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BEASTCHILD

a complete new novel by
DEAN R. KOONTZ



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SCIENCE FICTION

NEW NOVEL, COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

BEASTCHILD

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The Naoli had struck first, their goal being the complete destruction of the human race, and they had been almost 100% successful. There were isolated survivors, of course, even rumors of a hideaway called The Haven; but for Hulann, a Naoli archaeologist with the occupation force, the battle was no longer with the humans but with his own guilt, a conflict that would lead him to the terrible truth about the war.

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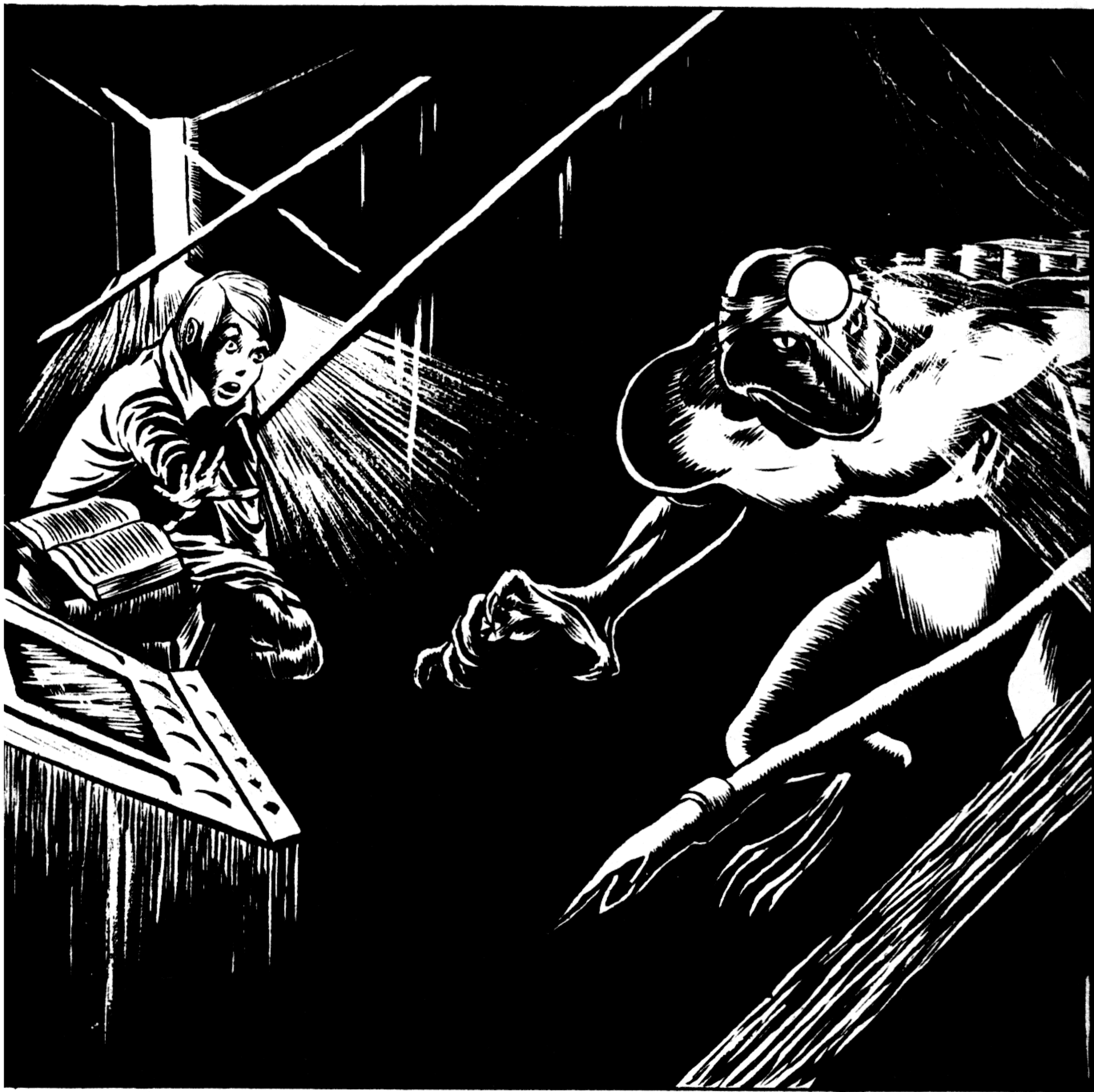
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BEASTCHILD

by DEAN R. KOONTZ



I

In his onyx-walled room in the occupation tower, Hulann had disassociated his overmind from his organic regulating brain, had removed it from all stimuli, including the cells of his memory banks, where it could not even dream. He slept the perfect, death-like sleep that only his kind, in all the myriad worlds of the galaxy, seemed to be able to achieve.

The naoli? The lizard men? They're the ones who die every night, aren't they?

To Hulann in his present state, there was no sound. No light. No images of color, no heat or cold. If there was a taste upon his long, thin tongue, his overmind could not know. Indeed, the

stimuli were so censored that there was not even darkness. For darkness represented something; darkness was concrete. There was only nothingness.

He could return to wakefulness in any one of three ways, though there was a decided order of preference among these methods. First, and most unpleasant, was his body's danger alarm. If his regulating brain, the convoluted organic portion of his mind, should discover something seriously amiss with his temporal shell, it would be able to contact and wake his overmind through a fail-safe system of seldom-used third-order nerve clusters by which it would shock its own gray cortex and thereby open the nether-world pocket in which the ethereal overmind sleeps.

Pause here for an anecdote or two. In a thousand places across the stars, stories are told which concern the naoli and the seriousness with which alcoholic beverages affect their "danger alarm" waking system. These stories are told in barrooms in port cities, down in the basements of questionable buildings that lease their rooms to even more questionable businessmen, or in sweet-drug centers on better-looking but no more honest streets. So think of them what you will. Anyway, it seems that while sweet-drugs bring only euphoria to the naoli, alcohol transforms them into bobbling, bouncing, scaly-tailed clowns who—after half an hour of making total fools of themselves—collapse into their deathlike sleep. They stretch out stiff as ice right on the floor. In some less reputable establishments (which is to say *most* of these

places) the other patrons make great sport out of carrying the unconscious lizard men to odd places like garbage bins and ladies' washrooms and letting them there to wake. This damages nothing but the naoli's ego. A far more nasty pastime among these same drunken buffoons is to see how far they must go to trigger the naoli's "danger alarm" system. But the alarm is stupefied by alcohol and does not work well. The stories you hear later are about naoli lying there with their webs sizzling, not even twitching in response. Or of a naoli with fifty pins stuck in its legs, sleeping peacefully while its heavy blood seeped out through its tough gray skin. Naoli do not often drink liquor. When they do, it is usually alone. They are not a stupid race.

Much less unpleasant but still not desirable, a naoli could come awake if the Phasersystem had something to tell him. That could, of course, be anything from urgent news to another spate of propaganda from the central committee. More often than not, it was the latter.

Finally, and best of all, the overmind could wake of its own accord. Before retiring into the nether-world, the overmind could plant a suggestion with a time-trigger. Then, ten or eight, or fifteen or twenty hours later, it would click into consciousness with the clarity of a tri-dimensional screen being turned on.

This morning, Hulann, a naoli archaeologist among the thousands in the occupation forces, was tuned into the real world by the second of these three methods—the Phasersystem.

One moment: nothingness.

Then: color. Crimson to bring total wakefulness. Rouge to indicate psychological-conditioning period (i.e., propaganda). Then amber to sooth jangled nerves.

Finally: the three-dimensional, total-sensory visions of the Phasersystem, fed directly into the organic brain and translated by the now-functioning overmind.

In the Phaserdream, Hulann was in a thick forest of strange, dark trees whose crisscrossing arms and broad, black-veined leaves thatched a roof that thrust back the sun. Only fine rays of peach light filtered through to the wet, rustling, musty-musky floor of the place. These were soon dissipated, for there was nothing here from which they might be reflected. The surface of each growth was dull, filmed with a mucus-like substance of a uniform gray-brown color.

He was on a narrow, winding path. Each step he took down this trail only isolated him further from whatever place he had begun his journey, for the tangled mass of vegetation flourishing on the forest bottom closed in behind him as swiftly as he advanced. There was no going back.

There seemed to be *things* hiding in the trees.

He moved on.

Eventually, the trail began to narrow. The walls of vines, stalks, and ropy roots pressed closer, closer, until he could no longer walk without the chilling touch of the cold and slimy lifeforms.

He tucked his tail between his legs, wrapping it around his left thigh in the age-old reaction to danger, to the unknown, to that which

made the scales of the scalp tighten and ache.

To the naoli, a voice chanted monotonously from nowhere, *the human mind was unfathomable . . .*

Still, the forest closed on him. He could almost see it moving.

The things in the swaying trees whispered to one another.

They were whispering about him . . .

To the human, the same voice said, *the naoli mind was equally mysterious . . .*

Yes, definitely, something was moving in the trees. In several places, at the same moment, he caught a shivering, shimmering, rippling action. He was not certain whether he was seeing the movements of a dozen creatures spread along his flank—or whether one being hid behind the trunks and the leaves, watching . . .

The confrontation, the chanter chanted, *was an inevitability. It was clear that the naoli had to move first in order to protect its very future . . .*

Now, the trail had ceased to exist. Ahead, there was only dark vegetation. It seemed to writhe.

He looked behind. The trail had closed.

The naoli met the aliens . . .

Hulann saw that the small, bare circle where he stood was rapidly being encroached upon by the eerie fungus-like vines. A tentacle of green slithered over his foot, making him leap in surprise.

The naoli saw the danger . . .

The forest reared up, snaring him with its chlorophyll ropes and strings. He found his arms pinned at his sides by clutching leaves. Roots

had grown up one side of his feet, across them, down the other side and into the earth again. He could not move.

The movement of the things in the trees came closer.

He tried to scream.

If the naoli had not acted, the voice said—

The things in the trees sprang, great dark shapes leaping onto him, engulfing him, chilly, wet things with fog for eyes and fingers that touched the insides of his overmind, squeezing the warmth out of it . . .

—the naoli would have died! the voice finished.

And Hulann died. The dark beasts sucked away his warmth, and he slipped out of his body forever.

There was a moment of intense blackness. Then the Phasersystem began to feed colors to him again, as it was feeding to nearly all the naoli in the occupation force. Amber to soothe the nerves again. Then blue to engender a sense of pride and fulfillment.

Then the last stage of the psychological condition/propaganda began. The questioning to determine fitness:

Why did the naoli strike first?

Hulann's overmind replied and was monitored by the main computer behind the Phasersystem. "For survival of our race."

Why did the naoli strike so completely?

"The human race was tenacious, ingenious. If the naoli had not been thorough, the human race would have grown, regrouped, and destroyed the naoli forever."

Should any naoli feel guilty over this extinction of the human race?

"Guilt has no role in it. One cannot feel guilty over something on so cosmic a scale. Nature ordained the meeting of our races. Since we have met the other eleven races without trouble, this must have been intended as a test to match us against humans to determine our fitness. We did not wish to war. It was a natural necessity. I feel no guilt."

There was a pause in the Phasersystem's interrogation. A moment later, the voice continued, but on a slightly different tonal level. Hulann knew that he had been taken off the general program of questions and was receiving individual attention from a more refined part of the computer's "brain."

You have registered eighteen points on a scale of one hundred in relation to your sense of guilt.

Hulann was surprised.

Is this a conscious guilt? the computer asked. *Please be truthful, for you will be under the observation of a triple-systems polygraph.*

"It is not a conscious guilt," Hulann's overmind replied.

There was another pause as the Phasersystem considered the sincerity of his answer. *You are honest, it said at last. But if this guilt index should rise—even if it remains subconscious, you understand—beyond thirty points on a scale of one hundred, you will have to be replaced in your position with the occupation forces and returned to the home system for recuperation and therapy.*

"Of course," his overmind replied, though he felt depressed with such a prospect; he liked his work and considered it valuable. He was trying to save the fragments of a race no one would ever see again.

The Phasersystem continued to probe his psyche, looking for faults that could open and swallow him.

Somewhere, Hulann, a group of humans is still holding out. Now and then a representative is reported to have contacted members of the other eleven races in search of support for a counterattack. We have thus far been unable to find their hiding place, the place they call the Haven. What do you feel when you consider the existence of this small but alien group?

"Fear," he said, and he was telling the truth.

If you discovered the whereabouts of these last creatures, would you report it to the central committee?

"Yes," Hulann said.

And if you were chosen to be in the expedition charged with the destruction of these last humans, could you kill them?

"Yes."

The Phasersystem was silent.

Then: Consciously, you are telling the truth. But your guilt index jumped to twenty-three on both questions. You will, therefore, request an appointment with the traumatist at his earliest convenience.

Then the colors came. Orange at first, then fading through a multitude of yellows. Lighter and lighter until there were no colors and the Phasersystem had released control of him.

Hulann remained in the force webbing that held him suspended four feet above the blue floor. It seemed as if he floated above the sky, a bird or a cloud and not an earthbound creature. He probed his own mind, looking for guilt that the computer had told him was there.

He could see nothing. Yet the computer never erred. When he thought of the Haven, his scalp tightened and hurt. He was afraid. Afraid not only for himself, but for his race and its history.

For a short moment, he had a vision of dark, fog-eyed things hiding behind a shield of trees, watching . . .

He snorted, opening his second set of nostrils now that he would need a full air supply for movement. When his lungs swelled and adjusted to the new air flow, he got out of bed.

For some reason, he was sore this morning, as if he had done a great deal of work the day before (when, in fact, he had not)—or as if he had tossed and turned in his sleep. Which was impossible for a naoli who slept the graveyard slumber. He very much wanted to cleanse himself, but he would soon have to be at the diggings to direct the day's operation.

He dialed breakfast, devoured it within minutes (a delicious paste of fish eggs and larva—something a remote force of naoli would have had to do without even fifty years ago; progress was truly wonderful—and looked at the clock. If he left now, he would arrive at the diggings before the others. He did not want to do that. The diggings were eerie places. One could easily imagine that things moved in the shadows, in places where one just couldn't quite see . . .

Well, after all, he was the director of the team. If he was late, that was merely his prerogative.

He went into the cleansing room and cycled the watertight door be-

hind. He set the dials where he liked them, and the thick, creamy fluid began to bubble upward through the holes in the floor.

He scrunched his toes in it, feeling good.

When it was up to his knees, he bent and splashed it over himself. It was warm and viscous. He felt it sluicing at the thousands of overlapping scales, drawing out the dust that had accumulated between them.

When it was four feet deep in the cubicle, he stretched it in like a swimmer, letting it buoy him. He was tempted to return to the dials and set the room for longer cycles, but he was not *that* irresponsible. Soon, the mud-cream began to thin until it seemed no thicker than water (though it still buoyed him with the same efficiency of the mud-cream). This new form washed away the cleansing fluid, dissipating it. Then the clear fluid also began draining out of the holes in the floor.

Hulann stood, waited until it was gone. His scales were already dry. He opened the door and went into the main room, gathered up his notetapes and stuffed them into the carrying pouch of the recorder. He slung the recorder over one shoulder, the camera over the other, and set out for the diggings.

His subordinates were busy with their individual project assignments. They toiled through the half-demolished structures on the litter-strewn avenue, prying with their tools, x-raying partitions and mounds of fallen stones and steel. They had been assigned the ruined sections of

the city which the humans had destroyed with their own weapons, trying to fend off the naoli forces. Hulann did not care that their site was a difficult one. If he had been assigned to the group tilling the undestroyed sectors, he would have been bored to tears. (And naoli *could* cry.) There was no adventure in collecting things that were sitting in the open. The pleasure came from unearthing a treasure, from the painstaking work of separating a find from the rubble around it.

Hulann nodded to the others, stepped by Fiala, then turned to look at her collection of statsheets which she had uncovered only yesterday. They had been waterlogged, but readable. She was translating now.

"Any luck?" he asked.

"Nothing much that's new."

She licked her lips with her tongue, then stuck more of it out, and flicked at her chin. She was pretty. He did not understand how he had almost walked by without stopping.

"Can't expect a treasure every day," he said.

"But they had a mania for repetition. I've found that."

"How so?"

"Day after day, the same stories appear in the statsheets. Oh, new ones come along. But once they printed a story, they didn't let up on it. Here. Look. For seven days in succession, this statsheet gave front-page coverage to the destruction of their Saturn moon bases and the pulling back of their defense ring."

"It was a major story."

"No story is *that* major. After two or three days, they were only repeating themselves."

"Research it," he said. "It may prove interesting."

She bent back to her papers, already forgetting his intrusion.

He watched her a moment longer, reluctant to leave. More than any other female he had seen in the last two hundred years, she made him want to commit himself verbally. It would be a delight to go away with her, into the warren of his own house back on the home world, and fuse for sixteen glorious days, living off the fat of their bodies and the ceremonial waters they would take into seclusion with them.

He could envision her in ecstasy.

And when she came out of the warren, she would have that gaunt, fleshless look of a desirable woman who has mated for a standard fusing period.

She would be stunning in her aura of femininity.

But Fiala did not seem concerned with the things in his reproductive pouch. Indeed, he often wondered if she had any sex drive. Perhaps she was not a male or female at all. Perhaps she was a third sex: an archaeologist.

He continued along the diggings until he reached the end, walked a hundred yards through a narrow street where the buildings still stood, though having sustained heavy damage. He had saved the best spot for himself. Others might consider that reprehensible, but again he viewed it as a simple prerogative of his position.

He went through the doorway of a large marble and concrete structure. The door had been glass and had shattered during the final battles. Inside, he crossed the littered

floor and went down the dark stairs, experiencing a delicious thrill at entering the catacombs of the mysterious creatures whose planet this had once been. At the bottom of the steps, he flicked on the lights he had begun rigging three days ago.

Brilliance sprang up for a great distance. Today, he would extend the bulbs another few blocks. The cellars and subcellars of this entire section of the city had been connected and turned into a repository of what the humans considered precious. He meant to open all of it and see every last inch firsthand before pulling the others from their present tasks to sift through what he had found.

He walked to the end of the lights and took his camera and recorder from his shoulders, piled them next to the cases of tools left since yesterday. Taking a handlamp, he went to the wall of rubble ahead where a ceiling had partially caved in. There was a gap between the ruins and the walls that he just might be able to push through to reach the chambers beyond and string his lights.

He clambered up the stones, sliding back a bit for every piece of progress he made. Dust rose around him.

At the top, he stretched on his belly and went through the gap into darkness. He turned up the power of his lamp and illuminated most of the chamber in which he found himself. The place was a library of sorts full of booktapes. For the humans to have buried it this deep must mean that the tomes here contained were considered their most valuable.

He advanced to a rack of spools and began to read the titles. Most of them, he did not recognize. What ones he knew were fiction. This, of course, was quite a surprise. The humans he had met—that his race had met—in the stars some hundred and seventy years ago had not been the type to enjoy fiction. They had been cold, precise men with little time to smile and only a slight imagination.

Yet here, apparently, was a room full of novels.

And they had thought highly enough of them to bury them against destruction.

He was still fumbling through the racks, amazed, when the light, airy voice called to him in pure, unaccented Terran: "Above you! A rat!"

He whirled, looked up.

The rat was hanging almost upside down from a beam. Its red eyes glared with reflected light.

Foolishly, he had come without a weapon.

He held the beam of the hand-lamp on it, paralyzing it, blinding it. He could see it plainly, and he was not happy with what he saw. It weighed a good twenty pounds. It had the wide mouth of a mutant, and the extra long teeth. He could hear them gnashing, whether in reality or as a fear delusion, he did not know. *Gnash, gnash!* Undoubtedly, its claws, now hooked around the beam, were also more wicked than those of a normal rat.

It was ironic that one of the naoli's own weapons might kill a naolic. Ironic, not amusing.

The naoli had introduced mutated rats into the humans' home planet some sixty years ago, one of

the preliminary weapons for the five-plus decades of the final assault. They had bred true in the sewers and cellars and had done their damage. Now, damnit, the virus the naoli had released to exterminate the mutants should have wiped them out!

Gnash, gnash!

Hulann held the light on the rat, keeping it hypnotized. He looked around for a weapon, something, anything. It was not his time to be particular. To his right was a length of steel pipe that had twisted loose, fallen to the floor. The end that had twisted away in some bomb blast was pointed and deadly. He inched to it, stooped, and picked it up with his free hand.

The rat hissed at him.

He advanced on it, clutching the pipe so hard that the muscles of his six-fingered hand ached.

Perhaps the growing brightness of the light warned the rat. It stiffened, then scurried along the beam, almost escaping the blinding light.

Hulann shifted the lamp, leaped, jabbed the sharp end of the pipe up at the low beam, caught the mutant on the flank. Blood appeared.

The rat screeched, scurried further, confused, angry. Froth tipped its brown lips and flecked its dung-colored fur. When he followed it with the light, it scrambled about on its perch and tried to go back the way it had come.

He stabbed it again.

It fell onto the floor, momentarily escaping his light. When it came to its feet, almost instantly, it saw him and came for him, chittering insanely. It was more than likely rab-

id. The mutated rats had been built with a low tolerance for diseases which they might catch and later transfer to humans.

He stepped back. But that was not a good move, and he knew it.

The rat's feet chattered on the cement floor. Pieces of cement, shards of glass, and other small debris rattled out from under it.

There was no time to open a link with the Phasersystem and send for help. He would be dead by the time they got here. He had to rely on his own quickness. He side-stepped, swung out at the beast with the pipe, and connected, knocking it end for end.

The rat's squeal echoed from wall to wall. For a moment, there were a hundred rats in the room. It came up, staggering, and scampered back at him, completely mad now.

He swung again, missed the rat, and slammed the pipe into a steel support beam. There was an explosion of sound in the room, and the concussion surged back his arm, making it numb. The pipe fell out of his fingers, clattered on the floor.

The noise had made the rat leap aside and fall back. Now that the echo had died, it came back at him.

His hand was still too weak to grasp anything.

The rat was close enough to leap. Almost leaped—when a chunk of concrete smashed into it, crushing its hind quarters. Another chunk rained down, missing it. A third connected. And a fourth. It stopped squirming, absolutely dead.

In his excitement, Hulann had all but forgotten the voice that had first called out the warning to him. The warning that had been in pure Ter-

ran. Unaccented Terran. Massaging his numbed arm, he looked around until he saw the human.

It was a young one, crouched on a shelf of rubble to his left. He tried to guess its age, could not. Anyway, it was a child. It looked down on him with a curious expression, then eyed the rat.

"Is it dead?"

"Yes," Hulann said.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"It was a mutant."

"I know. Yes. A mutant."

The boy looked at the naoli, then back the way he had come. "You're alone?"

Hulann nodded.

"I guess you'll turn me over to the rest of them."

Hulann's chest was afire. He was waging a constant battle between his mind and his overmind, trying to stifle at least a little of the fear his organic brain was feeding the higher levels of his thinking apparatus. He had seen humans before. But never when he was alone. And never when they would have had so much to hate him for.

"Will you turn me in?" the boy asked.

Hulann was afraid. Desperately. Painfully. But there was something else stirring in him too. It took some moments before he realized this other thing was guilt . . .

Though surely there must have been things the boy wished to say to Hulann (curses and damnations should fill at least an hour; a naoli rarely engaged in physical violence with his own kind, resorting to sustained verbal denunciations to work off accumulated frustrations), he

merely sat upon the rubble, the concrete, wood and steel, the plastic and aluminum, watching the alien. He did not seem frightened nor particularly angry. Curious more than anything.

It was quite an uncomfortable situation as far as Hulann was concerned. To be spat upon would have raised his own hatred. Hating the boy, he could have acted. But the lengthening silence was a wall he could not breach.

Hulann went to the rat, kicked the chunks of stone away and looked at the corpse. He prodded it with a foot. The fleshy body quivered with a post-mortem muscle spasm and was still again. He walked back to the boy and looked up at him where he sat slightly above eye level.

The boy looked back, his head tilted to one side. He was, Hulann supposed, a pretty specimen by human standards. His head seemed somewhat too large, but its features were well placed for his species. He had a thick mass of golden hair. Hair alone astounded the scaled naoli; golden hair was nearly too much to comprehend. Blue eyes beneath yellow brows, a small nose, and thin lips. His skin was dotted here and there with what humans called "freckles" and strangely considered an attractive attribute—but which the naoli chose to regard as imperfections in coloration and possibly the marks of disease, though they never had been able to study a freckled human at close quarters.

"What are you doing here?" Hulann asked.

The boy shrugged his shoulders.

Hulann interpreted this as indecision, though he was not certain

that some more subtle, complex answer was being given.

"You must have some reason for being down here in the cellars!"

"Hiding," the boy said simply.

Hulann felt the guilt again. He was doubly frightened. To be in the presence of a human after all that had happened was terrifying enough. But he was also afraid of his own guilt—and his lack of concern for that guilt. A good naoli would call for help on the Phasersystem, then turn himself into the traumatist and get himself sent home for therapy. Somehow the guilt seemed fitting. Deep in his overmind, he had a desire to know penance.

He repeated the arguments fed to all naoli by the Phasersystem during the psychological-conditioning periods every morning. He attempted to recall that cold, eerie forest where the plants had been sentient and monsters had lurked in the trees. But that seemed silly now.

"Are you turning me in?" the boy asked.

"That is my duty."

"Of course. Your duty." It was said without malice.

"I would be severely punished."

The boy said nothing. "Unless, of course, you were to escape before I could apprehend you," Hulann said.

Even as he spoke, he could not believe his vocal apparatus had formed the words. He had always been an individual of great common sense, of cool thought and reasoned action. Now, he was engaging in sheer madness.

"That's no good," the boy said, shaking his head so his yellow hair

bounced and sprayed about. To Hulann, the sight was breathtaking. "I can't get away. I crawled in here because I thought it was safe. I thought I'd come out when you'd all gone."

"Ten years," Hulann said. "That would be ten years." The boy looked surprised. "That's how long our researches would—will take. The reconstruction of daily human life alone—"

"Anyway," the boy interrupted, "I'm stuck here. There's food and water. I thought I could hole up. Then you came along. It's my leg."

Hulann moved closer, raising the double lids completely free of his huge, oval eyes. "What's wrong with it?"

"I was hurt," the boy said, "in the final stand."

"You participated in the battle?"

"I was on a grenade-lobbing station. Loader, not marksman. We were struck with something. Don't know what. See? Here. It's kind of dirty, but you can see."

Hulann was within a foot of the boy now. He saw a tear on the lad's thigh, perhaps five inches in length. Crusted with dirt and blood, ugly. His trouser leg had been torn off, and there was nothing to protect the wound from all the filth it came into contact with. Hulann could see a giant bruise spreading out in all directions from the gash.

"You'll poison from that," he said.

The boy shrugged.

"Oh, certainly you will." He turned and started back toward the other cellar, beyond the caved-in ceiling.

"Where are you going?" the human asked.

"I've got a kit in the next room. I'll do something for your leg."

When he returned with the medicines, the boy had come down from the rubble and was sitting on the floor. Hulann could see that he was in pain. But the moment the boy realized the naoli had returned, he erased the grimace from his face.

"Some of the medicines would endanger you," he said, talking as much for his own gratification as for the human's. "But I think I can remember which ones will do some good." He fumbled through the kit, brought out a hypodermic needle designed for naoli skin. He would have to remember to be gentle; human skin was fragile. He filled it with green liquid from a green bottle. When he turned to inject it into the thigh, he stopped and made what passed for a frown on a naoli face. "It should be cleaned," he said.

"It wouldn't clot," the boy said. "It stopped bleeding a lot faster when I let the dirt collect."

Hulann dampened a sterile sponge and bent to the muddied wound. Abruptly, he recoiled, realizing he was going to have to touch the human.

There are things in the trees . . .

"Could you clean it?" he asked of the boy.

The boy took the sponge, smelled it for some reason or other, then began swabbing the wound. It was soon apparent that three hands were required to do a proper job. Two to hold away the ragged edges of flesh, the third to daub at the crusted slash.

"Here," Hulann said at last, taking the sponge. "Hold your hand here."

And he touched the human. He held one side of the wound while the boy held the other, and he worked the antiseptic into the flesh until he had sponged away the last of the dirt. New blood slowly welled, ran down the leg.

Hulann injected the green fluid into several points about the wound, then bound the thigh in a pressure bandage of light, two-molecule cloth that had almost no bulk. The bleeding stopped.

"It will be healed in three to four days," he said.

"We had these bandages too. But they were pretty scarce for civilians during the last years of the war."

As Hulann repacked the kit, he asked, "Why didn't you let the rat kill me?"

"They're ugly. Nobody should die under one."

Hulann winced. His double stomach burned on both levels with acidic agitation. Surely his guilt index must have been higher than eighteen points. Or was it merely that his guilt was now a conscious thing?

"But I am a naoli," he argued. "We're at war."

The boy did not answer. When Hulann clamped down the top of the medical kit, the boy said, "My name's Leo. Do you have one? A name?"

"Hulann."

He thought it over, nodded his yellow head with approval. "I'm eleven. How old are you?"

"Two hundred and eighty-four of your years."

"You're lying!" To lie seemed a greater crime than all the acts of war.

"No, no. We have a long lifespan. Your kind dies at a hundred and fifty. We live for five or six hundred years."

They sat in silence for a time, listening to the rustle of things in the rubble, to the moaning wind that had picked up above and somehow found its way down into this dungeon. At last, the boy said, "Are you turning me in?"

"I guess so," Hulann said.

"I don't think you will."

"What?"

The boy indicated the leg dressing. "After healing me, why take me in to be killed?"

Hulann watched his enemy, his friend. His overmind was overtaxed trying to analyze his own behavior. He was obviously quite a sick creature. It would be a crime against his race to release this beast. It would have bordered on sin, except that his people had no such concept. Whatever this boy did from now until his death would be Hulann's fault. He might murder other naoli. And if Hulann's crime were discovered, he would either be tried as a traitor or sent home for total washing and restructuring. The first was bad, the second horrifying.

The organic brain specialists had developed startling techniques during the war. They had learned to totally erase a captured human's mind and refill it with a false identity and purpose. It had been these unknowing traitors among the human fleets who had signaled the turning of the war tide against mankind. The naoli doctors had now learned to use the same procedures on their own kind in the treatment of the most mentally deranged.

Washed, he would never remember his first two hundred and eighty-seven years. The centuries to come would be a farce without history—and therefore without purpose.

Yet now he was considering letting the human escape, thereby risking all these things. It had to do with the boy's saving him from the rat. But there was also that great pool of misery lying on his soul's bottom: the knowledge that he had assisted in the extermination of an entire race . . .

"No," he said. "I am not taking you in to be killed. But I want you to be gone from here as fast as possible. I will be back tomorrow to continue my work. You will be gone?"

"Of course," Leo said. Hulann thought of him as Leo now, not just as a human or a boy. He wondered if Leo also thought of him by his naoli name.

"I'll go now," Hulann said.

He went. He took with him the knowledge that he was now a criminal against all others of his race, against the naoli treasures and traditions, against the beloved home worlds and the powerful central committee. Against Fiala—and maybe against himself as well.

Banalog, the chief traumatist of the occupation forces' Second Division, leaned his head into the scope of the tapeviewer and watched the life history of Hulann Ponaga flit before his weary eyes. The film moved at a rate four times faster than he could consciously comprehend what it was telling him. Yet in the depths of the overmind, the

data was slowed until it began to mean something. The more high-speed material he fed himself, the more rapidly the overmind translated, until, now, it lagged only minutes behind the film itself. His eyes still rebelled.

The end of the film passed, then only whiteness. Banalog pushed the viewer away and settled back in his chair, crossing his hands on the slight rise of his primary stomach. When his overmind had mulled the data, he punched a desk stud and spoke to the air in a gruff, commanding tone, which was only his natural voice.

"Tentative recommendation based on files. Hulann should be returned to home world for therapy. Otherwise, he will become a hopeless neurotic. He is a fine and gentle person; the war has affected him more than most. Too, he has a history of mild obsessions. Therapy will be to his advantage. Naturally, final recommendation will be deferred until I've seen the patient firsthand, as per the Phasersystem's advice. Perhaps it is relevant to note that, although he was told to contact me as soon as possible, Hulann has thus far not come to schedule an interview. This may be an indication that he is suffering and subconsciously nursing his guilt. The Phasersystem should remind him of the necessity of making an appointment during the conditioning period in the morning."

He shut off the recorder.

For a while, he sat in the office, the lights dimmed almost to total darkness. Not much light filtered through the window from the late winter afternoon.

He thought of the home world where his family was now safe. The menace had been put down. Mankind was gone. There would be much mating, many days spent in the warrens in rejoicing. He thought of his children, the entire brood of three hundred and some. How many exactly? He did not know. But he was proud of all of them.

Inexorably, his mind traced rambling patterns until it had returned to the situation at hand. The occupied planet. The dead cities. The ill naoli stationed here.

