal at the entry.

"No, Ban," they said. "We begin to remember, now. This is not a good thing, Ban. It is a thing better lost and forgotten."

"How did it come to be here? How long has it been here?"

"Our memories tell us that this was a cave-that-moved, Ban. Once there were many such. In them we moved from world to world, knowing the light of many suns, drawing the arms of the Galaxy into the nets of our understanding. Then . . . evil befell us. Our great cities, so cunningly carved beneath the crusts of a thousand worlds, were shattered and killed. We died, Ban. Oh, we died. . . .

"They tracked us, where we fled. Great were our powers, but as nothing under the onslaught of the Axorc. By the energies emitted by our vessels they followed, and they slew, and slew. In the end, we last ones, we few, came here to the sea-world; we concealed our vessels, and in the shallow caves beside the surf we made hid ourselves.

"Time passed, and the seas are gone, Ban. But still we live, and still we fear. For the Axorc are many, and great is their power for evil."

I thought of the eons that must have rolled past while the oceans of Roseworld dried up. Ten million years? A hundred million?

"We have seen and remembered, Ban," they said. "Now let us go, and re-seal the chamber, and again forget that which once was, the evil that drove us here."

"These Axorc: what were they like?"

"They are the whirlwinds of destruction, jealous of lifelight, that only theirs should shine across the Galaxies. Now perhaps they have forgotten us, as we had forgotten them."

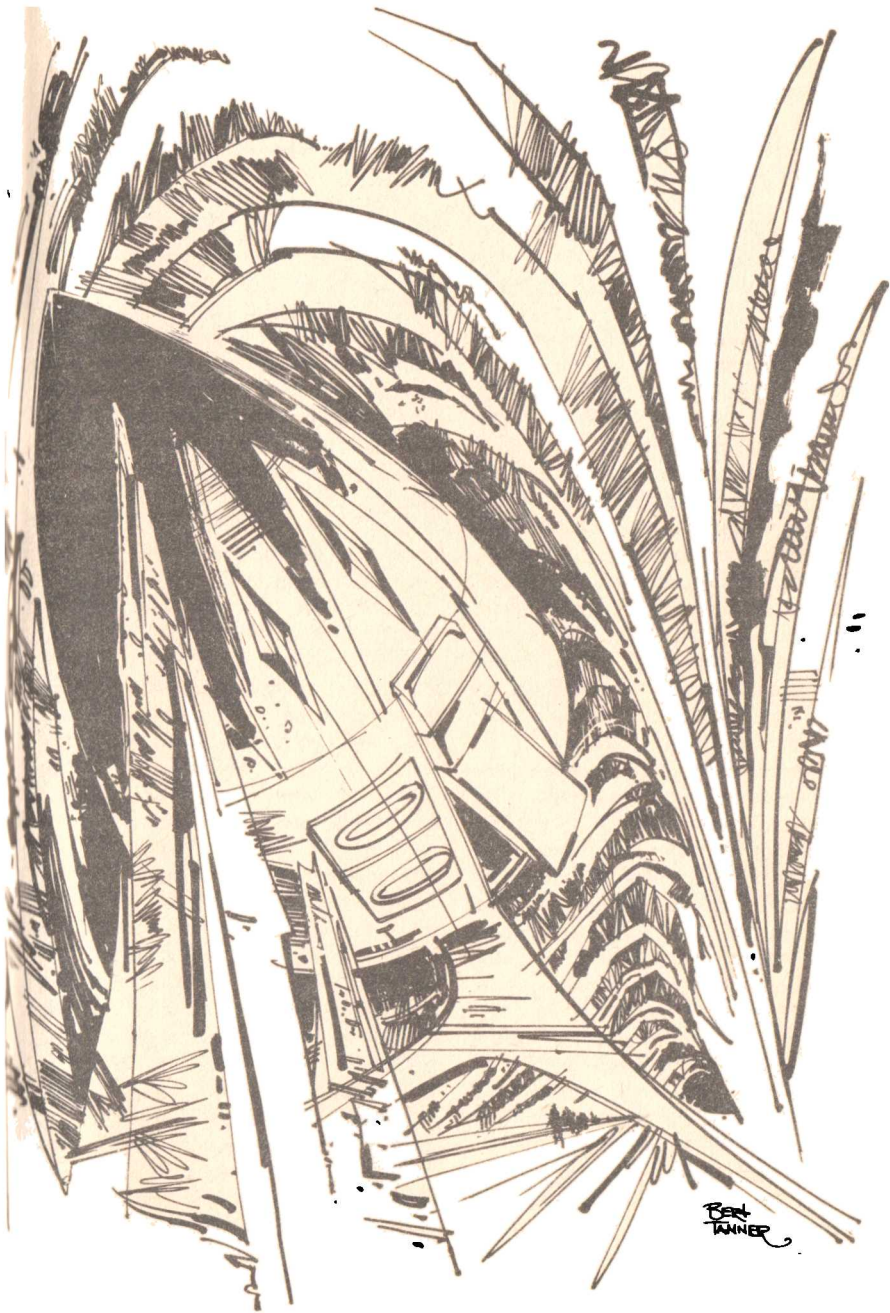
"I'm going to have a look inside," I said. They complained, but I ignored them. In the end they threatened, and for the first time since the night we had met I felt their ghost-touches in my mind; but I thrust them out, and began to climb.

"Now are you healed indeed, Ban," they called after me, sadly rather than angrily. "And great is the power of your mind-force. But as your young vigor is to our withered vitality, so is the might of the Axorc to your force. Beware, Ban. Touch nothing; disturb nothing, let the ogre sleep in peace."

"I'm not going to summon up any demons," I told them. "I just want to see."

In the end they followed me.

The hatch stood ajar, as the last Ancil had left it, at a time when the first great saurians were depositing their gallon-sized eggs on the young beaches of Earth. But the imperishable alloy was still as sound as it had been that long-ago day. The heavy, foot-thick disk swung aside at a touch, and I stepped over the threshold into a low-ceilinged passage. A faint glow sprang up before me, showing me doors, a



branching passage, a companionway leading down, all scaled to a ten-year-old boy; cramped for me, but roomier than needed for the Ancils.

"Once we were larger, Ban," they told me. "But what need in our close world for great size? And so we dwindled. Now the works of our youth appear as the craftsmanship of giants."

I went along the corridor, looked into rooms furnished with chairs and beds not much different than the ones I had been using all my life, except for the slight degree of miniaturization. The dust was half an inch thick—the remains of whatever perishable materials had been aboard. There were no decorations, nothing that wasn't strictly functional. I went down to the lower deck, looked in on equipment rooms, storage spaces, a navigation section with recognizable instruments. I found the command section forward, a maintenance shop aft. In the prow a battery of what looked like weapons was mounted. The Ancils explained that they were the heat-projectors that had been used to vaporize the rock, cutting the bore for the concealment of the ship.

I pictured the vessel, hovering half a mile above the ancient atoll, suspended on pressor beams, pouring the torrents of invisible light into the wet, pink rock, the steam and vapor boiling upward . . .

"There's something missing," I said. "Where's the Power Section? I want to see the engines."

The Ancils started wailing again.

"No, Ban, come away now, we remember danger! Danger, Ban! Come, come away . . .!"

I insisted; they moaned and pleaded, but in the end they led the way to a small door set chest-high in the wall, like an incinerator hatch.

"There, Ban. But you must not—must not! touch this!"

I pulled open the door. A tray slid out. In its center lay a glistening white object some four inches long, an inch and a half in diameter, smoothly rounded. There were perforations at one end; otherwise it was as featureless as an egg. I had never seen anything like it before—but I had heard it described: it was what Blane had seen in *Tyrant's* Power Room, just before he was clubbed down and thrown out of the Navy.

A Starcore, he had called it. A thing no bigger than a goose egg, he had said, that poured out a Niagara of energy to power a ship of the line. A device that powered the industry and technology of Earth; a device without which the economy would collapse in an hour. The proprietary property of Lord Imbolo and the Starlords, the five men who owned the world.

Five thieves.

I was delivering a lecture to myself: "Imbolo's grandfather was one of the early astronauts. He went off course on a one-man Jupiter shot, sometime in the late 20th Century. He was given up for lost. Later—he came back. He had a story of a miraculous three-cushion shot among Saturn's moons that swung him back onto course. There were questions, but the fact that he was home—three months late—seemed

to prove his contention. After all, there was no fuelling station out there. His reentry craft was never found; he landed via chute in the Canadian Rockies. They didn't find him for two days, wandering in the woods.

He left the service after that, used his bonus to start up a small research company. In ten years he had taken in four monied partners and parlayed his patents into the biggest industrial empire in the world. All built on cheap, plentiful power . . ."

"*Come away now, Ban,*" the Ancils called. They weren't listening. It didn't matter. I was talking to myself, trying to get the picture straight. The picture of a lost astronaut in a primitive ship, wandering off course, out to Saturn, bringing his craft in to a landing on one of her moons, exploring on foot, finding—what? A ruined city? An abandoned ship, like the one I had ferreted out buried in the rock? Finding the Starcore, bringing his cockleshell back with the fabulous find safely tucked away in a pocket, hiding it, getting away clean with a treasure worth more than all the money spent on space research since Sputnik I.

"It explains so many things; the Company space-monopoly with the Navy as a police force, to insure that no one else stumbles on anything."

I picked up the glistening, floss-white Starcore. It was abnormally heavy, with a soapy feel in my hand. My eyes fell on the fitted hollow in which it had been nestling. I had seen a hollow like that before: in

the piece of stone Paul had cut from the floating boulder in the Rings; the one I had taken from Hatcher's body. I had held it in my hand a thousand times on the long run back; I had run my fingers over the curved depression, wondering what it was, what it meant.

Now I knew.

No wonder they had killed Paul Danton. He had found the secret that would destroy their world.

And so had I.

I became aware again of the chorus of Ancil voices, piping the alarm.

"How does it work?" I demanded.

"Ban—hear us! Understand your peril! If you touch the Starcore with your mind—if you tap its heart for energy—the signal leaps out, at the square of the velocity of light—to warn the Axorc! Then nothing can save us, Ban! Then they come again with their world-destroying fires, and Ancil and Man alike go down to eternal death!"

"It's been a long time," I said. "Your old enemy is dead. Tell me—"

"Not so, Ban! What are a few millions of years to a race older than time? They live—and will come again!"

"The Starcore has been in everyday use for a hundred and fifty years," I said. "Imbolo and Company must have found quite a trove of them—or learned to duplicate them. Nothing has happened."

For a long moment there was absolute silence—physical and mental. Then a wave of sick despair struck me like a thirty-foot comber smashing down out of the dark, a

chorus of moans and wails like all the lost souls in all the hells.

"Then are we truly doomed, Ban," the message came through like a bell tolling disaster. "Now nothing can save us. Great Axorc dwells far away, in the satellite system you call the Lesser Magellanic cloud. Yet the message would have reached him mere months after the first of your kind blundered on the Starcore. They knew then that once again a rival mindlight glows here in the Galaxy. They will not have delayed, Ban. Even now they come, they come!"