So Hulann's conscience was bothering him. Genocide was a bitter pill to swallow.

Banalog toyed with the recorder microphone, then thumbed the lights completely out. The room seemed to shrink in the darkness until it was the size of a closet.

He rose from his desk and went to the window to look upon the fallen city that the humans had called Boston. He could not see much, for the clouds hung low, and a snowfall was beginning. Sheets of fine white flakes drifted by the glass, some smearing wetly along it, distorting what little the traumatist could see of the place where men had once lived.

So Hulann's conscience was bothering him, eh? Well, there were other naoli with the same problem . . .

Later that night, Fiala stretched in the invisible strands of her bed, allowed the pleasant power web to caress her lithe body. Though her flesh began to feel better, her mind still boiled. She was cultivating her hatred for Hulann. She had a nice garden.

There was no reason why he should have been appointed director of this team. His record was no better than hers. Not substantially. And his time of service was actually somewhat less. She could see no logic in his receiving the position other than the possibility that he had been able to pull strings that she had no knowledge of.

Today, when he had left the diggings early, he had looked drawn and troubled. His lids had been drooping until his eyes were only slits. He had his lips drawn tightly over his teeth, covering them, the sign of shame. She knew that he was a strong candidate for therapy, and she had been expecting him to be pulled out of the operation by this time, sent home to recover. Yet he hung on.

Damn him!

And she could no longer afford to wait for his breakdown. Whoever brought this job to a conclusion would be established for the rest of his—or her, of course—career. It was the greatest chore in the history of archaeology, in the entire span of naoli scientific history. And Boston was one of the few unatomized cities where something worthwhile could still be uncovered. The humans had been madmen there at the end of it, destroying their own metropolises and themselves when the naoli had forced entry.

There must be some way of hurrying Hulann's certain collapse, though the method presently evaded her. She toiled over various plans, rejecting one after another, and finally gave up on it for the night.

Elsewhere in the dead city:

Hulann slept the death sleep, his overmind tucked in its nether-world pocket. Even with his burdens, he could know peace in this manner.

Leo had finished fashioning a place for himself among clothes that had spilled from a shattered closet. He nestled deeply in them to ward off the cold of the New England night. There was a knife by his side which he could reach easily if he should need it. As he was falling asleep, a picture of perfect clarity burst into his mind. It was of his father, lying dead beneath the grenade-lobbing station. He sat upright in the clothes, as if activated by a spring, shivering. He refused to allow himself to think about it. When he felt he could trust to sleep without nightmares, he lay down again and sought his pocket of warmth.

Two blocks away, above ground, a winter bird worked its way down into an offal and grass, string and ribbon nest, pecking and plucking at the fibers of its home with a quick, unpleasant nervousness. Farther along the rain gutter, a hundred feet down from where the bird worried, the sick and dying mutant rat crept stealthily as it could. Its head kept drooping, and it found itself stopping at the same spot for long periods of time, delirious. Its legs felt weak to it, and there was a burning sensation along its spine. It could not know of the naoli virus that did deadly work within it. It only knew that it was hungry and that, perhaps, the hunger was the cause of the other bad sensations. When it was within a few feet of the nest, it tensed to leap. Somehow, the bird heard and took wing. The diseased rat jumped in one last, desperate ef-

fort, missed the slapping feathers, and felt itself going over the edge of the rain gutter. It clawed wildly at the stone, could find no purchase. It fell away from the top of the empty cathedral toward the silent, solid street below . . .

In the chief administration building of the occupation forces, the programmers of the Phaserdreams worked industriously on the broadcasts for the following morning. Now and then, one of the technicians gladly took a break, went outside and popped a sweet-drug lozenge for fifteen minutes, watched the snow falling and eddying around his splayed feet. Under the effects of the chemicals, it seemed as if the naoli was becoming one with the drifting flakes, was losing his identity to the natural forces of this world . . .

II

The second warning from the Phasersystem had disconcerted Hulann. He had honestly forgotten all about the need to make an appointment with the traumatist. He was shaken by his neglectfulness and made certain to complete his obligation before going to the diggings. He set a time with Banalog's secretary-computer for late that afternoon, then went to work, late for the second day in a row.

He passed the others without comment, noticing, however, the odd looks he drew from them. Realizing that his lips were pulled in over his teeth and that this gave him the look of shame, he quickly rearranged his facial composure until he seemed nothing more than a happy

bone-hunter on his way to rich graveyards.

He went into the tumble-down building, down into the cellar, flicking on the lights. He went to the break in the continuous rooms, took his handlamp through the hole, into the chamber where the human child had been yesterday, where the rat had almost killed him.

Leo was still there.

He sat in a pile of clothes, wearing two coats to keep from freezing, eating some earthly fruit from a plastic container. The container apparently had a heat tab, for steam was rising from it.

Hulann stood, in disbelief, his eyes totally uncovered, the lids folded like accordions in the overhanging ledge of bone above his sockets.

"Would you like some?" Leo asked, offering the fruit.

"What are you doing here?" Hulann demanded.

Leo said nothing, took another bite of food, swallowed it. "Well, where else was there for me to go?"

"The city," Hulann said. "The whole city!"

"No. There are other naoli. It is all occupied."

"Out of the city, then. Away from here!"

"My leg's better," Leo admitted. "Though I couldn't walk well on it yet. Even so, there isn't anything outside the city. There has been a war, remember."

Hulann could find nothing to say. For the first time in his life, he felt that he could not control his emotions. There was a desire in him to kneel and relax and cry.

"It's so cold," Leo said, still eat-

ing. "Yet you don't wear anything. Aren't you cold?"

Hulann crossed, sat down in the dirt a few feet in front of the boy. Almost absent-mindedly, he said, "No. I'm not cold. We have no constant body temperature such as humans have. Ours varies according to the cold. Though not greatly, really. And then there are our skins. Little body heat can escape us if we wish to contain it."

"Well, I'm cold!" Leo said. He put the empty can aside. Slight white vapors still streamed upward from it. "I've looked for a personal heating unit ever since the city fell. I can't find one. Do you think you could bring one to me?"

Hulann looked incredulous. Yet he found himself saying, "I've seen a few recovered from the ruins. Maybe . . ."

"That would be swell."

"If I bring it, will you leave?" he asked.

Leo shrugged his shoulders, which seemed to be his most characteristic gesture. Hulann wished he knew for certain what emotion it expressed. "Where would I go?"

Hulann waved his arms weakly, pointlessly. "Away from the city. Even if there isn't anything out there, you could take food and wait until we were gone."

"Ten years."

"Yes."

"That's silly."

"Yes."

"So we are back where we started."

"Yes."

"Doesn't that hurt?" Leo asked, leaning forward.

"What?"

"Your lips. When you pull them in over your teeth like that."

Hulann quickly showed his teeth, put a hand to his lips and felt them. "No," he said. "We have few nerves in our outer layers of flesh."

"You looked funny," Leo said. He drew his own lips in over his teeth and made talking motions, then burst out laughing.

Hulann found himself laughing also, watching the boy mimic him. Did he really look like that? It was a serious expression on a naoli, or at least he had been raised to respect it as such. In this mock version, it truly was humorous.

"What are you doing!" the boy squealed, laughing even harder.

"What?" Hulann asked, looking about him. His body was still. His hands and feet did not move.

"That noise," Leo said.

"Noise?"

"That wheezing sound."

Hulann was perplexed. "Mirth," he said. "Laughter like yours."

"It sounds like a drain that's clogged," Leo said. "Do I sound that bad."

Hulann began laughing again. "To me you sound strange. I had not noticed before. You sound like some birds that we have on my world. They are great, hairy things with legs three feet long and little, tiny bills."

They laughed some more until they were tired.

"How long can you stay today?" the boy asked when they had sat in comfortable silence for a while.

The depression settled on Hulann again. "Not long. And you can stay for even a shorter time. You must leave. Now."

"I've said I can't, Hulann."

"No. There will be no refusal. You must leave now, or I will turn you over to the executioners as I should have in the first place."

Leo made no move to leave.

Hulann stood. "Now!" he said.

"No, Hulann."

"Now, now, now!" He grabbed the boy, lifted him off the floor, surprised at his lightness. He shook him until the boy's face was a blur. "Now or I will kill you myself!" He dropped him back onto the floor.

Leo made no move to depart. He looked at Hulann, then down at the clothes spread around him. He began to draw them in against him, cuddled into a hollow in the old synthetics to contain his body heat. With only his upper face uncovered, he stared at the naoli.

"You can't do this to me," Hulann said. He was no longer angry, just exasperated. "You can't make me do these things. Please. It is not right of you."

The boy did not answer.

The wind howled overhead.

"Don't you see what you are doing? You are making a criminal of me. You are making me a traitor."

A gust of cold air found its way through the debris and twisted by them. Hulann did not notice. The child drew deeper into his nest.

"You should have let the rat kill me. You were a stupid child for warning me. What am I to you? I am the enemy. I was better dead to you."

The boy listened. Nothing more.

"Stupid. And a traitor to your own race."

"The war was over," Leo said. "You had won."

Hulann hunched as if bending over a pain in his stomachs. "No! No, the war is not over until one or the other race is extinct. There is no quarter in this battle."

"You don't believe that."

Hulann did not speak. He did not, of course, believe it—just as the boy had said. Perhaps he had never believed it. Now, he realized the war was somewhat of a mistake. Man and naoli had never been able to coexist even in a cold-war sort of situation. They were too alien to meet on any common ground. Yet this child was reachable. They were communicating. Which meant there had been a flaw in their reasoning, which meant the war could have been avoided.

"Well," Hulann said, "I have no choice. I must open these cellars to the researchers on my team. I cannot hide their existence. I'll string the lights. If you are not gone when I call them in, it is your problem. It is no longer mine."

He got up then and began his work for the day. Two hours before he was due to go to the traumatist, he had strung lights through this cellar and the next. He came back and looked at the boy. "The next cellar is the last. I've finished."

Leo said nothing.

"You should be going."

Again: "There is nowhere for me to go."

Hulann stood, watching the child for a long while. At last, he turned and unstrung the glow bulbs, pulled up the poles he had planted, rewound the wire, and took everything into the outer cellar. He came back and put his handlamp with the boy.

"It will give you light tonight."

"Thank you," Leo said.

"I have undone my work."

Leo nodded.

"Perhaps, tomorrow, I can fill up the crevice in that wall of ruins, seal this and the last cellar off so you won't be bothered."

"I'll help you," Leo said.

"You know," Hulann said, his heavy face strained so even the boy could see the anguish in the alien features, "you are—you are—*crucifying* me?"

And he went away. Leaving the boy with light . . .

"Come in, Hulann," the traumatist Banalog said, smiling and friendly as all traumatists are with their patients. He exuded a fatherliness, an exaggerated sense of well-being that could not help but infect his charges.

Hulann took the seat to the right of Banalog's desk while the older naoli went behind and sat down in his customary chair, leaned back and feigned relaxation.

"I am sorry I forgot to arrange an appointment yesterday," Hulann said.

"Nothing damaged," Banalog said quietly, gently. "Just shows that this guilt is not as bad as the Phasersystem computer thinks. Otherwise, you wouldn't have been able to continue working as you did." Banalog wondered if his lie was transparent. Hulann seemed to perk up, and the traumatist thought that he had told it with conviction. But now he saw that the archaeologist was consciously aware of his guilt and trying to hide it.

"I didn't know I had a guilt com-

plex until the Phasersystem told me.”

Banalog waved his hands to indicate the unimportance of the situation. He pulled his chair in closer to the desk, rested his arms on the top, and began to punch a series of buttons on his multicolored control console.

There was a stirring above Hulann's head. As he looked up to see the cause of the noise and movement, the hood of the monitoring robot descended like a landing shuttlecraft. It stopped two feet above where he sat, the four-foot diameter of the hood radiating to all sides of him.

Banalog worked other controls, calling forth a post consisting of lenses and sensors of various types. It rose from the floor, half a dozen feet before Hulann, stopped when it was at his eye level.

“I thought this equipment was for severe cases,” he said to Banalog, losing his sense of ease, a hard edge of terror in his voice.

“Misconception,” Banalog said as if he were quite bored, really, with this whole affair. “We have much more sophisticated equipment for a severe case.”

“But you are afraid I would lie to you?”

“No, no. I do not insult you, Hulann. But the mind is strange. Your own overmind may lie to you. You would be telling me what you thought was the truth about your guilt complex. But it would still be festering inside you. We all are creatures strange to our own selves.”

The machines vibrated slightly as they came to life. Some of the sensors glowed green, like a naoli's eyes.

Others were yellow and purple. Hulann's skin crawled as the probing waves penetrated him and began collecting data for the traumatist.

“Then it is necessary?” he asked.

“Not *necessary*, Hulann. That makes it sound like you are in a bad way. Believe me, I think your problem is minor. Not necessary. Just standard procedure.”

Hulann nodded, resigned to it. He would have to hedge his answers, try to be as honest as possible, try to phrase his response so that they were literally true while not giving away the exact situation.

The questioning began gently.

“You like your work, Hulann?”

“Very much.”

“How many years have you been an archaeologist?”

“Seventy-three.”

“Before that?”

“A writer.”

“How interesting!”

“Yes.”

“A writer of what?”

“History. Creative history.”

“Archaeology, then, was a natural follow-up.”

“I suppose so.”

“Why do you like archaeology, Hulann. Why this specific job?”

“The excitement of digging up the past, of finding things unexpectedly.”

Banalog checked the readout monitors on his desk and tried to keep from frowning. He looked up at Hulann and smiled. “Does your work here on this planet assuage your guilt any?”

“I don't understand.”

“Well, do you feel as if you are working out a penance in reconstructing the daily life of mankind?”

And so the questions went. Probing, prodding. It began to be clear to Hulann that Banalog was learning more than he had intended to let him discover. He tried to answer as well as he could, but there was no way to hide from the probing traumatist and the probing machines.

Then the trouble came.

Banalog leaned forward, conspiratorially, and said, "Of course, Hulann, your guilt is now conscious."

"I—"

Banalog frowned and waved him to silence. "It is. I can see that. But there is something else you are hiding from me."

"Nothing."

"Please, Hulann." Banalog looked pained. "This is for your own good. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes," he said reluctantly.

"Then, will you tell me?"

"I can't."

"You would feel guilty?"

He nodded affirmatively.

Banalog sat back in his chair and was quiet for a long while. The machines continued to hum and lance their invisible fingers through Hulann. Banalog turned to the window and watched the snow falling in the dim light. It had been spitting for a day now, but it was putting the white stuff down in earnest finally, had been since noon. He worked over the details he had thus far uncovered, munched them with his overmind until he thought he had the proper question.

"Hulann, does this have something to do with anything you've uncovered in your diggings?"

The monitors on Banalog's desk reacted violently.

"No," Hulann said.

Banalog ignored the answer. "What have you found?"

"Nothing."

"What could it be that you would consider so important that you would risk washing and restructuring to hide it?"

Hulann was terrified. Suddenly, he saw his world falling down around him, crumbling to ruin, powdering, blowing away on a cold wind. His past would be erased by the washing techniques. His first two hundred and eighty-seven years would be taken from him. He would have no past for his children. The stigma would be born by his family for a dozen generations.

Banalog looked suddenly shocked. "Hulann! Have you found a human in those ruins? A living human?"

The monitors, the machines, the telling rays would not let him lie.

"You have!" Banalog said.

Hulann had a vision of Leo being dragged from the shattered, charred building. He had another vision of the boy's frightened face. And a final picture of the small, twisted, bloodied body lying on the frozen earth after the executioners had finished with it.

He came out of the chair with a swiftness he did not know he could summon, a swiftness reserved for the first two hundred years of life. He went over the desk, not around it, tramping on the screens of the traumatist's data devices, flicking switches off and on as he scrambled over them.

Banalog tried to scream.

Hulann toppled the traumatist's chair, spilled both of them onto the floor, using his forearm to choke the

other naoli's mouth so full that the call for help could not be heard. Banalog tried to push up. Though he was a hundred years Hulann's senior, he almost managed to break free.

Swinging his arm, Hulann cracked Banalog's head back. It bounced off the floor. The wide, green eyes were shut off by the slowly descending double lids.

Hulann struck again, to make certain. But Banalog was unconscious and would remain that way long enough for Hulann to make plans.

Make plans . . .

The full understanding of his position came to him harshly, making him dizzy and weak. He thought that he might vomit. He felt the contents of his more sensitive second stomach surging back into his first stomach. But he managed to stop the regression there. Up until a moment ago, he had been a candidate for washing and restructuring. That had been bad. Now, it was worse. He was a traitor. He had struck Banalog to keep himself from being committed and to keep the human child, Leo, safe. They would surely execute him now.

Once, he had thought losing his past was the worst they could do to him, worse than death as a traitor. Now he realized this was not so. At least, restructured, he could give his children the heritage of his future deeds. But executed as a turncoat, he would give them nothing but disgrace for centuries to come.

What could be done? Nothing. There was no way to salvage his family name. He was only thankful that he had bred so few children. He rose from Banalog and consid-

ered his next step. Suicide, at first, seemed the only honorable path. Yet, as not even that would redeem his name, it seemed silly. He had nothing now but his life. He must salvage that.

And the life of Leo. That too. For, after all, it had been for Leo that he had ruined himself. To let Leo die now would be to give an air of slapstick to the entire affair. The first thing, then, was to secure Banalog so that he could not spread an alarm until Hulann and the boy were beyond the clutches of the Second Division.

Transferring the unconscious traumatist to the chair beneath the hood where he himself had recently sat, he searched the office for something with which to bind him. He uncovered nothing of value. At last, he took down the drapes to either side of the window and tore them into strips. He wet the strips in the attached toilet and secured Banalog to the chair. First, both feet, then both hands. He looped his rope around the naoli's shoulders and tied that strand to the chair. Then his chest. Then a strip across his lap and under the seat.

"That would seem enough," Banalog said.

Hulann stood, startled.

"It would take a trick expert to escape from these."

Hulann drew his lips over his teeth.

"No need for that," Banalog said. "You're doing what you consider correct. You are ill. You do not know better."

Hulann turned for the door.

"Wait. Two things," Banalog said. "First, an injection of sweet-

drugs so that my Phasersystem contact is no good. Then a gag for my mouth."

Numbly, he went back, found the traumatist's sweet-drugs in the center drawer, filled a needle with a strong dose of the potent liquid form, slipped the stuff into a vein in Banalog's neck. Then he gagged him. All of this made no sense. Why was Banalog cooperating? Hulann was tempted to remove the wad of drapery material and ask the older naoli why. But there was not time for that. He was a fugitive now. He had to move swiftly . . .

III

The street of the diggings was deserted in the early evening's muddy light. The heaviest machinery that could not be easily removed from the scene was covered by blown plastic to protect it from the storm. Four inches of snow had softened the jagged outline of the ruins; it drifted into crevices and filled them up, swept over peaks and spikes, obliterating them. There was a sepulcher silence on the land, save for the constant humming moan of the wind and the swish of the flakes as they drifted over one another like specks of wet sand.

Hulann made his way along the shrouded avenue, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, though his dark body stood out painfully against the snow. He found the building where Leo waited, went down into the cellar, turning on the lights, back through the crevice in the rubble into the room where Leo waited.

The boy was asleep. Hulann

could see nothing but the child's eyes, closed, and a bit of his brow. His face was almost totally buried in his covers.

"Leo," he called softly.

The boy did not stir.

Now, Hulann thought. Now there is still time. I haven't wakened him. I haven't told him we're leaving. Now I should turn back before it is finally too late.

But it was already too late. He was well aware of that. From the moment he had attacked one of his own kind—Banalogue—to protect a human, he had become an outcast.

Besides, he could remember the visions he had seen. Leo being dragged outside. Leo, frightened. Leo, dead. Blood on the snow. And he could also recall the rat, hanging above him, ready to fall and tear with talons and teeth. The boy had called out . . .

Hulann went to him, knelt and shook him gently. "Leo!"

The boy stirred, suddenly leaped up, wide awake, his eyes fully open, his hand clutched around a knife that Hulann had not even seen but which had been lying outside the blankets for easy access. He held the blade on the naoli for a moment, then relaxed and dropped it, put his cold-numbed fingers under his improvised blankets again.

"It's you, Hulann."

"We have to go," Hulann said.

"Go?"

"Yes. Get up."

"You're turning me in?"

"No!" Hulann hissed. "I've been found out. They know I have been harboring you. We have to leave."

"I'm sorry," the boy said.

"It's nothing. Come on. Quickly."

The boy stood, shedding coats and dresses and trousers and hats and sweaters and shirts that he had been layered with. Hulann picked up a few of these that seemed the boy's size and ordered him to put them on over his own clothes, explaining that they might have to spend time outside of a shelter in the early hours of their escape.

"But where will we go?" the boy asked.

"Beyond the city."

"There is nothing out there."

"We will find something."

"What?"

"You ask too many questions. We don't have time for them now. Hurry."

They went back through the rooms to the first collar, where Hulann turned off the lights. They climbed the stairs, moved through the quiet building to the empty doorway, where the snow was blowing in and drifting against the frame. Leo huddled against himself, kept to the right and slightly behind the naoli. Hulann stepped into the street, his wide feet sinking in the soft whiteness. When he had looked both ways and listened intently for the sound of life he motioned the boy to follow him.

They progressed up the avenue, keeping against the still erect walls of as many buildings as possible. Though they listened for approaching naoli, there was nothing for their ears but the wind and the swish of the calcimine-like fluff, the biting squeak of their own footfalls. Hulann had drawn his double lids down to leave as little of his big eyes exposed as possible, but he remained vigilant.

They left the avenue for the comparative safety of an alleyway cutting off to their left. It was a narrow path, twisted and unevenly paved. The buildings rose so high and abruptly on either side that the snow had only put an inch or so of depth here. Though there was little likelihood of being seen in such a sheltered, dismal place, they nevertheless hugged the shadowed walls and moved with caution.

Hulann made more changes of course until, in time, they came to the mouth of another alley which was blocked by a tumbled wall and the overturned hulk of a human military vehicle. They crept over the bricks and mortar until they were stretched out against the flank of the vehicle, looking beneath the turret of a large gun. Beyond, the sleek naoli occupation-force structures sat in a leveled area free of human artifacts.

"What have we come here for if we're running?" the boy asked.

"We couldn't expect to get far without food, could we? And even a naoli needs warmth sometimes. We ought to have heat units. And weapons. And I don't want to start walking until we have to."

"You have a car?"

"No. I have no need for one. But I know someone who has one I may be able to get."

Which was Fiala. Aside from her own courses of research, she was the courier for the archaeology teams in Boston. Once every afternoon, she made the rounds of the various sectors, delivering notes from team directors and collecting whatever artifacts the directors thought would do more good with another director's

line of study. Whether he could persuade her to let him have it on some pretext was highly unlikely, but he had no other choice.

"Wait here," he said. "If I get the car, I'll pull it over close to the alley and open the door on your side. Get in as quickly as you can."

Leo nodded.

Hulann pushed up, went around the tank, clattered down the hill of debris, and strode off toward the naoli complex and the tower on the end where both he and Fiala—and everyone else on this team—had a room. He was almost to Fiala's door when he decided his idea was full of holes big enough to crawl through. Perhaps Banalog was sympathetic, but that was no guarantee Fiala would feel the same. If she suspected him, she could call for help through the Phasersystem before he could do anything to stop her.

He went up a few more floors to his own quarters. He packed an equipment case full of food which he dialed from the tower kitchen. He hoped there was not a repairman monitoring the food system; this large an order would draw attention he could not afford. He packed his own personal heat source and a handgun for protection against mutant lifeforms. He could think of nothing more to take.

He got his supply of sweet-drugs and filled a hypo full of the stuff. There were still two doses in the bottle. He tucked the bottle in the case with the other things, closed the case. Then, carrying the provisions in one hand and concealing the hypo of sweet-drugs in the other, he went downstairs to see Fiala . . .

She answered her door on the

third ring. She was stunning, as usual, and she aroused a pang of desire in him that made his reproductive pouch contract pleasantly. He also knew a moment of guilt at what he was about to do.

"Hulann?"

"May I come in?"

She looked at the satchel he carried, but did not see the needle in his other hand. She stepped back from the door to allow him by her.

When he was around her, he turned, swept the needle into her hip, jabbed deep, depressed the release. The bright fluid drained into her in less than half a dozen seconds.

But even as the first drops had been injected, she had ceased to whirl, to try to get out of his grasp. Her motions became relaxed. She had lost, from now until the sweet-drugs wore off, the ability to seek help through her Phasersystem contact.

"What are you doing?" she asked dreamily, her eyes heavy.

The needle still stuck out of her rump. He pulled it free and laid it on top of his suitcase, which he had set next to her desk.

"Come," he said.

She allowed herself to be led to the couch.

"What do you want of me, Hulann?"

"The keys to your ground car," he said, looking down at her. "Where are they?"

"Why do you want them?" Her words were thick, slow, syrupy.

"Never mind. If you won't tell me, I'll have to search the place. I won't be gentle, Fiala. I'll wreck some of your files."

"They're in the desk. Top left."

He went and got them. When he turned to come back, she was opening the door to the corridor.

He took three leaps, fell on her, dragging her away from the portal, kicking it shut, crushing her under him to smother any scream she might attempt. And she attempted several.

He pressed down on her, used his left hand to pinch off the wide, four-nostriled nose. When she passed out, he could tie and gag her as he had Banalog.

But she feigned unconsciousness. And when he let go of her slack body, she drove a well-muscled knee upwards into his reproductive pouch, making him gasp with pain and fall off her. Colorful flashes erupted in his head. His stomachs contracted. He clutched at himself to try to stop the pain, but it was no use.

Fiala was up, weaving as the drug drew her further and further away from reality. She found the door again.

He fought his nausea, reached out, grabbed her legs and pulled her backwards.

She fell over him, clawing, tearing at him with her fingers and her wicked teeth.

He wrestled her, trying to get another chance at her nose, to cut off her breath until she was genuinely unconscious. But she tossed her head and bit him.

The pupils of her eyes were enormous as the drug worked against her and for Hulann. But he was not going to be able to wait for it to help him.

She drew blood from his hand

and made a gurgling sound of pleasure deep in her throat.

She bucked, almost threw him off.

At last, regretting the necessity for his action, he drew back his open hand, slammed the flattened palm into *her* sex pouch. She made a harsh strangling sound, gagged as he had gagged. He did it again, sending a new wave of paralysis through her.

Then he stood. She was in no condition to run now. She writhed on the floor, calling him names and hugging herself. She said something about his buying his directorship from the commander of the Second Division and of how she would now get the job she should have had in the first place.

He ignored her. His mind was not clear enough to handle any more problems than those he already had.

Ten minutes later, he had her tied in a chair, gagged as thoroughly as Banalog had been. She did not know what he was doing or much about anything in the here and now. The sweet-drugs had taken her to another land that was much more enjoyable than this one. She murmured and cooed at the imaginary things she saw.

He went into the corridor, found the drop shaft, punched for the ground floor, and stepped into the nothingness, fell down and down and down until the winds of the mechanism began to slow his descent.

He found the ground car parked with the others behind the tower. It was a five-foot model, six feet high because of a cargo space on top. He opened the door, climbed in, in-

serted the key. The engine purred to life. The rotors in the undercarriage coughed, sputtered, and then beat steadily. The car lifted off the ground, bobbling slightly in the stiff, snow-laden wind.

Hulann pulled out onto the cleared square, located the overturned tank where Leo would still be waiting. He accelerated, arced, slowed before the rubble. Leaning across the seat, he touched the door stud and flung it open. The boy crashed down the slope, tripped over a twisted length of aluminum, fell full length. But a moment later, he was up, moving again. He leaped into the car and pulled the door shut behind.

Hulann knew that only one street out of the square was clear enough to negotiate. He turned to head that way and saw the naoli guard coming across the snow-covered fused glass floor of the compound. He was waving his arms and shouting. As yet, he had not opened contact with the Phasersystem (Hulann would have heard), but he would do that any instant . . .

The guard came between Hulann and the exit from the square. He still waved and called.

Hulann depressed the accelerator. The blades whined faster.

The guard realized his mistake in not calling for help earlier. Hulann heard the shift in the Phasersystem silence as the other naoli prepared to issue a general alarm.

He accelerated, closing on the guard.

Attention: . . .

The first word of the Phasersystem alarm boomed inside Hulann's head.

Too late, the naoli guard tried to jump aside. The front of the ground car struck him, knocking him back. Then the thick, steel blades went over him, barely registering a change in their speed of revolution.

Hulann did not look back. He concentrated on the street ahead. He had succeeded in cutting off a warning. Even if the guard were soon found, they would have no way of knowing who had hurt him. Hurt? No, killed. Hulann had killed the guard.

There was a spreading numbness in his body as the realization began to reach the depths of him. He, who had never killed, had never carried a weapon in anger against another intelligent being . . . He had murdered. He drove with a hypnotic concentration now, unable to stop the car, unable to think of anything to do but run. Run not only from the naoli who would be searching for him as soon as Fiala or Banalog was found, but running also from the dead guard. And from his past. Faster, Hulann, faster . . . Booming through the darkness in the fluttering insect machine.

In the occasional flushes of light as they passed other naoli buildings along other parts of the city, Leo could see the traces of tears on Hulann's thick, gray alien hide . . .

The traumatist Banalog sat bound in his office chair. He had turned it so he could look out the window at the snow.

If the universe is truly as balanced as all our studies have indicated, he mused, then how fundamental a part of that equilibrium is a race? An intelligent race? One of

the eleven races, for instance. The naoli? The humans? Would the destruction, the total extinction of a major galactic race have an influence on the overall balance? Would it be a large or small influence? Small. Yes. We think too highly of ourselves. The loss of a race will have but a small effect. Yet will that small effect snowball? Will more and more things change because mankind no longer exists? And will this snowball grow so large that a hundred thousand years from now—a hundred thousand centuries, perhaps—it will roll over the naoli as well? Have we, in the last analysis, damned ourselves. Have we only managed to borrow a little time against the end of everything?

He would have thought on it more, but for the growing delusions of the sweet-drug. Outside the window, the snow was now crimson and yellow.

It formed faces.

Hulann . . .

A human boy . . .

It was pretty. He watched, letting the unreality engulf him . . .

The Hunter sleeps. His is the death sleep of the naoli. He does not yet know that it will soon be time to stalk.

This time, his prey will be a lizard man, not a human. This will be unique for him. He will enjoy it. He has within him the seeds of destruction. He has longed to walk among his own kind with his sword of light and his permission to pass judgment. He will soon have that opportunity.

Now, he sleeps . . .

Leo was quiet for a long while,

watching the wipers thrust the thickening snow to the ends of the windscreen. At last, he turned to Hulann and said, "Where are we fleeing to?"

"I told you. Just away from the city."

"We will have to stay away ten years. We should have a destination."

"There is no destination."

Leo considered a moment. "The Haven."

Hulann looked sideways, almost lost control of the craft. He pulled it back onto the road, then talked without turning his attention away from driving. "It is not even certain that such a place exists. It may be a myth. Even if there is a sanctuary for the last humans which we have not reached, its whereabouts is a well-held secret."

"There is a Haven," Leo assured him. "I heard it talked about in the days of the last stand. I knew of certain leaders and irreplaceable specialists who were ferreted out of the city to be taken to the Haven."

"You know where it is?"

"Not exactly."

"What does that mean?"

Leo scrunched down in the corner between the seat and the door, turned sideways. He played with the hole in the seat which let the naoli tail through to the rear floor. "Well, I know that it's on the Coast. The West Coast. Along the Pacific Ocean."

"That doesn't pinpoint it."

"But it's a start!" he insisted.

"How would we ever search so much coast once we got there? And avoid the naoli forces all the way across the country."

Leo did not seem perturbed by what seemed insurmountable obstacles. "We'll find a way. You're a naoli. You can bluff your way through if you have to."

"Not likely."

"Otherwise," the boy said, "we hang around here until they catch us. And they will, you know."

Hulann hesitated. "I know."

"Well, then?"

"I couldn't enter the Haven with you. What would I do?" The worst thing now was to be utterly alone. He could not have put it in words, but it was the thing he most dreaded. To be an outcast, a murderer, and without friends, isolated on an alien world.

"I'll talk to them. You're different, Hulann. I'll make them see."

"Well—" he said.

"Please, Hulann. I want to be with people again. My people."

Hulann could understand that desire. "All right," he said.

They followed the markers over the beltway, eventually heading west across the great expanse of the North American continent. They did not see even one other car in the hours left of the night. In the silence and gently thrumming music of the blades beneath them, Leo fell asleep once more . . .

IV

As Hulann drove, he allowed his mind to wander, for a deluge of memories seemed the only present manner of assuaging his depression. Therefore, he raised up a monolith of the past and walled off the recent events, then studied the brickwork of his partition . . .

He had met his first human while aboard the naoli ship *Tagasa*, which had been of the private fleet of the central committee. He had been a guest of the government, a writer of creative history then. The *Tagasa* had been enroute from the home worlds to a series of outlying colony planets in the Nucio System. The rich background of the Nucio colonies had been obvious material for a series of tapebook adventures, and Hulann had been quick to take the chance to investigate the worlds firsthand.

The *Tagasa* had been in port on the world called Dala, a place of vegetation and no animals. He had returned to his cabin after a day of exploration of the surrounding jungle. He had seen the snake vines which moved almost as fast as a man could walk, slipping oily over each other and the trees on which they grew, pollinating the flowers that grew on the bark of some of the larger pines. He had seen the plants which ate other plants (and which impolitely spat out his finger when, at the urging of his guide, he had stuffed it into the pulpy orifice). He saw the breathing plants with their baggy, lung-like flowers, busy spewing out carbon dioxide to continue the cycle that had started here eons earlier.

"An incredibly old culture," his guide had said. "To have evolved plant life this far."

"No animals at all?" he asked.

"None. They've found a few insects, little mites, that live between the outer and second layer of bark on the red-top trees."

"Ah . . ."

"But there's a question about

those too. Seems the boys working on them in the labs have found traces of chlorophyll in them."

"You mean—"

"Plants too. Looking quite like insects. Mobile. Able to suck up nutriment from other plants and move about like animals."

The guide—an elderly naoli with a jewelry affectation: he wore a raw iris stone around his neck on a wood-bead necklace—had shown him more. The Quick Ferns, for instance. Cute little, frilly green things, lush and vibrant, swaying briskly under the slightest breath. They lined the forest floor, the shortest growth, a carpet beneath all else. As he watched, they grew, pushed up new plants, spread their feathery leaves—then grew brown, blackened, collapsed, gave off a puff of spores, and were gone. In a place where there was no animal feces, no animal decay, the vegetation had come to rely on its own death to give it life. For so much life—there was a wild, thick sprawl of growing things unlike anything he had ever seen before—a great deal of fertilizer was required. It was natural, then, that the Quick Ferns should develop with a total lifespan from spore germination to death of the plant and ejection of the next spore cycle—of fourteen minutes. At the end of each summer on Dala, there was five feet of thick, black organic material lying on the forest floor. By the following spring, it was decomposed, gone, and the Quick Ferns began their job again.

"No animals at all," he said to the guide, still amazed at the society of this primitive world.

"Not now," the guide replied.

"What's that?"

"I said, not now. There used to be."

"How do you know?"

"They've found the fossils," he said, fingering the stone hanging about his withered neck. "Thousands of them. Not any that might have been possessed by intelligent creatures. Primitive animals. Some small dinosaurs."

"What happened to them?" Hulann asked, fascinated.

The old naoli waved his arms around at the jungle. "The plants happened to them. That's what. The plants just developed a little faster. They think the animals were a slow lot. When the first ambulant plants arrived on the scene, they ate flesh."

Hulann shivered.

The forest seemed to close in on him, to grow from just a pleasant patch of trees to something malevolent and purposeful. He felt himself backing away toward their shuttlecraft, stopped himself and chided himself for his youthful superstition. "Yet now the plants are finally subservient to animals. To us."

"Wouldn't be so certain," the old man said. He pulled on the iris stone. The warmth of his gnarled hand made the black and green gem pulsate, the green iris growing larger and smaller with the changes in temperature.

"How so?"

"The plants are trying to adapt to us. Hunting a way to do us in."

Hulann shivered. "Now you're talking the kind of superstition I just got finished scolding myself for."

"It's not superstition. Couple of years ago, the first Concrete Vines showed up."

"They—"

"Yeah. Eat concrete. The wall of the central administration building fell in. Killed a hundred and some. Roof collapsed under the stress. Later, they found a funny thing. They found these vines, only as big around as the tip of your tail, honey-combing the wall. They had come in from the forest edge, growing underground until they reached the wall. Then they grew upwards until they had weakened it. Ate the insides out of that wall. After a few more cases like that, we started building with plastics and plastic metals." He laughed an ancient, dry cough of a laugh. "But I suppose we'll be seeing some Plastic Vines before long. The jungle has had time to work it out, I guess."

Hulann had gone back to the *Ta-gasa* with a brooding idea for a speculative-fiction work about what might happen on Dala when the plants finally launched a successful attack against the naoli colonists. The book had been a critical and financial success. Twenty-one million cartridges had been sold. Forty-six years after publication, the plants of Dala launched a successful revolt. . . .

He had been making notes into his recorder about his day with the guide when a messenger had come from the captain's quarters with a private note that he did not want sent over the Phasersystem. It was a simple request to come to meet a few humans who had come to Dala to argue various trade contracts and whom the captain had requested aboard.

Hulann, having seen only seven of the eleven races (some are quite

hermetic) and never having seen a human, was more than eager to comply with the request. Too, humans were the novelty of the many worlds, having only appeared in galactic society some twenty years earlier.

He had gone to the captain's quarters highly excited, unable to control the dilation of his primary nostrils, or the faint quivering of his interior eyelids. In the end, he had come away disappointed—and more than a little frightened.

The humans were cold, efficient men who seemed to have little time for pleasantries. Oh, they made all the gestures and did some customary small talk in broken naoli home-world tongue to prove their desire for cooperation. But the pleasantries ended there. They constantly steered the conversation back onto business topics whenever it strayed for more than a moment or two. They only smiled—never laughed. Perhaps it was this last quality which made them, in the final analysis, so terrifying. When those solid, phony grins were summoned to cover their faces, Hulann had wondered what lay behind the facade. It seemed something inestimably horrid and evil was hiding in the shells of their bodies.

At first, this difficulty was deemed natural. None of the other races had been easily understood. It had taken as much as fifty years to break down the cultural lines and begin meaningful communications and day-to-day relationships. The naoli expected it would take at least as long with the humans.

Fifty years came and went. The humans moved further into the

galaxy, spreading out, founding colonies on unclaimed worlds (only the naoli, the glimm, the sardonias, and the jacksters wanted to compete for oxynitrogen planets; the other races considered such places at least undesirable, and at worst intolerable). Their rate of expansion into the many-peopled stars was slow by some standards, but the humans explained that they had their own method of pioneering. It was a not-so-polite way of telling everyone else to mind their own business.

Fifty years came and went, and the humans that the naoli—and the other races—saw were still as withdrawn, cool, and unfriendly as ever. By the end of the second fifty years, various disputes arose between the naoli and the humans over trade routes and colony claims and half a hundred other things more petty. In not one case, could the races reach agreement. The humans began to settle many problems by force, the most expedient route—and the most illegal in the eyes of the naoli.

Eventually: the war.

It was not necessary to convince Hulann that the war was essential to the naoli's survival. He had always carried with him the memory of those humans on the *Tagasa*, the strange, smooth-skinned, hairy creatures with the brooding eyes and the quiet, solemn faces that argued for a shrewd and wicked mind within their skulls.

Long ago . . .

And this was the here and now. And Leo was beside him, sleeping, curled fetally. Why was the boy different? Why was the boy easy to reach? This was, as far as he knew, the first instance of inter-

communication between naoli and man in the hundred and eighty years of their acquaintance. It went against all that was known of humans. Yet here they were . . .

He abruptly broke his train of thought. It was leading him back through the events of the last two days, and he did not want to be plagued with those things again. Not yet.

He blinked his large eyes and looked carefully through the wet glass at the road and the landscape around it. If anything, it was snowing harder now than when they had left Boston. Long, almost impenetrable walls of snow swirled by on both sides while the craft knifed between them, kicked up an even whiter infreno behind as its own draughts stirred the fluff on the road surface. The markers at the edges of the throughway were drifted over here and there. Elsewhere, just their orange, phosphorescent caps peaked out. The direction signs suspended overhead were collecting a film of the hard-driven snow and were becoming increasingly difficult to read.

If the storm grew worse and the drifts covered the roadbed, they would founder. A shuttlecraft could cross snow—as long as it was light enough to blow out of the way and give the down-draught a clear blow-surface on the roadbed. Hard-packed drifts created an uneven surface, which invariably led to disaster.

Near Warren, in the human province of Pennsylvania, moving at a hundred and ninety miles an hour toward the province of Ohio, disaster stopped waiting and leapt at them . . .

Hulann was squinting through the snow, paying strict attention to the highway in order to keep his mind off things he would rather not ponder. It was this extra attentiveness that saved their lives. Had he been lax, he would not have seen the glow of the crater . . .

He made out a light, green flickering between the sheets of white that whirled by him. Then, through a parting in the curtain of the storm, a brilliant ripple of emerald fire shot out into the distance.

He braked, fought the wheel to keep the tilted blowers from carrying them toward the guard rails and into the fields beyond.

The blades whined, ground as if tearing through metal grit. The shuttle bumped, started a spin. They were going backwards now toward the shimmering green fire . . .

Then they were around, had swung a full circle . . .

He steadied them.

The speedometer read fifty miles an hour. The edge of the crater was only a few hundred yards away. He could see the great black depression, the sheets of energy shimmering and exploding across its vast length.

He pushed the brake into the floor, stomped and stomped it like a madman. The engine stalled. The blades clattered to a halt. He braced himself for the impact to come.

The rubber rim of the shuttlecraft sloughed into the ground as they dropped (now without an air cushion under them) onto the road. The craft bucked, leaped, came down hard again. Hulann was thrown forward, had the air knocked out of him as he struck the controls with his chest.

Then they were sliding. There was a jolt as the rubber cushion rim began to rip free. He saw a great snake of it spiral into the air and fall away behind them. The bare metal grazed the road, sent up sparks of yellow and blue.

The craft listed, then righted, turning sideways.

And then, they were still.

Hulann sat, his head bent over the wheel, taking in heavy loads of air which felt good in his lungs. It could have been the stalest, most polluted air in the galaxy, and yet it would have been a treasure to him. For, had they slid another fifteen feet, he would never have breathed again. That close, the rim of the crater gleamed with its jeweled flames . . .

"That was close," Leo said from his nook next to the far door.

Hulann sat up. "Very. Perhaps you don't know how close."

The boy leaned forward and stared out the window at the seemingly endless expanse of the crater. He watched it making its lights for a while, then asked, "What is it?"

"Come," Hulann said. "I'll show you."

They got out of the car and hunched against the power of the winter night. Winter morning, now. Leo followed the naoli to the edge of the depression, stood with him, staring across the nothingness.

"What did it? What exploded?"

"One of our weapons," Hulann said. "Although it was not quite what you would call an 'explosion'."

Leo stepped closer to the crater and cocked his head, pushed his long, blond hair away from his ears. "What's that noise?"

There was a faint hissing noise, now and then a grumble like the first stirrings of a volcano.

"That's part of it," Hulann said. "Like, it wasn't a bomb really. Not as you're thinking of a bomb. All along your Great Lakes, there was, at the start of the war, a vast complex of factories, robo-factories producing the vast quantities of materials needed to wage a galactic battle. Not only was ore mined from your own world, but brought from your moon, from the asteroid belts of your solar system. It was a formidable complex. The easiest way to wipe it out was to drop a few conversion canisters on it."

"I don't understand," Leo said. "We weren't told the Lake production centers had been hit."

"Only seven years ago. It was the final blow. Otherwise, the planet would have held us off incredibly long."

"You said—'conversion canisters'?"

The constant sheet of green fires that played across the crater from rim to rim, up and down, zigzagging, puffing like balls of burning gas, now flashed through with a faint streak of purple that caught their attention and held it for some minutes.

"Conversion canisters," Hulann continued, "contain one of the most virulent bacterial lifeforms in the known universe. The bacteria are capable of attacking certain forms of matter and converting them to energy. In the labs, various strains have been developed, some which will attack only fixed nitrogen, others which will convert only iron, others for calcium, lead, on and on,

for as many elements and types of elements as there are."

"The hissing—"

"Is the conversion of matter taking place. The variety of strains included in the canisters dropped here attack only the elements in your chief building supplies—and in the average sample of your topsoil for this area of the earth. The bacteria will convert everything in their path, convert it to a slowly leaked form of energy rather than explosions of the atomic sort, down until they hit bedrock which they are not equipped to devour, and onward until they reach water or some other 'indigestible' barrier."

"And the green light is the only result?" Leo asked, stepping back as the edge of the pit came almost imperceptibly closer.

"No. The green light energy is what we can see. Above your range of audio reception—even above mine—there is a great deal of sound energy generated. Also, there is an enormous amount of energy consumed by the bacteria themselves to enable them to continue their conversions and to reproduce at the rate the lab men set for them."

"And it'll go on until there's nothing left?"

"No. We don't want to destroy a world. Within a few days, a special naoli team will arrive to begin anti-bacterial work to halt the progress of the crater and destroy the mites."

"But the air will carry them," Leo protested.

"No. Such catastrophes have been guarded against. The bacteria are designed to anchor themselves to whatever elemental molecules they are bred to attack. Thus, a wind

would have to blow away the entire linkage of ferrous trace elements in an area to also spread the iron-eating bacteria. And if a bacterium cannot find, within moments, any of its particular 'tropic' substance to latch on to, it dies. There are all sorts of built-in protections."

"Why not a series of nuclears to wipe out the Lake complex?"

Hulann shook his head negatively. "Nuclears cannot damage well-shielded underground establishments. The bacteria can—by dissolving the earth that covers them, then converting the very structural materials of the installations."

They watched the pit, the shimmering, glimmering flames. Faint heat waves rolled over them and kept the snow melted around the perimeter of the hole. If they strained their ears, they could hear the sound of the energy of conversion being released far up the scale of vibrations.

"We didn't really have a chance against you," Leo said at last.

Green erupted, staining their faces . . .

"No," Hulann agreed.

Leo went back to the car. Hulann followed.

"Will it still fly?" Leo asked.

Hulann bent and inspected the bottom of the craft. There was almost nothing remaining of the heavy rubber cushion rim. The metal frame was bent and ripped, but not so severely that it would push in against the blades in the recessed undercarriage. If there still were any blades under there. He looked back along the snowy highway but could not see any large dark

objects that might be shafts or rotors.

"Let's see," he said.

The engine coughed, but turned over. They rose on the wind of the blades, though there was a steady vibration that gently rattled the frame. "Well, it runs," Hulann said. "But where do we go from here? The road ends, as you see."

"Over the medial," Leo said. "On back to the next exit. We'll just have to take secondary roads until we're past the crater and can get back on the good beater-surface of a throughway."

Hulann took the shuttlecraft over the concrete bump in the center of the highway, wheeled the craft around and started back, looking for a way off the useless expressway that would take them west where they wished to go . . .

The Hunter will soon be awakened.

The Hunter will rise up in his glory and take upon him the robes of his power.

The Hunter will seek.

Before, there has always been success.

The Hunter was born to hunt, as his prey was born to be brought down at his desire . . .

They made much poorer time on the secondary roads than they had on the highways where the beater surface was solid and flat. Here, the pavement had been originally designed for wheeled vehicles, which made it far too uneven and twisted to offer much to a shuttlecraft. Besides, they were moving into the mountains near the end of the

Pennsylvania line, where the weather, if anything, was more fierce than before.

The wind had picked up a few notches, battered the already-beaten craft until the shuddering of the wounded mechanical beast grew severe enough to shatter one of the two round ports on the rear, behind the luggage shelf. Glass imploded, spun throughout the cabin. A piece of it caught Leo on the cheek, drew blood. Other pieces stuck in Hulann's flesh but not deep enough to cause him pain or to make him bleed.

Hulann maintained a low blade-revolution count in order to hug the road and avoid the draughts that were much stronger even a few feet further up. The only problem with this strategy was that the secondary roads had not been designed for air-cushion vehicles, but for the wheeled variety. Sudden rises in the pavement gave them hair-raising moments as Hulann fought to go around them—or increase the rotor speed and go over them—to keep from sheering off the blades.

Then there was the snow. There seemed to be half a dozen inches of it now, and the steadiness with which it fell indicated no soon end to the storm. The biting wind—now whistling and howling through the shattered rear port and leeching out their cabin heat—piled the white stuff into every nook and crevice, stacked it against every outcropping of stone, layer on layer until it backed up across the highway, thick, cold fingers packing hard and making progress on air cushion even more difficult. Undrifted snow was light and flushed away under the

blades. But the wind-packed stuff was solid as ice, would not blow away, and gave Hulann trouble with his machine.

"How much can it snow here?" he asked Leo as they flitted up the side of a mountain which should have been tunneled through. He was amazed at the impracticality.

"Maybe a foot. Two feet is not unusual."

"Two feet!"

"Like you and me."

"That's impossible!"

"You don't have snow on your world?"

"Not that much!"

"Wait," the boy said, smiling.

He waited.

The snow continued. Mounted. Blew. Drifted. The shuttlecraft slowed and slowed until he could not drop their forward speed any further. It was maddening to realize that there were forces behind which would soon be after them and that they could only crawl along at under ten miles an hour. The only consolation Hulann could find was the realization that those chasing them would also have to move slowly. Then that consolation was ruined too. The Hunter—would the Hunter be turned loose on them? It seemed likely, although the situation would be unique—would wait until the storm had ended, then come by air, in a helicopter . . .

They rounded a bend in the road near the top of the mountain, were confronted by a wall of packed snow four feet high, stretching across from the rock bank on their right to the precipice on their left. Hulann braked, but not fast enough. The shuttlecraft bumped into the drift at

seven miles an hour and wedged the first few feet of itself into the smooth, wind-polished whiteness.

"Stuck," Leo said knowledgeably.

"We have nothing to dig with. I'll have to maneuver."

Leo braced himself, feet against the dash, back pressed into the seat. Hulann laughed. "Ready," Leo said.

Hulann fed power to the blades and kicked the side jets into reverse. The craft lurched but held fast. He eased down on the accelerator until it was almost floored. The blades chewed at the snow that packed the front section of them, seemed only to lodge themselves more firmly.

He eased off on the pedal until the blades whirred softly, then tramped it down hard. The shuttle started like an animal, wiggled. He eased up, slammed down again. The craft jolted free and swept backwards, sliding sideways toward the guardrails and the long, deadly embankment.

Hulann let up on the pedal, but too quickly as . . .

. . . the engine died and the blades choked and he no longer had control of his machine . . .

They struck the rails, tilted, went over.

The car hung there, caught on some projection, teetering. Then it fell.

Glass shattered.

And they were rolling down, down . . .

V

It was a hundred and five minutes before dawn of that day.

In the city that had once been called Atlanta when there were men

to make with names, one of the few human metropolises not destroyed by its owners in the last convulsions of their defeat, Sara Laramie moved through the iron castings in the foundry yard, keeping low so that she was at all times concealed from view on at least three sides. The Hunter Relemar was in pursuit of her, had been for some days. She did not know that he was called a Hunter by his kind or that his name was Relemar. It was obvious, however, that he was *different* from other naoli.

He moved quietly, stealthily, like a wraith. She had watched him prowl a street from a vantage point on the roof of a department store. At times, she had even lost sight of him, though there was damned little he could hide behind in an open avenue. She had been glad she was not down there, running. She saw, for the first time, why she had not been able to lose him before this. He was not a naoli. Not really.

He was something else. Something more.

A special breed of animal . . .

While she had been watching, he suddenly turned and scanned the rooftops along the street, as if some extra sense had warned him of her whereabouts. She had ducked behind the parapet, breathless, trembling. Her hands had begun to shake, and she felt a scream building up in her lungs that she could not allow into her throat.

Time passed.

She looked out.

Relemar the Hunter with the Fourth Division of the naoli occupation forces, was still there, standing in his dark clothes—the only naoli

she had ever seen dressed—and watched, listened, *felt* the darkened buildings for her presence . . .

Then he moved, crossing toward the department store.

Deep scream, lovely scream, wanting out . . .

At the last minute, he veered from his projected path and went into the building next door.

She breathed out, swallowed the scream, digested it. Then she had moved fast, down through the department store, into the street and away before he could return.

Now, in the foundry yard, she slipped from hulk to hulk until she reached the thousand-gallon storage tank in which she now made her home. She went to the end, pulled open the entry plate as gently as possible (it squeaked; Releamar the Hunter listened for squeaks), and went inside, depositing her burlap sack of food on the metal floor. She had found a rare little grocery that dealt in specialty foods still packaged—of all things!—in cans and bottles and jars. She was not partial to such exotic, weird items for her menu, but it was all she could find. With the destruction of the city generators, the dial-kitchens no longer functioned.

Behind her, farther back in the single room of the hollow tank, there was a scraping noise.

Rats, she thought. They found their way in through the entry plate which had no lock, of course—and which would have been sealed had the tank ever been completed. Rats did not bother her as much as they once would have. She would have run screaming only a year ago. Now she had learned how to beat them,

how to avoid their lunges. Not the mutated kind, of course. Just the friendly little Earth-normal breeds. She had not seen a mutated rat since shortly after the fall of the city, which was a grateful-making thing.

She bent and found the glowlamp next to the entrance, fumbled with it in the utter pitch.

The tank brightened to a warm yellow.

She turned to locate the rat, choked, and dropped the glowlamp. It fell to the floor, making shadows dance on the walls, was still, unbroken.

“Hello,” said Releamar the Hunter.

He walked slowly forward from the rear of the room.

He was smiling. Or trying to.

This time, she did not suppress the scream . . .

It was ninety-four minutes before dawn of that day.

David stood in the center of the book shop, looking around at the hundreds of cartridges. Now and then, he withdrew one from its rack and looked at the title and author. If he was intrigued, he would put the earpiece in his good right ear and touch the tab for a summation of the volume and a few critical comments. If it sounded good, he dropped it in the plastic bag he carried and went on, looking for something to balance what he had just selected. If he had just taken a cartridge of poetry, he made certain his next acquisition was a novel of sheer adventure. Then something in the nonfiction line. Then something humorous. Then a heavy novel.

He was delighted. Here was all

the art he wanted—for nothing. That had always been the problem with art before: it had cost. And he had not had enough to spend on it. No matter how much he earned, what he scrimped from other necessities, he could not buy all he wanted. Now the cartridges were free for the taking. Who was to stop him? Certainly not the owner. The naoli had finished him off long ago, had disposed of his corpse in a sanitary fashion. The naoli were quite fastidious.

When he had gathered all he needed—which was all that interested him—he slung the heavy bag over his shoulder and went into the street. He moved quickly to the alleys and the walkways between the building mazes which were ideal for secretive travel now that their lights did not burn and their police-monitor eyes did not see. He wound through the great city, breathing in the cold air, enjoying the specters of his frosted breath, until he arrived at the train yards.

Bluebolt stood on the side track where he had left her, long and shiny, as magnificent as ever. He stood in the yard, admiring her lines and speculating dreamily on the journey ahead. What better way to cross the continent? A luxurious form of travel he could never have afforded. *Bluebolt* was a private train—or had been before the war—and would have cost several million to construct.

He climbed up the stairs, palmed open the door into the engineer's cabin. The lights of the computer board winked softly blue and green. He took his books through into the second car, which was the living

room, deposited the bag of them beside a luxurious simulated-leather chair. Stacked other places in the room were the other provisions he would need.

He nodded with approval, smiled, and went back to the cabin, whistling. He slipped into the comfortable command chair before the thick plexiglass window and took a moment to enjoy the silent power of the great engine.

If the handiwork of man had all been as smooth and pure as the *Bluebolt*, Earth never would have fallen. For she would not have deserved to fall. He looked out the window again at the dark yard and the glimpses of the captured city that he could see. It all looked shabby and corrupt next to *Bluebolt*. It was the creation of Man the Capitalist.

Capitalism was fine. As long as man used it. But when the system had become so big that it guided the destiny of society rather than society regulating it, then capitalism had become dangerous. The interest of capitalism rampant had led to the serious air pollution crisis decades ago. It had led to the population crisis too (more babies meant more buyers). It had ground out plastic, imitation streets and cities like this one. In the early days of war, no attempt had been made to find out why the naoli wanted to fight, because a war used products and selling products was the name of the game. When it was obvious that the naoli were winning, there was too much hatred to start the talks that should have been initiated immediately. So the senseless war had been waged—and lost deservedly.

Bluebolt was a capitalist's toy, which proved the system could produce quality. But the man who had built this had been a rare bird indeed: in command of his money instead of a servant to it.

David swung the programming board around and looked at the typewriter keys, then punched out:

CALIFORNIA. SHORTEST ROUTE

The computer gurgled, buzzed, and chimed three times. It said: "Destination acknowledged. Route established. Proceeding on command."

He typed:

PROCEED.

Laboriously, the *Bluebolt* built speed, pulling out of the darkened yards, faster and faster, until it was barreling past the empty city, moving quietly on polished rails and its almost frictionless, rollamite-processed wheels. David fought an urge to pull the silver cord of the train whistle. He wished to make as unspectacular a departure as possible.

Eventually, he was torn between two desires. He wanted to watch the landscape flash by, wanted to see the dawn from his command chair. Yet he felt like having some time with a cartridge. At last, he went back and brought an adventure novel up front, plugged it in his ear. The sound and the visions came—the sound deep in his ear, the visions behind his eyeballs. Whenever he could no longer contain himself, he stopped the sound and the pictures and watched the *Bluebolt* gobble rails toward California and the Haven . . .

It was forty-nine minutes before dawn of that day.

*Soon, the Hunter would rise.
And dress in the hides of a
hunter.*

*And make his prayers and set
forth to do vengeance . . .*

VI

Hulann's overmind had to wait only a few moments for his organic brain to come to life. When he was fully alert once again, he was immediately conscious of the cold. For a naoli to feel such a sharp sensation of temperature, the situation had to be drastic.

As it was.

He had been flung free of the shuttlecraft, had slid along the snowy mountainside, scraping even his tough naoli hide raw in places. He had come to rest in a deep drift sloping into a row of seven, thick-boled pines. He was looking out of a depression in the drift now, up the well his body had made falling in. His body heat had melted the crystals, and the severe cold had refrozen them. He was coated in ice that kept melting and refreezing. The bitterness was worst on the torn patches where he would have bled if the blood had not been frozen solid.

Even a naoli could not survive for long in a situation such as this. He pushed up, stumbled erect, and wearily slapped and kicked his way free of the drift. He stood in the early morning air, half an hour before dawn, scanning the darkness for a sign of Leo or the shuttle.

He could see neither.

Indeed, much of what he could see was blurred by the great clouds of ghostly vapor spouting from his four nostrils, especially from the

lower, secondary set which, when operative, did the greatest amount of respiratory work. He was annoyed at this, yet he could not close the secondary nostrils without operating on a semidormant level. And he presently needed to move as fast and wisely as possible.

He looked up the side of the mountain, but he could not see the top. A combination of darkness and shifting snow kept his range of vision down to thirty feet. How far down the slope had they come, then? At what point had he been thrown free of the shuttlecraft? Had the car gone to the bottom of the mountain, or had it too come to a stop only part way down? Was Leo alive—or dead? Or dying?

He felt a rising panic at the last few questions his overactive overmind had presented for contemplation. If Leo were dead or dying, then what purpose was there? If Leo were dead or beyond Hurlann's help, then this entire flight, and the crime which had given it genesis, was without meaning. He might just as well turn himself in. The point was lost. The symbol had evaporated.

"Leo!" He called loudly, but his words were torn away by the wind, lost in the howling of the natural elements.

He turned and huddled against the wind, cupped his hands on either side of his mouth, shouted again. His hands withered the sound, only served to make the wind's final dissipation easier. Besides, if Leo were dead or unconscious, shouting would do no good whatsoever.

He stood, legs spread, drifted

snow up to his knobbed knees, and looked around at the wilderness, confused and frightened. In all his nearly three hundred years, he had never found himself in remotely as dire a situation. The most dangerous moments of his life had been no more horrifying than those with the mutant rat in the cellar only days earlier. This was something else again. He was in a strange landscape, trapped without transportation other than his own feet during a furious spell of weather unlike anything he had ever encountered on the naoli home worlds. Somewhere, there was a boy, perhaps wounded seriously, whom he had to reach. And even if they did get out of this, onto the road again, there was nowhere to go. They had no friends.

The wind blew about him, whipped the snow hard against his scales, leaving it packed on him in some places. As he stood, huge green eyes picking up what little illumination there was, he seemed more of a statue, sculpted by a madman, than anything truly alive and functioning. An alien in an alien world, it seemed almost as if he generated the wind with his very presence, caused the snow to fall by merely standing and watching the darkness . . .

At last, he moved tentatively to his right, which somehow seemed the proper direction—though there were no signs by which he could intelligently judge. He knew that the car would surely have left a trail as it careened down the mountainside, and he hoped to cross over this eventually, then turn and follow it until he discovered the shuttle or whatever remained of it after its jolting descent.

The wind pounded him as he moved directly into it, buffeted like padded hammers. He could only progress when bent, making himself into a battering ram to crash through the eternal succession of the wind's doors. White breath gusted around him, swirled into the darkness.

He pushed to the last of this clump of pines, brushing a low, snow-laden limb out of his way. The vibrations of his rude passage swept upward through the tiers of the pine, causing a heavy deluge of snow that almost drove him to his knees.

A hundred yards later, he began to worry about his choice of direction. As yet, he had come across no signs of the shuttlecraft, only the smooth-blown skin of the storm. Surely he could not have been thrown this far! He decided to make another twenty agonizing steps before turning back to explore the other direction. On the seventeenth step, he came to the edge of the ravine . . .

He almost stepped into the gulf. As he put a foot down, he realized the front of it curled over a break in the terrain. Cautiously, he pulled it back and went to his knees, peered into the fuzzy mask of the storm. As he concentrated, he began to make out the lines of a cut in the mountainside. He could not see the other side of it, but it was easily a few hundreds yards long, since he could not make out a point of origin or termination on either side.

It was also deep. Very. It ended in a tumble of broken, jagged rocks that peeped up here and there, even through their white blanket. If the

shuttle had gone into that, then Leo was dead. There was no sense in descending to look for him.

Hulann stood and retraced his steps. During the last hundred feet or so, the wind had obscured his tracks, and he was forced to rely on what little he had noticed about the landscape on his way out. Still, using pines for markers, he got lost twice, spent several minutes stumbling drunkenly both times. He found the drift where he had awakened, for his fall had disturbed it too badly for the wind to heal it in minutes. Here, he hunkered for a moment against the trunk of a pine, trying to recover his breath, energy, and a little of the body heat he had lost.

He picked at the layer of ice that crusted him everywhere but at his joints, then stopped, deciding that the ice would offer his flesh some protection from the wind. He did not want to think about the warmth the ice itself sucked from his system.

After only three minutes of rest, he stood, stretched, and set out over the unexplored region to his left. At first, the wind was an asset, at his back now. It seemed to buoy him along, to make his treading lighter. Soon, the illusion disappeared. The wind became a great fist shoving, slamming against his rear. It sent him stumbling sideways, threw him to the earth and bulletted over him. He kept his long head tucked as much between his shoulders as he could, but the icy blasts against the back of his skull could not be ignored.

But he found the track of the shuttlecraft ripped through the virgin mantle of the winter storm. The

snow had begun to fill it in, and the drifting wind had made fast work, narrowing it considerably from what it must have been in the first moments after the car passed. Hulann looked up the trail toward the top of the mountain, wondering if Leo had been thrown free further back. He tried to recall the long, falling moments after they had crashed through the rails, but it was all a blurr, even to his usually observant overmind. He would have to hope that the boy had remained in the craft. Stepping into the trail, he started down to find whatever there was to find . . .

At times, the way became so steep that he was afraid of stumbling, falling, losing control and sliding as the car had slid. In these places, he went to his hands and knees, crawling from one sprout of vegetation to another, from one jutting rock outcrop to the next. Here, the car had often left the ground, then smashed back to continue sliding.

Hulann found a few twisted pieces of it.

He held on to a few of them as he crawled forward, until he realized there was no purpose in that. He threw them away to free his hands again.

The cold air burned into his lungs. His chest had begun to ache strangely, and spasms of sharper pain more frequently lashed through his entire torso with a fierceness that forced him to stop and grit his needle teeth into his lips, drawing blood. It was some time before he understood that his tender lung tissues were being frozen by the winter air. The soft, wet internal flesh would harden and crack under this

sort of punishment. He would have to take smaller breaths, slower breaths, so that they had more of a chance to warm on their way to his lungs. He could not get by on his primary nostrils, though he might be able to manage on the larger secondary set. He allowed the muscles of the primary pair to force down the blockage flap further back in his sinuses.

There was a mysterious grayness in the air. Dawn was coming, and even reaching small fingers through the clouds and the snow, through the pine needles to the floor of the earth where he so desperately needed it. Then, in the slightly increased light, he saw the fractured hulk of the shuttlecraft ahead . . .

It was wedged between two columns of rock which thrust out of the mountainside like markers for some sacred portal. At first, he thought they were artificial, but discovered they were natural—albeit odd—formations. The craft was on its side between the rocks, crushed by a third, battered beyond recognition. From this vantage point, looking partly in on the bottom of it, Hulann could see that both rotors were gone, that all of the drive mechanisms had been torn free. He had not expected it to be operative, of course. Yet its final, total death was somehow depressing.