"The Lesser Magellanic cloud is three hundred thousand light-years away—"

"Great Axorc can cross space at a multiple of the velocity of propagation of radiation, Ban. It may be long—a thousand years, or ten thousand—but come they will. Nothing can stop them, now."

"But . . . perhaps . . ." another Ancil voice spoke up. "Man is a young race; their potential is unrealized. Perhaps they can stand against Axorc—with our help."

"How could they succeed where we failed?"

"They are not like us; their kind can kill smiling—and face the knowledge of mortality with laughter. In them may be the seeds of a greatness we could never know."

"These rough beasts, a single Great Century from mindlessness—win out where we with a hundred times that span of culture—died?"

"Nothing will be lost if we try."

"Would you unleash the power to ignite suns among these primitives? What then of us?"

"Our time is done. Yet our bequest may give them a chance at life."

"Just show me how it works," I cut into the babble. "That's all I need!"

"This is no easy trick, Ban. Your mind may break under the knowledge."

"I'll take the chance."

There was a moment of silence—or perhaps they communicated at a level inaudible to me then.

"We will try, Ban. Good luck."

For a moment longer, nothing happened. Then a bomb burst inside my head, and drowned me in a torrent of light.

An intangible finger of thought traced a pattern in my mind. I saw how the crystalline matrix of the Starcore was arranged, the forces in balance. I saw how, by a slight realignment, a channel was opened, tapping a bottomless well of energy—the power-flow which is the substance of space/time.

I tried a tentative touch, explored the interior of the egg-shape, sensed the fantastic forces held in precarious equilibrium. Molecule by molecule I picked my way, found the nexial point, touched it with infinite delicacy—

Energy fountained up like a shower of fire. Instantaneously, the Ancils clamped down on it, shut it off at the source—

I struck them, forced them back, resumed control. They struggled to resist me, but I erected a shaped barrier, enclosed their assault, compressed it in on itself, forced it out of my mind as a splinter might be

forced by thumb-pressure out of swollen flesh.

And the Starcore pulsed in my hand, alive.

Around me the Ancils fluttered, emitting faint, unfocussed pulses of distress and confusion. I ignored them. The apathy of many months was gone. I knew now what I had to do. I left the ship, closed off the tunnel, returned to the cavern that had been my unquestioned home for so many weeks, now no more than a gloomy den carved in the cold rock of an alien world. I made my way up to the cave mouth. It was early dusk. The scarlet sky seemed strangely deep and luminous.

"I'm going now, Ancils," I said. "Thank you—for everything."

There was no answer. Without a backward look I walked away across the desert.

The Zephyrs failed to recognize me at first; by the time they did, I had told them enough to restrain them from making any abrupt errors in judgment. I showed them the Starcore, let them pass it from hand to hand. Blane confirmed that it was the twin to the thing he had seen in *Tyrant's* Power Room. He weighed it on his palm, looked at me, frowning.

"Good work, Jonah," he said. "I'll keep this. It may be useful to us in some way—"

"I'll have it back now," I said. "I have a use for it, rest assured."

Blane's face darkened. "Jonah, you're here on sufferance. I suggest you conduct yourself with great circumspection—"

"The time for circumspection is past," I cut him off. "I'm going to Llywarch Hen tonight. You may come along if you wish."

Blane made a motion and a man behind me stooped to scoop up a stone of skull-crushing size. I touched his sleep center lightly, he crumpled on his face and snored. Two other men started toward me from opposite sides. They tripped and were unable to get up. The others moved back, looking suddenly frightened. I held Blane where he was, lifted the Starcore from his palm and dropped it in my pocket.

"As you see, I'm in command now," I said. "Does anyone dispute the point?"

No one did. We rested that day, and at nightfall set off for Hen.

Cymraeg's men met us two miles out, eight men standing beside their carryall where it had stalled at the crest of a rise. Two of them carried standard prison-guard issue handguns of the type energized by broadcast power from a central transmitter—a safety measure in the event the weapons fell into the wrong hands. I felt out for the transmitter, found the Starcore, shut it down.

"Close enough," one of the men called when we were fifty feet from them.

We halted.

"I don't know what you monkeys had in mind," the spokesman said. "But it just flunked out. Line up in a column of twos, hands behind the heads."

I walked toward him. He barked at me. I kept coming. He raised the gun and aimed between my eyes

and sweat popped out on his forehead. He yelled at me to halt, and when I didn't, he squeezed the firing stud.

His expression when nothing happened was like a silent scream. The other armed man jumped front and center and made firing motions. His gun failed to function. He drew his arm back to throw it at me and I blacked him out. I felled three more of them before they understood. I ordered the Zephyrs into the vehicle, reactivated the power unit. The four former owners watched with numb expressions as we drove down toward Hen.

There was very little trouble in the camp. I found Cymraeg busy shouting a report into a dead comm screen and silenced him. My men gathered in his cadre, locked them in a barracks, recruited forty-three inmates, loaded the carryall with food and water. We headed west.

It was a four day hike to Base Station. I had left a volunteer behind at Hen to man the reactivated comm screen, in case one of the infrequent calls from the Station came through before we arrived. In spite of that, they were waiting for us; I could see the crew around the lone power cannon mounted atop the Admin building as we came up.

"Keep going," I told the driver. When we were half a mile out, a PA voice boomed across the flats, ordering us to halt. We did not comply. There was a flurry of activity around the gun, then a pause, then a more frantic flurry. A man left the gun and dashed away. Other men emerged from the stairhead onto the roof, hurried over to try

their hands at the malfunctioning cannon. As we cross the perimeter line, they were still pounding at it, swearing.

Men came running from the guard barracks as we halted in front of it. Their guns failed to fire. My troops gathered them in—there were nineteen guards in all—and locked them up. The Station commandant sat in his chair with a fury-white face and trembled as I gave him his instructions. He was stubborn; I touched his pain center three times with increasing severity before he broke and transmitted the emergency call to the cutter standing by on picket detail off-planet.

There was a three hour wait then. I found a corner table in the mess hall and sipped a cold drink from Cymraeg's private bar stock. Faintly, at the edge of sensitivity, I could sense the tiny energy-pattern of the distant vessel as it drove toward Pink Hell at full disaster acceleration. As I withdrew, the man called Heavy sat down opposite me.

"You've changed, Tarleton," he said. "What happened to you out there? What did it turn you into?" I didn't answer; my thoughts were elsewhere.

"You're not well, Tarleton. You move like a zombie. Your eyes are strange. And these—miracles you perform: It's eerie. The men are all afraid of you. I'm afraid of you too."

"Follow instructions and you will not be injured," I reassured him.

"We were friends, once," he said. "Whatever you may believe, I had no ulterior motives. I kept Blanc from catching you. Later I searched for you, to bring you back—"

"What is it you want of me?" I asked.

"Tarleton—listen to me: I want you to step down, let the rest of us handle it from this point on."

"That will not be possible."

I sensed movement around me, and scanned, and struck. Men fell, lay breathing hoarsely. Heavy edged back in his chair and watched me warily.

"Don't try it again," I said. "If you should interfere at a critical moment, the results might be serious." I walked out past the men on the floor and the equally silent men at the tables. The midmorning sun was hot.

There were two hours and forty minutes still to wait.

There was no difficulty. The cutter assumed a parking orbit and dropped a launch. I followed it down, waited until it had settled in, half a mile from Base, then deactivated it. There was some slight resistance—fists and impromptu clubs—but in a quarter of an hour we had rounded up the thirty-man riot detail and marched them off to be detained. I took ten men and lifted the launch, less than an hour after it had touched down.

It was strange to be in space again. Old thoughts came crowding, but I pushed them back. The business at hand required all my attention. The cutter hailed us as we took up orbit twenty miles from her, preparatory to assuming a closing course. I answered, told them to stand by to take us aboard.

They ordered us to stand clear or be fired on. I damped down their Starcore and moved in. When we

had grappled to the hull, I restored power, used it to cycle the boatdeck hatch, moved the launch inside.

All ten of my men had handguns, tuned to the Starcore I carried with me. The 'stabs who met us were also armed, but their weapons failed to fire. When I demonstrated that we were under no such handicap, they surrendered.

My interview with the cutter's captain was brief and businesslike. He seemed eager to inform me of the terrible punishment awaiting all of us, myself in particular; but I had no time to indulge his fancies. I ordered him to transmit an urgent SOS to the nearest battlewagon: *Belthazar*, on out-system patrol a week's run Sol-ward.

He refused.

I touched his pain center, but his conditioning held. He blacked out. I transmitted the call myself. Aboard *Belthazar*, the commodore might wonder; but he would come. For what could resist the armed might of a ship of the line?

For seven days, while my men stood guard over the ninety-man complement of the cutter, I waited, sleeping, eating, monitoring the actions of all one hundred men, feeling outward for the battleship's tell-tale energy pattern. It appeared, grew stronger; at a distance of ten thousand miles, I sensed the readying of warheads. Company policy, I saw, allowed no room for half-measures. Before she could launch, I cut her power. Now fifty million tons of dead metal rushed toward me out of the immense blackness of interstellar space.

It was the work of nine hours to match course and velocity with her, draw along side at a distance of ten miles. Then I reopened communications:

"Your armament is dead. I suspect conditions inside are rapidly becoming untenable, in the absence of heat, light, air circulation, and so on. I have only one battery, but it functions effectively. I call on you to surrender."

I restored power to enable her to answer, and at once six torpedoes leaped toward us. I was forced to detonate them instantly. The resultant blasts did heavy damage to *Belthazar's* port quarter. I renewed my demand for her surrender.

There was no response for another hour. Then she fired a signal flare, indicating acceptance of the inevitable.

I boarded her alone, and was conducted to the suite of the Commodore Commanding.

His name was Thatch; he was a man I had once known. I silenced his questions and expostulations, told him what he was to do. He was aware that he and all his crew of over twenty thousand were at my mercy; he transmitted a message to the Chief of Naval Operations requesting an immediate rendezvous of the entire out-system flotilla at a point designated by me. His arguments were convincing. If indeed battleships were helpless against me, they had no choice but cooperation; and if not, it would be as well to bring all available force against me in a conclusive counter-attack.

Again I waited, keeping to the closely guarded environs of the com-

modore's suite. I had restored power to the ship, after seeing to the disarming of her batteries.

The cutter's ninety-man crew had been transferred to the battleship. Manned now by my ten men, she trailed us, ready to open fire on command. There was no trouble. Nine great vessels of war approached, found themselves suddenly without power, disarmed, helpless. My crew went aboard each in turn, as I held *Belthazar's* battery on them, destroyed the fire-control center, after which their captains were amenable to instruction. I called the latter to a conference aboard the flagship. For the occasion, I dressed myself in a regulation Naval uniform, but without insignia of rank or organization.

Two captains, five commodores, two rear admirals, and a vice-admiral awaited me; be-ribboned, grey veterans of a long campaign more grim than battle. These were the men who implemented the Starlords' policies. I wasted no time on amenities.

"You are here to surrender the Fleet," I told them. "Your ships will return to Earth orbit and disembark your crews."

There was a great deal of talk, and one effort to rush me. The four-man Marine guard detail and three of the elderly officers lay on the deep-pile rug before they recognized the futility of it.