Giving way to the slope, he slid and stumbled to the vehicle, came up hard against the back of it. He gripped it, breathing hard through his secondary nostrils. When he felt steady again, he looked the car over, cataloguing the dents and scrapes, then found a way up its side and along it until he came to the driver's

door. The other door was pressed flat to the earth on the other side.

He could see nothing inside, for the passenger compartment was in total darkness.

"Leo!"

There was no answer.

"Leo!"

Silence.

He wrenched at the door, frantic. The guilt that had begun to lose its edge in him now flowered larger than ever. If the boy were dead, then he had killed the boy. Surely. Yes. Because he had been driving; because he had not been careful; because he was a naoli, and naoli had set up the conditions which had made their flight necessary in the first place.

But the door held, jammed, locked by bent and intermingled parts. It rattled slightly in its mounts, nothing more.

He fought it until he was exhausted. Then he called the boy's name some more. Though the boy did not answer.

He tried listening for the sound of breathing from within, but he was defeated by the breath of the storm, which was greater, louder, more dynamic.

When more work at the door would not help, he leaned back and inspected the shuttlecraft for a breach that might give him entrance. He saw, then, that the wraparound windscreen had been shattered. There were only a few splinters of glass sticking in the edges of the frame. He broke these out with the flat of his palm, then braced against the rocks and the hood, worked himself inside the car.

Leo had crawled—or had been

tossed—into the luggage space behind the seats. It had been, in the plummeting, disintegrating car, the safest place to be. Hulann lifted his own suitcase off the boy's legs, rolled him over onto his back.

"Leo," he said softly. Then louder. Then he shouted it, slapping the small face.

The boy's face was very white. His lips seemed slightly blue. Hulann used the sensitive patches of his fingertips to test for skin temperature, found it dismayingly low for a human. He remembered then how little tolerance these people had to changes of temperature. Two hours exposed like this could do great damage to one of their frail systems.

He rummaged through his suitcase, brought out the powerful personal heat unit and thumbed the controls on the smooth, gray object that looked like nothing so much as a water-washed stone. Immediately, there was a burst of warmth that even he appreciated. He placed the device next to the boy and waited.

In a few minutes, the snow that had blown in melted and ran away, down the slanting floor to collect in the corners. The blueness left the boy's face; Hulann deemed it proper to inject a stimulant now. From the sparse medicinals in the case, he filled a hypo with serum and slid the needle into the visible vein in the boy's wrist, being careful to do as little damage as possible with the naoli-broad point.

Eventually, Leo stirred, kicking as if in a nightmare. Hulann quieted him by stroking his forehead. Ten minutes after these first signs, he opened his bloodshot eyes.

"Hello," he said to Hulann.
"Cold."

"It's getting warmer."

The boy moved closer to the heat unit.

"Are you all right?"

"Cold."

"Aside from that. Broken bones? Cuts?"

"I don't think so."

Hulann leaned against the back of the passenger's seat as he sat on what should have been the wall of the car. He breathed a sigh, realized that his primary nostrils were still closed, and opened them. The warm air was good inside his chest.

In time, Leo sat up, held his head in his hands.

"We have to get out of here soon," Hulann said. "They'll be after us soon. We can't waste any time. Also, the heat source is going to give out if we have to keep it on full power. We'll have to find some place to shelter and regain our strength and perspective."

"Where?"

"Up the mountain. There's no sense in going down. We don't know if there's anything down there. But there's a road at the top. If we get back on that, follow the guardrails, we should come to a building sooner or later."

Leo shook his head with doubt.

"How far up?"

"Not far," Hulann lied.

"I'm still cold. And tired. And hungry too."

"We'll use the heat unit," Hulann said. "We'll have just a little to eat before we go out. You'll just have to fight the weariness. We must make time. The Hunter will surely be sent out soon."

"Hunter?"

"One of my kind. Yet not of my kind. He hunts."

Leo saw the terror in Hulann's eyes and stopped arguing. Maybe there were two kinds of naoli. The kind men had fought—and Hulann's kind. Hulann was friendly. The other kind hunted. Maybe that explained the war. Yet Hulann had given him the impression that there was one Hunter—no more than a few. So that did not explain the war. That was still a mystery.

Hulann withdrew some doughy material which he compared with wheat bread—though Leo thought the taste altogether different, and inferior. He did not say so. The naoli seemed proud of the quality of the food he had been able to bring and considered these things minor naoli delicacies. To argue otherwise would only be to insult him.

They also had the eggs of certain fishes suspended in a sour honey-gel. This Leo thought was indeed something special and would have eaten much more if Hulann had not pointed out the danger of requiring too much heat for digestion and thereby forfeiting that needed to keep from freezing to death. Also, it might be wise to begin rationing.

When they finished and were as warm as they could get, Hulann closed the case, shoved it through the window. It slid down the hood, caught in among the rocks of the column on that side. He went out next, back into the maelstrom, and pulled Leo through the broken windscreen. They scrambled down until they were on the ground. Hulann fetched the case. He had Leo hold the heat unit, though the boy

protested that Hulann was the naked one. He promised he would take turns with the unit now and then, and would stay within a few feet of the boy in order to benefit by what it broadcast.

They turned and faced up the slope. Though daylight was now upon the land, visibility had not increased much. He could see an extra thirty feet, no more. The sky was low and threatened to stay that way for many hours to come. Hulann was thankful. At least, in the gloom and the walls of dancing flakes, Leo would not be able to see how far the top of the mountain really was . . .

"I'll break a way," he said to Leo. "Stay close, in my steps. Crawl when I crawl, walk when I walk. Okay?"

"I can take orders," the boy said haughtily.

Hulann laughed, slapped him on the shoulder, then turned and took the first step of the trek back to the highway . . .

. . . and simultaneously heard the first word of the Phasersystem alert . . .

Banalog stiffened in his chair when he heard the beginning of the Phasersystem alarm. The last traces of the sweet-drugs had left him an hour earlier, though he had decided to wait as long as possible before giving the alarm that would wake the Hunter and send him stalking Hulann and the boy. At first, he thought this alert had nothing to do with Hulann. It was being given by a woman named Fiala, an archaeologist and moderately well-known essayist in certain technical circles. When he ascertained, after the first

few words, that she too was now tied and gagged by Hulann, he waited no longer. He added his voice to hers—rather, his *Phasersystem* voice to hers.

Moments after they had finished, there were naoli in his office to untie him, to take the gag from his mouth. One of them was a military officer named Zenolan, an extremely large person, a foot taller than Banalog, a super lizard with a head half again as large as a head should be. He took the empty hypo with the traces of sweet-drugs in it from the hands of one of the other naoli.

"Sweet-drugs?" he asked Banalog unnecessarily.

"Yes."

"When?"

"Last evening," Banalog lied.

"Why was he here?"

"A session under the machines."

Zenolan looked at the equipment hanging in the recessed section of the office ceiling. "A session? At night?"

"Early evening," Banalog said. "And it was because he had forgotten his appointment for this afternoon. Or so he said. I contacted him to get him in after hours. He was reluctant even then. Tried to make excuses. I wouldn't have any of it." He looked at Zenolan to see what effect the story was having.

The big man seemed to believe it. "Go on," he said.

"Then, when he was here, he tried to outwit the machines. Which is impossible, of course."

"Of course."

"When I found his secret, that he was harboring a boy—well, he overpowered me, smashed my head against the floor, knocked me out be-

fore I thought to use my Phaser contact. When I woke, he had me tied and drugged."

"You're sure it was not any earlier than last evening?"

Banalog looked perplexed. "If it had been, the sweet-drugs would have worn off. I would have contacted you sooner."

"That's what I mean."

"Are you suggesting—"

"No," Zenolan said, shaking his huge head. "Forget it. I'm just upset."

Banalog snorted to show his contempt. He knew better than to get too irate. Too much anger would make them suspect he really did have something to cover. He was pondering his next move when his deskphone buzzed. He wondered what private message he was receiving that could not be sent over the Phasersystem. He picked up the receiver and said hello.

"You will come to see me in ten minutes," the smooth, cold voice on the other end said. "I will want your full story."

It was the Hunter Docanil . . .

The Hunter Releamar stepped out of the thousand-gallon storage tank in the foundry yards in the place that had been Atlanta. He opened his Phasersystem contact and informed the military officials who gave him his missions (and, incidentally, everyone else linked to the Atlanta-area system and the Fourth Division system) that he had achieved the completion of his assignment. Then he broke contact.

He did not look back at what had been Sara Laramie.

He stuffed his clawed hands into

the pockets of his greatcoat and walked across the yards toward the exit gate.

There was only a slight chill in the air, yet he could not go without clothes as other naoli could.

He was a Hunter.

He was different.

Very . . .

Elsewhere at that time:

Fiala finished the necessary tape-forms for application for director of her archaeological team. The job that should have been hers in the first place. There was no problem now. She could not help but get it. Hulann had cracked without her help. She felt terribly pleased with things.

David watched the dawn from the viewglass of the engineer's room in front of the plummeting *Bluebolt* as it streaked down a two-mile incline toward a flat plain where speed could be safely raised. It was one of the nicest dawns he had seen in some time. When it was over and day had insinuated itself on the world, he planned to go back to the sleeping car and—sleep.

The body of the dead naoli guard who had fallen under Hulann's shuttlecraft was anointed with sweet-drugs, wrapped in a purple shroud, and burned . . .

The edges of the conversion-canister crater near the Great Lakes continued to crawl forward, hissing and spitting green light . . .

VII

Attention: was the first word of the Phasersystem alert. It struck Hu-

lann with the force of a pile driver, mentally and emotionally, not physically. He stood very still, receiving the alert until there was nothing more to be heard except official messages and directions which could do him little or no good now.

"What is it?" the boy asked.

"They have discovered my absence and know its reason."

"How?"

"They found the traumatist I tied and gagged. And the woman from whom I stole the shuttle."

"But how do you know this?"

"The Phasersystem?"

Leo looked perplexed, screwed his face up until his eyes and mouth seemed to be sucked in towards his nose. "What's that?"

"You—you haven't such a thing. We do. A means of talking together without talking. For intercommunication."

"Mind reading?"

"Sort of. Only it's all mechanical. A little thing they implant in your skull when you've just grown big enough to come out of the brood hole."

"Brood hole?"

"Every house has a brood hole near its warren where—" Hulann paused, blinked his big eyes. "Forget it. For now, anyway. It just gets more complicated to explain."

Leo shrugged. "You want the heat?"

"You keep it a while. We have to get moving."

Before he could start, a second interruption drew his attention. There was a loud crash from somewhere near at hand, the sound of metal striking metal, and the hollow ring of an echo.

"What's that?" he asked the boy.

"It came from over there." He gestured to their left.

The noise came a second time. Not as loud, but definitely metal against metal. Big pieces of metal, too.

Hulann forced down his terrors. The Hunter could not have come this far in only moments. He would not have received the alert any sooner than Hulann had. They still had many hours of grace. He turned and walked in the direction of the clanging noise, Leo close behind.

They had not gone forty feet before the faint outlines of the pylons began to be visible through the snow. And the swinging, squarish bulk of the car. "An aerial cableway," he said as much to himself as to Leo. He was astonished. He had heard of the things, had heard that Earthmen had built them in places where they considered elevators impractical. But to see one . . .

"It must go somewhere," Leo said. "Perhaps there is a town above. That would give us shelter."

"Perhaps," Hulann said distantly as he watched the yellow cablecar swinging in the wind. If he drew his lids down, it seemed as if the car were a great, yellow bee dancing above the storm.

"You said we should hurry."

Hulann looked at the boy, then back to the swaying yellow car dangling from the nearly invisible filament of the aerial cable. "Perhaps we could ride up," he said. "It would save us walking."

"We'd have to go to the bottom to get on the thing," Leo said. "It would be easier to go up."

The wind seemed to increase in

fury. Snow whipped them like buckshot pellets, exploding by, whining through the trees, gone.

Hulann watched the car. "It's further up the mountain than I led you to believe."

"You lied?"

"Something like that."

Leo grinned. "Or are you lying now—so you can get to ride the cableway?" When Hulann made the sign of naoli shame, the boy pushed by him and trudged off toward the nearest pylon. "Come on, then. It might not work any more, but you won't be satisfied until we find out."

A few moments later, they drew up next to the ice-crusting pylon, looked up at the bobbling yellow bee that waited overhead. They involuntarily ducked as it slammed into the pylon again. The sound of crashing metal echoed painfully in their ears.

"There," Leo said, pointing down the mountainside. "We don't have to go clear to the bottom after all."

Two hundred yards down, there was a boarding station on the middle of the mountain. Stairs wound around a pylon, then jutted out near the top on a support beam, stopped at a platform which served as a boarding and debarking station. It was all quite ghostly, seen through the waves of snow, like the ruined tower of a long-dead civilization.

Leo was forty feet away, kicking up clouds of white as he stomped down the steep slope, huddled against the wind, cradling the heat source against his chest. Hulann shook off his reverie and followed. At the base of the stairs up to the platform, Leo was waiting, staring

up the steel rungs, licking his lips, squinting as if wrestling with a difficult problem.

"Ice," he said to Hulann.

"What?"

"Ice on the stairs. No maintenance since the war. It's not going to be easy to climb up there."

"There's only thirty steps."

The boy laughed. "I wasn't suggesting we give up. Come on." He grabbed the single handrailing and started climbing.

Before they were even halfway up, Leo slipped twice, banging his knees on the icy steel, and fell backwards once. If Hulann had not been close behind to stop him, the boy would have rolled to the bottom, banging his head on riser after riser, scrabbling uselessly at the purchaseless ice. When they realized that the reason Hulann was having no trouble was because his hard toe claws shredded the ice under him, the alien went first, making the glossy stuff into runneled treads which the boy could manage.

At the top, they found the controls were frozen solid, jammed with drifted snow. They used the smooth gray heat source to melt this, freeing the levers. They studied the board until they were relatively certain of what they were doing; then Hulann depressed what appeared to be the proper device. There was a grumbling somewhat louder than the storm, a deep, angry sound like gods are said to make. Slowly, it grew louder. Louder still. Until it was the sustained cough of an avalanche bearing down on them.

Then the yellow bee car rolled into view, and they saw the source of the artificial thunder: the cables

were sheathed in ice from disuse, and the advancing car was cracking this away as it pressed toward its summoners. Long, translucent chunks fell down toward the white earth. The bee pulled up next to the boarding platform, stopped slightly beyond it, swaying in the wind, the door only half aligned with the platform.

They were forced to chip at the ice sealing the seam of the sliding portal. When that broke away, they opened the cablecar, jumped from the platform into the shiny interior. Hulann was fascinated with the dozen passenger seats, all bright black plastileather studded with chrome—though surely the interior of a naoli spacecraft was quite a deal more spectacular than this simple cabin.

Leo called from the far end of the cabin—fifteen feet away. He was standing by a console, much like the one on the platform outside. Hulann went to him, looked down.

"We're in luck," the boy said, pointing to the topmost toggle on the board. Beside the toggle was a label telling where the cab would take you if you chose to flip this one. **THE FREGCH ALPINE**, it announced.

"What's that?"

"A hotel," Leo said. "I've heard of it. I didn't know we were close to it, though. It'll be a good place to rest."

Hulann reached forward and set the toggle.

The bee jolted and began humming as it moved back the cable toward the top of the mountain.

They looked through the window in front of them, holding onto the safety bar that ran around all sides

of the cabin, except where there were seats. The snow was spat at them, coursed around them as they moved into the heart of it, gaining speed. It was very strange to be plummeting *up*, to be speedballing without the touch of wind. Hulann held tight to the safety bar, inspecting the magnificent view, seeing:

—the gray snake of the cable stretching into the snow haze;

—the rimed land stretching to all sides, losing its contour under the coverlet of winter, losing character and sex, like a sleeping giant concealed by cotton;

—the great dark pines that bristled like whiskers out of the cold foam;

—an onrushing pylon, steel arms spread to receive them, then jolting past them, making them sway so all these other things danced delightfully beneath them;

—a flock of dark birds, moving by the mountain, flying level with them, knifing the storm with soft feathers;

—his and Leo's breath fogging the glass so that the boy had to reach out a hand and clear the port

...

Hulann's tail snapped, then wound around his left thigh, tight.

"What's the matter?" the boy asked.

"Nothing."

"You look upset."

Hulann grimaced, his reptilian features taking on a pained look. "We're awfully high," he said in a thin voice.

"High? But it's only a hundred feet down!"

Hulann looked mournfully at the

cable sliding past above them. "A hundred feet is enough if that should break."

"You've been in a shuttlecraft without even a cable."

"The highest they go is fifteen feet."

"Your starships, then. You can't get any higher than that."

"And you can't fall, either. There's no gravity out there."

Leo was laughing now, bending over the waist-high safety bar and giggling deep down in his throat. When he looked up again, his small face was red, and his eyes were watery. "This is something else!" he said. "You're afraid of heights. Naoli aren't supposed to be afraid of anything. Do you know that? Naoli are vicious fighters, hard, ruthless opponents. Nowhere does it say they are permitted to fear anything."

"Well—" Hulann said weakly.

"We're almost there," Leo said. "Just steel yourself for another minute or two, and it'll all be over."

Indeed, the bulk of the receiving station loomed out of the storm ahead. It was a gaily painted Swiss-styled header with a scalloped shelter roof over the entrance trough and large windows divided into dozens of small panes by crisscrossing spines of polished pine. As they glided up the cable, it seemed as if the header was moving to meet them, as if they were the stationary object.

A dozen feet from the header station, the yellow bee jolted, leaped up and down on its connections, bouncing the two occupants severely. There was a crunching sound, much like that the ice had been making on the last few hundred feet of unbro-

ken trail—though this noise was nastier and somehow frightening. The car seemed to stop, then lurch ahead. Then, very definitely, it slipped back. There was a second jolt, worse than the first, which knocked Hulann's feet out from under him and made him fall in against the wall and the safety bar to which he still clung.

"What is it?" he asked the boy.

"I don't know."

The car tried to move ahead toward the looming header station, thumped again, slipped back, began swaying wildly. It was a combination of Ferris wheel, roller coaster, out-of-control shuttlecraft, a dizzying, horrifying explosion of movement, sound and swirling light. Hulann felt his second stomach reject its refined contents, tasted the product of his first stomach in his throat. It required all the effort he could muster to avoid vomiting.

Leo lost his hold on the safety bar, went rolling across the front of the cabin, slammed hard against the far wall. Hulann thought he heard the boy squeal in pain, but the rattling of the bee and the singing of the tortured cable drowned it out.

The car moved forward again, leaped again, was tossed backwards a few feet on the cable.

The cabin swung like a pendulum. Leo rolled away, arms and legs akimbo, came up sharply against the edge of the guidance console, only a few feet from Hulann.

The alien could see the bright blood trickling from the broken corner of the boy's mouth. Leo reached for something which might afford him a handhold, scrabbled gloved

fingers over smooth, cold metal. The car swung violently, ripping him back across the bottom of the see.

The arcs of the pendulum were high and distant now, the swings so long and wild that they made Hulann feel giddy like a child on an amusement ride. But he was not amused.

Leo pulled himself into a tight ball to protect his more vulnerable regions, rebounded from the far wall without much damage, bounced back, and came up against the housing of the guidance system again. There was a bruise along his left jaw, already brown-blue and surely growing darker.

Hulann held to the safety railing with one hand, reached out and clutched the boy's coat with the other, slid his six claws into the layers of fabric to hook it securely. The cabin tilted again, but Leo did not go rolling back. Painstakingly, Hulann began to use his great but not well-cared-for muscles to reel the boy in. When he had brought him against his own heaving chest, he pulled himself erect with one hand, then drew Leo up with the claws that were hooked in the boy's clothing. Leo seized the rail once more, held it so tightly that his knuckles were bleached white.

"We have to stop it!" he shouted to Hulann. His small face was lined like the weathered visage of an old man. "It'll jump the cable any minute now!"

Hulann nodded. They were facing the window again, and he could not take his eyes off the view, like a man hypnotized by the wild lion stalking him. The Swiss header station whirled dizzyingly back and

forth. Again, it seemed as if it were the building that moved while the bright cablecar remained still. Yet, if that were the case, then the pines below were also moving, performing an eerie ritual dance. And the sky was coming closer, then receding, the great masses of blue-gray clouds scudding forward, then reversing their direction.

"Shut it off!" Leo insisted. He was afraid to let go with either of his small hands, for he knew he would be torn free, sent stumbling, crashing across the room again.

Hulann reached out to the console.

The car moved forward, jolted against whatever was halting it, reeled backwards, setting up an even more tortuous arc.

He shut down the systems. The car ceased to challenge the obstruction, settled to a halt on the cable. Gradually, the swaying began to settle until it was no more severe than it had been before the trouble started. The wind kidded it into a gentle rocking, nothing more.

"What now?" Hulann asked, obviously quite shaken.

Leo released the safety rail, looked at it as if he expected it to be bent where he had grasped it. He flexed his hands, trying to take the numbness out of them. "There's something wrong with the cable. We'll have to see what."

"How?"

Leo examined the ceiling. "There's the access door."

Halfway back in the room, against the right wall, rungs led up to a trap door in the ceiling.

"You'll have to be the one," Leo said. "I'd get blown away out there."

Hulann shook his long head in agreement. His tail was still wrapped tightly around his thigh.

VIII

Banalog sat stiffly in the heavy green chair in the dimly lighted chambers of the Hunter Docanil. If he had been a scientist of any lesser form of knowledge, he would not have been able to withstand the probing interrogation of the Hunter. He would have made an error in detail, would have betrayed himself with a stutter or a flicker of fear across his wide features. But a traumatist was a man with total knowledge of the mind, its physical functions and the more refined thought processes of the overmind. He knew how to control his own emotions to a degree that no other naoli—aside from a Hunter—could manage. He repressed his fear, sheltered his deceit, and amplified a projected image of sincerity, honesty, and professional concern. He thought Docanil was fooled. He could not be certain, of course; no one could ever really know what a Hunter thought. But it did *seem* as if he were pulling this off quite well.

Docanil stood next to the room's only window. The heavy, amber velvet drapes had been tied back with thick cord. Outside, the early morning light was weak. The snow continued. Docanil seemed to be looking beyond the snow, beyond the ruins, into some pocket universe only he had the vision to penetrate.

Banalog watched the other creature with barely concealed interest. He was fascinated by every detail of a Hunter, always had been. This

was a professional concern that was not faked. He longed to take a Hunter under analysis, longed to work deep into one of their minds to find out what went on in there. But a Hunter would never need a traumatist's care and counseling. They were totally in control of themselves at all times. Or so the legend said . . .

Docanil was dressed in snug blue slacks that were tucked into black boots. A sweater-like garment cloaked his torso, came up high on his long, thick neck. The blue of these was almost dark enough to be called black. Around his waist was a stretch belt with dull, silver buckle and over the buckle the insignia of his trade: the reaching hand, claws extended to capture the enemy, the circle of wicked-looking nails enclosing this. Tossed across another chair was his greatcoat, a heavy, fuzzy thing that looked like it was made of fur-lined velvet. This was black. On the shoulders there were black leather decorative straps. A black leather belt around the middle. There were buttons instead of a pressure seal, and they were as large around as a naoli eye, stamped from heavy black metal, each with the reaching claw and the ring of nails.

Banalog shuddered.

He knew that Hunters wore clothes for a practical reason: as Hunters, destined to their trade even before birth, they were in all ways more sensitive to external stimuli than other naoli. Their body temperature could not easily adjust to changes in the atmosphere as could those of normal naoli. In intense summer heat, they were forced to remain in shadows as much as

possible and to drink great quantities of fluids to replace those lost by their bodies. In bitter winter cold, they needed protection against the elements just as humans did.

Yet, there was something sinister in their clothes. Not just in the fact that they wore them—but in the type of garments they chose. Or was this just a childish fear of the unknown? Banalog thought not. He could not pinpoint what, exactly, disturbed him about the sort of uniform the Hunters had adopted, but his uneasiness persisted.

Docanil turned away from the window, looked across the gloomy chamber to the traumatist. Hunters did not seem to need much light to see well . . .

“What you have told me is of little value,” he said. His voice was haunting, a deep, whispered hiss of a voice that somehow managed to carry as well as Banalog’s own.

“I have tried to—”

“You have told me about the guilt. About the sort of trauma growing more common which has caused Hulann to act as he has. I understand what you say—though I do not understand the trauma. But I must have more information, more theories about how this individual will act now that he is on the run. I cannot go by normal standards.”

“You haven’t tracked naoli before?” Banalog asked.

“It is rare, as you know. Once before. But he was a common criminal, similar in his reaction patterns to our enemies. He was not, however, a traitor. I cannot understand Hulann.”

“I don’t know what else I can say.”

Docanil crossed the room.

His boots made soft ticking sounds on the floor.

He stopped by Banalog’s chair, looked down from his great height, his hideously high cranium picking up bits of the glowlamps. He looked down, smiling the most frightening smile Banalog had ever seen. Beneath his blue-black sweater, his heavy, abnormal muscles bulged and rippled as if they were alive.

“You will help me further,” he hissed to Banalog.

“How? I have told you—”

“You will accompany me in the chase. You will give me your advice. You will try to analyze Hulann from what he does and try to project his next move.”

“I do not see how I—”

“I will use the Phasersystem in an attempt to get his general location. That should succeed. Whether it does or not, we will then begin. Be ready in an hour.”

The Hunter turned away, started for the door into the other room of his quarters.

“But—”

“An hour,” he said as he passed through the portal and closed it behind him, leaving Banalog alone.

The tone of his voice permitted no argument . . .

On the northernmost petal of the daisy-shaped continent of the home world of the naoli system, next to a pincer-formed cove where the green sea beat softly insistent, stood the House of Jonovel, a respected and ancient establishment. Deep within the rock-walled, hand-hewn cellars of the venerable mansion was the family’s brood hole in which the

most recent Jonovel children rested and grew. There were six of them—blind and deaf and mostly dumb as well—snuggled in the warm, wet richness of the brood hole mothermud. Each was no larger than a human thumb, looked more like a small fish than a naoli. There were no visible legs, though the tail had already formed and would remain. The arms were little more than filaments. The tiny heads were buds that could be crushed between thumb and forefinger with little effort. They lay in their individual wombwads, the slimy white semi-living discharges that had carried them out of their mother after the first stage of their development had been achieved. Fine amber-red ganglia connected them to the wads. Traceries of darker wine-hued blood vessels fed them fluid and took away their wastes. The wads pulsed around their charges, regulating all the delicate processes of life. In two months' time, the wombwads would no longer be needed. The Jonovel children would squirm loose of them. The wads, deprived of their patients, would die. The rich mothermud of the hole would then begin to break them down and absorb their protein-laden tissues to maintain a healthy mixture for future births. The children, moving now, no longer blind nor deaf—and totally free to speak their nonsense words—would feed upon the cultures of fungus ringing the walls, sucking for their own life upon the mothermud. The children, at the end of six months, would be brought forth. The Phasersystem contact would be surgically implanted. Education, then, would be rapid, fed

right into their overminds without need for vocal instruction.

Retawan Jonovel stood above the brood hole, looking down from the entrance foyer onto the mothermud and his six offspring. They were his first brood in fifty-one years. And, damnit, there should have been nine of them!

Nine. Not six!

But Hunters had to come from somewhere . . .

Shortly after his mate and Retawan had come forth from sixteen days in the warren, the central committee had authorized the Hunters' Guild to treat three of the barely fertilized fetuses and to withdraw them from the woman's womb for development in the artificial wombs beneath the Hunters' Monastery.

He should have expected it sooner or later. The Jonovel's were ancient, pure stock, just the sort the Hunters liked to use. If they had not come for part of this brood, they would have come the next time.

Still . . .

The six below chattered and squealed mindlessly.

Retawan Jonovel cursed the Hunters and the need for them that made their existence a reality. He left the brood hole, closing the iron door behind. The heat, smell, and noise was getting to him . . .

A white-haired man stood in a cleft of rock, letting the wind flap his clothes and uncomb his frosted mane. It felt good to stand here in the open on his own world after so long in the depths of the fortress, so long in artificial light and artificial darkness. He watched the foamy breakers toiling in toward shore,

cresting, battering, spraying up on the rocks three hundred feet below at the foot of the mountain. It was a truly wonderful sight.

Taken from them now. As everything had been.

Unconsciously, he scanned the sky for sign of a naoli copter. But the skies were clear.

The sea rolled in . . .

. . . crashing, spitting up, frothing.

The sea had great strength. Perhaps the world could survive this. Perhaps man could. No, not *perhaps*. They would survive. There could be no doubt! For doubt would be the end of them . . .

The scattered clouds burned away. The sun was full and radiant. It felt warm on his face, even though the wind was cool. A long while later, he turned and went into the channel in the cliffside, followed the twist in it until he came to the well-known spot. He made the recognition signal, waited for reply. The door in the rock slid slowly open. He stepped into the Haven and returned to the dismal burden of his duties . . .

IX

Hulann pushed the access door up and way to his right. Instantly, the booming storm winds rushed down the hole he had made, swept by him, and made Leo, who was standing at the foot of the rungs, shiver and hold himself with his arms to contain his heat. Hulann went up two more steps until he could see above the roof of the cab. He inspected the suspension bracket for damage, though he was not cer-

tain he would recognize any if he saw it. As the cold bit at him and the wind decided to take off the flat flaps of his ears, he tried to think of some way to avoid crawling onto the roof—and decided there was none. He climbed the rest of the way out, staying on his hands and knees to offer as little resistance as possible to the wind.

He edged his way over the icy roof toward the suspension bracket, grabbed hold of it with both arms when he reached it. He was breathing heavily, and he felt as if he had traveled a dozen miles instead of eight or nine feet.

He looked back the way they had come, at the endless length of swinging cable. Nothing wrong behind them. He turned, looked forward the dozen feet to the header station. There it was. Two feet before the car wheels, there was a lump of dark-cored ice four or so inches thick, perhaps half a foot long. The wheels had come up against that, repeatedly, and had been forced back.

It was a minor miracle that they had not been bumped off the cable to crash on the rocky slopes below.

Below . . .

He looked down, over the edge of the cab, then quickly looked back up. The distance down had seemed frightening from *inside* the cabin. Unenclosed as he now was, it was perfectly terrifying. He realized, with little surprise, that he was never meant to be a rebel. He was never designed, emotionally, to be on the run, to take risks, to be an outlaw. How had he gotten into this? Guilt, yes. He hadn't wanted to turn the boy in to be slaughtered. But that all seemed so petty now. He

was willing to turn a hundred boys in if necessary. Just so he would not have to do what he was beginning to understand he *must* do if they were to survive.

"What is it?" Leo called.

Hulann turned. The boy had climbed the rungs and had poked his head out of the hole in the roof. His yellow hair seemed almost white now, fluttering above him, sweeping down now and then to blot out his features.

"Ice on the cable. A huge chunk of it. I don't know what caused it. Very unnatural."

"We'll have to go back," Leo said.

"No."

"What?"

The car began swaying slightly more than usual as a stronger gust of wind caught it broadside.

"We can't go back," Hulann said. "I might have tried climbing half the mountain before. Not now. We both got battered around in the cab. We've lost more strength. I'm afraid I'm getting too cold. I have no feeling in my feet at all. We have to get there by cableway or not at all."

"But we'll be thrown loose trying to cross the ice."

"I'm going to break it loose."

The boy, even with his face distorted in the cold, looked incredulous. "How close to the car is it?"

"A couple of feet."

"Can you stand on the roof?"

"I don't think so," he said.

"You mean you plan on—"

"—hanging on the cable," Hulann finished.

"You'll fall. You're scared of heights even inside the cab."

"You have any better ideas?"

"Let me," the boy said.

For answer, Hulann stood, gripping the cable, and held it as he walked gingerly along the roof toward the edge.

"Hulann!"

He did not answer.

It was not that he was heroic or that he indulged in acts of foolish courage. At this moment, it was abject fear which drove him, not courage of any stripe. If he did not break that ice, they would die. They would have to go back to the boarding station at the middle of the mountain and make their way up the slopes to the top. Though the storm had not increased in strength, it seemed to have gained thirty miles an hour in velocity, for he could not withstand its battering as well as before. And the wearier they became, the more fierce the storm would seem. Until they would collapse in it and go to sleep—and die. And there was no sense in sending the boy out on the cable to do the job, for he would surely be blown loose, fall, and shatter upon the rocks. And then there would be no point in going on. It would be as good to die.

He left the roof, holding to the cable with both hands, the muscles of his brawny arms corded and thumping under the strain.

He did not hang on a plumb line, but was blown slightly to the left. He had to fight the wind, his own weight, and the growing ache in his arms . . .

He found that his hands had a tendency to freeze to the cable.

His lungs burned as the bitter air scorched them. He would have been better off on one set of nostrils, but he could not close the primaries down and still operate on full capac-

ity. And he needed everything he had . . .