Admiral Constant made one last effort:

"Tarleton, you'll be reinstated—with an immediate jump in grade to captain. I personally guarantee your star in the statutory minimum

time! I'm sure that there'll be a decoration in it for you—a very high decoration—and unofficially, other rewards—”

“I'm not susceptible to bribes,” I told him.

In the end they accepted the *fait accompli*. They had no choice, no possibility of resistance. The Navy was the planet's sole armed force, the Starcore its sole power source. And I controlled the Starcore.

The flotilla returned to Earth. One by one the great ships discharged their complements. I did not permit even skeleton crews to remain aboard. For the first time since their launching in the previous century, the dreadnaughts drifted, lightless and unmanned.

The man known to me as Heavy came to the bridge of the flagship, from which I had observed the disembarkation.

“All right,” he said. “You've captured the Fleet. Now what?”

“We're going down,” I said.

“Have you lost your mind, man? You're holding the situation in the palm of your hand—as long as you're here, sitting behind the big guns. Go down, and you've thrown it all away!”

“I have unfinished business on planet.”

“Do you have any idea what conditions will be like down there when word gets around that the Navy's disbanded—”

“That's not my concern. My business is with Lord Imbolo.”

“Stop and think for a minute, Tarleton. You've spiked his guns; you can dictate policy. Isn't that enough?”

“I intend to destroy the disease at its source.”

“Tarleton—even a bad system is better than no system at all. Killing Imbolo is nothing—but the anarchy that will come afterwards will throw the whole world back to the Neolithic!”

“Perhaps.”

“Poor, bitter, disillusioned young Tarleton,” Heavy said sardonically. “He got a bad deal; his idols turned out to be clay from the neck down; all his cherished ideals turned out to be solid brass. So he makes his grand gesture and then breaks his toys! Sure, what are a few billion people, so long as you have your big moment, eyeball to eyeball with the villain of the piece! To hell with you, Lieutenant!”

“Prepare a G-boat,” I said. “Get the men aboard.”

THIRTEEN

THE FIFTY-ACRE FORTRESS palace known as Imbolo Tower had been built on an island off the Carolina coast. We landed at the port outside the town. No ground crew met us. The terminal was deserted. Already, scraps of paper were blowing across the formerly immaculate ramp. We selected a pair of limousines from among the vehicles abandoned outside the terminal building and drove out through the open gates, past empty guard posts.

There were a few people abroad in the village. They stared as we went past. I saw a few broken windows; a wrecked car sat unattended across a sidewalk. There were no other signs of disorder.

The palace gates stood open. We drove in along the wide, curved drive, into the shadow of the tower that reared up half a mile above us. I reached out cautiously, but could detect no mind within my range of sensitivity.

Suddenly the car veered to the left, leaving the pavement. The drive unit died. I caught the wheel, steered it to a halt. The driver was slumped sideways, his face slack. The other four men sprawled unconscious in their seats. There was a rending crash behind me. I turned to see the second car on its side against a tree. No one moved inside it.

I got out of the car, stood on the flat green lawn under the spreading trees. Vivid flowers grew in beds beside the drive. In the silence, I heard the hum of insects, the twittering of a bird. The sun shone down brightly from the blue sky. Across the park, the white facade of the palace stood unguarded. I walked toward it, alert for attack; but no attack came.

Inside the palace, all was silent, the offices empty, the corridors dark. I knew that Lord Imbolo's apartments were situated in the Upper Tower. In the grand foyer a bank of elevators stood with open doors. I rode one to the highest level to which it gave access, continued my climb on foot.

Twice, I encountered doors secured by powerlocks which I opened with a touch of my mind. A more elaborate device protected the ornate doors controlling access to the one hundred and eighty-fifth level, but it, too, opened to my touch.

I found myself in a wide, grey-carpeted room, softly lit, furnished with low chairs and tables, a desk at one side, a pair of wide, carved doors beyond it. They opened without resistance into an unadorned passage leading to still another pair of doors. As I approached, they swung open before me. I passed through them and was in the presence of a man.

He was a figure carved from basalt, weathered by time and hard usage. His skull was small, round, hairless, set close against wide, still powerful shoulders. His eyes were large, with yellowish whites, steady on me as I looked across at him. His hands, large, dusty-black, were folded on the desk before him.

"Come in, Mr. Tarleton," he said in a deep voice, as soft as crumpled velvet. "Sit down. You and I have matters which require discussion." He spoke with great assurance, as if I were a routine caller, dropping in on invitation. I reached out to touch his mind—

And encountered a surface as smooth and impermeable as polished steel.

"I knew this day would come, in time," he said, speaking easily, as if he had noticed nothing. "Space is too wide, men are too curious. And Roseworld was a mistake, of course. We had found traces there, and it seemed a clever solution to use the exiles to carry out the search. Perhaps I'd grown overconfident in my old age. Perhaps it was mere luck." He smiled, but it seemed to me that I detected a trace of tension under the blandness.

"I congratulate you on your abilities," he went on when I made no answer. "In some ways you've learned more in a few months than I in all my years of experimentation." He leaned back in his chair, still smiling a little. "But for all your cleverness, you've walked into my trap as neatly as though I'd led you on a rope." His smile grew a little wider, a remarkably youthful, white-toothed smile in his dark face.

"I point this out, not in a spirit of boastfulness, but only to make it clear to you that you're overmatched. And even if you'd kept your distance, attacked me indirectly, in the end the result would have been the same. I could have stopped you sooner, of course, but this way we save time, eh?"

As he spoke, I had again extended my awareness, with the greatest delicacy had scanned the surface of that incredible shield that protected his mind. What I found was not precisely a weakness, but a point of focus, where the lines of force came together. Retaining only the most tenuous contact, I again withdrew.

"I've followed your career with great interest, you know," he said, almost dreamily. "I knew your father, of course. A vigorous young man—and an even more vigorous old one." His expression became grim.

"Over the years I've been forced to do many things that caused me pain, Tarleton. But they were necessary." He turned to stare out the wide, curved window, waved a hand. "A pleasant view, is it not? A garden city, busy, prosperous, happy. A garden world. Man's old

dream of peace and order realized." He swung back to stare into my face. "A dream worth protecting, Mr. Tarleton. A dream worth whatever it may have cost."

"Curious that other men have always paid the cost, Imbolo," I said. "Your bill is long overdue."

He laughed, a quiet, patient chuckle.

"I didn't entice you here to destroy you," he said. "Far from it. I need you, Mr. Tarleton. I'm free to admit it. The burdens grow greater, and I grow weary. I need help; understanding help, someone to share the burden of superiority."

"You misunderstand," I said. "I'm in no danger of destruction."

A frown flicked across his face like a shadow. "Don't be a fool, young man. There's nothing to be gained by conflict between us. We two hold the power. The others—Catrice, Banshire and the rest: they're puppets, nothing more. They were wise enough to back me with their fortunes in the beginning; in gratitude I've kept my promises to them. But you and I—we're a different matter, boy! We hold the key, we two alone of all the billions—"

He struck without warning, a hammer-blow aimed at my mind. My vision blacked out; for a time outside of time the pressure crushed at me, while I strained against it with every erg of power I could summon. . . .

Suddenly the pressure was gone. I blinked away dimness. Sweat was running down across the fine wrinkles of Imbolo's face. He looked at me, his mouth curved in a smile without meaning.

"So—you surprise me, boy. I meant only to give you a touch of the quirt, as it were. But I see you're not yet broken to the whip." He shook his head like a man dazed by a blow. "All the better. I need a partner, not another underling. Things are falling apart, Tarleton. I confess this to you. It's gotten too big, too complex; too many pressures have built, too many repercussions of repercussions. What they don't understand, they fear—and when they fear, they hate. You'll learn that, Tarleton. Perhaps you already have. The price of your supremacy is the love of your fellow man."

"Things are worse than you realize, Imbolo," I said—and this time I struck first. The featureless shield held firm for an instant; then split, and I lanced in past the motor control centers, past the volitional node, toward the brilliant point of pseudo-light that was the essential ego of the man—

And merged.

His mind lay bare to me, as mine to him. I saw his memories: the long-ago days of his youth, the early aspirations, the years of dedication, the fears, mastered at last, the beginning of the long journey outward into the unknown. I saw disaster strike as a gyro malfunction aborted his Jupiter approach, felt with him panic, and then the acceptance, and the terrible loneliness as his primitive vessel fell outward toward the emptiness of interstellar space.

I watched as he gathered his forces, cleared away the paralysis;

I saw the focussing of a brilliant intellect, the analysis of the situation, the rebirth of hope. I followed as he calculated, planned, waited—and at the proper moment, used the last of his fuel in a forlorn effort to throw the vessel into orbit around Saturn's outermost moon. Not in hope of saving his own life—he knew there was no chance of that—but to preserve the ship intact for the study of those who followed, a lonely act of heroism and desperation.

Then the waiting, the growing awareness that he had failed again, that the ship was falling in past Europa; and then again hope, as it took up an eccentric orbit that brought it close to Ganymede. Close enough for a final desperate attempt, using the atmospheric braking jets, to maneuver for a landing—and to succeed.

And the dawning wonder as he realized that the time-eroded shapes around him were those of a city fallen into ruin.

In his spacesuit, he had emerged from the tiny vessel, tramped through the dust- and ice-covered avenues, silvery in the light of the ringed, impossible world that hung swollen in the black sky. I saw him, light-headed with starvation, stumble on the chamber where the white egg-shapes lay racked, saw how his mind, half-freed from his body, groped out instinctively, touched the triggering impulse—and awoke the power of the Starcore.

Alone, without instruction, in a state bordering delirium, he had learned to tap the energy source, direct its flow into his ship's power

system, had re-energized the synthesizer system which converted inert mineral matter into edible organics, had regained his strength, lifted from the barren world, and begun his return voyage to Earth.

And on the way, he had considered the results of his discovery. He had visualized the impact of a perpetual, inexhaustible power source on the tortured world, assessed his culture's ability to use it wisely—and found it wanting.

I agonized with him as he recognized—and accepted—the burden that devolved on him.

The years of struggle, planning, of the gradual shaping of order, the lessons learned, the controls imposed, the growing weariness. . . .

The rise of the Hateniks, an expression of the formless urge of humanity for change. The threat, ever-present, that the secret of the Star-core would fall into the hands of one who would misuse it.

Culminating in the arrival of the brash young man with the strange eyes . . . myself.

I saw the welcome in his heart, the overwhelming desire to relinquish the terrible power he had held so long to another, younger man, to rest at last. But first, the need to be sure of his successor's abilities, his intentions. The need to teach him, to pass along the bitterly won lessons of his long life. . . .

"Now you see, Tarleton," his voice came from far away. "Now you understand."

"You made mistakes, Imbolo," I said. "There were things you didn't know. The Ancils still live, they can teach us . . ."

"Now I understand. Too late, Tarleton. Too late for me. I underestimated you. You struck too hard. . . ."

The light of his mind was fading. I tried to grapple to it, to breathe new life into it, but I was too slow, too clumsy.

Then I was alone in darkness.

Lord Imbolo sat in the chair behind the gleaming desk, his eyes half open, the faint smile still on his mouth, dead.

I made my way out of the suite, down the stairs, out of the building. On the wide terrace they waited for me, warily.

"You went in—and you came back alive," Heavy said. "I suppose that means you've done what you came for. Now you hold all the cards. What game are you calling?"

"I'm throwing in my hand," I said. "You take over."

He stepped forward and caught my arm. "You're yourself again," he said. "What happened?"

"I discovered what playing God means. I'm not up to the job." I shook his hand off. I had taken two steps when a familiar touch brushed my mind:

"Ban . . . we have followed with you, directed you, through your eyes. Brutal you are, and primitive; but see the nature of your young kind. The seeds of greatness are in you. Our long era ends, yours begins. You must play your role, as have we."

"I'm finished," I said. "I'm tired. I want to rest."

"Alas, Ban," the Ancils mourned; their voices were faint with distance.

"For you there is no rest. And in a thousand years, perhaps, you will know the true meaning of weariness. You have assumed a burden you cannot discard: embarked on a path from which you cannot depart.

"And yet—you are young. Go forth, breathe the clear air, look on your green world. When your mind is healed—come back."

"Tarleton," Heavy was saying. "I've already talked with Admiral Grayson. He wants permission to hold the Navy together as a peace-keeping force until you've . . . made other arrangements. I think we ought to cooperate. We have to begin somewhere. Rebuilding a world from scratch is a bigger job than any of us ever considered."

"Yes," I said, "hold it together. Make it work. Imbolo is dead, but the world lives on."

"Where are you going, Tarleton? What are your plans?"

"Plans?" I looked up at the toy clouds drifting across the sky. "I have no plans. I'm going out there

. . ." I waved a hand that encompassed the world ". . . and see if there's anything worth preserving. If so . . . one day perhaps I'll be back."

I walked away under the green trees. A soft breeze carried the perfume of flowers. A fountain tinkled. A bird sang.

Perhaps in a thousand years—or ten thousand—a destroying horde known as the Axorc would burst from the deeps of intergalactic space to sweep us away. Perhaps they would succeed—and perhaps we would surprise them. Or perhaps they had died a thousand centuries ago, and their threat was an empty bugaboo.

But if the Axorc did not exist, there would be other, even greater threats to Man. And of these, the greatest would be Man himself.

"And if you master yourselves, whom then can you fear?" a voice whispered from far away.

"Who indeed?" I said aloud, and laughed, and passed through the gate into the wide world.

Back issues of VENTURE

If you missed any of the first three issues of VENTURE Science Fiction, copies are available direct from the publisher. The novel featured in the May issue was Gordon R. Dickson's *HOUR OF THE HORDE*; in the August issue, Julius Fast's *THE LEAGUE OF GREY-EYED WOMEN* ("impossible to put down"—*Publisher's Weekly*); and in the November issue, *PLAGUE SHIP* by Harry Harrison. All stories are new and complete in one issue. Send 60¢ for each to: Mercury Press, Inc., Box 271, Rockville Centre, N. Y. 11571.



Books

THE SILENT MULTITUDE

D. G. Compton

Ace, 75¢

H. G. Wells sometimes rode to his assignments on a bicycle. And in his early science fiction novels he also mixed the prosaic with the romantic and unusual. I imagine illicit affairs are carried on differently in Britain now than they were seventy or so years ago, but English science fiction writers are still attempting books in which quiet everyday life meets an alien-intrusion. The late John Wyndham was good at the plain folks versus the mass cataclysm sort of thing. Here Mr. Compton is giving it a try. He writes very well. You have to write well to get by with a novel that opens with a stray cat as the focal character. The trouble is, when he gets to his commonplace people they turn out to be too commonplace. Realistically drawn, but dull. Even their eccentricities are common-

place, familiar ones. Reading the first hundred or so pages is like watching a play which seems to be full of only the second leads. At first you wait for the star to enter. Then slowly you realize there is no lead, no hero. These curtain-raising people are all you're going to get. I dropped out of this one before the catastrophe ever got to Gloucester, England. The threat is described in the blurb as a mysterious spore from outer space that destroys buildings. I bet it turned out to be a dull spore.

SIX GATES FROM LIMBO

J. T. McIntosh

Avon, 75¢

I've never paid much attention to J. T. McIntosh's novels. In fact, I didn't pay much attention to this one while reading it. Still, I have the notion he's been playing eeny meeny miney mo with civilization for quite a while now. He looks to be getting tired of

grinding out this same old tune, but he keeps at it. Underneath all the bad allegory here ("The word *limbo* dropped into his hazy awareness, and being reluctant to be a man without a name in a place without a name, he named one of the two at once: Limbo;" "He had a name. He was Rex. He moved to the next casket and scarcely had to look at the plate to know what it said: *Regina*," etc.) this current book is another of those who-will-live-who-will-die things. McIntosh's work lacks sympathy, humor or understanding. Next time around he would be better advised to save the people and get rid of his book.

RED SNOW

Kenneth Robeson
Bantam, 60¢

You never know what sort of monument you'll get. Lester Dent had hoped to have a chance to write what he felt was first-class books and stories, the kind of thing that shows up on slick paper and best-seller lists. Instead he became Kenneth Robeson and wrote pulp stories, among which were nearly two hundred of these novels about Doc Savage. The Bantam revivals of the old pulp-wood novels have now sold millions of copies and this must mean Dent is, some ten years after his death, one of the best-selling science fiction writers of this cen-

tury. And these novels are science fiction. A kind of wacky, free-wheeling science fiction, full of infernal machines and crazed schemes. One of the things that makes Dent worth looking into is his sense of humor. He evidently had fun batting out the Doc Savage saga, and it shows. RED SNOW is a pretty good example. It contains a man-made plague, the incredibly gifted Doc Savage, his boys' book gang of gifted side-kicks, a hairless villain named Ark, a government agent named O. Garfew Beech, and a heroine named Nona Space. There are chases through swamps, across mysterious islands, through rococo 1930s Florida towns. A relief from the pomposity and coldness of the above two books.

A WILDERNESS OF STARS

William F. Nolan, Editor
Sherbourne Press, \$5.95

This is an anthology with a theme: The broad one of "man in conflict with space." Nolan's excavations in the heaps of past science fiction are always a little more thorough and personal than those of most anthologists. Here he's gathered together ten stories, including two by Walter Miller, Jr., one by Nolan, a Bradbury from the old *Super Science* pulp, a Poul Anderson and an Arthur C. Clarke from *Boys' Life*.

In a postscript to the collection Nolan implies he's abandoning the sf anthology field. Let us hope

he can be talked into a few more farewell tours.

—RON GOULART



In the February issue of FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION

F&SF's February issue features **INITIATION** by Joanna Russ, a novelet about an extraordinary "crash landing" on a planet of telepaths, and **FROM THE MOON WITH LOVE**, a fresh, convincing and offbeat post-holocaust story from newcomer Neil Shapiro. Plus, short stories from Gahan Wilson, Sterling Lanier (a new Brigadier Ffellowes adventure) and others. Also, James Blish on sf books, and, of course, Isaac Asimov with his regular science feature. The February issue of *Fantasy and Science Fiction* is on sale December 30.

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Neither side made a habit of taking prisoners, but the Colonel had survived the attack and had information the enemy wanted. And the enemy had apparently discovered how to defeat the man whose determination was stronger than the capacity of his body to endure pain.

V. N. McIntyre

BREAKING POINT



FOR hours, the only sounds had been the faint, pulsing radar blips of the enemy and the flow of musical individual voices in dull, multiple monotone. The only lights were the red and green tell-tales, the multicolored stars, and the narrow crescent of the looming Jupiter-sized planet circling the contested yellow sun and dominating every viewscreen.

At the master display, the Colonel watched the enemy ships as they massed and seemed to halt in a three-dimensional attack formation. His eyes narrowed at the opposing commander's stupidity. *Playing a game of nerves, eh?* The lesson the Colonel's adversary would learn next would do him little good, because it would be fatal.

This is my battle. The Colonel mulled the thought without any real pleasure, but with satisfaction. It was the chance he had spent thirty years waiting for. The capture of this single seven-planet system would make him—his career and his fame. It seemed almost ludicrous, for the system was nearly worthless in itself. But despite its gas giants and its sterile rocks and its sole barely inhabitable planet, it was still strategic.

Strategic. He allowed himself a tiny, grim, humorless smile for the control that was almost his.

He heard a soft growl of warning behind him. Automatically he

tensed the muscles of his left shoulder before Hell landed on it, balancing precariously with claws retracted. The cat purred in the Colonel's ear, pushed his long whiskers in his face, communicated the undercurrent of excitement imperceptible to the mere human beings who generated it. The Colonel reached up and scratched behind the big tufted ears, stroked in long strokes to the Manx's tail-stub. "They're going to move soon," the Colonel told his only confidant, watching the little blue blips on the radar screen. "They won't hold out much longer." Hell growled in anticipation and agreement, and once again they were bathed in the comforting normalcy of battle preparation, the only life either of them had ever known.

His computers purred contentedly, like the cat, indifferent to the enemy. They were concerned only with the theoretical problems of attack, never with the human results.

The Colonel's task force functioned like a computer itself, each man or woman a finely tuned circuit or a perfectly programmed memory bank, integrated in the team, honed to a fine edge, and nerveless. Though at any moment they might be attacked, there was no smell or feel of fear in the control room. The Colonel was surrounded by five-sense music, the pure feel of human machines,

machine humans, readying for battle.

Then, incredibly, the dull thud of a false note fell into the symphony and shattered it. The black-uniformed warriors became only people for a moment, and stood staring, horrified for perhaps the first time in their lives. The Colonel rose, frowning toward the sound.

In the shadow of the master computer, faintly darker among all the other darknesses, a second lieutenant cowered on the deck. There was no reaction yet to this incongruity, this impossibility, this blasphemy.

The lieutenant lay on the deck and sobbed.

The Colonel was the first to recover, of course, after a micro-second of surprised hesitation and a micron of raised eyebrow. A cold shaft of apprehension stirred inside him when he recognized the boy, but his voice, unaffected, bulged out against the silence that was complete, now, except for the imperturbable machines.

"Get up, Lieutenant," the Colonel said.

The lieutenant just lay there, shivering, his face pressed up against the warm flank of the computer. Seeming not to hear, he stared vacantly toward its soft curve of burnished metal. Oblivious to everything else, he reached out with trembling fingers and touched it, stroking it tentatively.

"Lieutenant," the Colonel repeated, his voice hard, "get up."

This time, the harsh bark registered. The lieutenant turned, barely enough to see him. The motion contorted his face with pain, but the trained intelligence leaked back into his eyes.

"I . . . can't . . . sir . . ."

The Colonel took a kind of cold pride in neither knowing nor caring what the names of his soldiers were. It was unnecessary. It was only necessary that they obey him unquestioningly, instantly, unfalteringly.

But the Colonel knew this one's name, his record, his background, and above all that this cowering boy was the keystone in his plans.

When the Colonel pulled him off the floor, he doubled up in agony.

"We are in the middle of a maneuver, Lieutenant," the Colonel snarled. "Would you like a little leave?"

The boy just clenched his arms tighter around his abdomen and moaned. The Colonel had no appreciation for a good act. He signaled for his aide.