Some of the outerlayers of scales were pulling loose. He did not feel any pain—chiefly because the wounds were artificial, but also because his flesh was numbed.

A moment later, he reached the ice lump. He looked up at it, saw a dark, irregular shape within. He could not guess what it might be, but he had no time for guessing games anyway. He let go with one hand, holding the other ready an inch from the cable in case one arm proved too weak to hold him. But, though his nerves screamed and his shoulder threatened to separate at its socket, he found he could manage on the single arm. Raising the other hand, he swung at the ice lump, claws extended.

The very ends of the hard nails shaved the ice. Some of it fell away and was lost in the pulsating snow sheaths.

The impact of the blow sent a tight vibration through the taut cable. The vibration coursed down the arm by which he hung, made his flesh pain even more.

He swung again.

More ice was sliced off. A major fracture appeared in the lump. He reached up, worked his claws into the crack, twisted and pried. The ice broke. Two large pieces fell away. He saw, then, what had caused the lump. A bird had struck the cable, had lodged itself on long enough for ice to form and to freeze it in place. Since then, the ice had continued to build over it.

He knocked off more ice, then tugged the mangled bird free, looked at it. Its eyes were frozen

solid, white and unseeing. Its beak was broken and covered with frozen blood. He dropped it, grabbed the cable with both hands, and began the tricky turnabout to head back for the safety of the roof, then the cab, then the header station, and finally the shelter of the blessed French Alpine Hotel . . .

Docanil the Hunter sat in a gray swivel chair before a bank of blinking lights and shuddering dials, flanked on either side by Phasersystem technicians who watched him from the corners of their eyes as one might watch an animal that seemed friendly but which one did not quite trust, despite all assurances. "How soon?" he asked the room.

"Any moment now," the chief technician said, flitting about his own console, touching various knobs and toggles and dials, turning some, just brushing others for the assurance they gave him.

"You must find all you can," Docanil said.

"Yes," the technician said. "Ah, here we are now . . ."

Hulann, the voiceless voice said.

He woke. Though not completely. The voice murmured to him, kept him slightly hazed as it asked questions of him. He felt it probing into his overmind, looking for something. What?

Relax, it whispered.

He started to relax . . .

. . . then sat bolt upright!

Open to us, Hulann.

"No." It was possible to close down one's contact with the Phasersystem. In the beginning, centuries upon centuries ago, the cen-

tral committee had decided that if the naoli could not have privacy when they wanted it, then the Phasersystem might become a tyranny, a thing from which there was no escape. Hulann was thankful for their foresight now.

Open, Hulann. It is the wise thing.

"Go. Leave me."

Turn the boy over, Hulann.

"To die?"

Hulann—

"Go. Now. I am not listening."

Reluctantly, the contact faded, broke, and left him alone.

Hulann sat in the dark lobby of the hotel, on the edge of the sofa where he had been sleeping. A few feet away, Leo snored lightly, drawn into a fetal position, his head tucked down between his shoulders. Hulann thought about the Phasersystem intrusion. They had, of course, been probing to find where he was. He tried to recall those first few moments of the probe to see whether he had given them what they wanted. It did not seem likely. A probe takes several minutes to be truly efficient. They couldn't have learned anything in six or eight seconds. Could they? Besides, would they have prodded him to give up the boy if they had discovered his whereabouts? Highly unlikely.

Before his thoughts could begin to stray to his family home in the home system, to his children that he would never see again, he stretched out on the couch and, for the second time in less than an hour, dissociated his overmind from his organic regulating brain, slipped into the nether-world pocket of death sleep . . .

"Well?" Docanil asked the chief technician.

The man handed over the printouts of the probe. "Not much."

"You tell me."

The voice was a rasping command, given in a low but deadly key.

The technician cleared his throat. "They've headed west. They passed the Great Lakes conversion crater. The scene was clear in his mind. They got off the superway at exit K-43 and took the secondary route toward Ohio."

"Nothing more?"

"Nothing more."

"This is not much."

"Enough for a Hunter," the technician chief said.

"This is true."

Docanil left the room, went into the corridor where Banalog waited. He glanced at the traumatist as he went by, as if he did not know him and was only mildly curious. Banalog rose and followed him to the end of the hall, through a plastiglass door into the frigid morning air. A copter was waiting, a large one with living quarters and enough supplies to last the two of them as long as the hunt required.

"You found them?" he asked Docanil when they were seated in the cockpit of the craft.

"More or less."

"Where are they?"

"West."

"That's all you know?"

"Not quite."

"What else?"

Docanil looked at the traumatist with interest. The glance made the other naoli cringe and draw away, tight against the door of the cabin.

"I was just curious," Banalog explained.

"Fight your curiosity. The rest is for me to know. It can mean nothing to you."

He started the copter and lifted out of the ruins of Boston, into the wind and snow and bleak winter sky

...

X

POINT:

In the Nucio System, on the fourth planet circling the giant sun (the place once called Dala but now called nothing at all) it was early evening. A brief but intense rain had just fallen, and the air was saturated with a fine, blue mist that settled ever so slowly on the glossy leaves of the thick forests. There were no animal sounds anywhere. Occasionally, there was a soft ululation—but that was not the cry of a beast.

Near the calm sea, where there had once been beasts, the jungle labored to turn a tangle of steel beams into dust. The metal was already eaten through in many places . . .

A hundred feet beyond this, closer the water's edge, a walking vine snaked a healthy green tentacle through the empty, yellow eye socket of a long, gleaming naoli skull . . .

XI

COUNTERPOINT:

In the city of Atlanta it was noon. It was a bright day, though a cloud or two drifted across the sun. In the foundry yard on the west end of town, everything was still. Except for the rats scrambling about the

interior of a huge storage tank at the yard's end. There were about a dozen of them, chittering and hissing at one another. This had once been the tank that temporarily housed Sara Laramie. The rats feasted . . .

XII

As they neared the border of Pennsylvania and Ohio, the Hunter Docanil prepared to initiate as careful a search as possible of the oncoming terrain. He withdrew the sensory patch-ins from their slots on the console. The patches were little metal tabs whose undersides were studded with a dozen half-inch needles of the finest copper alloy, honed and sharpened to a rigid specification. There were six of them, and Docanil pressed each of them into a different set of nerve clusters on his body, having to roll back his sleeves in the process; his trousers were equipped with zippers along the legs to open them for the same purpose. When he was patched in to the exterior sensory amplifiers on the copter's hide, he settled back in his chair, six wire snakes winding from him to the console, making him look like some automaton or some part of the machine and not a living creature in his own right.

Banalog watched, fascinated and horrified. What fascinated him would fascinate anyone watching a Hunter at work for the first time. What horrified him was the ease with which the creature became a part of a machine. He seemed to suffer no psychological shock in the process. Indeed, he seemed to enjoy linking to the copter and its electronic ears and eyes and nose. The

mechanical devices amplified not only his perceptions, but his stature, his very being—until now he was as some mythopoetic creature from legends.

Docanil had closed his eyes, for he did not need them now. The exterior cameras fed sight data directly to his brain—that superbrain that could interpret all sensations much more thoroughly and readily than the average organic mound of gray tissue.

The copter swept up the mountainside, following the road that its radar gear said existed beneath the billowing, undulating dunes of snow.

Banalog had never seen so much snow in his life. It had begun snowing steadily only yesterday afternoon, and in one day had put down almost a foot. The occupation-force meteorologists said the end was not in sight. It looked as if the storm could last another six or eight hours and put down another half foot of the white stuff. Not only was it a record breaker in duration and amount of precipitation (in naoli experience) but also in the area it blanketed. It stretched all along the top of what used to be called the States, from the midwest to the New England coastline. It would have held the traumatist enthralled, had not the Hunter also fascinated him.

The copter drifted on, flying itself, only twenty-five feet above the land.

They were almost to the top of the mountain when Docanil opened his eyes, leaned forward, kicked the automatic pilot off, and took control of the machine.

“What is it?” **Banalog** inquired.

Docanil did not answer. He brought the copter around, headed back down the mountain for a few hundred feet, then set the machine to hover.

Banalog looked out the wind-screen, studied the area that seemed to concern the Hunter. He could make out only what appeared to be a few guardrails thrusting above the snow, a tangle of safety cable, and a great deal of drift.

“What?” he asked again. “I’m supposed to help you if I can.”

He thought the Hunter almost smiled; at least, he came closer to it than any Hunter the traumatist had ever seen.

“You help me to think ahead of Hulann. I can pick up the trail myself. But since you are curious . . . Do you see the rails and the cable?”

“Yes.”

“The rails are crooked, as if they have been partially uprooted or bent out of shape. The cable is broken. See how it meanders across the snow. Something has struck here. Perhaps they have already died. See the drift ahead? They could have swerved to miss that.”

Banalog licked his lips. He wanted to twine his tail about his leg, but knew the Hunter would see. “I didn’t know you were so sensitive to clues this small or to—”

“Of course,” the Hunter said.

He took the copter over the rails and down the side of the mountain, handily avoiding the pines, swerving through breaks in them that Banalog did not even see until they were upon them, zigging and zagging, using the stiff wind that tried to batter their craft, moving with it instead of against it.

"There," Docanil said.

Banalog looked. "What? I see nothing."

"Between the two columns of rock. The car."

If the traumatist looked closely, strained his big eyes until they watered, he was able to make out pieces of a shuttlecraft body peeking through the snow, no section more than a few inches square.

"The vehicle is on its side," Docanil said. "And it is the one they escaped in."

"They're dead?"

"I don't know," the Hunter said. "We will stop and look."

Leo was roused by the stuttering blades of a copter. He sat up on the plush couch and listened closely. The noise was gone now, but he was certain he had not dreamed it. He sat very tensely for a time. At last, he got up and went to the windows, walked from one to the other. There was nothing but the trees, the snow, and the hotel grounds.

Then the sound came again.

A helicopter. Close.

He ran across the room to where Hulann slept, shook the naoli.

Hulann did not respond.

"Hulann!"

Still, he did not move.

The sound of the copter faded, then came back again. He could not tell if it was coming closer or not. But he knew it was almost a certainty that the passengers of that machine were looking for him and Hulann. He continued to harass the sleeping alien, but with no more luck than before. There are only three ways to wake a naoli from his nether-world slumber . . .

Docanil the Hunter clambered out of the smashed shuttlecar, walked across the side of the twisted wreck, and jumped to the ground, sinking in snow up to his knees. Despite the difficult conditions, he moved with grace and catlike quiet.

"Are they dead?" Banalog asked.

"They are not there."

Banalog managed to keep his relief from showing. He *should* have been anxious for the Hunter's success and against anything that benefited the renegades. Irresponsibly, he felt just the opposite. He wanted them to escape, to find refuge, to survive. Deep within, he was aware of what the Phasersystem said would happen if humans survived. A hundred years from now, two hundred, and they would find a way to strike back. His irresponsibility, if it became popular, would be a danger to the race. Yet . . . He did not stop to analyze himself. He did not dare . . .

They boarded the chopper again.

Docanil pulled the patch-ins from their slots and reconnected himself to the exterior pickups. The cords dangled. When the copper-alloy needles had slid into his flesh, he started the machine and—keeping it under manual control—took it up into the grayness.

"What now?" Banalog asked.

"We quarter the mountain."

"Quarter?"

"You are not familiar with search techniques?"

"No," Banalog agreed.

The Hunter said no more.

At length, after they had danced back and forth, up and down a relatively small portion of the slope for some time, Docanil brought the cop-

ter in over a pylon boarding-station that was part of an aerial cableway running from the base of the mountain to the top.

"There," he hissed, as excited as a Hunter could get.

Again, Banalog could see nothing.

Docanil said, "Ice. See? Broken from the steps. And it has been melted from the control board recently." The helicopter passed over the platform; he brought it around once more. "They've used the cablecar. Also notice that the ice has been broken from the cable going to the top of the slope, though it still remains on the cable leading to the bottom. They went up."

He turned the copter; they fluttered toward the peak.

The cable ran by below them.

The Swiss-styled header station lay ahead, becoming visible through the snow . . .

Leo had heard stories of naoli and the condition they entered when they slept and when they drank alcoholic beverages. He knew there were other ways to wake them, but he did not know what they were. He had only heard about the application of pain, heard about it from spacers who had been in the outer reaches, among the many races of the galaxy. He did not want to hurt Hulann. There was no other choice.

The chopper was working closer now, swaying back and forth directly down the slope from them, around the cableway system. He could hear it coming gradually closer, then receding, only to come back again.

"Hulann!"

The naoli did not respond, and there was no time to try anything but that which he knew would work. He stood and ran through the lobby, along a corridor and into the main dining hall. The tables were set, everything ready for a full house—except dust had collected on the silverware. Leo moved between the tables, through the double doors at the rear of the room and into the large hotel kitchen. In moments, he found a knife and went back to the lobby.

He knelt next to the couch where Hulann slept. His hands shook as he brought the blade forth, and he dropped it as if it were red-hot the first time the gleaming point touched the tough alien skin. He looked at the knife on the carpet and could not bring himself to lift it.

The helicopter's engine changed tone. Then, the roar of it grew steadily louder. It was coming directly for the hotel!

He picked up the knife in both hands so that he could be sure of holding onto it. He pricked the point of it in Hulann's biceps.

The alien slept on.

He jabbed deeper. A small well of blood sprang up around the edges of the knife. A thin trickle of it ran down Hulann's arm and dripped onto the couch.

Leo felt distinctly ill.

The copter's engine boomed abruptly louder, three times the volume of before, as it came over the brow of the mountain down near the header station.

He twisted the blade, opening the wound farther.

More blood sprang up.

The copter passed over the hotel, turned to come back.

Leo gritted his teeth, twisted the blade viciously in the rubbery flesh.

Instantly, Hulann sat up, striking out with an arm that caught the boy on the side of the head and knocked him sprawling on the floor.

"They're here!" Leo shouted, not angry that he had been struck.

"I thought you were—"

"They're here!" he insisted.

Hulann listened as the Hunter's craft swept low over the hotel roof. He stood, his entire body trembling now. It had to be a Hunter, for they could not have been found so quickly by anyone else. The Hunter—Docanil. Yes, that was his name.

Dark-blue velveteen trousers and shirt . . . Black boots . . . Heavy greatcoat . . . Gloves for the six-fingered hands, gloves with the ends open to permit the claws their deadly full-length when he chose to unsheath them . . . The high skull . . . The deadly, steady eyes . . . And the extended claw circled by the sharpened iron nails . . .

While he stood, nightmares flushing through his mind, the copter settled onto the promenade before the hotel, only a hundred yards from the lobby doors.

"What can we do?" Leo asked.

"Hurry," Hulann said, turning and striding across the lobby toward the rear of the great hotel complex. He was not certain where he was going. Panic was guiding him. But panic was better than paralysis, for it carried him away from the Hunter Docanil, gained a few extra minutes in which to think.

Leo hurried behind.

They passed the dining hall entrance, went beyond a small mall with a plastic glass roof that gave a view of the sky. Here, there were a dozen shops for the hotel patrons, a few little restaurants, a barber, curios, a hundred-seat theater. They went out the other side of the mall and into the offices of the hotel administration. These were bare now. The doors stood open. Dust gathered on what had once been urgent memos and important reports.

At last, they reached the back of the hotel, pushed open a heavy fire door and stepped into the snow again. They had gotten several hours of sleep, but the moment the cold and wind hit them, they felt as if they had only paused a minute or two since getting off the cablecar.

Ahead, the top of the mountain stretched. There were various markers indicating the direction to the ski slopes and the toboggan trails, other points of interest. A hundred feet away, a squat, block building perched on a small knoll, windowless, with a single sliding door that rolled away overhead.

"There," Hulann said.

"But they'll check that after they search the hotel."

"We're not staying there. I think it may be a garage. The skiers had to have some way to reach the slopes besides walking."

"Yeah!" Leo said, grinning.

Hulann could not grin, and he marveled at the boy's delight over such a small treasure. Even if it turned out to be a garage, there might be no vehicles there. And if there were cars, they might not run. And if they ran, there was still no

guarantee they could escape Docanil and his copter. Certainly no time to grin.

The boy reached the door first, palmed the control set in a black panel in the concrete wall. The metal portal shuddered, then groaned upward, admitting them. The interior of the place was like a tomb, dim and cold and sifted over with dust and frost. But there were cars. There were heavy-tread vehicles for use in drifts of almost any size.

They boarded the first, found that it would not turn over; the second was in the same condition. As was the third. But the fourth one coughed twice, sputtered like a man with a mouthful of some unpleasant food, and grumbled into life. Hulann brought the lumbering beast out of the garage, surprised that—now that it was running—it made almost no noise. That would be better for an escape. And for something else he had in mind. He turned the car toward the front of the hotel.

“Where are you going?” Leo wanted to know.

“To see if they left the helicopter unguarded,” Hulann said.

Leo grinned. Despite himself, Hulann grinned too . . .

Docanil and the traumatist stood in the deserted lobby, surveying the rich draperies and plush furniture. Now and then, the Hunter would go to a chair or couch to inspect it. Banalog could not begin to guess what he expected to find.

“They’ve been here?” he asked the Hunter.

“Yes.”

“Are they still—”

“Perhaps.”

“It is a large place to have to search.”

“We will not have to search it all,” Docanil said. He bent to the carpet, his steady eyes on it. “The dust. Here. And there. And leading that way. It has been disturbed.”

“I cannot see—”

“Of course not.”

Docanil peeled off his gloves and tucked them into the pockets of his enormous coat. Banalog looked at the hands. Though they were larger than most naoli hands, they appeared no more deadly. He knew the truth to be different. They were the deadliest tools in the galaxy . . .

He strode off toward the back of the hotel . . .

. . . and stopped instantly as the crash sounded from the front promenade.

“The helicopter!” Banalog said.

But Docanil was by him, running for the door, a huge, dark figure much like something a human might have painted to represent a demon of Hell fleeing the wrath of the Almighty. He burst through the doors and onto the porch, Banalog a few steps behind.

The copter was lying on its side. It had been rammed by a heavy, ten-passenger, ground car, toppled from its landing skis. The car circled and came back, running headlong for the front of the aircraft. It struck with a resounding jar that shook the ground and even sent a tremble through the patio on which they stood. The windscreen shattered. The nose crumpled inward, jamming the control mechanisms.

Docanil leaped into the snow,

covering several yards, landing more lightly than Banalog would have thought possible. He started for the ground car in which Hulann and the human rode.

The car turned from the demolished copter, struck for the side of the hotel, trying to get behind it and away across the wild top of the mountain.

The Hunter Docanil turned, trying to cut them off, running faster than was possible in snow so deep.

Hulann gunned the engine of the car. The treads kicked up chunks of snow and mud, threw them back over the Hunter.

But it would take a few moments for the car to gain speed, whereas the specially nurtured, specially constructed muscles of the Hunter had ground into high gear in a fraction of a second. It would be a tossup who would reach the end of the hotel wall sooner.

Banalog was furious that he could do nothing. But if he had the power to decide the outcome of the contest, whom would he chose? Hulann and the boy? And go against his race. Or side with the Hunter—and be responsible for the other two deaths. Two deaths? A human death was merely an extermination, was it not? His head spun dizzily . . .

It was now apparent that, despite his furious pace, Docanil was going to lose the race. The ground car was moving now, leaving him a few more feet behind every moment.

The Hunter stopped, not even panting for breath, and raised his bare hands.

The car was at the corner of the hotel.

Docanil's fingers twitched.

Around the car, flames sprang up, and the snow burned.

The fingers twitched again.

The rear left fender of the car burst like a balloon, the fragments of steel whirling upwards into the snow, ringing down on the patio or falling with soft plops in the whiteness.

But Hulann kept his foot on the accelerator. The car moved on, around the wall, out of sight.

The Hunter Docanil ran to the corner and stared after it. Once more, he raised his fingers and tried to destroy it. But it was beyond his range now.

He watched it for several minutes. Soon, the elements pulled a white veil over it.

Watching the spot where he had last seen it, he took his gloves from his pockets and slowly pulled them on his freezing hands.

"What now?" Banalog asked at his side.

He said nothing.

The Hunters' Guild perpetuates the original conception of the proper making of a Hunter. While the fetus is still in early stages, steps are made to limit the emotions its brain is capable of. Things like love and sympathy are, naturally, excised. Duty remains. A Hunter must have a sense of duty. Hate is left in too. That always helps. But perhaps, most important of all, a Hunter is permitted to feel humiliation. And when once humiliated, he is relentless. He pursues with a dogged determination that rules out all possibility of escape.

Docanil the Hunter had just been humiliated for the first time in his life . . .

XIII

It was three o'clock in the morning when Docanil the Hunter found the abandoned ground car that Hulann and the human child had used to escape. He would have discovered it sooner (they had only driven it twenty miles before leaving it), but he had been forced to wait for a replacement helicopter to arrive in reply to his Phasersystem summons. Now, when it was the time to sleep and store energies, he was toiling more vigorously than ever. Though naoli preferred to sleep on much the same schedule as humans, they could go as much as five days without rest and still function properly. A Hunter, it was rumored, could perform his duties well for up to two sleepless weeks.

Banalog, on the other hand, was beginning to drag. He followed Docanil about the ground car as the creature explored it for every thread of evidence left clinging to it. Then the search pattern widened, taking in the rest of the cluster of buildings that made up the little town of Leimas near the base of the mountain, at the opposite side of the hotel.

Docanil stopped before a squat building to their right, turned and carefully approached it. He started to take off his gloves, then ceased as he more fully interpreted the data supplied to his oversensitive system.

"They aren't here?" Banalog asked.

"No. They were."

"Oh."

Docanil turned from his examination of the premises and stared openly at the traumatist, stared with

an intensity common only to Hunters. "You seem relieved."

Banalog tried to remain expressionless. A Hunter might have the talent to see deeper, but a traumatist had the talent to increase the depth of his facade. "What do you mean?"

"Relieved. As if you were glad they have still managed to avoid me."

"Nonsense."

Although he tried to maintain a self-righteous look, tried to keep his lips from drawing tightly over his teeth, tried to keep his whip-like tail from lashing around his thigh, Banalog was certain that the Hunter had seen the crack in his facade, had seen the festering doubt that he held concerning the value, morality, and wisdom of the naoli-human war. After an uncomfortably long while (which could actually be no more than one or two Earth-length minutes) the Hunter looked away.

And he had seen.

Yes . . .

Banalog was certain Docanil had found that crack in his false front, had peered through it and had seen the turmoil within the traumatist's mind. He would report what he had seen to higher officials. There would be a Phasersystem probe of him some morning soon, during the psychological-conditioning periods. Enough would be found for him to be sent to a session with the Third Division traumatist. If his guilt index was as high as he sometimes thought, he would soon be boarding a ship for the home system and a stretch in a hospital for therapy. Maybe they would wash and restructure his tainted mind. Wipe out

his past. That was possible. Was it desirable? Well, it would allow him to start fresh. He did not want to be a detriment to the naoli race. He did not want to be always plagued with these stirrings of self-disgust and displeasure with the doings of his people. The idea did not hold as much terror for him as it had for Hulann. True, his children would be denied his past, would have to found their homes on only scraps of history. And he had far more children than Hulann. Yet he did not mind the idea of washing and restructuring so much—for he had sent so many people to have it done. And in justifying all those cases, he had pretty much convinced himself that the process was desirable and beneficial, not only to society but to the individual in question.

“You see?” Docanil the Hunter asked, interrupting the other naoli’s reveries.

“I’m afraid not.”

A mixture of disgust and pleasure crossed the Hunter’s face. Disgust at the traumatist’s lack of powers of observation; pleasure at his own superior powers. A Hunter felt pleasure in a limited number of situations. He could not enjoy sex. He loathed it. Hunter’s did not reproduce, but were made from normal fetuses. He had little interest in food beyond supplying himself with a well-balanced diet. He felt nothing when administered sweet-drugs. His system burned alcohol so fast that the drug could have no effect, ill or beneficial. He *did* have an ego, for the ego is the motivator for all good works. When anything fed this intangible portion of his overmind, he felt comfortable, happy, and warm

as he could in no other way. His ego was subjugated only to the Hunters’ Guild; it fed triumphantly on all other naoli.

“Look,” Docanil went on. “The drifts about the buildings on this street.”

Banalog looked.

“Compare them to the drift before this building.”

“They are deeper,” Banalog said.

“Yes. This one has been disturbed and has had to rebuild itself during the last several hours. There was a shuttlecraft within, most certainly.”

Inside the structure, they found three shuttlecraft—and a space between two of them where another had been parked until quite recently. Docanil knew the fourth had been moved only hours earlier, for a brown mouse had made a nest in the undercarriage of that long-stilled vehicle and had been chopped to bits when it had started and the big blades had stuttered to life without warning. Though the flesh and blood were frozen, the eyes were not solidly white as they would have been had the incident occurred more than a day ago.

They went back into the night and the snow, which was finally beginning to taper off. The wind whipped what had already fallen and blew that around, stinging wet clouds of it that cut their range of vision as thoroughly as if the storm had still been in progress.

“Do you know which way?” Banalog asked.

“West,” Docanil said. “So they went that way.”

“What are the signs?”

“There are no physical ones. The snow has effaced their passage.”

"Then how—"

"The Haven is to the west, is it not?"

"That's mythical, of course," the traumatist said.

"Is it?"

"Yes."

"So many of their leaders have not been found," Docanil said. "They must be hiding somewhere."

"They could have died in the nuclear suicides. Or been carried away in the general holocaust. We have probably already disposed of them, thinking them only part of the common people."

"I think not."

"But—"

"I think not." There was no argumentative tone in the Hunter's words. His opinion was stated in the same voice a scientist might use to set forth an established law of the universe.

They boarded the new chopper.

Docanil lifted it into the night after connecting himself to the patch-ins. Banalog saw that the copper needles had a film of dried blood on them.

Docanil flew, watching. Banalog, resigned to the unrelenting pace of the search, settled into his seat, freed his overmind from his organic brain, set a time alarm in his subconscious, and slipped into simulated death . . .

It was dawn, and Hulann had driven the shuttlecraft far enough south to leave the snow line and enter a place of leafless trees and cold, clear skies. The naoli thought the weather was now comfortable, though Leo told him it was still somewhat chilly by human stand-

ards. They kept to secondary roads, simply because it would be easier for the Hunter to check the main arteries, therefore easier to be found if they rode them. Besides, the snow no longer hid the pavement, and Hulann was able to adjust their blade speed and elevation far in advance of any change in the surface.

They had been making light conversation on and off through the dark hours of their flight. At first, the talk had helped to soothe them, had distracted them so that they could not dwell on the memory of the Hunter's lightning that had torn off the rear fender. It was not "lightning," of course. The Hunters had several surgically implanted weapons systems within their overlarge bodies. In their arms and hands was the gas pellet gun. From a storage sack in the arm, the system drew a highly compressed droplet of liquid oxygen, propelled it through the tubes by the controlled explosion of other gas, and fired the pellet from beneath the fingernails. It sunk into its target, expanding, and exploding the target from within. It was a short-range device. But effective. Knowing how it worked did not make it seem any the less mystical.

Hunters made an effort to cloak themselves in the attributes of gods—even in a race without a religious mythos. It was no surprise that they succeeded. Indeed, when Hulann had first comprehended the "gods" concept held in several of the other galactic races, he had immediately wondered whether—in a hundred or a thousand centuries—the naoli would look back upon the first Hunters as ancient gods of a sort. Perhaps these genetically engi-

neered creatures were destined to be the first of a line of saints that would one day be held in more esteem than they truly deserved. Worshiped? Maybe . . .

Eventually, their conversation turned to more personal channels, away from the artificial, frantic chatter which had first been subconsciously meant to blot out unpleasant thoughts. They talked of their pasts, of their families. Hulann was surprised at the compassion the boy showed, at the way he cried when he told of the death of his father and sister (his mother had died shortly after his birth). It was not like a human to show such emotions. At least, it was rare—and always with less intensity than this. Humans were cold, with little laughter and even fewer tears. This unemotional, stoic reserve was the thing that made them so basically alien to the naoli. And alien to all of the other races as well—all of which were gregarious.

Then the understanding came.

It sliced through his brain, stabbed upward into his overmind, jolting the entire foundation of his reason.

It hurt.

The first inklings of comprehension stirred and began to blossom when Leo pointed to the distant light of a rising naoli starship, easily a hundred miles away to the east. He watched the flame and the blue-green haze it created with the gaze of a washed and restructured naoli longing for his past. He sucked in his breath as the majestic plume grew longer on the velvet backdrop of the still dark sky (just the horizon rim was touched with

orange daylight). Hulann's mind leaped into the chasm of discovery when Leo said:

"I wanted to be a spacer. Always wanted it. But I wasn't chosen."

"Chosen?" Hulann asked, not realizing yet where the conversation was leading.

"Yes. My family stock was not what they called 'prime'."

"But you are too young to have applied for space work."

Leo looked confused.

"You said you were only eleven."

"You're chosen before you're born," the boy said. "Isn't it that way with naoli?"

"That makes no sense!" Hulann said. "You can't be trained for space work until you're older, able to grasp basic physics."

"It would take too long that way," Leo said. "To be a spacer, you have to know so many things. Hundreds of thousands of things. To learn them as an adult—even with the help of hypnoteachers—would require too long."

"Forty years. Fifty at the most," Hulann said. "Then there are centuries ahead in which—"

"Exactly," Leo said when Hulann failed to finish the sentence. "Humans only live to an average age of a hundred and fifty years. Only the first two thirds are 'strong' years in which we can withstand the rigors of intergalactic travel."

"That's horrible!" the naoli said. "Then your spacers spend their entire lives doing the same thing?"

"What else?"

Hulann tried to explain that the naoli held many occupations in one lifetime. It was unthinkable, he said, that a man should spend his

short years doing the same thing. Limiting. Boring. Deadly to the mind. But it was not easy to press across this basic naoli principle of life to someone of so short-lived a species.

The understanding was hovering closer. Hulann felt the weight of it, though he could not understand exactly what was weighing on him . . .

"Once," Leo said, "in the early days of our space programs, spacers were not trained from before birth. They grew up, led normal lives, went to the moon, came back. Maybe they remained in the space program, maybe not. Some of them went into business. Others entered politics. One of them became president of the major country of that time. But when the faster-than-light drives were perfected and we began to accumulate more and more relevant data a spacer had to learn, the old way of choosing astronauts had to be replaced."

There was now full understanding. Hulann realized why there had been a war, why Leo was different from the humans the naoli had met in space.

"The fertilized egg is withdrawn from the mother soon after conception," the boy went on. "The Spacer Institute then takes it and develops it into all the things a spacer should be. A spacer has toes twice as long as nonspacers, because he needs them for grasping in free-fall. The big toe is also an opposable thumb after the genetic engineers are finished. His range of vision runs into the infrared. His hearing is more acute. When the fetus is four months developed, it is sub-

jected to a constant-learning environment where data is fed directly into its developing brain. The human brain never learns faster than during that five-month period."

Hulann found he could barely speak. His voice was thinner, hoarser than normal. His lips kept drawing in over his teeth in shame and he had to withdraw them to speak clearly. "How . . . did the nonspacers feel . . . about the spacers?"

"Hated them. They were different from the rest of us, of course. They could survive much better in space, in any alien environment. There was talk of beginning to send out nonspacers as passengers, but the spacers fought that for a good many years. They guarded their own power."

"And they were cold," Hulann said sickly. "Showed very few emotions, never laughed . . ."

"Was bred out of them. The less emotional they were, the better the job they could be counted on to perform."

"The war—" Hulann said.

When he did not finish, Leo said: "Yeah?"

"We thought the spacers . . . We never considered that they might not be typical of your race. We met hundreds. Thousands of them. They were all alike. We could not know."

"What are you saying?" Leo asked curiously.

"The war was a mistake. We were fighting Hunters. Your spacers are the equivalent of our Hunters. And we destroyed all of you because we thought your Hunters—your *spacers* were typical of all of you. . ."

Master Hunter Peneton sat in the

control chair of the Shaper, three hundred and sixty-one electrodes attached to his body, snaking away from every part of him, disappearing into the vast machinery of the micro-surgical machine. His fingers danced across three hundred and sixty-one controls on the board before him.

He shaped. He changed.

In the steamy, sealed plastiglass module beyond the foot-thick quartz wall, a tiny fetus was buoyed on a cushion of forces that would be forever beyond his understanding, even when he was grown into a full-size creature. For this fetus was destined only to be a Hunter. Not a Master Hunter.

That was something else again. There was a special program of genetic juggling, a program of the highest complexities, to be used in the creation of Master Hunters. It was used only once every century. There were never more than five Master Hunters at any one moment.

Peneton was a Master Hunter.

He shaped.

He *changed* . . .

In a storage tank in Atlanta: rats

. . .