"Sir."

"Take him to the surgeon." His black eyes glowered from the deep pits beneath his bushy eyebrows, showing the anger but none of the fear. "I want him back on duty in half an hour. Get the auxiliary programmer."

"Aye, sir."

The Colonel had always known, deep down, that he himself was not a brilliant tactician. He was a leader, of sorts, due to his discipline rather than to any extreme loyalty he inspired. He was a dedicated officer, but he lacked imagination. After he finally realized that, he resigned himself to making brigadier, perhaps, when he retired. His pride and his ambition seethed under his inability to advance, but the same discipline that made him as good as he was hid his frustration. Finally it was buried and almost forgotten.

Then, only a year earlier, the second lieutenant was transferred to his ship. It was as if that one indispensable quality the Colonel had never possessed had been grafted onto him. The boy was a tactical genius. In the following three engagements he did things with ships and ordnance that had never been thought of, much less tried. After the first scrimmage, which could have been a disaster, the Colonel watched him with growing, invisible excitement. He allowed the ambition he had buried so many years before to peer up out of his soul and grow.

Now it was threatened, and it did not want to die again.

"What happened to your perfect squad, Colonel?" the surgeon asked with a sardonic smile. "Every part replaceable, like a printed circuit—"

"I won't argue with you any more," the Colonel said, dangerously softly. "I want that man."

"You need him, you mean." The surgeon laughed. "Here's your chance to be a big hero and it's going down the tubes with one case of combat fatigue."

The absurdity of that notion struck the Colonel silent for a moment. "Combat fatigue! That's ridiculous. It's impossible. My men are analyzed for stability—trained—"

"Oh, right," the surgeon sneered. "Nobody ever accuses the brainbusters in *this* army of making a mistake."

"You're saying," the Colonel said icily, "that the psychmeds let a coward on my team. That's very close to treason—"

"Treason!" The surgeon barked a laugh. "They've got you as hooked on the loyalty line as a green recruit." His expression hardened into bitterness. "You've pushed that kid so hard that he's close to cracking—but your army mass-produces killers, and your lieutenant is one of us. He wants me to fitstamp his slip, dope him up, and put him back on duty." He leaned back in his chair and crossed his feet on the desk. The holster of the archaic revolver he wore on his hip slid back and thudded against the plastic chair seat; automatically, he repositioned it. "Well, Colonel," he said, disdain in his cold gray eyes,

"you can have your ticket to the Council back. If I dope him to the hairline, he'll probably stay ahead of even the psychosomatic symptoms—for a while." He stood up, half smiling in that irritating way of his, one hand on his hip and the other resting easily on the gun almost caressing it. "Just be sure," he said, "that when we get it, you land us where we can get in some real fighting."

The Colonel left the surgery, feeling uneasy, as always. The doctor was a strange man, solitary, undisciplined, irritating. He came to the service not of his own accord, but he stayed because he liked it. He didn't care who won the war they were presently embroiled in—it was the fighting, the struggle, that mattered. He ridiculed the impersonality and ease of space-fought battles. He had no loyalty to anyone, except possibly himself.

I wonder, the Colonel thought, if he'd rather go back to planet-based wars, with all the destruction and waste . . .

The strangest thing about him was that he was, despite all, a good doctor.

They were playing tag among the moons of the outer gas-giant when the lieutenant returned, glassy-eyed and drawn but game, and reported to the Colonel. "Sorry, sir. Some virus, I think—"

"Never mind, Lieutenant. Get back to your post." He feigned indifference, stroking Hell with one hand, his gaze intent on the master display before him. The cat blinked at the lieutenant with green-eyed solemnity.

"Aye, sir."

The lieutenant went to his station, hardly noticing the man who had come to replace him as he shouldered him aside. He played his fingers over contoured keys, requesting printouts of what he had missed. During the few seconds it took for the wide strips of paper to spew out to him, he glanced at the six facets of his multidirectional viewscreen. He recognized what he was seeing, but thru the hypnodrugs he didn't feel what they meant. Finally, slowly, as he read the strings of numbers that put themselves together in his head into trajectories, ships, planets, men, he realized the trap they had been lured into.

"Oh, my God," he whispered.

It was a preposterous, impossible, suicidal, and totally successful attack. The enemy ships came out of a gravity well that should have pulled them crashing to the frozen surface of the planet that seemed to loom above the Colonel's small fleet. The fusion torpedoes, even damped by the screens, blew apart the lower half of his flagship and sent a shock

wave thru the rest of the huge sphere. In what seemed like slow motion, the plastalloy cracked past its self-sealing capacity. The Colonel felt himself falling, hitting his head, bouncing back and spinning slowly as they lost gravity.

Losing consciousness, he knew he was going to die.

Neither side made a habit of taking prisoners, but the Colonel's task force was part of an overall plan, and the enemy commander had no intention of letting the opportunity to question him pass. With a forcenet over the flagship to keep the survivors from dying of vacuum exposure, the boarding party went out to bring back anyone even barely alive.

The control room was relatively undamaged. Radiation sickness would kill everyone they found, eventually, but not before there was time for interrogations.

The Colonel was floating half-conscious in the air currents set up by a slow leak. The cut in his scalp leaked globules of blood that formed small shaky spheres and wavered away. Hell was sitting on his shoulder, his claws hooked in the uniform material, when the enemy found them. He hissed as they approached, and yowled angrily when they didn't even hesitate.

The first man shot him and pushed the twitching body away

with the muzzle of his laser rifle. Hell's final cry, and the reflex-clench of his claws, penetrated the layer of pain around the Colonel's mind. He struggled around, clumsy with the unaccustomed weightlessness, reaching toward them ineffectually. The same man who had killed Hell clouted him with his rifle butt.

The enemy was expert in the creation of illusions. When the Colonel came to, he could not tell if he was living in reality or surrounded by their fabrications. He was lying on the floor of a damp stone cell. The tiny window in the metal door was barred. Pale dull light fell out of his reach in heavy blocks beside him. He was groggy with the pain that lay inside his head like a stone.

Using the wall as support, he pulled himself to his feet, to the rust-flaked metal door. There was nothing outside, nothing but a long bare corridor stretching in both directions to a convergence of ragged lines of rock walls, floor, and ceiling.

He sagged back down, in a dark corner away from the light. He had expected to be dead, and to be alive was no comfort. He was in an illusion on an enemy ship, or in some horrible reality at an enemy outpost. Hopelessness welled up inside him as the knowledge of what would soon occur slid around the knot of pain and mixed with confusion and

fear. He leaned his forehead against his knees.

In the cell there was no sense of time, no way to tell if it fled or crept. Perhaps it followed the course of his mind, spinning furiously yet standing still, shattering his sanity and his iron control in a whirl of meaningless thoughts, impossible hopes, inescapable fears.

He dreamt the soft strong pressure against his leg. It was the only explanation for the purr he heard, for the feel of the rough tongue on his cheek. He reached up to push away the illusion, but his hand touched fur.

It isn't real, he thought. He looked up, into Hell's steady green gaze. Incredulity flooded his mind. Illusion or reality, the Colonel didn't care. His only real friend was here and now, a handhold on sanity in an abyss of madness.

Time passed, but to the Colonel a second was the same as a century. His mind had stopped spinning insanely, for he had stopped thinking of the past, the present, the future. Now and again he slid a hand over the cinnamon-striped black fur. He began to mumble, bits of nothing, not even listening to his own voice. He began to talk about his hopes and his dreams, the campaigns he had served in and the battles he had won. As he pro-

gressed toward the last battle, even Hell did not react to the coldly excited tension gathering around them.

"This was my chance," he whispered. "This was going to be my chance." He scratched behind Hell's ears, stroked his head. ". . . my chance . . ."

He cut himself off with a sharp intake of breath. Beneath his fingers was a small lump, covered by fur. In the dim light he could see nothing. His fingers probed it carefully. It caused Hell no distress.

Adrenalin flushed thru his system when after a moment of stunned disbelief he realized that the lump was metallic, implanted. A following wave of fear rushed upon him as he tried to remember what he had said.

Hell—no, he corrected himself calmly and carefully, *this is not Hell. This is not Hell. Not Hell. Not . . . Hell . . .*

The cat cried out in piteous incomprehension as the Colonel's clutching fingers tightened around him, then lay quiescent, dilated eyes closed and ears half back. It trembled with fear but made no move as the Colonel's hands moved slowly to its throat and began to squeeze.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to the friend that this was not. "I'm sorry . . ."

"Damn," he heard. "Damn, damn. Five more minutes—"

"We had it and we lost it," said another, deeper voice. "Now we try another way."

"We should have tried it this way first."

"We had our orders. It's done."

After hours of pain, questions, demands, the respite was almost worse. He tried to curl himself in fetal position to escape them, but his body was restrained.

The agony would have been more bearable if it had been truly physical. Then he might have been able to die. But though a sword vibrated up and down his spinal nerves if he tried to move, though his fingers twitched with the pain of his torn fingernails, there was no bruise or abrasion on his shoulder, and his nails appeared as manicured and smooth as the hour he had been captured.

If there were a large enough supply of expendable human beings, the method they were using was almost always effective. They had finally discovered how to defeat the man whose determination was stronger than the capacity of his body to endure pain.

Twenty-three prisoners had been taken from the Colonel's flagship to be used in his questioning. The odds were high that most of them would die of the radiation they had absorbed in the attack rather than of torture, that he would break before many of

them were needed to relay agony into his mind. The enemy found it a better method than trying to feed compulsion into a prisoner: useful information was held by strong-willed individuals, and someone always lost the silent battle, someone was always reduced to imbecility.

The torture was as much illusion as the cat or the stone cell or the straps that held him immobile beneath stark lights. He began to wonder why he should fight them, struggling with the knowledge that with a few words he could make them stop, make them let him sleep.

He moved, slightly, and a wave of pain and nausea wiped out his fears.

The Colonel awakened abruptly, clearheaded and alert and even above the pain, for now, high on an overdose of an illegitimate offspring of methedrine.

"He's ready," he heard, but the meaning didn't penetrate. The light above him was beautiful. Without needing a prism he split the light from the white-hot unshaded filament into a million multicolored wavelengths.

The two interrogators attached electrodes to his temples and checked the restraints around his chest and hips and arms and legs.

"Can you break him now?"

"One more won't do it."

The brushed-silver comets of an

enemy commander hit the periphery of his vision and spun across the sky of black plastic.

"Then use another one. Or as many as you need. But hurry up. Doc doesn't give any of them much longer."

"Radiation sickness?"

The commander nodded. His eyes were narrowed, putting deep worry-lines in his forehead.

"We'll do our best," the interrogator told him.

"We'll beat them anyway," the commander said, without vehemence or hatred, as a simple statement of fact. "But fewer of us will check out if we know what they're planning."

"Got the other one hooked up?"

There was a grunt of agreement.

Now, as before, the Colonel had two bodies, and it was not the effect of the drug. He was lying *here*, in his torn uniform, feeling the circulation in his legs slowing from too-tight straps, feeling the remnants of pain flow through the fog over his mind, feeling the fear creep in with it.

And he was *there*, naked, unafraid, wearing a sardonic half-smile of derision.

He strained to lift his head, and turned to see the surgeon lying on the other table. With a feeling that nothing could be real, he watched.

His breath rushed out with the

vicious blow. *No . . . he forced himself to remember: It's him who's being hurt, not me. Not me.*

The exhilaration of the drugs exploded, leaving him with only an inescapable consciousness.

But his other body recovered its breath, and laughed at them. They stopped for a moment, in astonishment, and he laughed again. He welcomed the pain as an unimportant by-product of the personal, individual battle. He gloried in the struggle, himself against them. No machine except the primitive instruments of torture could intervene. He seemed to know that no matter what happened, he would be the victor, even if they killed him. The Colonel gained no strength from him, as he had from some of the others, for in him there was no loyalty to what the Colonel was trying to protect.

The surgeon knew what they were doing, and the contempt of his smile penetrated thru the machines that connected them, as ridicule of the Colonel's loyalty to anything but himself.

The pain continued in gouts and streams.

After a long, long time, even through the hard shell he had tried to build around his consciousness, he could tell that the sharp edge had worn off the surgeon's battle, that he was weary of the combat, that he would die

—could die, if he chose, but he did not. The Colonel wondered briefly why. Possibly in answer, possibly to remind himself of why he must continue to life, the surgeon thought, *So I can listen to him break.*

There came another stretch of hours, and finally he cried, "Let me die!" but they laughed at him, and the surgeon echoed them. *Answer them and maybe they will,* he thought, knowing the Colonel could hear him.

I can't, the Colonel sobbed, not knowing if the surgeon could hear him or not. *I can't.*

Go ahead, returned the mocking soundless voice. *Sell them out the way they sold you.*

I can't! the Colonel cried in a frenzy of knowledge that the torture would continue. *Don't you understand, I can't?* He drew a long deep breath. *Could you beg them for mercy?*

He felt suddenly hollow and lost, so abruptly that he cried out when the sensation opened up inside him. It would not be denied or driven out, for it was an emptiness and not a thing. It swelled, and from the depths of its center came a lonely sob.

It was unidentifiable until he realized that the contemptuous smile-image had disappeared. Without thinking, he reached out for it, a known, if distasteful, companion.

It was gone. Slowly, gradually,

it was replaced by a calm deliberation and quiet compassion.

His mouth seemed filled with a bitter taste and splinters of broken glass. He recoiled, and the sensation lessened. In its place came anger, and the surgeon's contempt avalanched across him again. *That's right,* the surgeon sneered, *die their way. Let them choose the time, the method, the degree of your degradation.* Then he built up a wall of assumed selfishness, denying he had ever had any other reason than his own for biting down on the suicide capsule they had not bothered to look for. The poison began to affect him. He laughed again at the Colonel, for the last time. The smile remained, mocking.

There were two paths the Colonel could take, now. He had flinched away from one. It was still open to him, but the slow-motion hand of one of the interrogators, reaching for the electrodes at his temples, would soon obliterate it. He plunged, like a terrified horse, his thoughts faster than any hand could move. Mockery dissolved, and he was welcomed.

The minds died like diamond snowflakes, melting slowly until a last sharp blow struck them into brilliant shards and droplets. The droplets disappeared, as droplets will, and the bright fragile bits drifted into a gray void.

Through Time And Space With Ferdinand Feghoot: LXXII*

On all five planets of the Anchovian System (Anchovy I, Anchovy II, Anchovy III, Goats' Heaven, and Egg), ghosts were perfectly visible, mingling freely with their live friends and relations. But only on Anchovy III were the spirits of living inhabitants as easily perceived. The natives were so proud of this fact that they snubbed everyone else in the Galaxy, refusing even to exchange ambassadors until Ferdinand Feghoot convinced them that their uniqueness was entirely illusory.

"We don't wave our souls around out in public," he told them, "but that doesn't mean we can't see them ourselves. And they aren't simple geometrical shapes like your own. Why, even our animals all have souls pleasantly shaped like letters of the alphabet. Come to Earth with me. Even if you won't believe what I tell you, surely you'll trust this innocent child." He introduced his son, Ferdinand Junior, then seven years old.

Sneering, the Anchovians accepted. Once on Earth, Feghoot took them for a walk in the country, where presently, in a meadow, they saw a sway-backed old nag, looking dismal.

"Well?" they demanded.

"That's a D-spirited horse," piped little Ferdinand.

The envoys grumbled unpleasantly and trudged on. Then, from a tree, they heard a large bird going, *Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!*

"Look, papa!" cried the boy, before they could ask. "There's a Y-souled owl!"

The Anchovians were furious. Their spirits began to glow luridly. At that instant, a fuzzy caterpillar appeared before them, and one of them at once ground the poor creature into the path with his huge mottled foot.

"L-I-look what you've done!" shrilled the lad, starting to cry. "You've rubbed him right out!"

"So okay!" growled the Anchovian. "So describe me the soul?"

"H-h-he was E-wraithed," lisped Ferdinand Junior.

—GRENDEL BRIARTON

*A *Super-Feghoot*. Mr. Briarton, at the editor's insistence, has agreed not to submit more than two *Super-Feghoots* a year.

DIS PO SAL

Ron Goulart

Garbage is getting to be another great issue in twentieth century America. But it's still hard to care about the stuff until your source of removal dries up, as it did for Lon Snowden.

HE couldn't eat any more of the haddock schnitzel. Lon Snowden nudged the sample container over to the left side of the dining-area table and reached into his briefcase. The next sample to be tested was labeled cod jubilee in the chief's lopsided printing. Lon didn't like to bring food home from the office but the preliminary response figures on eleven new—he glanced at his watch: nearly midnight—Seawise Processed Seafoods was due tomorrow before coffee break 1.

Fog was resting heavy against the shuttered window of the dining area. Victorian Village was thick with fog tonight, most nights. Lon pried open the cod container, made a note with a grease pencil on a blue response punch card. He was thirty-four—he glanced at his watch: five past midnight—and already he was but two moves away from being a Senior Food Tester for Seawise. As Ryan Kubert, the only guy at Seawise he almost trusted, had said at lunch several times, being a Senior Food Tester was a good thing. Ryan was four moves from it.

When Lon was rushed, as tonight, he never bothered to heat the foods he was responding to. That didn't seem to affect his judgment. Rolling another bite of cod around in his mouth he blacked in the square next to the TERRIBLE response. He shoved

the rest of the sample over with the nine he'd run through since Maya had gone into the sleeping area. Before he tried the eel brittle he'd stand up—he glanced at his watch: quarter after twelve—and stretch.

Terry, their younger boy, was watching him from the entrance to the children's sleep section. "What's the matter?" Lon mouthed.

"Some day," said Terry, "I'll be boss around here. You'll be among the first to get it. Quick, like that."

Terry was four. The death-threat business was something he was going through. "Back to bed," Lon told him softly. The office psychiatrist said feeling hostile toward the father figure was okay.

"First pull your fingers off, one by one," said the little boy. "Then the toes. Lastly, the nose."

"Get the hell into bed or I'll break your damn arm." Lon glanced at his watch: twenty-one past twelve.

Terry obeyed.

Lon found his stomach mint capsules in his briefcase, quickly swallowed two. Then he got back to the eel brittle. It was BLAND and DELICIOUS he decided.

By one he had everything tested. Somehow fog had seeped into the dining area and was hanging low to the rug. As Lon walked into the kitchen with all the scraps of seafood, the mist tat-

tered. He got the light control with his elbow, side-stepped to the porthole of the disposal unit. "Grind away," he said and both-handed all the containers and fish scraps into the hole.

A new and not appropriate sound came out of the wall disposal. The unit made a sound like packages of metal washers dropping off the back of a truck, then a grating cat wail. Twenty-nine seconds of silence and then all the garbage was thrown back out of the hole.

Lon gathered it up in a lemon-yellow refuse pan and shot it back through the porthole.

The disposal made the same new sounds, and an out of tune guitar twang, and threw the garbage out again. The leftovers from Lon's testing plus the leavings from dinner.

"It's on the fritz," he said.

Finally he found an empty container big enough to hold all the rejected garbage. He didn't know what to do with it. He left it in the kitchen and went to bed. In the morning Maya would know.

Maya, with a metronome motion of her hand, put eggshells into a blue plyfilm bag. "We can store it in the utility closet until the disposal's fixed."

Lon flathanded the legs of the turned-off cleaning android aside and wedged the box of last night's garbage into the tiny utility closet.

The Victorian Village school cruiser chimed outside and Pete, the six-year-old, ran from the kitchen.

Terry got up from the breakfast nook with his half-finished bowl of protein mash and said, "I want to put my garbage in the hole."

"Disposal's busted," said Lon. "You can't. Put it there by mommy."

"I want to put it in the hole."

"Well, you can't."

Terry frowned. "When I take over this place I won't forget all this. First we'll stretch you, then compress you. Crack, crack your bones will go. Snap, snap."

"Go to your room," said Lon.

"Not a room, it's an area," said Terry, going.

"A phase." Maya set the bag of breakfast garbage in the closet. "Shall I call Mr. Goodwagon at the Victorian Village office?"

Lon checked the wall clock. Fourteen minutes before he had to be at the San Francisco tube. "I'll do it." In the phone alcove he smoothed his pale hair, sat down, dialled Goodwagon.

"Well, aren't you the early riser," said the secretary android who appeared on the screen.

"Mr. Goodwagon, please."

"He's on the links."

"Oh. Well, look. Our disposal isn't working. Victorian Village's Maintenance Department is supposed to fix it, isn't it?"

"Of course. No one else is al-

lowed to tamper with VV equipment. Read your lease."

"Okay. When exactly could you have somebody over to fix the thing?"

The android said, "September 14 at 2:30."

Lon looked at his wristwatch. "Yes, but this is August 26, 8:14."

"8:16," corrected the android. "Otherwise you're right."

"What do we do with our garbage until September?"

"Don't throw it in the street," said the android. "That's against state, federal and Victorian Village law. Don't bury it. That's illegal, too."

"What would you suggest?"

"I'll switch you to Dr. Wigransky, our staff troubleshooter."

Dr. Wigransky, when he came on the screen, was naked. "Yes?"

"We have," said Lon, looking away, "this problem about our garbage."

"You can't seem to look me in the eye."

"Your eye maybe. It's the rest of you."

"You call so early you can't expect formal attire. Lots of business stress?"

"Sure, but the problem is we have this disposal that won't work and they can't come and fix it till the middle of next month and I was wondering what we were supposed to do."

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-four. Why?"

"Thirty-four years old and native-born from the way you talk and you don't know what to do with a little garbage."

"It's not a little. By next month it'll be a lot. I'm a food tester, I bring a great deal of food home to work on."

"That's an interesting field," said Dr. Wigransky, who had slipped on a polo shirt while Lon hadn't been watching him. "I have a brother who's a wastrel. Maybe you could get him into food testing."

"I don't have much influence," Lon told him. "What about our garbage?"

"Call Sayffertitz."

"Sayffertitz?"

"The last of the scavengers." Dr. Wigransky blacked off.