In the morning light, the Great Lakes conversion crater's light looked more yellow than green. Along the southeast rim, the first team of naoli antibacterial-warfare technicians deployed their equipment and began to introduce the proper antitoxin to eliminate the hungry microbes. By nightfall, the warmth and the heat and the lovely emerald radiance of conversion would be gone . . .

XIV

Ahead was only desert, a vast stretch of yellow-white sand broken through with patches of redder dirt. Now and then, a volcanic plug arose to break the monotony, great columns of stone, freaks of the land-forming process. There was a sparse scattering of vegetation, none of it particularly healthy looking. It was a place not to be. Hulann stopped the shuttle on the crest of the ridge, looked down the highway that crossed the endless expanse of desolation.

"It'll make good beater-surface for the shuttle, even if we get off the road," Leo said.

Hulann said nothing, merely stared ahead at what they must cover. The last eight hours had brought a lot of soul-searching. He had turned the facts over and over in his mind, and still he did not cease to be amazed, intrigued, and horrified by them. The awful, bloody war had been totally unnecessary. But who would have guessed that any race would have been breeding spacemen like naoli bred Hunters? Did this lessen the naoli guilt? Did this make their acts of genocide somehow more justified—or, at least, reasonable? Could they be held responsible for such a whim of Fate? Surely not. Yet . . .

Even if one considered the trick of Fate, the war did not become acceptable. Instead, it became morbidly amusing. Two giant races, both able to travel between stars with relative ease, waging total, blows-to-the-end combat over a simple misunderstanding. The entire affair became a cosmic comedy.

And such awe-inspiring death counts should never be fodder for humor.

"What are you thinking?" the boy asked.

Hulann turned from the desert and looked at the human. So much had transpired between their races—with so little meaning. He looked back out the windscreen; it was easier to meet the glare of the desert than the soft, patient eyes of the child.

"We should tell them," Hulann said.

"Your people?"

"Yes. They should know about this. It changes everything so much. They wouldn't kill you once they knew. And they wouldn't wash and restructure me or hang me or whatever. They couldn't. Oh, some of them will want to. But the evidence does not permit it. If any humans are still alive, we must do whatever we can to help them."

"We aren't going to the Haven?"

Hulann considered it. "We could. But it would serve no purpose. It would solve nothing. Our only chance is to let the others know what I've found. Oh, they'll get it on their own sooner or later. There are archaeological teams sifting the ruins of every city not nuked. There are anthropologists piecing your culture together. Others will find that the spacers were a different breed. But it may take months—even years. And in that time, the few remnants of your race may be found and killed. And then knowing about the spacers will do no good at all."

"I guess," Leo agreed.

"Then I'll call the Hunter off."

"You can do that?"

"I can try."

"I'll go for a walk," the boy said. "My legs need stretching." He opened the door, stepped onto the road, slammed the door behind. He walked off to the left, stooped to examine a small, purple-flowered cactus.

A moment later, Hulann opened his contact with the Phasersystem.

He sensed the channel of minds.

"Docanil," he said with his mind.

"Docanil the Hunter."

There was silence. Then:

Hulann . . .

He shuddered at the coldness of the thoughts.

"We will not run any longer," he said to the distant Hunter. "If you will listen to us, we will not run."

Listen, Hulann?

"To what I have discovered. I—"

Am I to understand you are surrendering yourselves to me?

"More or less, Docanil. But that is not what is important. You must listen to what I have discovered about the humans—"

I wish you would run. If you are begging mercy, you are not being realistic.

"You will not want to kill us when you hear what I have to say."

On the contrary. Nothing you say can influence a Hunter, Hulann. A Hunter cannot be made to sympathize. And a Hunter cannot be deceived. There is no sense in what you plan.

"Listen and you will not kill—"

I will kill on sight, Hulann. I will dispose of you at once. It is my prerogative as a Hunter.

Docanil the Hunter had only been humiliated once in his life. Having little emotional range, a

Hunter clings to and nourishes whatever deep feelings arise in him. Even if those feelings are humiliation, anger, and hatred . . .

I know where you are Hulann. I will be there soon.

"Please—"

I am coming, Hulann.

Hulann spread the area of his broadcast, boosted it so that it was something that could not escape the notice of any naoli on the Second Division system. He said: "I have discovered something vital about the humans. It is something which makes the war senseless. You must listen. The humans—"

But before he could continue, the psychological-conditioning dreams began . . .

He was standing on a dark plain. There were no boundaries to either side, nor any ahead or behind him. He was the highest point for a thousand miles. He stood upon a cushion of vines that tangled in upon one another, concealing the real floor of the land.

We are in an unknown place, the conditioning chanter whispered. This is not the home of naoli . . .

He realized, for the first time, that there were animals in the spaces between the vines, hiding beneath the surface. He could hear them rustling, scampering about. He thought they must have long claws and sharp teeth, small red eyes, poisonous venom. Though he did not see any evidence to support this conception and did not know why he imagined them as beasts.

Because they are beasts, the chanter said.

He felt their fingers at his feet, trying to topple him. He knew that,

if his face came close enough, they would shred it, go for his vulnerable green eyes.

They are clever . . .

He thought he felt one coming out of the vines and starting up his leg. He kicked, tossed it free. He began to run, though he found that when he moved his feet tended to slip between the vines, down into the holes where the *things* waited.

He fell, rolled, gained his feet. There was blood running down his face from where the claws of a beast had struck in the split moment he had been down.

There is no running. They are everywhere. The naoli had to realize this. There could be no running, for the beasts came wherever the naoli went.

Slowly, he began to realize that the beasts in the vines were really humans. The Phasersystem increased his fear tenfold, fed him a host of anxiety patterns.

The only thing to be done was to exterminate the beasts. Exterminate them or be murdered ourselves . . .

He found himself with a flame-gun in his hands. He trained it on the vines.

Yellow-crimson fire leapt forward, flushed into the growth.

The beasts squealed below.

They leaped into the open, burning.

They died.

The vines did not burn: a naoli only destroyed that which *had* to be destroyed.

The beasts did death dances on flaming toes, tongues lit, eyes turned to coals and then gray ashes . . .

And Hulann enjoyed it. He was grinning. Laughing now . . .

. . . and suddenly gagging.

He choked, felt his stomachs contracting. The conditioning dream had not been strong enough to counteract the truth he had learned. The humans weren't vicious enemies. They were basically as peaceful as naoli. What should have been done was this: the Hunters should have been pitted against the spacers. And the normal citizens of both races should have been left to their gentle lives.

The dreams were your last chance, Docanil said through the Phasersystem. I did not agree to the plan. But others thought you could be reached if you checked in on your own with a bit of guilt for your traitorous acts.

Hulann said nothing. He opened the door and vomited on the sand. When both stomachs were empty, he became aware of Docanil the Hunter still speaking on the Phasersystem link.

I am coming, Hulann.

"Please—"

I know where you are. I come.

Hulann broke his Phasersystem contact. He felt seven hundred years old, in the last of his days. He was a hollow nonentity, a blown-glass figurine, nothing more.

The boy returned to the car, got in. "Well?"

Hulann shook his head and started the engine of the shuttlecraft. The car moved forward, down the rise into the great desert, on toward the Haven somewhere in the mountains of the West . . .

Six hours later, Docanil debarked from his copter beside Hulann's abandoned shuttlecraft. He looked

up and down the twin steel railroad lines, speculating. He examined the rails with his superb vision, calculated from the brake markings which way the train had been coming from, and which way it went after picking up its two new passengers. He could not conceive of who might be driving it. But he would soon find out.

He was certain of that, for the simple fact of the train made his quest all the easier. The train could not leave the tracks; as long as Hulann and the boy did not leave the train, he had only to follow the rails.

He looked the the west, grinned tightly. If possible, his orders had said, he was to return Hulann and the human alive so that traumatists might examine them. Yet Docanil the Hunter knew it was going to have to be death for them. It was just going to *have* to be . . .

XV

When Hulann leaned over Davod's shoulder to watch the man programming the train's complex computers on the simple keyboard, the human jumped in the command chair as if struck by a bullet, and his face drained to the color of dry sand bleached by much sun. Hulann stepped backwards, shuffling his large feet, then went to the side window to look at the scenery.

"I told you that he would not harm us," Leo said impatiently.

David looked at Hulann's back, swallowed. "I'm sorry," he said.

Hulann waved a hand nonchalantly to indicate it was of no import. He could hardly expect a

grown man, conditioned by twenty-odd years of antinaoli propaganda, to respond to him as quickly and easily as an eleven-year-old boy whose mind was still fresh and open to changes of every magnitude.

"Why don't you sit down?" David asked. "I get jumpy—sorry again, and in advance this time—when you're parading around behind me like that."

"Can't sit comfortably," Hulann said.

"What?" David asked.

"His tail," Leo said. "Your chairs don't have any holes to let his tail hang out. A naoli has a sensitive tail. It hurts to just sit on it."

Confused, David returned to the keyboard, typing instructions to the computer. Yesterday, he had been serene, content to flee from the enemy in his swift-wheeled magic wagon; today, he was ferrying a naoli across the country. It had begun yesterday when he had watched, from the corner of his eye, what seemed to be a shuttle pacing the train, yet attempting to remain concealed. Whenever he turned his head and looked quickly out the side port, there would be nothing to see, merely unrolling landscape—as if he had been observing a mote suspended on his eyelash. At last he rejected the vision as a manifestation of his paranoia.

Near dusk, he came to a place where debris clogged the tracks and was forced to stop the *Bluebolt* and examine the disaster before trying to nose through it.

The blockage was a mangled trio of shuttlecraft. To all sides, the country was littered with the dilapidated, decaying machines. People

had congregated here as they had in all the "wild" areas of the world, seeking to escape the burning, falling, alien-infested cities. But the naoli had come here too. And in trying to escape at any cost, the shuttle drivers collided as in this tangled despair. David did not look closely at the mess, for fear he would see skeletons, staring empty sockets . . .

When he determined he could move the wreckage with the locomotive's pilot, he turned to board the *Bluebolt* again—

—and came face to face with a naoli!

His first instinct was to go for a weapon, though he had nothing lethal and was not the type to use a gun even if he had possessed one. The second instinct was to run; however, he saw the boy then, and the boy showed no fear and did not seem stupefied by drugs. Having hesitated this short moment longer, he found it was too late to run. They both babbled excitedly to him, trying to state their case; he listened to them, numb, disbelieving at first, then being won over by the story of the Hunter-spacer correlation. The naoli had thought spacers were typical of all humans . . . It was just absurd, just hideously comical enough to be true.

Their shuttlecraft was seriously depleted in power stores and had no way to recharge. They proposed the three of them ride the *Bluebolt*, since the train could make better speed anyway. They assumed David was going to the Haven—though he found it difficult to comprehend that Hulann's destination was the same.

Now they were in the province of California after a high-speed all-

night run. They could soon begin a quest for the Haven, for final safety and a new life—if this Hulann did not betray them . . .

As the computer answered David's programming with blood letters on its response board, Hulann pressed palms against the side window, as if trying to push the glass away to get a better look at something. His four nostrils were open, and his breathing was ragged. Abruptly, his tail snapped and wound snake-like around his thigh.

"What is it?" Leo asked, coming out of his command chair next to David.

"Docanil," Hulann replied. He pointed to the sky, far above and out from them. A coppery speck flitted along the bottom of the high clouds. It was monitoring them perfectly; that could not be accidental.

"Perhaps he doesn't see us," Leo said.

"He does."

"Yes."

They watched the copter until big muddy droplets of rain splattered the glass. In this dark sheath of mist, the Hunter's helicopter was lost to their sight . . .

The *Bluebolt* thundered on, hugged the rails as the sky lowered and the clouds appeared to drag by at only an arm's length overhead. The four heavy rubber wipers thumped back and forth, sloshing the water off the windscreen.

When Docanil struck, it was too swift to allow even surprise. Several hundred yards up the track, the copter bobbed out of the scudding clouds, skimmed toward them only inches above the rails. A firing tube opened in its side, and the first of its

small power-launch tubes spat a fist-sized missile.

Involuntarily, they flinched from anticipated impact, dropped to the floor. The concussion almost threw them erect again as the missile exploded a hundred feet ahead. Docanil had not been trying to kill; such long-range retaliation would not have absolved his humiliation. He had only been trying to derail them.

The engine's front wheels leaped the twisted ends of track, sank through crossties and into the sand. The cab tilted, toppled sideways in painfully slow motion. It pulled the other cars after it, whirling them free of the rails, hurtling them onto the wet sand. The noise grew until it was a vicious, impossible assault on the ears—then died with the abruptness of an exhausted man falling into sleep.

David felt the blood trickling down his head from the superficial cut on his temple. For the first time in his life, the meaning of the war came home to him. He had been separated from it before. He had told himself that was a writer's duty, to be separate from the grossness of his generation, then later to comment. But now the blood was real.

Aching, bloodied, they got to their feet inside the canted cabin, struggled upwards toward the sheared section of the cab where Docanil waited, silhouetted by the light-gray dreariness of the sky . . .

Outside, the three fugitives stood against the overturned *Bluebolt*, watching the Hunter Docanil parade before them, recounting the details of his careful search from the first moments of Phasersystem alert. In a human or a naoli normal, such be-

havior would have been termed a Braggart's Act. But in a Hunter, it was more than self-aggrandizement, something more sinister, something tied closely to sadism.

Once, David tried to run when Docanil turned his back, but ceased such foolish acts when the Hunter whirled, thrust out death-cored fingers, and turned the sand before David's feet into bubbling, steaming, glassy stuff.

When Docanil finished his account, he described in detail what he would now do to them. When Banalog objected that they were to be brought back alive, Docanil withered the traumatist with a glance that frankly threatened him. That done, he began his series of revenge deaths with David. Again, his bare hands came out, twitching. David's flesh, reacting to the invisible weapon, took on a ruddy glow. Then, the temperature increased until the pain drove him to his knees.

Docanil played his hands over the man's body, then used one hand to increase the deadly plague on David's right arm. The clothes burned from that arm, fell away as ashes.

"Stop!" Banalog pleaded miserably.

Docanil ignored him.

The outer layer of skin on David's arm began to shrivel, break open and expose pinker layers. These too were browned quickly. There was a smell of roasting meat.

David was screaming.

Leo was screaming also, remembering his father beneath the grenade launcher, twisted, broken, dead . . .

Hulann put his arm around the boy, tried not to let him see what

was becoming of David. He felt, surprisingly, as if he were with one of his own brood. And the touch of the boy was warm, not ugly and frightening as it had been that first time when he had tried to dress his wound in the Boston cellar. But the boy felt worse for not knowing and pulled away to watch.

David rolled, cradling his damaged arm under his chest to keep it from being totally ruined. Even now, it would take months to heal it. But what was he thinking? He would not be alive months from now. He was *dying* . . . This was *real*.

Docanil brought his fingers to center on David's legs. The boy-man's clothes caught fire and ashed, as did the first layer of his tender skin. Docanil laughed, a terrible cackling sound and—

—abruptly gasped, tried to scream, eyes wide. He fell forward onto the sand, quite dead. Protruding from his back was the hilt of a ceremonial knife of the sort Hunters used to cut out and eat certain parts of their victims' bodies. Banalog had taken it from the prepared Hunters' Guild Altar, had brought Docanil to the end he had so often distributed to others.

As the others stood transfixed, Banalog reached to the body, moving dream-like, withdrew the blade, wiped every drop of Hunter blood from it. He then turned the point against his chest and slipped it quietly between two ribs, deep into the eighteen-layered muscles of his pulsing heart. He tried not to think of his brood, of his family name, of the history he had denied his children. Instead of crying out in pain, he

smiled rather wistfully and went over on top of Docanil, lying very, very still indeed.

Hulann could not straighten out his emotions. Here, in the moments of disaster, death, and disgrace, they had been salvaged. They could go on now, find the Haven and try to do something about the misunderstanding between naoli and spacer-Earthmen. Yet Hulann was not a violent creature. A writer of historical fiction for the first of his working days, an archaeologist after that. Never one for broadswords. Now, as the blood of the Hunter and the good Banalog mixed, his stomachs ached to retch out their contents. He staggered forward, somehow managed to lift the traumatist's body as if it weighed only ounces, carried it off so that its precious blood would not mingle with that of the Hunter Docanil.

With that accomplished, the joy of the moment began to take the upper hand. They were in California. The ocean roared near them. The tracks paralleled the sea, so they could follow those to search for the Haven. Leo would be safe, could grow, become a man, have his own brood. And would not his brood have, as part of its cultural heritage, the history of Hulann? He turned to Leo, wanting to lift the boy and dance with him as he might have with one of his own lizardy children, and he felt the first bullet sink deep into his side, ripping through vital things and bringing with it a horrible, final darkness . . .

XVI

At first, the blackness had

seemed like the plunge into sleep. But it was different, because he became aware of the blackness, was able to speculate on it. In time, the blackness began to phase into gray, then soft blue. In the azure expanse that stretched on all sides, there was a gentle white radiance directly before him . . .

Death: Hello, Hulann.

Spirit: What is this place?

Death: This is the Changeover. You have been here before, of course. You do not remember because that is the way of Changeover.

Spirit: Where do I go from here?

Death: A brood hole. Back into your own family.

Spirit: Which I have disgraced.

Death: Which you have honored. You will be raised, in your new husk, to revere the memory of Hulann.

Spirit: But I left life a failure. I did not achieve the whole purpose.

Death: The humans who shot you were from Haven. They thought you molested the boy, though they soon learned their error. They took you to their fortress for surgery. But they knew little of naoli anatomy. They failed to keep you alive. But they will find a means for bringing the truth to the Earth-occupying naoli. The war will end soon, before the human race is destroyed.

Spirit: That is good news. (*He ponders the specter of Death a moment, somehow little interested in the past life now that he has been told his own role in it.*) You are Death?

Death: I am.

Spirit: And I am to be born again?

Death: You are.

Spirit: Then you are not permanent.

Death: No. Your race long ago programmed me not to be. I operate on the proper laws, recalling your souls at death and remaking you within a new husk.

Spirit: You are a machine!

Death: Yes.

Spirit: The human . . . ?

Death: I know not of their Death. Though I believe they have not thought of abstract mechanism. Sadly, I believe their deaths are permanent. But if you thought the war against men to be a little justified by learning that death was not permanent, you are wrong. Your race has forgotten their abstract mechanisms, forgotten my creation as a restorer of souls. And so it was meant to be—to keep the race at least a little humble. And to help purify the race morally. To that end, we must get on with your reincarnation. By practice, as programmed, I am to ask you what single thing or lesson you wish to remember from your previous life, what Truth.

Spirit: (*Hesitating.*) The Hunter. Docanil. What would a naoli like that remember? What would he want to save?

Death: Surely, you jest. A Hunter has no soul.

Spirit: (*Pondering for a time.*) Then that is what I will remember. I wish to carry into my new life the knowledge that a Hunter has no soul.

Death: It is an unusual request.

Spirit: It is all I will accept; it is the only thing worth remembering.

Death: So be it!

There was an explosion of life into rebirth . . .

The white-haired man stood in the nook of rock, overlooking the blue-green sea that ruffled in toward him, far below. He watched the boy named Leo and several of the men from the Haven as they buried the alien body in a grave dug in the beach above the high-tide line. In the gloominess, with the rain obscuring details, their electric hand-lamps looked very much like flickering votive candles. As the boy bent over the hole and threw the first sand onto the stiffened alien shell, he could have been a wizened little priest in some ancient European cemetery, administering the final rites of the graveside.

He thought that, perhaps, he should have gone with them after all, added his office's prestige to the funeral. But he had not been able to do it. That was a naoli, one of those who had killed his race, or very nearly had done so. He had been trained, almost since birth, to loathe them. He knew now what the situation was. Men had always allowed foreigners to judge the common men of their nation by the personalities and activities of their soldiers and diplomats. That, of course, was a mistake, for soldiers and diplomats were not representative of the common citizen. The same error had been made and amplified with the spacers; it had proved disastrous on a scale never before imagined.

The sand filled the grave quickly.

The huddled mourners worked swiftly as the rain drove harder upon their shoulders.

The white-haired man thought about going back into the Haven to the pile of work now awaiting him.

(continued on page 119)

Cats are supposed to have nine lives, but when you put a soft muscled house pet on a hostile, alien planet, he begins to use them up at a fearsome rate.

J. W. SCHUTZ

SURVIVAL COURSE



THE WAY ROUGHNECK GOT HIS name was certainly not because he was a tough character. Quite the contrary. He earned that distinction later. He was smuggled aboard the Orion Wanderer in O'Flaherty's pocket when he was far too young to be anything but gentle.

O'Flaherty had some trouble with the Skipper when Roughneck was first found floundering helplessly in midair in the astro-gation chamber shortly after the Wanderer went into hyperspace on the first leg of the trip. The Skipper was for feeding him to the reaction-mass chamber at once, for Company rules about pets aboard the Orion Lines ships were particularly strict. But the red-bearded O'Flaherty was a highly persuasive guy, and one small, tiger-striped kitten fresh from Texas got a reprieve that became definite the day he caught, killed, and distastefully delivered the body of one of the ship's ubiquitous cockroaches to the mouth of a trash-filter outlet.

No, Roughneck got his name from the improbable ruff of Angora fur around his neck, bequeathed to him by a generous assortment of ancestors. By the time he had completed his first trip, a two-year-long stretch of weightlessness in hyperspace, to the Pleiades worlds, he was an accepted member of the Wanderer's

crew. It had taken him only a matter of hours to conquer his instinctive fear of falling and to adapt to shipboard conditions. Thereafter he learned to run along handlines with barely un-sheathed claws, and to launch himself playfully across a cabin to the back of an unsuspecting crewman and bound away again to clawholds on padded bunks or ceiling vents before his victim could so much as sketch a friendly swat at him. Within the first dozen days the patient O'Flaherty had rigged, and taught him to use, a miniature vacuum disposal unit in the crew's toilet. For much of the rest of the voyage he amused himself by ridding the ship of cockroaches, and even managed to unearth a hapless mouse in the cargo holds for his first fiercely growling taste of real blood.

He took his meals by holding bits of re-hydrated protein with his claws against a bit of canvas webbing fastened to the wall of O'Flaherty's cabin, and drank his occasional spoonful of water by sipping delicately at free-floating globules of the stuff released by the crew, mostly for their own amusement. At night, when the lights were dimmed, and pretty frequently at other times, he slept, clinging with one or two carefully half-sheathed claws to the webbing of one of the crewmen's bunks. On the occasion of his first planetfall he had become so used

to zero-G that he was actually miserable in the heavy gravity of New Kingston and, to console him, the Chief Engineer made him a fancy leather collar with his name on it on a small brass tag. The origin of the name forgotten, it was spelled Roughneck.

But the now husky two-year-old cat was no hardened alley-panther. Not at all. He was a soft-muscled, thoroughly spoiled house pet whom any cooing dowager could have cuddled with impunity. Only at times, when wrestling with a free-floating sock or the like, would his growls reveal the instinctive savagery of his feline jungle heritage.

It was no wonder, then, that when the Wanderer's main gyro motor shorted across a coil which had been twenty years too long in hyperspace, Roughneck was a sadly battered cat by the time emergency measures were taken and a landing made on reaction-mass alone on the nearest theoretically habitable planet. It was no wonder also, that the ship's cat was temporarily forgotten, even by O'Flaherty, during the race against time while the short was repaired, the gyros set spinning again, and carefully calibrated on a series of known radio sources.

The race against time was occasioned by the fact that the Skipper, setting the Wanderer down where he could, had unluckily chosen a slightly sloping spot that

looked stonehard, but wasn't. From the moment of shut-down the ship had revealed by minute creaking complaints that she was slowly tipping even more out of vertical on the already tilted ground, as O'Flaherty and two of the crew found by digging around one of her landing pads that it was sinking slowly into the deceptively stoney-looking soil. The computer unemotionally reported that repairs and recalibration must be completed within six hours and four minutes or the ship would be too far out of plumb ever to rise again.

The planet, although far from Earth-normal, had a clean, breathable atmosphere, too hot by a dozen degrees for comfort, and with too much carbon dioxide, but a welcome change from the stale, re-cycled air of the ship. After hurried chemical and biological tests, the Skipper decreed that the main landing lock be left open while the crew worked and the blowers changed the air.

By the time Roughneck had become bored with the effects of newly regained gravity within the ship, the moisture-laden soil had steamed away the heat of the short landing blast. Roughneck tested the sand at the foot of the ladder and found it walkable. No one observed him as he made his way, daintily sniffing, to the edge of the blast area and luxuriously sharpened his claws on a fallen

log of the thoroughly alien planet listed in the Wanderer's memory banks as "Pl. Sec. 4432/IV."

Several of the smaller denizens of the tangled jungle surrounding the ship observed him, however, and, incorrectly identifying his upright, gently twitching tail as a weapon, decided to stalk him with slightly more than the usual caution.

Roughneck was exploring the fringes of the jungle near the blast area with an exaggerated caution of his own and beginning to feel slightly hungry when the warning siren roared. As usual at the sound of the siren, the young cat took cover. But the cover was totally inadequate for the terror which followed.

The take-off blast, fiercer and more sustained than that for landing, swept hot sand, ash, and shredded leaves into his haven, filling his eyes, nose, and ears, and singeing the long hairs of his Angora ruff. Roughneck burst from his temporary cover and fled yowling into the jungle.

It was hours later when, driven by growing hunger, he threaded his way carefully, starting at sudden slight sounds, through the tangled, flesh-like vines of 4432/IV back to the Wanderer's landing site.

The Wanderer was no longer there.

Roughneck carefully confirmed this inexplicable fact by prowling

the edge of the blast area briefly, then turned his back with magnificent unconcern, and trotted into the jungle in search of food.

Fortunately for the sheltered life of the little cat, the larger fauna of this hitherto untouched planet had left the landing area even farther behind them than he had, and, unlike him, had not felt drawn again to the spot by appetite. Game was scarce, therefore, but predators were even scarcer.

An hour later Roughneck captured a small, hairless, toad-like animal slightly larger than his one historic mouse. Unlike the mouse, the toad-thing resisted furiously and before dying left evidence of its courage and of its surprisingly long fangs in the form of a gash on Roughneck's tender black nose. Roughneck ate the creature at once without any temptation to play with it. A few minutes later the cat vomited his first alien meal and went into painful and exhausting convulsions.

The hot orange sun of 4432/IV was setting before Roughneck, weak and considerably chastened, found the strength to drag himself into the branches of a slender tree to avoid spending the night at ground level, which his instincts told him was dangerous. In the first crotch of the tree he settled himself for the night, both the strength and the inclination for nocturnal

hunting purged along with the poisonous flesh his body had rejected. Hunger and thirst kept him from sleep except in momentary snatches, and his cat's eyes, dilated to catch the slightest glimmer of the stars and of IV's one tiny moon, gave him, during his first night, a valuable introduction to the habits of the planet's hunters and hunted.

There was a pale-skinned animal, smaller than himself, which moved a long body on six short legs with a stealth so feral that Roughneck recognized it at once as an enemy and bared his fangs at it in silence from the safety of his branch. The cat's silence saved him, for a moment later the other animal pursued a huge-eared hopping creature twice its size up a neighboring tree and literally ripped it to shreds.

On the ground soon after, the pale-skinned predator was driven from the remnants of its prey by a band of lizard-like animals hardly larger than rats, loping on long, springy legs. The pale-skinned one decapitated the first of these with a snap of its jaws, but the lizard-things attacked at once in mass, and the two or three which gained a grip on its flanks calmly began devouring the flesh from which they dangled. The others swiftly ate the remains of the hopper, and those of their beheaded member, then loped in pursuit of the original hunter.

Most of what occurred during the long night happened on the ground. But once a large animal like a terrestrial wolf, except for very short fur and long, clawless digits on its paws, scented Roughneck and began rapidly climbing his tree.

Roughneck retreated to higher, smaller branches until the pursuer, fearing to trust his weight to them, renounced the chase to find other, easier prey.

Toward morning another large animal—this one definitely arboreal—appeared high in the branches of a nearby forest colossus. Except for being blind and hairless, the thing resembled a large monkey with enormous, bowl-shaped ears. Although Roughneck watched it in motionless silence, it seemed aware of him, but not immediately able to locate him. It circled the small tree in which he hid, constantly turning its huge ears in his direction, and little by little coming closer to where he lay. The frightened cat had by now ceased to move even the muscles of his restless tail. But the monkey-thing was closing in, able, perhaps, to hear Roughneck's gentle breath or the beating of his heart. When the big-eared one swung stealthily into the upper branches of Roughneck's refuge, the cat tensed his muscles in preparation for flight.

Flight was not necessary, however, for as the light waxed, a

swarm of insects the size and color of ping-pong balls found the stalker and attacked it at once, drawing streams of brownish blood from its naked flanks with each darting sting. In moments the monkey-creature fell heavily to the distant ground and the insects settled upon it while it writhed in dying convulsions. Roughneck watched until full daylight, seeing the giant insects' bodies become suffused with their victim's blood, then he slipped to the ground and vanished in the underbrush with a silence and stealth which he might never have learned in the holds and corridors of the Orion Wanderer.

In the ensuing days the cat learned many other things. He learned that hardly any of the fauna of 4432/IV, no matter how small and innocent seeming, was entirely harmless. He learned that some of the vegetation, too, was deadly, nearly losing his life when a slender, spine-covered plant whipped a net of sticky strings about his head. This experience cost the cat most of his Angora ruff and a patch of skin which was slow to heal and attracted an agonizing infestation of green, flea-like things of which he could only rid himself by deliberate and un-catlike immersion in a pool of stagnant water.

Fortunately Roughneck also learned the wiles of the hunted creature, and learned them

quickly. He found a thicket of thorny growth whose spines his thick fur could ward off, but which was avoided by nearly all of his enemies, most of which were tender-skinned and hairless. In the midst of this thicket there was a large, open-fronted cave lined with sparkling crystals whose overhanging roof protected him, when he could reach it in time, from the worst of the frequent hot downpours of the planet's storms.

Roughneck made this cave his permanent lair, and sallied forth from it in search of nourishment only at dusk, before the larger beasts of prey emerged for their nightly hunting. By trial and unhappily frequent error he found an animal whose flesh, although repugnant to his fastidious spaceship tastes, he could eat without harm.

The food-thing was a thick-bodied reptile about twice his own length, bearing a cluster of prehensile tentacles behind its head. It was covered not with scales but rather with leathery skin, and its underbelly was a rasp of small, sharp, grinding teeth. Its normal prey was a creature of about Roughneck's size which it killed by anchoring itself with its cluster of tentacles, whipping its body about its victim, and both crushing and grinding it to a pulp which it swallowed without further chewing.

Roughneck's fur offered it no purchase, and on the all-too-rare occasions when the cat could find one, he would spring up on it, spitting and snarling, and sever its head below the group of tentacles. When the muscular body ceased its writhing, Roughneck would feed upon it, tearing off chunks of the tough, unpalatable flesh, and chewing them patiently until they could be swallowed.

On one occasion Roughneck came upon one of these reptiles while it was being dealt with in a similar fashion by a beast which strongly resembled the cat himself. Seeing what he took to be a fellow feline, Roughneck approached without his recent, hard-learned caution. The cat-like animal regarded Roughneck balefully in silence until he was a pace from it, then whipped out its heavy, horn-tipped tail and not only knocked him spinning but also gave him a painful dose of formic acid injected by the spine at the end of the lashing tail.

Roughneck learned in subsequent encounters that he was no match for the cat-thing, absorbing some near-fatal stings in his desire for some kind of companionship before he learned to leave its kind strictly alone.

It was the nagging desire for companionship also which tempted him to approach a motionless object in the trail leading to his refuge among the sparkling

rocks. The object was man-sized and so roughly man-shaped that only the unsophisticated could have taken it even for O'Flaherty of the Wanderer. It waited for the cat, which it had been stalking, to come within reach, then snatched him up and, without bothering to kill him, took a generous mouthful out of his flank.

The combination—to the beast—of Roughneck's alien fur, and something poisonous to it in the flesh, prompted it to fling the young cat from it with a grunt of disgust before Roughneck could so much as scratch its incredibly tough hide with his claws.

Roughneck landed heavily ten meters away in the thorns surrounding his sanctuary, his side bleeding copiously, and one of his ears in ribbons. After a long, panting recovery, the cat got painfully to his feet and slunk to his cave, not to emerge for a full day and a night. When he did come forth at last he was obliged to range far for his next meal, a smaller than average reptile which, in the cat's now seriously weakened condition, nearly escaped him at the last moment.

The experience with the man-thing both awakened his waning memories of human companionship and completed his metamorphosis from spoiled tabby to super-cautious jungle dweller. It was then that Roughneck began to

take matters into his own well-sharpened and competent claws. If the ecology of an entire planet would not adjust to his needs, he could, and would adjust those needs himself.

Nearly everything Roughneck's size, or larger—and most things were larger—both plant and animal, stalked him, attacked him, or resisted his attacks with fangs, claws, or poison. He learned, therefore, when to attack first, what he could pursue and what he should not, and above all, how to avoid the stalkers, never going too far from the thorn-girt fastness of his cave.