The vintage dump truck drove up onto their small lawn at a little after nine that evening. From the real-leather driver's seat leaped a tanned man in a tweed jumpsuit. He had a moustache, shoulder-length black hair and a Malacca stick. He hit the chime buzzer with a gloved thumb.

"Sayffertitz," he told Maya when she opened the door.

"Oh, yes. We understand you still pick up garbage."

Sayffertitz handed her his cane, eased off his gloves. "I am the only remaining scavenger in the San Francisco Bay Area. People depend on disposal units now. However, as you've just learned,

disposals do break down. Then you have to come to Sayffertitz."

Lon had been sitting in the living area, sampling. He stood now as Maya led Sayffertitz in. "When will you pick up the garbage?"

Sayffertitz sat down on a ply-stool. "You people amuse me. I haven't agreed to haul your garbage yet. Tell me about it and I'll see if I can take on your account. Do you have any brandy?"

"Maya, get Mr. Sayffertitz a brandy."

Sayffertitz' left eye was not quite the same shade of green as his right. He fixed it on Lon, tossed his hair once. "Just what sort of garbage is it you'd like me to consider?"

"Garbage," said Lon. "Household stuff."

The scavenger stroked one tweedy knee. "What's that in front of you there?"

"My work. I'm a food tester."

"But what is it specifically?"

"Well," said Lon, pointing in turn, "terrapin flambe, shrimp jellyroll, chicken fried halibut and anchovy bisque."

"You intend to include that stuff in my garbage?" asked Sayffertitz. He dropped to the rug, approaching the coffee table on hands and knees. "Which is the halibut again?"

"The orange stuff. It's artificially colored."

Sayffertitz sniffed. "I don't know. You people. Boy, you want

me to toss that kind of thing into my truck. That's an awfully persistent odor."

"Seafood. It does have a sort of oceany smell."

"You're used to it. Numbed by your job."

"What days do you pick up? Is there a regular schedule or what?"

Sayffertitz rubbed his lighter eye. "You people." He stretched up, scratched his stomach. "I service my clients in this area on Tuesday mornings at the moment."

"Next week then?"

"Next week. Tuesday morning at 7 AM." He bent to sniff the halibut again. "I don't know if I can accept you people or not."

"We'll pay well," said Maya, offering him a brandy on a bronzed tray.

"My fee is ten dollars per pick-up. In advance."

"Ten dollars?" asked Lon.

"In advance. If I accept the account." He touched the tip of his nose with the brandy glass rim. "Do you have a scale?"

"In the bathroom."

"Remember this then. No more than five pounds of garbage per Tuesday."

"Then you accept us?" said Maya.

"This brandy is not too bad." He drank it down. "Tuesday, seven promptly. No more than five pounds. In boxes. On the left side

of the lawn facing the street." He took the money Lon held out, bowed slightly. He went to the door and let himself out into the fog.

Lon picked up the container of halibut and inhaled.

Sayffertitz didn't show up on the following Tuesday. Nor Wednesday. Thursday at 8:17, with nine cartons of garbage stacked in the corner of the cruiser port, Lon called the scavenger. That morning Sayffertitz didn't answer. On Friday he did but he was unhappy that Lon was waking him at 8:14 on his day off. Lon apologized.

Sayffertitz said, "You people and your fish. I refuse to accept any further garbage from you."

"What do you mean any further? I gave you ten bucks and you . . ."

The scavenger went to black.

Using fog as a cover, Lon was able, that night, to toss one carton of garbage into a public disposal at the nearest cul-de-sac. The unit was labelled: FOR LEAVES AND FALLEN GREENERY ONLY. Friday it worked but Saturday the mist was thinner and a mounted android policer, who had been watching from a shadowy gazebo, caught Lon and fined him twenty-two dollars.

Maya found she could flush eggshells and coffee grounds down the toilet. The bowl balked at anything else. Lon dumped

four cartons the next Monday night at the beach some eighteen miles from their home. The litter patrol caught him on the third trip and that resulted in a seventy-three dollar fine and the revoking of his sunbathing privileges for a ninety-day period. He was able, by pretending to be strewing the ashes of a loved one, to get rid of three cartons flying low over the Pacific Ocean in his cruiser at sundown. You couldn't do that more than once a month, though.

By the end of August they had twenty-one cartons of garbage in their gingerbread house. When no more would fit in the small cruiser port, Maya started putting refuse in the recreation area cupboards. The house now had a quiet sour-sweet odor most of the time and Terry threatened to have his father pulled assunder by draft horses if the smell didn't stop. Lon called the Bay Area Health Authority but they said they couldn't help him until he had either maggots or plague-carrying rats in his garbage.

He discovered he could get rid of about a half a pound a day by carrying it to work in his briefcase and tossing it in the office disposal when the machine was not being watched. Maya had meanwhile been taking a carton a day over to Carole and Robert, their friends two blocks away. Carole and Robert couldn't dispose of more because the first

time Maya had tried to get rid of several cartons at once and the Victorian Village authorities had warned Carole against overloading her appliances again. They knew three other couples in the development and gradually, by using all of their friends' disposal units and with Lon sneaking the more unobtrusive garbage into the office, they got down to only ten cartons stored in the cruiser area.

On the first Tuesday in September Terry decided to drop his left shoe in their disposal hole. The unit roared and thrashed for three and a quarter minutes and then started kicking back. Out came eggshells, orange peels, coconut shreds, soft drink bulbs, teabags, hambones, fishtails, kleenex, back issue magazines, green marbles, cabbage, bandaids, protein loaf, plyogloves, rose petals, tuna fish, melon rinds, a dead canary and Terry's shredded shoe. The kitchen area was a foot awash with old garbage before the machine stopped rejecting.

"Okay," said Lon when it sputtered and stopped. "That's it. I'm going to bury the stuff." He strode into the cruiser area and grabbed up the power shovel.

It was dark and misty. He turned on the lawn spotlights and began to dig. He had a pit about seven inches deep and three feet wide dug when the Victorian Village cop cruised down.

"What are you up to, Mr. Snowden?" asked the cop.

"Burying garbage."

"No, now," said the VV cop. "That's an infraction."

"The whole house is possessed by the stuff," Lon told him. "Besides which I'm starting to feel an enormous guilt over this."

"But you people shouldn't dig up your lawn."

Lon threw the shovel at him.

Victorian Village didn't have its own jail completed yet so Lon was put in the city jail in nearby Sunnyvale. The judge let him off with a \$500 fine and twelve days in jail. Maya told him, on his third day in the cell, that since he'd assaulted a Victorian Village staff member the tract people were considering evicting them and had, in the meantime, put their name at the end of the waiting list for repairs. That meant no disposal repairs would be made until October 2nd.

In jail Lon dreamt a great deal about garbage. And he got to know a man in the next cell named Blind John Dove. Blind John said he was one of the few blind private investigators in the San Francisco Bay Area and he solved his cases with his sense of smell.

Lon explained his garbage problem and Blind John, a fat, freckled man with a strip of green plyoglass across his upper face, said, "Know what?"

"What?"

"Playland. Near Playland over in Frisco there's an old bath house that's closed up. By the ocean. From the street level it's three floors down inside. All gutted out. Lots of people with garbage problems throw things there. No guards at night. That part of the city's hardly frequented any more. Load your cruiser. Fly."

After his release Lon went back to Seawise and found he no longer had his job. That same evening he and Maya, with the house still cluttered with nineteen cartons of garbage Maya hadn't been able to get rid of yet with the neighbors, had a quarrel. Maya took Terry and Pete and walked over to Carole and Robert's to spend the night.

Lon sat in the kitchen area for a while. He was hungry but if he ate it would only mean more garbage. At 10:16 he started loading boxes of garbage into the cruiser. It was a chill, foggy night and he put on a realfleece jacket. He got all the garbage, except for a handful of burnt marshmallows that fell and eluded him in a corner, stowed in the ship.

He took off for the city. By eleven he was parked up hill from the long-deserted public bath house. He quietly carried an armload of garbage up to the marble steps, climbed down and pushed the doors open. They skit-

tered back and he was looking down on a cool hollow. There was a sweet-sour musty damp smell here. Lon heaved the first batch of cartons. Heard them hit seconds later and bounce on some kind of loose metal.

A wind was rising out across the ocean and it blew the lid off one of the cartons on the next load. In twenty-two minutes he was at the pit edge with the last three boxes. He threw them, listened as they hit, bounced, settled.

A truck cut off behind him in the street, leaping feet hit the misted pavement. "You people," said a voice. "Encroaching on one of my private dump spots. It's difficult enough to survive in our society without people like you."

Lon turned and watched Sayffertitz approach.

"The fish man," grinned the scavenger. "Well, climb down there and retrieve whatever it is you've thrown. You poacher." He pointed at the pit with his Malacca cane.

Lon bobbed, caught the stick away from him. He hit him several times over the skull with it. Sayffertitz slumped. Lon flung the stick into the pit. He stooped and grabbed two holds on the tweed jumpsuit. He braced himself and pitched Sayffertitz into the dark hollow.

He didn't stay to hear him land.

This is Robert Toomey's first appearance in VENTURE. We think you'll enjoy this fine story about a basic trait—one shared by both human and alien.

Standoff

by
**Robert
Toomey**

CAN you hear me, human?" Carpenter stared at the radio. The voice coming through it was low and steady. The voice was alien. It spoke without a trace of accent.

"I hear you."

"Are you afraid?"

"Yes." There was no sense in lying when lies didn't matter.

"I too am afraid."

Silence for a while.

Carpenter grimaced. He knew where the Eszawant ship was. He knew its location exactly. If he could somehow have bored a hole straight through the asteroid to the opposite side he would have struck alien steel. The other ship was as far away from Carpenter as it could be and still share the same little hunk of rock with him.

The asteroid itself was an airless barren wasteland. It retained only the slightest of gravities, a wisp of memory from the days when it had been part of a far larger mass that had broken up during some unimaginable disaster eons before. Carpenter's life-craft lay belly-down on it, but a good swift kick would have booted it right back out into space again. It was slim and graceful; the silver sheen of its micropolished hull punctuated sharply the gully of shattered rocks where it hid. The asteroid was shaped like a lumpy egg, ten kilometers from pole to pole, six kilometers through the core.

"Have you called for help?" the alien asked, his voice still soft and slightly husky.

Again there was no sense in lying, but Carpenter said, "Have you?"

"Yes."

"So have I. How soon will your people be here?" The word *people* was a half-throttled grunt in his throat, forced through constricting passages to bounce off the palate with an audible thud.

"It is very hard to say."

"In other words, you won't tell me."

"I really do not know, human."

"The name is Carpenter."

"I have no name. You may call me—" A pause.

"What?"

"Engineer will do."

"Why no name?"

Another pause. Then: "We know who we are."

Yeah, thought Carpenter, a goddam vegetable. "Let's get back to your distress call," he said, keeping the animosity out of his voice. "Has it been answered yet?"

"Has yours?"

"No," Carpenter said slowly. "But these things take time. I'm sure it's been heard." Count from the thin red line: twelve minutes elapsed since the mayday transmission.

"My call has not been answered, either, Carpenter. I am also certain it has been heard."

"Just a matter of waiting, then, before one of us is rescued."

"Our ships are faster," the Eszawant said. His voice was toneless, stating a fact.