He grew thin. Patches of his once glossy fur were torn away, and his healthy metabolism countered maladies of skin, flesh, and intestines. But, bit by bit, he toughened and became, himself, ever more swift and deadly. He even acquired something of a swagger when his belly was full.

Only one thing the jungle could not be made to supply: the easy, amused companionship of O'Flaherty and the other members of the Wanderer's crew. In search of these, loneliness would drive him to return often to the Wanderer's landing place, into which the weeds were beginning to march, where he would remain for brief periods, meowing softly.

It was in the fourth week of Roughneck's jungle education, but only six subjective days away

aboard the Orion Wanderer, that something happened several lights from 4432/IV. O'Flaherty changed his trousers.

O'Flaherty was one of those who had descended to the surface of 4432/IV to check the Wanderer's sinking landing pads. In doing so he had blackened the cuffs of his pants with the blast-charred remains of the planet's vegetation. A day or two off planet the Skipper began making pointed remarks about the slovenly appearance of some of the crew, and O'Flaherty had prudently decided to fold the trousers away until proper cleaning could be done. While straightening the shabby cuffs, O'Flaherty's fingers flipped into the air a rough emerald the size of a pigeon's egg.

Emeralds are as rare on any planet as they are on earth, and on many they are even rarer. On all planets they are coveted by pretty women, and since the number of pretty women was happily increasing, and the number of emeralds was unfortunately not, the value of the latter had increased rapidly and steadily over the passing centuries. No one knew this better than O'Flaherty, who had once spent a miserable month on Mars prospecting for stones and a week gambling and drinking away his meager discoveries.

Windfalls such as O'Flaherty's emerald are commonly divided

among the crews of the Orion Line ships. His first impulse, then, was to hide the stone. But O'Flaherty was both a persuasive man—as has been noted—and a generous one. Also he was a quick-witted man and had hard-earned special knowledge of emerald prospecting. So his second impulse was the one upon which he acted.

He acted knowing that space crews are as easily stirred by wealth as other men, that the Skipper was a poor man with many obligations, and that the Wanderer had ample supplies and power for a twelve-day, round-trip detour, and, best of all, that the Chief Engineer, a fussy man where his work was concerned, was not altogether satisfied with the recalibration of the gyros. He showed his emerald to the crew, therefore, and shortly afterwards headed a delegation to the Skipper's quarters.

By the time Wanderer was again orbiting 4432/IV, Roughneck had become scarcely recognizable as O'Flaherty's once fluffy pet. His ruff had been mostly torn away; the rest of his fur was sleeked by the frequent showers of his far-from-native planet, the sticky exudations of its often aggressive plant life, and Roughneck's own ministrations with a determined tongue. The tough little serpent things had become increasingly hard to find, and

among those that were left a sort of word had gone out that the cat was dangerous and to be sedulously avoided. His hunts, therefore, took him far afield, developing a tireless, pantherish lope.

When the hunts were unsuccessful he took to frequenting the Wanderer's former landing site, looking for he knew not what. He often sat for hours at the edge of the burned-out clearing, cleaning his scarred hide and even, at times, risking a lonesome yowl or two. For the rest of such hungry times he crouched in his cave in the midst of its protective thicket of thorns and placed his ancient Egyptian curse on all that his narrow-pupiled eyes fell upon.

The day the Wanderer landed, scarcely a thousand meters from its original spot, Roughneck had braved a veritable plague of the ferocious catlike things with the punishing poison-tipped tails to prowl that area, cat-cursing his anger and disgust with the entire unfriendly universe.

The thunder and flame of the Wanderer's landing blast sent both him and his alien-planet cousins racing into the relative safety of the jungle, every one of Roughneck's hairs on end. His newly learned caution kept him to his cave for many hours thereafter.

His alien relatives recovered their curiosity more readily than Roughneck did, and before long

they were haunting the edges of the new, still warm clearing where O'Flaherty, the Chief Engineer, and two other crew members were already stirring the soil for traces of wealth. The felinoids watched.

The Chief Engineer caught a glimpse of one of them in the tangle of vines at the edge of the landing site and shouted in amazement, "Believe it or not, boys, there's Roughneck!"

Followed by O'Flaherty, he approached the beast confidently, and the beast, equally confident, knowing itself a match for most creatures, waited quietly in its tangle of vines. When the Chief, a bit near-sighted from close work with minicircuits, reached for the animal, however, it promptly lashed his hand with its heavy, fang-tipped tail, nearly breaking one of his knuckles. The Chief took a backward step and swore. The animal followed up with a lightning snap at his calf, ripped out a generous mouthful of flesh, and trotted off into the jungle with its gory prize. Thereafter, discounting the possibility of Roughneck's survival, the crew, with the exception of O'Flaherty, picked off several of the things with their sidearms without approaching them.

Other than its catlike predators, the second landing site yielded nothing of interest, although the crew spent two pre-

vious days exploring its surroundings. The Skipper became sceptical and questioned O'Flaherty suspiciously concerning the source of his one and only emerald.

During these two days, Roughneck sallied only briefly out of his thorny refuge, and on none of his excursions found anything that he could eat. It was both hunger and vague memories of spaceship-days of pampering that led him on the morning of the third day to make his foray in the direction of the original landing site.

O'Flaherty, after an earnest argument with the Skipper, led a party the same morning in that direction. O'Flaherty maintained that the hunt should have started there in the first place. The Skipper, suspecting that the expedition was motivated as much by O'Flaherty's desire to find traces of his pet as by the thirst for riches, reluctantly agreed upon one more day of prospecting before his already delayed schedule would be resumed and the Wanderer would recommence its long journey home.

The prospecting party reached the site at about noon. Roughneck, delayed by a savage encounter with a harmless looking thing with a vicious mouthful of fangs, arrived at about the same time.

The cat, mindful of the man-sized animal which had once taken a mouthful of his hide, re-

garded them suspiciously from cover at first. But then he saw O'Flaherty's flaming red thatch, and cats' memories for people being excellent, galloped joyfully into the open toward where O'Flaherty and the Chief were standing together sifting a handful of pebbles in their fingers.

The Chief saw Roughneck first and immediately drew a near-sighted bead on him with a rocket pistol. Too late O'Flaherty saw the cat's nameplate winking on its collar and struck at the Chief's arm. The explosive dart was on its way.

An instant later the deadly little missile struck a stone centimeters from Roughneck's right side. The explosion took the tip of Roughneck's tail, a part of his until now undamaged right ear, and embedded splinters of steel and stone the length of the small body between.

Ordinarily, nothing smaller than a bear survives a rocket pistol blast. But cats notoriously have more than one life. Roughneck, stunned for a moment, scrambled to his feet with the energy of scandalized horror and plunged into the vines before the dust and smoke cleared.

The dispute between the Chief, who considered O'Flaherty a sentimental fool and a mistaken one, and O'Flaherty, who called the Chief, among other things, an illegitimate, trigger-mad pet-mur-

derer, was long, involved, and hot enough so that it took the other members of the party some trouble to separate them.

The rest of the day was short and unprofitable. No further gem stones were found and, according to an embittered O'Flaherty, no formations were nearby which were likely to have produced them. As the sun reddened in the afternoon sky, short-handled shovels were slung on back packs, and the detail, tired, sweat-drenched, and discouraged, prepared to leave the site for the last time.

O'Flaherty, after a calculating glance at the sun and the dusky jungle around him announced his intention of taking half an hour to find Roughneck's body if possible, and to bury it. The others protested, and the Chief, nominally the ranking man, stated flatly that they would return to the ship while there was still enough daylight. O'Flaherty made an obscene and thoroughly insubordinate gesture and stepped into the jungle at a place which showed traces of Roughneck's clotted blood. The Chief shrugged, told O'Flaherty he would have to catch up as best he could—if he could—and ordered the return march.

Roughneck, meanwhile, bleeding in a hundred small spots and his supple muscles rapidly stiffening, slowly dragged his shocked and beaten small body to-

ward the one spot on this hated planet where he had been relatively safe—his thicket and cave. And, sniffing the trail of his blood, followed a small band of the lizard-things he had observed during his first night from the relative safety of his tree limb. The lizards would not be deterred by Roughneck's thorn fence and would even consider O'Flaherty himself as feasible prey.

While it was yet light O'Flaherty followed Roughneck's blood-speckled trail with ease and speed, but as the dusk grew thicker his pace slowed. Faced with a dense tangle of thorns, and his flashlight showing no further spots of red, he was about to give up altogether and return to the ship when he heard Roughneck's cry of rage.

He burst through the thicket, leaving patches of his skin, and was just in time to scatter the band of lizards with a series of angry kicks. Those that survived

came at him and Roughneck impartially in the mouth of their shallow hole until the last lizard had been stamped underfoot or disembowelled by feline claws. It was only then that he had time to turn his torch on the wounded cat, crouched just inside the cave. As he did so the sparkling pebbles with which it was lined cast back a glory of green fire.

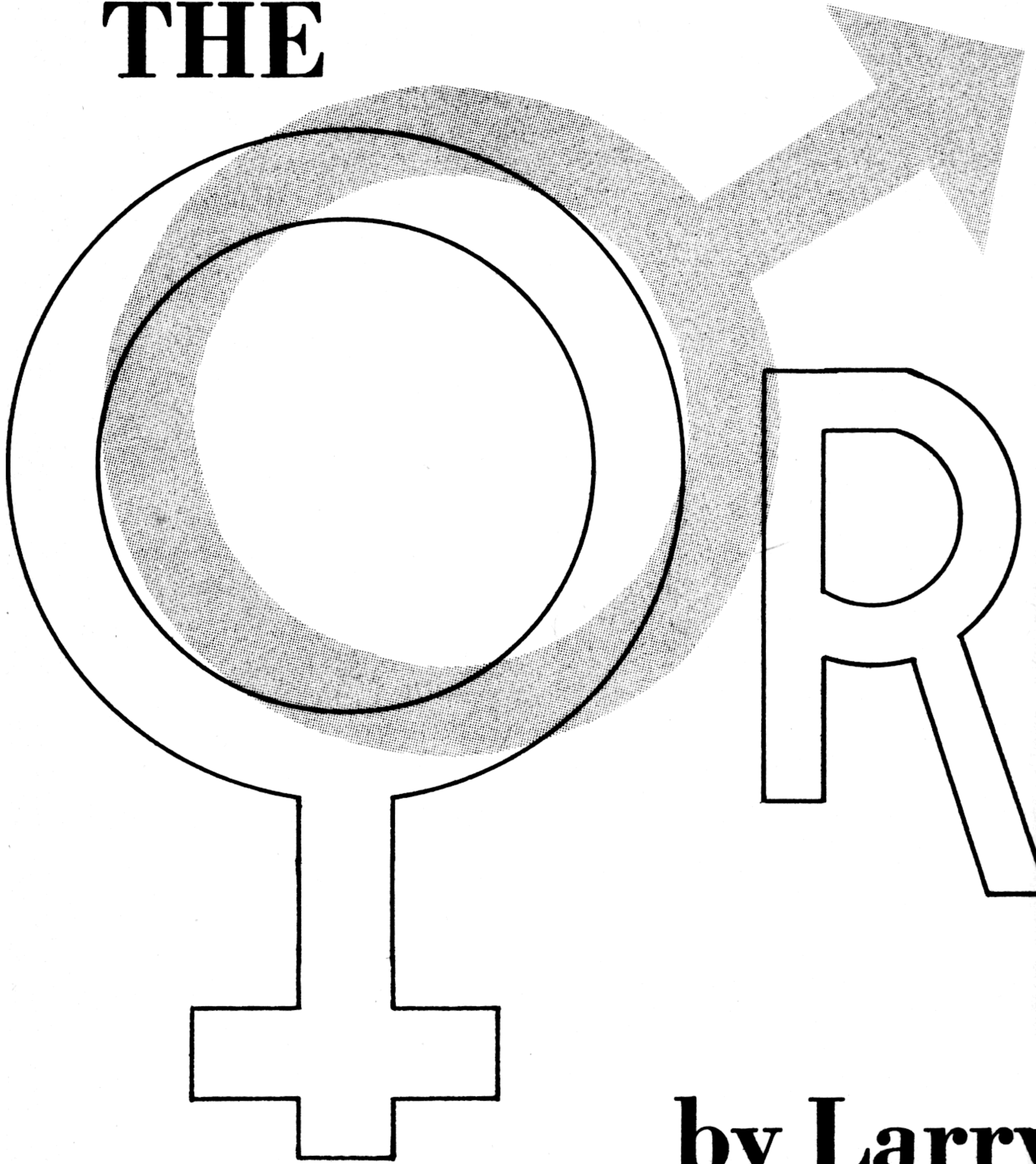
"Emeralds!" O'Flaherty breathed. "Emeralds, kilos, hundreds of kilos of them! Roughneck, you're a poor, battered kittybeast, but a *rich* one!"

And so he is.

If you should come upon a tattered but swaggering tomcat in one of the spaceports of the galaxy, and should notice that he's wearing a broad collar of fine emeralds, don't be tempted to finger it. It covers some very sensitive spots on Roughneck's hide and it may cost you a thumb. If O'Flaherty or the Skipper should catch you at it, it will cost you a great deal more than that.



THE



by Larry

The Sentients' plan seemed absurdly obvious; their weapon was so subtle as to be invisible . . .

G Y

Lisenberg

GENERAL Hinsley was bored. Once each year, by direction of the Solar System Directorate, the Occupation Command was required to invite the Sentient authorities to a lavish social affair. The budget was meager enough. Fifty thousand Terran credits were allowed for food and drinks and with the inevitable corruption in the non-com ranks, it was hard to live up to expectations. Nevertheless, the affair was always well attended.

The historic Sentient Hall of Mirrors was the site of the party, the same hall in which the formal articles of surrender had been signed. Near the General's hand-carved chair, Colonel Mauro and another officer were arguing the war all over again. General Hinsley shook his head. Why did Mauro have to continually beat the subject to death. Leave it to the goddamn military historians to construct the most flattering explanation of the crushing victory.

"I can't see why," Mauro was saying, "they didn't use their neutron weapons. They might not have beaten us, but they would have cut a wide swath in our fleet."

The General was annoyed. He knew that most of the Command considered the swarthy Colonel to be the true brains of the staff. Admittedly, Mauro had formulated the strategy that won the short-lived war with the Sentients. But

it was General Hinsley who had taken the responsibility for choosing Mauro's strategy over several other possibilities.

"What's the argument about?" he said pettishly.

"It's just this," said Colonel Mauro respectfully. He admired the General's strength and ability to make a firm decision, but he found it difficult to conceal his contempt for his conventional military mind. "I was just remarking that none of this makes sense to me. Item one," he ticked off on outstretched fingers, putting down his glass of the potent *ragacsi*. "The Sentients had a powerful armory of anti-particle weapons. Item two, they had the means of delivering them. Item three, they didn't fire a single one at us and let our forces devastate all of their major cities. I'm baffled."

The General snorted.

"I'm not," he said brusquely. "We caught them unprepared. It would have been too risky for them to use their bombs under automatic computer direction. So they had to hold off."

"I'd buy that explanation," said Mauro, "except for one thing. *They weren't unprepared.* We captured their communications center almost intact. And there was a general alarm sent out a full eight hours before we arrived."

He picked up his glass and sipped at the liquid almost reverently. Then he sighed.

"No sir," he said. "There is no doubt in my mind that they could have used their bombs. But they didn't."

At the other end of the room, the General could see the dark skin of his wife, Cynthia, contrasted against the creamy white features of the chief Sentient administrator, Dr. Skacsi. His wife's manner was animated. Painted and corseted, she was still a striking-looking woman. He gestured to a waiter and got himself another stiff shot of the Sentient liqueur. And then another.

Where would his destiny lead next? He had reached the highest military post attainable in the Terran hierarchy. And now, although he had never discussed it openly with anyone, he thought seriously about civilian leadership. Why not? He would make as forceful and efficient a Secretary of the Solar System Directorate as anyone around, probably better. He raised his hand and beckoned to the waiter once again.

Colonel Mauro eased his way through the knotted groups of officers and Sentients to join the General's wife and Dr. Skacsi. He admired the Sentient Administrator. With no armed forces, he persistently nagged at the Occupation Command in an attempt at getting the Sentient economy rolling again. Mauro smiled. He was willing to see that happen, but not too

rapidly. It was important to keep the Sentients down in the mud for a while. But they had to recover quickly enough to ease the economic burden on the Terran invaders. A good part of the occupation's expenses were offset by reparations from the Sentient colonies, colonies which were now under Terran dominion.

"In a sense," thought Colonel Mauro, "they're not paying us reparations at all. Since the colonies are now ours, we're paying out of one pocket and into another."

He laughed at the irony of his joke and looked about for one of his junior officers so that he could seem to casually extemporize this *bon mot*. But no one was in easy range. Mauro looked at the powdered neck of the General's wife. She had once been a lovely woman and was still attractive despite her years. He felt the eyes of the Sentient administrator upon him and pretended not to notice. Dr. Skacsi had a mind very much on a par with his own. Each time Mauro attempted to implement the Peace Treaty, Skacsi came up with an involved legal interpretation that vitiated what the Terrans wanted to do. After several hours of frustrating legalisms, Mauro would usually tell the Sentient what to do.

"Like LaFontaine's wolf and lamb," he thought to himself.

"Colonel Mauro," said Dr. Skacsi softly, turning very deliber-

ately to the Terran officer. "Have you set a new time for us to continue our discussions?"

"There are no further discussions slated," said Mauro. "I have issued a complete set of regulations for all Sentient civil authorities to follow. You can forward your objections in writing. But I shall ignore them."

"Nevertheless," said Dr. Skacsi, "my objections will be correct and your rulings wrong."

Mauro smiled.

"Right? Wrong? You sound like a sixteenth-century Terran theologian. For centuries, nations, planets, even entire solar systems, have operated on the principle of self-interest. We do what's best for Terra. Within that framework, we won't be too harsh on your people. But whenever our mutual interests clash, you will have to yield."

"I see," said Dr. Skacsi.

His face was impassive, the eyes neutral but guarded.

"He's angry with you," said the General's wife.

"Are you?" said Colonel Mauro.

"Not angry," said Dr. Skacsi. "Does one get angry at the wind or the upheaval from below the ground? These are primitive elemental forces without reason or ethic. One cannot become angry with them."

"Do you consider us to be barbarians?" said the General's wife.

Dr. Skacsi shrugged.

"I am your guest," he said. "Still, you can't deny that you've done barbaric things. We could have retaliated. It's no secret to you that we had the weapons to wreak terrible havoc on your people. But we didn't use them."

Mauro's spine had begun to tingle. He had tried to turn the conversation in this direction many times before yet the Sentients had always refused to discuss their conduct during the war. He wondered why Skacsi was talking freely now.

"I know that," he said. "Yet your entire nation went into underground shelters and let us take your lands, unmolested."

"We had two choices," said Dr. Skacsi. "We could use our anti-particle weapons and kill enormous numbers of your people. We could not in good conscience take that course. We had the weapons, but only to deter. We never intended to use them on anyone. So we went in the direction we knew we had to choose. We set into motion our long-range plan."

"A plan which of course you can't reveal," said Mauro.

"On the contrary," said Dr. Skacsi. "There is no secret. I will tell you our plan and you will still be unable to prevent the final course of events. We will cooperate with you. We will not resist by physical means. We will pay your outrageous demands for repara-

tions. You will hold on to the richest of our lands. And yet, in the end, we will be masters of our planet."

"Excuse me," said the General's wife. "I see a friend."

She moved through the throng gracefully, followed by the admiring eyes of the Terran and the Sentient.

"A lady of great charm," said Dr. Skacsi. "But quite unlike our own women."

"To get back to your remarks," said Mauro. "The conquered swallowing the conqueror? It has happened before. But it's hardly a plan. And it may take many centuries."

"We can wait," said Dr. Skacsi.

The General sat in his office, frustrated. He had played the tapes over and over again and each time his excitement mounted higher and higher. It was no sign of mistrust on his part, just routine caution that required him to keep his staff officers under continual surveillance.

They were good men, loyal to Terra and to his leadership. Occasionally they were critical of him but it was clear that they respected his strength. No, it was not their loyalty that had set his thoughts into turmoil but their incessant harping on the fabulous *Enchantress*. With sighs of rapture, they would detail down to the tiniest motion everything that

had taken place in her scented boudoir. He set the tape in motion once again, listening with bowed head and he felt the passionate, provocative descriptions eating into his body.

The arrangements, they said, had to be made through the Sentients. But it was obvious to the General that he himself could not use the usual channels. He would have to be discreet, to move circumspectly.

His orderly came in and announced the arrival of Dr. Skacsi. He masked his excitement and asked that the Sentient leader be shown in. He received Skacsi with gruff familiarity and raised a rather trivial point which could have easily been handled by subordinates. He had worked out in his mind what he would say, but now, as Dr. Skacsi sat there looking at him with immobile eyes, he began to lose the thread of his thought. Nevertheless, he doggedly went through his entire set speech. The Sentient agreed he would attend to this matter.

Before Dr. Skacsi left, almost casually, the General raised the question of the Enchantress. Dr. Skacsi seemed to start, and then his features regained their composure.

"The Enchantress?" he said.

The General shrugged.

"I've heard rumors about her," he said. "My men seem to think highly of her charms."

"Of that I couldn't say," said Dr. Skacsi.

"You owe me a favor," said the General. "I've always seen things in a more liberal way than I had to."

"I'd be happy to be of service."

"Then do this for me," said the General. "Arrange for me to meet the Enchantress. It must be done with the utmost discretion, of course. But I want to meet her."

"Surely," said Dr. Skacsi, a slight bite coming into his voice, "you don't think that I have anything to do with her?"

"Absolutely not," said the General. "And I hope I haven't offended you. But I have no one else that I can trust in this matter. In a way, it's a mark of my great confidence in you."

Dr. Skacsi nodded.

"I hope I can prove worthy of your confidence," he said.

When General Hinsley opened his eyes the next morning, he forgot for a single moment how special the day was to be. And then he remembered and his heart sang within him.

He leaped out of bed and stretched his body before his wife's full-length mirror. The hard-muscled arms had gone flaccid, the flat stomach bulged outward, the skin was pockmarked and sallow. The General cursed the slothfulness of routine that allowed his once magnificent body

to run down. But then he smiled because he could see beneath trivial externals and glory in the wonders that lay within him. He alone knew of the deep tenderness that welled in his breast, the sensitivity that suffused every pore, the witty ripostes that bubbled in his head, simply waiting for the proper setting to dart out and mesmerize the surrounding company.

He turned around and looked back at his wife, shorn of paint and finery, still deep in sleep. Her mouth was open, her breathing heavy and uneven, purple and red blotches scattered about the puffed contours of her cheeks. Her hair was bound in a Sentient *khat*, a napless towel wound about her head like a half-finished bowl on a potter's wheel. He sighed and shook his head. After twenty-seven years, surely he deserved a little more of life.

General Hinsley went into the stall shower that had been fashioned to meet his personal instructions, a reminder of the more cultivated pleasure back home. He turned on the icy water and scrubbed at his skin until every inch of it became angry with blood. He emerged all aglow, towelling himself as he hummed an old Army tune with bawdy lyrics which he no longer remembered. He began to clean his teeth relentlessly, as though he were planning to model for one of the huge billboards that marred the

highways of Terra. And, at the very end, with consummate care, he brushed his thinning locks of hair to one side, spreading the hairs by hand so that no bare patch of the yellowed scalp might show.

He dressed with unusual devotion, even for him. He took real silk underwear, hidden away at the bottom of a bureau drawer, then the elegant dress shirt he had been saving for a very special occasion. The tie was not standard Terran issue, but a sky-blue Sentient cravat, slender, elegant, and he knotted it with the practiced grace of an expert. He put on his dark-gray dress uniform, the very same one he had worn when, as Commanding Officer of the Terran forces, he had met with the head of the conquered Sentient armies.

He stepped back and eyed the complete soldier. It was perfect! Pausing only to don the flaming-scarlet beret of the Terran Commando, he softly tiptoed along the foyer corridor and out of the apartment door.

The Sentient star had not yet risen. There was a haze in the morning air which he detested. It always made him feel as though he were breathing through wet gauze. A few HQ officers were standing about but he brushed by them. His orderly snapped to rigid attention and opened the door to his helivehicle. The General

leaned forward, and just as he had rehearsed, casually instructed his orderly to stay behind.

"I'll pilot the heli myself," he said. "It's a sensitive mission and I've got to go alone."

It was moderately risky, the General knew. He ought not to travel alone. But the Sentients had accepted the occupying armies with spineless servility. There had been little violence. Occasionally a drunken Terran soldier raised a little Cain, broke a shop window, or raped a Sentient woman. The General had little respect for the Sentient men. In their place, Terrans, by now, would have had a violent underground going full blast.

He soared high in the fetid air and opened up full speed, handling the helivehicle with the easy carelessness of an old-time space pilot, looking coolly at his curved side mirror to see if the reflecting superconductors were properly aligned.

He slid back the front panel and let the sharp streams of air blow across his nose and mouth and he felt clean and vital and young. He flew almost one hundred miles before he noted the landmark he had been instructed to watch for.

He dropped down into a patchy, burned-out field, just next to an Occupation Billboard that proclaimed in Sentient characters, "Cooperate with the Terran

Forces; They Are Your Friends." He climbed out of the heli and walked very gingerly behind the billboard.

An elderly Sentient male whom he had never seen, came forward, his face impassive, bowing to the General with great deference.

"Please forgive me, General," he said. "But it will be necessary to blindfold you first. It is a matter of absolute necessity."

"I quite understand," said the General.

Nevertheless, he felt just a trace of fear, as the cold binding went around his eyes. He sensed his pulse rate rising, but otherwise, he was surprisingly calm. The Sentient man took a firm hold on his arm and guided him forward. He was eased into some kind of vehicle, a Sentient airbus he supposed, and after his seat belt had been tightly fixed, they rose into the air under the throbbing and sighing of controlled air bursts.

He sat in complete silence, wondering even now why he had risked his reputation for what lay ahead. He thought again of what his men had said about the Enchantress. It was barbaric, lewd. It involved a kind of vulgar sensuality that he normally would have skirted. But after all, he told himself, wasn't this another world, to be judged by a totally new set of standards?

The Sentient airbus had landed

now, and very gently he was led out on to the ground. He walked on for what seemed to be great distances, stumbling occasionally on a stone, but taking it all with good humor. Then he felt the texture of the ground change beneath his feet and the chill dank smell of an underground passage in his nostrils. And finally, although he hadn't touched a wall or a door, he sensed that he had come into a building of some kind.

His blindfold was not removed, but gentle fingers began to gradually strip him of all his clothes. He was faintly embarrassed at first, but an unfamiliar Sentient voice reassured him. He began to chuckle at the recollection of all the care he had taken in dressing that morning. He reached out and touched himself and discovered that he was mother naked.

Someone now eased him into yet another room and for the first time in his journey, he heard a door close behind him. He stood there awkwardly, waiting for some word that might tell him what was to be done next. But there was no sound other than the rhythmic breathing of a woman, perhaps

nine or ten feet beyond him. It was the moment he had waited for, the moment for which he had risked censure and perhaps the blighting of his political ambitions.

He tore the blindfold from his eyes and bounded forward to the fabled Enchantress, ready for the unparalleled ecstatic love-making others had described in such fascinating detail.

Lying on the bed before him, her face shyly averted from his, was his wife, Cynthia. He pivoted in midair, turning frantically in the hope that she had not yet recognized him before he realized that he was in his own apartment near Occupation Headquarters.

The following morning, Colonel Mauro found the General hanging from the sturdy ceiling fixture of his stall shower. He had used his tie, not the standard Terran issue, but a sky-blue Sentient cravat, slender, elegant but strong. He was wearing his dark-gray dress uniform, the very same one he had worn, when, as Commanding Officer of the Terran Forces, he had met with the head of the conquered Sentient people. ▼





Books

THE new decade has been very eclectic so far. Among the stuff I've been sent to review since the last column are four comic books, a collection of L. Frank Baum animal stories printed in the Orient, several new things by Jules Verne and a novel of my own. I read my own book (*AFTER THINGS FELL APART*, Ace, 75¢) all the way through again and decided James Dickey is not the only poet among novelists. The comic books were mailed out by National Periodicals to prove they're "concerned—about ecology, about youth rebellion, about race problems." So now Batman, Aquaman, The Green Lantern and the rest of the Muscle Beach super crowd talk about pollution and politics while they kick people in the face. This may indicate concern but looks about as sensible as blowing up the school library to ensure free speech. The Baum animal tales have been brought back to life by some of his more devoted fans and

do little but prove he was wise to have spent most of his time in Oz. As for Jules Verne, if he is indeed "the founder of modern science fiction," this may explain why so much of it is such tough going.

Years ago in Los Angeles I worked for a copy chief who tested each commercial script and piece of advertising I turned in by holding his thumb and forefinger about an inch apart and setting them down on the opening paragraph. If something interesting or compelling didn't happen between those two fingers, the commercial got rejected. Certainly I'm unwilling to apply such a harsh rule to all science fiction novels. I have to admit, though, that it is a critical device I now and then use in reviewing. And that is why *ALIEN ISLAND* by T. L. Sherred (Ballantine, 75¢)—

The traditional way to tell a story is to begin at the beginning, but I wasn't there at the beginning.

At that important time I was

night barkeep at the only bread-booze-beer stop in Greenbush, population sixty plus, two hundred miles north of Detroit. Three days a week I worked in the cafeteria at Wurtsmith SAC Airbase just outside of Oscoda . . .

—and *WITCH QUEEN OF LOCHLANN* by George Henry Smith (Signet, 60¢)—

Peggy O'Shea was my favorite manicurist.

—are not among the books reviewed this time.

LAND OF UNREASON

Fletcher Pratt/L. Sprague de Camp
Ballantine, 95¢

One of the many small things the Second World War put an end to was this kind of book. It first appeared in 1941 and back then would have been called a screwball comedy or a wacky and slightly ribald fantasy. Such genres are no more. This is an affable novel and, for all its preoccupation with drinking and jumping into bed, a gentle one. About a man who wakes up and finds himself in the country of elves and magicians.

THE STEEL CROCODILE

D.G. Compton
Ace, 75¢

I used to know a guy who had the notion he was nondescript. He claimed he could never get a drink because to bartenders he always

looked just like the customer they'd served a minute before. I got to thinking of him while reading *THE STEEL CROCODILE*. Because during it I kept getting the feeling I had already read it before, even though it is a brand new novel. Compton, as I've mentioned in these pages, writes well enough. But this book is more a synthesis of other glum technological future books than something of his very own. Here I seemed to sense an accumulation of prior British authors lurking just around the next turn in the corridor, peeping through the hedge, and peeking over the garden wall.

THE SPIRIT OF JEM

P. H. Newby
Dell Yearling, 75¢

Supposedly, this is a juvenile. In fact, the back cover says you only have to be ten years old to read it. The story of a boy who suffers a forced loss of memory, this is, though full of motion and violence, a strange and quiet book. It was first published in England in 1948 and shares with the works of Orwell and some others the early postwar preoccupation with the nature of dictatorships and how people were going from then on to react to them. An allegory to be sure, but with little of the pretentiousness this term too often implies.

THE MOON OF SKULLS

Robert E. Howard
Centaur Press, 60¢

The Centaur Press, which may well be defunct by the time you read this, has plans to rescue an assortment of novels and stories out of the old pulps. They have good intentions and awful typography. Howard, who's had a very successful posthumous career, is barely readable. However, the other title Centaur has brought out, though not quite a fantasy, is much more interesting. The novel is **THE PATHLESS TRAIL** by Arthur O. Friel, and it was originally a serial in the venerable action pulp *Adventure*. I would have bet I was beyond enjoying a trek up river through the jungle book, but I read this one straight through.

TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

Emmanuel G. Mesthene
Mentor, \$1.25

This book might be useful if Professor Mesthene came along with it. It reads not like a book but like a syllabus for some new university course. A course aimed at demonstrating that colleges are concerned and keeping up with the times. It is so deliberately fair minded as to make absolutely no points about the social and political changes being wrought by advancing technology. Don't buy it, but try to sneak a look at its bib-

liography, which makes up a good fourth of the book. There you'll find a generous list of the books that do cover the areas Mesthene has skimmed over.

THE MAKING OF KUBRICK'S 2001

Edited by Jerome Agel
Signet, \$1.50

Editor Jerome Agel is a very now person. So you can bet when he puts together a scrapbook devoted to clippings and photos about his favorite movie that it isn't going to look like something you might whip up with a Woolworth tablet and some flour paste. No, it is a very now scrapbook. The kind of thing you'd expect from the man who conceived and co-ordinated one of Marshall McLuhan's books. Lots of typography, lots of graphics. If you would like to have a 367 page souvenir of Kubrick's dreary space opera, here it is.