"Ours are closer."

"We will know soon enough."

"Yeah."

The explosion had caught Carpenter already aboard the lifeship. He had been standing watch. When the noiseless wave of the concussion hit, Carpenter had been halfway through the manual of emergency oxygen regeneration procedures, a thorough working knowledge of which was required before he could advance to his second-class Damage Controlman's rating. It had been the tail end of a dull watch, wagged in a sector of space that had been presumed clear. The *Hoffman* was on a routine patrol, scouting for enemy activity but not really expecting much.

The alarm had slashed through Carpenter's lulled concentration like a machete. The blast followed it by seconds. The nine other men aboard the *Hoffman* were killed almost instantly. In the moment before his death, Commander Reese must have hit the two buttons; one activating the programmed seek-and-destroy missile, the other throwing the lifeship free of the critically wounded *Hoffman*.

Carpenter watched numbly as the concentrated oxygen stores of

the alien ship ignited like a magnesium flare. Just in time he remembered to avert his eyes, which held the image of the conflagration on the retinas, a glowing blood-red seal of death. Cutting a sharp chord through the seal, on the periphery of his stunned vision, was another image: that of an Eszawant lifecraft, dissimilar to the one Carpenter piloted except in purpose.

Carpenter had boosted immediately to the nearest asteroid to make a stand, not that he was carrying much in the way of heavy armament. Just enough to waste the little alien ship if he got the chance.

But the Eszawant had landed on the far side of the ancient rockball, and there he sat, waiting.

It was a standoff. Neither could proceed until the other had passed. Neither could pass without laying himself open to attack. In order to blast the alien, Carpenter would have to take off and orbit the asteroid. He didn't have enough ordnance aboard to blast *through* the rock. Apparently the Eszawant had the same limitations. Lifeships were built for escape, not battle. If Carpenter did take off and circle the asteroid, the alien would destroy him the moment he came within effective firing range.

Standoff.

So . . .

They waited for help. And whoever got that help first would survive.

"A carpenter is one who builds things of wood, is he not?" the Eszawant said. "A strange occupation aboard a spaceship."

"I'm not really a carpenter. I suppose someone in my family was, a long time ago. Now the name is just a name. It hasn't any particular significance any more."

"That is even stranger. A name without significance. Is it like that with all of you humans?"

"Pretty much. I've never given it much thought."

"Truly? With us, identity is a very important thing. We may all spring from the same soil, but differences swiftly become apparent. We reckon our worth by our abilities and accomplishments."

"So do we. Generally. Sometimes somebody sneaks through and makes it to the top without having anything to offer. We call them politicians."

"Do you hate me, Carpenter?"

The question took him by surprise. "No," he said thoughtfully. "I hate your—people, though. Why did you start this war?"

"I didn't start it," the alien said, with the first trace of inflection Carpenter had heard since the conversation began.

"Your people did." Each time the word came more easily, more readily to the tongue.

"Your people started it, human.

Do you actually deny it?" There was no anger in the level, even voice; only a hairline of bemusement that might only have been an illusion caused by the eighth of a second lag as the radio wave hit a nearby asteroid and bounced back.

"I sure as hell do deny it. Yours started it."

"No. Yours."

"We didn't."

"You did."

Carpenter forced a laugh to clear the air. "We sound like a couple of kids bickering over whose toy is whose."

"Whose toy *is* whose, human?"

Irritation? Strain? Or an eighth of a second time lag between departure and destination?

"We came in peace, Engineer," Carpenter said firmly. "And we were attacked."

"If your notion of peace is to claim our property for your own and attempt to confine us with threats and violence, then you came in peace. You define your terms oddly. We were there to begin with."

"You attacked us," Carpenter insisted.

"To protect ourselves. What should we have done?"

Carpenter's broad shoulders moved in an unconscious shrug. "I don't know."

"What would you have done if you had been in our position?"

"The same, I guess," Carpenter

admitted, feeling very much as if he were being painted into a corner.

"Yes. But does it matter who fired the first shot or for what reason? Does it matter here and now who is in the wrong and who is in the right? In the end it comes down to the same thing exactly. One of us will live and the other will perish. We, you and I, we are a microcosm of the entire war."

The discussion had become too abstract for Carpenter's taste. Elapsed time: seventeen minutes. He changed the subject.

"You speak my language pretty well, Engineer."

"Thank you."

"How'd you happen to learn it?"

"It is a part of our training, but I have taken a special interest. Your language is a very simple one compared to ours, and a very confusing one. The structure is quite primitive. You depend so much on words that mean little, on inflections, impossible idioms and paradoxes. My own tongue, for example, makes the construction of a paradox as difficult as a windless mating season. Yours makes such a construction almost unavoidable."

"We get along in it just fine, Engineer."

"Surprisingly. No, it is not quite as bad as I make it appear from a casual academic appraisal.

Our language contains no poetry either."

"A shame," Carpenter said, standing halfway between nightmare and hysteria, bombed by the thought of God making a tree that made poems.

"Perhaps," the alien continued steadily. "Perhaps not. I have constructed poems in your language and tried to translate them into my own. I failed, of course. What poems I have seen go nowhere. They are far more emotion than logic."

"Is that better than all logic and no emotion?"

"This is uncertain and problematical. Somehow a balance should be struck between the two, but it is a difficult balance. The scales tip too easily and dump one out."

Abstractions again. Carpenter froze. What was he doing, sitting here on this lousy fragment of broken rock arguing the value of human poetry with a perambulating, professorial, animated log of firewood whose greatest desire was to throw *him* into the flames? Talk about your crazy paradoxes!

"What's your world like?" Carpenter asked, shifting gears again.

"It is home. It is green and brown, rich and humid. Even the name is lovely—" he made a sound like a hacking cough. "And yours?"

"Lovely. Green and brown and blue. It's mostly water."

"Yes. Ours is mostly land, of course. There is enough water to make it fertile. The air is clean; we keep it that way."

"We came from the sea," Carpenter said. "It continually calls us back. I used to love sailing and fishing. I was born near a great lake that sparkles white and silver where the sun hits the waves." An early morning mist of homesickness blew across him for a moment.

"I have seen your world, Carpenter. You have torn the rocks from the cliffs and your air is soiled and filthy. You say the green is beautiful, yet you kill it and cover the graves with stone and steel. You are lucky your photosynthetic life cannot fight back."

"Wouldn't get very far if they tried. Don't tell me you haven't weeded out your own gardens."

"Some. But there is more green on my world than there is on yours. We have been careful to preserve as much of it as possible."

Carpenter checked the chronometer. Twenty-six minutes.

"Will your people be here soon, Engineer?"

"I do not know."

"Will they kill me?"

"Yes. We are not bothering with prisoners any longer. Will yours kill me?"

"Yes. In this kind of war, prisoners are more trouble than they're worth."

"One of us must die, then. I hope it will be you."

"Funny, I've been hoping it'll be you."

"Funny . . . We have a sense of humor, but I do not think you would appreciate it. I know that we do not appreciate yours."

"Our humor's based on pratfalls, incongruities and misunderstandings. Do any of them strike you funny?"

"We can talk, can we not? I find that amusing in itself."

"Yeah. So do I, now that you mention it."

"We are not laughing, though."

"Do you laugh, Engineer?"

"Not in the same sense that you do. Laughter is a release. We have our releases."

"Sex?" said Carpenter curiously.

"Not really. We propagate. The basic drive is there, imperative and demanding, but again, it is not the same."

"Violence?"

"Yes. We do not kill for pleasure, however."

"Neither do we," Carpenter said, instantly defensive.

"You speak for yourself, not your race. Your history is a bloody one."

"And a short one. Give us a chance."

"A chance. Such as the chance that brought us together like this? Why are you fighting us? You personally, I mean."

Carpenter considered. Finally he said, "Because we're at war with you."

"What a marvelous language you have: We are at war because we are fighting; we are fighting because we are at war."

"Well—why are *you* fighting us?"

"Because you seek to destroy my race."

"We don't!"

"You say that quickly, but I have seen my people wither and die."

"My people have died, too, you know, and damned recently. If your friends get here first, they'll kill me. You said it yourself."

"You return to what we spoke of before. It is still no answer. It is not even a justification. It is an evasion, a circumlocution. I would let you live if the power were mine. I would end this war now if it were in my power."

"So would I."

"Would you?"

"Yes, damn it. I don't enjoy being killed any more than the next one."

"You prefer life?"

"Of course."

"We have that much in common, human. But is it enough?"

"Enough for what?"

"I would say peace, but neither of us is in a position to make such a settlement, even if we desired it."

"I desire it," Carpenter said.

"Do you?"

"Yes! Now what are you leading up to?"

Another silence.

Carpenter wondered. He speculated. He wished he could read the alien's mind. He stared at the radio, at the row of lights across the panel that meant it was open to receive signals from space.

Had the Eszawant already received his signal? Were enemy ships even now homing in on the asteroid, fixing their position precisely and running fast through the eternal black to get there first?

He ran his hands through his long hair, looked down at them. The nails were short, bitten off. The fingers were blunt and heavy. They were competent hands, good as any for repairing a fuel cell or quickly splicing together a series of shorted-out wires; but all their competence wasn't doing him a shred of good at the moment.

"I have been thinking," the alien said.

"About what?" Here it comes, Carpenter thought, tensing.

"About our situation."

"Have you reached any conclusions?"

"Possibly. I do not wish to die. You do not wish to die."

"That's right. So?"

"I have a proposal. We simply leave. You go your way and I go mine. Your death would not help my people that much; my death

would be of little help to yours. Can we agree on this?"

"Sure. Can I trust you, though?"

"Can I trust *you*, Carpenter?"

"If I agree, you can trust me."

"Let us do it. We have met, we have spoken, we part. There is no logical reason why one of us *must* die."

"All right, Engineer. We're agreed."

Thirty-six minutes elapsed time.

It has to be done carefully, Carpenter thought. Very carefully. He boosted free of the asteroid. For a moment his screen showed only empty space, shot through with the undiminished brilliance of near and distant stars, teeming with rockballs and mudballs and spaceships and planets and promises big and small. Space is space between, never space alone. Its emptiness is what defines it. The alien lifecraft came into view. It was short and stubby, a hump rising out of the hull somewhat forward of center.

"Good-bye," the alien said.

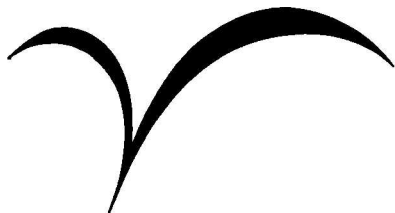
Carpenter stabbed at the button that released his largest projectile. "Good-bye, you bastard." The missile was small, but it was big enough to do the job.

"Emotion and logic never balance out," the Eszawant said softly. "I was prepared for this, but I would not have betrayed you, human."

The radio crackled with static. To Carpenter, staring at the screen, it seemed a spark leapt across the gap separating the two lifecraft. The alien ship flashed like a hopelessly overloaded circuit, then blew apart. One bright

fragment detached itself from the expanding nexus of destruction, homing in.

"Liar!" howled Carpenter, unable even to hear himself as the static surged. Then died.



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