THE YEAR 2000

Edited by Harry Harrison
Doubleday, \$4.95

Here is Harry Harrison, a year behind Kubrick & Clarke. But with a considerably more entertaining book. His introduction is a fairly good quick lecture about technological change, the future and some of the things science fiction does. The authors of the thirteen stories in the book didn't

read the introduction, and a few of them can't seem to think of even one good use to put the SF medium to. While a couple, notably Keith Laumer in his elephantine parable about the future of abortion laws, nudge you in the

ribs with the message so hard as to produce the illusion of breaking bones. Most of the contributors do well by themselves and science fiction. Chad Oliver, in a rare appearance, especially so.

—RON GOULART

Through Time And Space With Ferdinand Feghoot: LXXIV

Feghoot's son Garthwaite, a six-year-old, wet his bed every night, to the great distress of his parents. Every remedy was exhausted: physicians, psychiatrists, hypnotists. Finally, Feghoot himself contrived an ingenious device which, at the very first sign of the accident happening, set off an alarm bell.

It worked to perfection. So swift and shrill was it that Garthwaite was always awakened in time to avoid all but the tiniest dampness. Night after night, this occurred, and the boy began to get sulky and fretful. "That silly old bell!" he complained. "It wakes me up all the time. I'd sooner be wet."

"Don't worry, son," his father assured him. "Pretty soon you won't need it at all."

Sure enough, a night came when the bell didn't ring—but the accident happened. Feghoot soon learned the truth of it. The precocious child, having cleverly short-circuited the alarm, was looking very smug about the whole business.

At once, frowning terribly, he turned him over his knee.

"Daddy!" screamed Garthwaite. "Y-y-you aren't going to g-give me a *spanking*?"

"What did you expect me to give you?" roared Ferdinand Feghoot. "A new Nobel Peace Prize?"

—GRENDAL BRIARTON

How We Won The Monodyne

Revolution is funny;
It makes the cloudy skies
sunny . . .

JOSEPH RENARD

I: TEXT OF PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS TO CONGRESS

Mr. Speaker, Mr. Vice-President, Members of the 239th Congress, Distinguished Guests, my fellow Americans:

It is with a heavy heart and a grievous conscience that I have called this extraordinary joint-session of Congress, a session summoned for the solemn reasons of which all of us are only too well aware. I shall try to make my remarks as brief as possible. Night is falling fast, and I know you all want to run back to your homes before the blackness envelops us.

The mysterious and catastrophic breakdown of our Monodyne, the very spine of our system, the source of all our power, this sudden and as yet unexplained paralysis, I say, which has darkened and crippled our great Cosmetropolis; silenced all, I repeat, *all* communications; turned our hot-houses into freezers and our freezers into furnaces while, in the process, transforming our food supply into a festering mass of garbage; grounded our aircraft (often from a considerable altitude); isolated our colonies on Mars, Venus and the Moon; rendered worthless the myriad automatic appurtenances

that are the very lifeblood of our citizenry; this vast disaster, I repeat, will be, shall be and is, yes, abhorrent.

As I said at the outset, my fellow Americans, we still have not traced the source of the breakdown; we have not yet established contact out there in the Rockies; but I swear to you, my fellow citizens, I swear to you on my mother's grave that every button will be pushed, even if I have to go out there and push them myself, every file will be rummaged, every wire traced, every circuit broken before we finally give up.

I fear, as I address this great Congress in these august halls, that my message is reaching very, very few of those on the outside. We are trying to broadcast this address from a hand-cranked generator borrowed from the Smithsonian Institution, and perhaps a few hundred of you out there with antique transistor sets from the nineteen seventies will be able to pick it up, however faintly.

But let the word go forth! We shall not sit back and wait for something to happen! We shall keep frantically busy until something does happen! Above all, rest assured that your President is not going to let you go catapulting into oblivion.

Good night, and pleasant dreams.

II: RELEVANT PRESIDENTIAL MEMORANDA

TO: SEC OF TRANSPORTATION.

Have thoroughbreds from Bowie and Laurel arrived at South Lawn? Get on this right now. We're going to need every last one of those nags.

TO: SEC OF DEFENSE.

Check with DOT on horses. Once they arrive, put a man on every one and take off immediately for Monodyne. Weapons. They may encounter trouble. You're going to have to get as many of those old gunpowder-and-bullet jobs as you can from the War Museum, the Smithsonian, the surplus houses. Do you know anybody who can fire them? And what about ammo? Isn't it ruined by now? I've ordered State to send runners and rowers to our foreign embassies to reassure them that everything's under control, that I'm in absolute power. For your family's sake you had better make sure I'm correct.

TO: CIA DIR.

Are your boys responsible for this? I want a direct answer.

III: TRANSCRIPTION OF VIDEOPHONE CONVERSATION BETWEEN PRESIDENT AND DR. MAX WHITE

MAX WHITE: Hello, Mr. President. Surprised to see your videophone working?

WHITE HOUSE: What? What? What? How did you dial in here?

MW: I'm on the hot line, Mr. President. From Monodyne.

WH: How did you get access to the hot line? Where's General Farnsworth?

MW: The general is incapacitated at the moment, along with several hundred other untrustworthy personnel. I've had to replace him as commander.

WH: What do you mean, replace him? Who are you? What's your name?

MW: Dr. Max White. I was the Assistant Chief Engineer before Farnsworth and the others above me took sick and I had to take command.

WH: Well, what's the trouble out there? Why has all the power stopped? When can you fix it? What's the trouble?

MW: Nothing is wrong with the mechanism. I simply cut the power. And now I need your help.

WH: Well, I can tell you, Doctor, I need your help. This country is in a mess.

MW: You can say that again.

WH: How can I help? What can I do?

MW: We need your physical presence to effect an orderly transfer of power. Foreign governments might look askance at a violent revolution.

WH: What in God's name are you talking about now?

MW: Mr. President, we are talk-

ing about an orderly transfer of power from you to me. Now please comply with my instructions or you will find your air-filtration factories functioning once more, but pumping nerve gas into every domed city in the country. We don't wish to do it that way. We're men of mercy and of reason.

WH: You'll never get away with this, White! This is treason. I order you to put Farnsworth on this phone at once and end this ridiculous farce which can only end in your public dismemberment.

MW: Mr. President, I will not tolerate that kind of talk from you. If you'll pardon the expression, I've got you by the balls. I can kill all your people and turn your country into embers right now. You are impotent, sir, and if you persist in shouting threats and orders at me, I shall exercise my power. If you place any value on the lives of your citizens and have any respect for your Constitution, you will comply with us now and follow our instructions.

WH: All right, all right, what's your crackpot plan?

MW: You leave immediately through the hydrotunnel for the Monodyne with your Vice-President and the next three men in line of succession. We will energize the Presidential car, and that car only. Needless to say, you'll be under constant surveillance, so don't try anything. Bon voyage.

IV: MINUTES OF THE CABINET MEETING

COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF: Gentlemen, I have grave news. I have heard from Monodyne and the situation is fraught with catastrophe—

Please, gentlemen, please, a little order here, listen to me. There's little time left and I must make this as brief as possible. A Dr. Max White—run a check on him fast, Edgar—is threatening a coup. He apparently has control of Monodyne and wants me out there for what he calls an "orderly transfer of power." I've got to leave immediately, or he threatens to gas all the cities. God knows what awaits me, but once I'm there I'll do everything in my power to stall for time. Jim, do you have any idea how long it will take your men to get out there on the horses?

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE: Frankly, sir, I don't know. My guess would be a week or two. Those horses are bred for speed; they're used to running six furlongs, a mile, maybe two at the most. I don't know how well they'll hold up galloping full tilt out to Colorado.

CIC: Well, get on it immediately. What about the weapons?

DOD: We ran a brief check at the war museum and the Smithsonian, and we're looking into some of the surplus houses. We should

be able to equip at least a company by morning.

CIC: That's not soon enough. I may be dead by then. Make it sooner.

DOD: Yes, sir. Incidentally, sir, Colonel Quackenbush of the Quartermaster General's Corps ran into some old uniforms like they wore in the Civil War. He thought it would be a good idea, being on horses and all, if the men wore those cavalry uniforms; that way there'd be . . .

CIC: You asshole! We're facing extinction and you want to try on costumes! I don't give a damn if Quackenbush wears a jockstrap or goes naked, I want those men out of here, now!

DOD: Yes, sir. And, good luck, sir.

CIC: Get out of here! All right, Edgar, what's the word on this White? Make it brief.

FBI: Forty-five. Been at Monodyne eighteen years. Largely responsible for consolidating all energy there and phasing out all other plants. No record of subversion, no membership in any political group or party. Distinguished military record. Valuable work on Lunar colony. Born in Poisoned Creek, Colorado, mother a . . .

CIC: Isn't that an Indian reservation?

FBI: That's right, sir, father was Chief Whitefeather of the Zunis. The son changed his name as soon as he went to college. He's been passing as White ever since.

Never had anything to do with the Indians, so he was given successive security clearances even though he's not really an American. No history of mental disorder. Married, has three . . .

cic: All right, that's enough. Let me have that dossier to study in the tube. Well, gentlemen, I must be leaving. Harry, John, Richard, Bill, you'll be coming with me; he wants you there too. Edgar, I'm delegating all final decisions to you in my absence. Otherwise, I want you department heads to take full responsibility for your actions. Let's go.

V: TRANSCRIPT OF CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF AND DR. MAX WHITE

mw: Ah, Mr. President. Sit down. Would you like a drink? Some coffee? Perhaps a bite to eat?

cic: All right, White, what's your story? What are you after, money?

mw: My country, Your Excellency.

cic: See this checkbook? I can write you a check for any amount you name, up to and including the entire U.S. Treasury. Whom do I make it out to?

mw: No, thank you, Mr. President.

cic: Afraid it's going to bounce? You want cash?

mw: No, Mr. President. We want

our country back. We're taking it back. And sending you to the Moon where you belong.

cic: What? What? What?

mw: You stole it from us almost a thousand years ago, and you've all but destroyed it and us. We never had the power to resist you successfully until now, so we kept our mouths shut after the first gigantic massacres. Until now we were the impotent ones. Now we have the power—I have the power—and we're booting you upstairs.

cic: Funny, White, there's nothing about your psychiatric troubles in your dossier here. When did you escape from the booby hatch?

mw: When I stopped believing in your society and started working for the revolution. Sit down, Mr. Chief Executive. You've been squatters on our land and you've ruined it so utterly that no plant can grow—you have to raise your food in artificial hothouses and process it in factories to make it edible. You've poisoned the air so badly you have to live in plastic domes. The few birds left can't fly. The few fish left can't swim. They can hardly float. The only animals left are cockroaches. You've chopped down the forests, paved the soil from coast to coast, mined and sucked the land underneath until even your vast parking lot is collapsing. And in the process you've made your people so dependent on all the vast gadgetry powered by the Monodyne that

they're helpless now, Mr. President, utterly at my mercy.

CIC: White, I'm giving you one last chance to recant. Please, please reconsider before you've blown us all to hell.

MW: Hardly, Mr. Commander-in-Chief, hardly. None of your people will be destroyed. We intend to treat them with a humanity you've never shown toward us.

CIC: What are you going to do then? Put us on reservations, I suppose.

MW: No, no. The Moon, Mr. President. You're all going to the Moon. That's where you belong anyway. You're all exiles, nomads. All your ancestors forsook their native lands, colonials like all the others. But the others went back when the natives made it too hot for them in the nineteen hundreds. The French left Algeria, the British India. But you stayed. You took the precaution of killing off the natives instead of enslaving them. But you didn't quite kill all of us off. And now our time has come. We're kicking you out.

CIC: That's absurd, White. We're Americans. We have no other place to go.

MW: That's right, Mr. President, nobody wants you back. You have no roots. Your only home is the Moon. That's where you belong, and that's where you're going.

CIC: I repeat, you're mad, sir. You say you'll send us to the Moon. Why, we'd perish up there in a

few months without supplies, without the Monodyne power to send ships back and forth.

MW: We'll keep this thing going to provide enough power for the regular runs of supplies, oxygen, raw materials. We'll trade with you. We'll give you foreign aid. But you're going, every last one of you. It's that or die here while we wait to take over. What is your decision, Mr. President?

CIC: I just don't see it. What do you want our country for; what the hell could a bunch of savages like you ever do with it? You'll ruin everything we've built.

MW: We'll let most of it erode. The worst blights we'll have to obliterate—the cities for instance, and most of the factories. We'll expose the soil, stop the pollution, let the birds fly again, let the animals breed and run wild. We can still make fire. We can still raise vegetables and fruits. We can still hunt, and when the animals are thriving, we'll take what we need for food and leave the rest alone. We still have body odors, puberty rites, families, tribes and gods we're loyal to rather than bureaucracies and brand names. We're taking our country back.

CIC: You'll never get away with this, White. We have allies, all deeply in debt to us. They'll never tolerate this. Not all of them are dependent on the Monodyne for power. Think you're living in a vacuum?

MW: I've already contacted them; they understand the situation as I've explained it to them, in your name, of course. There won't be any trouble whatsoever. That's why I want you to hand power over to me peacefully, constitutionally. It will make things easier for everyone.

CIC: All right, White, what do you want me to do?

MW: I suggest a nationwide address tonight, tendering your resignation, ordering your people to the Moon. The ships are ready to begin ferrying immediately, the power will be provided as necessary.

CIC: Give me a week to think it over.

MW: Your people will be dead or dying if we wait that long. We must begin immediately. You'll have to get them on the road to the launching sites now if you want even half of them to survive.

CIC: I need time, White, I need time to prepare a speech, for one thing. I have to come up with a cover story. The people must never know the truth.

MW: Tomorrow afternoon, then. At three o'clock. I'll activate the TV sets and flash a message every hour. They'll all be waiting for you.

VI: PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS TO THE PEOPLE

My fellow Americans: It is

with a heavy heart and a grievous conscience that I come before you this afternoon. At this moment I am at Monodyne. I have inspected every wire, pushed every button, broken every circuit, searched every file, and I have some very grave news. The plant is irreparably damaged, no longer capable of providing for us in the manner to which we have grown accustomed. We have to take other measures. I have grappled with this problem over the last insomniac fifteen hours, and I have several alternatives. We can stay here and slowly perish. I give us three weeks before all available food, water and other essential needs are depleted. At that point we will all drop dead.

Another alternative is to ask the help of those who, in the past, have enjoyed our largess. Vast extension cords could be hooked into Europe. But we have always been a self-supporting land, and it is out of the question at this point in our history to go, as it were, on welfare.

The only honorable alternative to perishing altogether or becoming the beggars of the globe is to leave this land altogether and re-settle on the Moon. There is, and will be, enough power to transport us and to sustain us once we have arrived, provided here by a small skeleton crew of self-sacrificing patriots. Once we have arrived there, a new government, a new

constitution will have to be formed. The skeleton crew here and the arch-reactionary senile population who refuse to leave will continue to be governed by the 1789 Constitution, and deal with other earthbound governments accordingly.

I hereby resign the office of President of the Republic. Vice-President Kennedy resigned this morning. The next two gentlemen in line, Speaker of the House Junckett and President Pro Tem of the Senate Llobye, were electrocuted last night in a terrible accident. The Secretary of State, Mr. Smythe, has also resigned, and I have appointed a new Secretary, Dr. Max White. By law, he now becomes President. See you all on the Moon.

VII: AP UP IP WIRE STORY

Shortly after delivering his concession speech, the President, according to highly placed White House sources, was racked with guilt over what he considered to be an act of high treason. Gnash-teethed and furrow-browed, the tall, burly, broad-shouldered veteran of many a *crise de conscience* seriously considered committing hara-kiri, but immediately dismissed the act, our source continued, as yellow. Should he have to face the spittle of billions of his fellow countrymen on the Moon, a barrage of high-bouncing Moon

rocks, the loss of his honor, his manhood, his Americanism, well, then, he is reputed to have thought, amen. He was determined, if necessary, to ride the tiger all the way to the zoo.

Stalling for time, the wily Prexy resisted White's efforts to send him off on one of the first ships. "I've got to stay here where the communications are, catch any foul-ups, go on the tube, and give orders. I want to be the last man on the last ship. You can understand that, can't you, White? The Captain goes up with his ship?"

White agreed, suspiciously at first, but then quite enthusiastically, sensing the logic, the justice, the honor of the paleface's plan.

The Presidential rocket, meanwhile, was being readied "up top," on the mesa a mile above Monodyne itself. The ship was packed with the sumptuous gifts that Indian emperors of yore were wont to bestow upon their white peers.

Down under, the President was sweating it out. As H-hour approached, as he monitored the last of the refugees loading onto the final ships at launching pads from Litte Rock to Big Sur, from Paris, Texas, to Rome, New York, from Napa Valley to Pike's Peak, the President said a final prayer and felt his body go limp. He was ready for the worst, for the final humiliation.

Along with Vice-President Ken-

nedy he was accompanied up to ground level by President White, dressed now in ceremonial robes and an enormous feather headdress, as well as by the most powerful members of the new government: fellow conspirators among the engineers and the tribal leaders of the Indian nations with whom White had been clandestinely plotting since his childhood.

Final farewells were exchanged, the Indian leaders passed the marijuana-stuffed peace pipe on which the tight-lipped President refused to puff. A tom-tom hammered out a menacing tattoo.

As the ceremonies were drawing to a close, as the President cast a last wistful glance across the horizon of his beloved country, he thought he heard a galloping of hooves, a distant but a hearty war cry. Other eyes turned to the source of the steadily rising noise and squinted with curiosity, suspicion, a hint of inbred fear. And then the first of the blue-clad troops leapt onto the plateau, urging on their sweating steeds with rusty spurs.

"THE CAVALRY, HARRY!" the President sobbed. "THE CAVALRY'S COMING!"

He grabbed the Vice-President and taking advantage of the shocked distraction of the redskins, rushed up the steps into the rocket and bolted the door behind them. From a porthole they

watched the amazing scene unfold before them: thousands of brave men clad in the dusty blue uniforms of the ancient Union Cavalry, firing antique M-16's from the war museum, screaming like madmen as they encircled the utterly defenseless, dumbfounded and stupefied redskins who hardly had time to scurry for cover under the superstructure of the spacecraft before the cavalry had massacred them.

The President and Vice-President emerged triumphant, screaming as madly as had the troopers. The CIC immediately conferred the rank of General of the Army on Colonel Quackenbush, who had led the heroic charge.

Two dozen of the elite corps descended into the bowels of Monodyne, accompanied by the CIC. The guards inside, unapprised of the situation up top and still over-awed by the presence of the President, were afraid to put up any sort of resistance and were quickly disarmed and detailed as guides.

Once in charge of the communications control point and the command post, the President quickly located the ground plans, and a half dozen of his men, led by the captured guards, descended to the brig, where several hundred of the top engineers, loyal Americans all, had been incarcerated.

The rest is history. Power was restored within the hour, and

within a month the nation had totally recovered. The economy boomed more spectacularly than ever.

The President, our source reveals, will never forget the moment of triumphant return to the launching pad. There—dismembered arms, shattered skulls, bodies like sieves letting blood, a

sprawling pile of gore—lay the redskins.

“We’ve done it, Mr. President,” General Quackenbush hollered. “We’ve done it again.”

“We have, we have,” the President affirmed, a bright glint gleaming from his clear, weary blue eyes. “The sons of bitches never learn. They never learn.” ▼



In the August issue of FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION

Part one of a two part novel, **THE GOAT WITHOUT HORNS**, by Thomas Burnett Swann. The narrator of this absorbing story is a dolphin! In the words of the narrator, “the story is monstrous at times, as chilling as a confrontation with a tiger shark, as unlikely as an octopus or a narwhal, and the ending—well, you shall judge for yourselves.”

The August F&SF is on sale June 30.

BEASTCHILD, (*from p. 83*)

But he would have to wait until he was able to settle his emotions. A leader of men should not be seen in tears . . .

Elsewhere at that time:

—David lay in healing bandages, swathed like a mummy, basking in the warm rays of a speed-heal lamp, attended constantly by machines and men (for a human life was a terribly precious thing now). He could not move nor speak. But his mind was active. Another book was in his mind now, the first he had thought about writing in some time. It would be about Hulann, about the boy Leo, about the war. He would begin it in Hulann's room in the occupation tower, with Hulann asleep, tucked into the nether-world pocket, his overmind detached and blank . . .

—Leo stopped walking away from the beach, looked back one last time at the almost invisible grave.

He felt much as he had when he had first seen the shattered form of his father. He wondered how Hulann had felt about him. He remembered the naoli putting a protective arm around his shoulders when Docanil had them up against the overturned locomotive. They had postured like father and son. Yet, only a week ago, Hulann would have thought of him as a Beastchild, a primitive. At last, the rain was running down his neck, making him shiver heavily. He turned and left the beach, the evening, the rain. Hulann had lived a few centuries. He, Leo, would have only another hundred years or so. He would have to try to make those decades as full as possible, as sort of a monument . . .

—The Spirit entered the flesh of a woman, sank deep into her pouch, settled into the egg as it was fertilized. It had no personality at such an age. It had no thoughts—save one: *A Hunter has no soul.* ▼

Color prints of cover

Full color prints of Bert Tanner's cover for this issue of *Venture* are available. The prints contain no overprinting and are delivered flat, suitable for framing. Send \$1.00 to: Mercury Press, Inc., P.O. Box 516, Rockville Centre, N.Y. 11571

prosthetic



by basil wells

RUHL ALLSON FELT HIMSELF relaxing into the comfortable foam cushioning of the control chair. As though from yards distant he listened to the building muted hum of the controls in the helmet that completely hooded his skull. Even his thoughts were coming slowly, stickily, as he waited for the mental contact that would link him directly with the Scoop.

Fifty hours without sleep . . . his body cried out for rest. His sight had grown blurred and gritty, and his mouth was a gummy cavity somewhere down there. Yet, when he closed the lone eye left to him, visions of the flaming hell of that gasoline truck dead ahead, and the terrified muted wail of Lisl beside him, came up from the emptiness to haunt him.

Only by throwing himself into the work on Project Knothole, here in this secluded test laboratory and its linked factory, could he banish, briefly, that recurrent nightmare . . .

Now the power hum had passed the upper ranges of human hearing, and he knew the linkage was about to take place.

He was, suddenly, seeing a limited range of the testing apron's blast-scorched floor, and further, out across the mesa's eastern brink, the impossibly blue sky and serrated peaks of distant mountains. He was seeing with both eyes. Or so it seemed. The controls—*mentrols* he had mentally christened them a matter of ten or twelve days earlier—bypassed the eyes, and nostrils, and ears to contact the proper brain centers . . .

With this mental contact the task of flying and manipulating the tiny four-inch flying disc, unofficially termed the Scoop, was much simplified. Only the miniaturized components of the Scoop's intricate control and receiving mechanisms were complex.

He set the power thrust at near maximum and took firm mental grip over the tiny craft's controls. He could see so clearly, with a perfection of detail and a sharpness his own faulty lenses had never supplied . . . and the Scoop was boring skyward.

The speed of this latest model was unbelievable. He gloried in the swift dwindling of the build-

ings and control towers on the mesa below him. For a few brief seconds he allowed the Scoop to dive, and bank, and go into tight, twisting rolls. Then he sent it plunging down toward the irrigated croplands and the knot of dwellings about the main factory, below the upreared testing mesa.

The Scoop was designed to spy on possible unfriendly ships, or infiltrating groups of suspected humans. It could record and transmit both sight and sound to the person back at the control center—in this case, Ruhl Allson. It could hover silently, or land, hopefully, undetected.

This, Allson was testing.

He slipped the Scoop past the windowed white box of the guards' small building, soaring easily over the remotely controlled metal gate that was a second barrier to unwanted visitors. The warehouse doors were open, for this was late May, and he slid the silent disc he controlled among the loaded pallets of completed industrial robots in their plastrene shipping cartons.

So far, the Scoop had gone undetected . . .

His mental control of the slow-drifting eyes-and-ears unit amazed him, even though he and ageless, dour old Philip Arkham were its coinventors. With the mentrols' miniature-clawed wires digging deep into his skull and activating the miniaturized duplicate men-

trols aboard the Scoop, he had the uncanny feeling that he was inside the tiny disc. His hooded body seemed detached and distant . . .

Now there were workers and the assembly lines where the industrial robots, or mechs in the everyday parlance of the Twenty-third Century, were tested and given their final permanent programming.

The Scoop hovered well above the men and women, choosing a shadowed spot, and took pictures and transmitted the sounds of the machines and of the men talking.

The shop stewards would have been enraged at this management prying into the privacy of their employees had they detected the Scoop. Allson grinned wryly at the thought of the shouting and furor that might ensue. Any snooping by television eyes on the performance, or nonperformance, of employees had been banned a century or more before . . .

Unscathed and unseen, he finally maneuvered the Scoop out of the factory proper, up a well-lighted ramp, and into the transparent panels of the offices' many cubicles. His own office, set apart from the general offices, he reached at last, and hovered, waiting for an opportunity to slip the four-inch machine through when someone opened the door.

Finally Ylva Dreiss, his personal secretary, chubby pink legs hurrying and chubby short arms

clutching half a dozen folders to her heavy silver-green-covered breasts, opened the way for him, and he entered.

On his desk, beside a tray of unanswered, and unread, correspondence, he set the Scoop down. In a moment he would unlink, and instead of seeing the familiar, comfortable spaciousness of the office, he would be seeing the test laboratory and the cement apron. But for a moment he let his eye, his far-extended eye, range the room.

The full-length portrait he had ordered, after the accident which came so close to claiming both their lives, of soft-eyed Lisl Kelsey hung directly in front of him. Glowing fair skin, massed flaming hair, with glints of golden brown and ash, and a body but slightly less perfect than that lovely face

. . . .

Back on the mesa Allson groaned. Instead of that living, vital beauty, there was now only a limbless torso semisubmerged in the thick, creamy cushion of a nutro bath. Scar tissue from the flames, like that twisting his face and neck and right arm, had claimed those laughing gray eyes and that perfect nose and mouth

. . . .

The wedding was to have been within two weeks' time. The son of Mechanicals, Inc.'s, founder, Colin Allson, and the daughter of his

old friend, Governor Kelsey, were returning from an afternoon drive through the autumn-painted Pennsylvania hills.

A mile ahead of them, to the twisting, sharply descending roadway, a truck loaded with fuel oil and gasoline swerved and abruptly jackknifed. A static spark or a shorted wire finished the building catastrophe. The toppled tank's cargo flared into red life.

Ruhl Allson and the girl he loved were later returning than they had planned. The low crimson car was topping eighty miles an hour, shrieking around too tight turns, and climbing blind-topped knolls.

They were on the hellish flaming wall before he found the brakes, and the car crumpled and merged with the burning truck to the sound of Lisl's last horrified scream

For ten months Allson had spent most of his waking and sleeping hours in the nutro tanks. He was removed only for skin grafts and prosthetic surgery. His left eye and his left arm, to the shoulder, were gone, and from the bridge of his nose down to his neck they had patchworked cartilage, metal, and skin grafts into a passable mask of a humanoid's facial structure.

Healed burns and skin grafts and repaired tendons could not repair the deep-seated warping of his physical structure. He limped

when he walked and he moved stiffly and, often, jerkily.

And there was pain.

Yet Allson had escaped from the wreck with an eye that could see and prosthetic ears, nose, arm, and dark-haired wig to mask the blasted ruin of his tall athlete's body. He could still carry on his duties as manager of his father's dozen factories and in hard work forget for many hours his bodily shortcomings.

Not so the girl he loved.

The marvel was that life remained in Lisl's fired-ravaged body. She had lost all four of her limbs, her eyes, her face, her hair and only the sterile softness of the nutro bath protected the seared ruin that had been her fair soft flesh . . .

Lisl could not talk or communicate in any way with Allson or her nurses. She had never left the nutro bath since she had been placed there three years earlier. There was some tissue repair, but she would never undergo surgery or be given prosthetic limbs or organs.

After three years Allson questioned whether the Lisl he had known had survived. How could any intelligence maintain sanity under such conditions?

Naturally, he blamed himself. He had been driving too fast. He had drunk a can of beer an hour earlier. He had been talking to Lisl instead of watching the road

. . . He wallowed in self-torture.

All that kept him going was his work. And when his father died he had made the business of Mechanicals, Incorporated, his life.

Now he stared at the picture of his love, and his brain, on the brink of exhaustion—crying for a long, dreamless potion of sleep—toyed ponderously with the problem of Lisl. His dulled eye, crossing the desk's burden of unread envelopes, briefly brightened.

He recalled the feeling of his brain merging with the Scoop, retaining only a lesser linkage with his controlling body back in the test laboratory. There was no such sense of unity with his synthetic arm, or his ingrafted ears, or his artificial eye.

Why only prosthetic limbs and other bodily parts? Why not a complete prosthetic body, lacking only the directing intelligence, and bypassing the imperfect senses of seeing, hearing, tasting, feeling and scent?

He already had the Scoop, the spy-eye, controlled by the mentrols directly from his brain cells. Why not a larger, more intricate system? Why not a complete body—a prosthetic body?

Why could not Lisl be so equipped—and himself as well? The completeness of physical love could never be theirs, but their life together could be close to perfection . . .

Back on the mesa Allson cut the switch. The Scoop, on his desk in the distant office, was inert. Allson swiftly freed himself from the mentrol helmet and hurried over to the cluttered workbench where the gloomy, sunken leanness of Philip Arkham's face awaited him.

All his sleepiness and exhaustion had, momentarily, vanished.

Arkham's sunken dark eyes gleamed an unspoken greeting.

"You didn't bring it back," he said. "Lose control? Or did you bash it into a cliff?"

"Neither, Phil. I left it parked on my desk at the factory. I couldn't be bothered bringing the Scoop back. I have something much more important.

"I want four humanoid-type mechs constructed. Two male and two female. The males to be, roughly, duplicates of myself. The others are to approximate the dimensions of Lisl. We can add the identifying pseudo-flesh and bodily structures if they respond as they should."

Arkham got up and came around the bench to Allson's side. He put his hands on his young employer's shoulders and looked up into his face. His dour bony face grew even longer.

"I had hoped," he said, "that the possible implications of our work in Operation Knothole would elude you . . . For yourself a mentally controlled robot

body would be useful, and even beneficial.

"But for Lisl . . ." He shook his lank dark head. Allson never ceased, with a remote detached thought, to wonder at the snow-white pallor of Arkham's upthrust pointed ears . . .

"Lisl's mind is gone, Ruhl. "You will give to a madwoman, or a drooling vegetable nothing, a body . . . I say, leave it alone."

"I cannot do that. You know why, Phil. If there is the faintest possibility that she . . . I must try to get through."

The ageless old scientist shrugged his narrow shoulders and nodded reluctantly. His left hand slapped Allson's sound shoulder.

"Of course you must," he agreed sadly. "I will put all our experimental staff to work on it at once.

"But now you must sleep. For this task we will all need clear heads. For what lies ahead—we can only hope for success."

"Thanks, Phil," Allson said. His weariness had returned as swiftly as it had left. He yawned.

"And if Lisl is no longer—Lisl," he said slowly, "we will know that we have done all within our power."

Three weeks later Allson, uncomfortable in his prosthetic new body, realized the bitter validity of Philip Arkham's words.

He wore his painstakingly du-

plicated body—identical with the sturdy body he had possessed three years before—so that Lisl would not turn in shock away from the broken hideousness of his present maimed and scarred body.

In the nearby room, where Lisl lay eternally in her nutro bath, Philip Arkham and a small corps of medical technicians, completed attachment of the mentrol hood's thousands of tactile filaments to her hairless skull.

Allson sat in a straight chair across from the deep, high-armed chair where the controlled mech duplicating Lisl's now-vanished perfection was seated. Padded straps held the robot body securely. Allson did not want the first startled reactions of his love to bring her hurt . . .

He saw Lisl stiffen—the mech duplication of Lisl's body, that is—and her synthafleshed mouth gaped loosely, and her soft gray eyes went empty and vacant. He saw her body slump, that proudly feminine form that he had so adored, into a flaccid lumpy bag of quivering flesh . . .

And Allson knew that the woman he had loved was dead. Her flesh lived on, the seared, shattered torso yet functioned, but Lisl was gone.

Somehow he found strength of will enough to make a graceful exit from the quiet nursing home where Lisl's body floated, and was

nourished, in its cushioning nutro bath. He drove the controlled mech image of himself into the hoptor Arkham had piloted down from the desert factory and there he abandoned it, sprawling.

Reaction made him send the mentrol hood spinning and pour drink after drink of the whiskey from a half-forgotten drawer in the mesa-top laboratory. He drank to his sorrow in the failure of his project. He drank to the final end of any hope of rehabilitating Lisl. He drank to forget.

He drank . . . he slept . . . and he drank again . . .

Eventually, when the prince of all headaches and a lasting queasiness made sobriety attractive, he set to work again at salvaging something worthwhile from his recently completed project.

A controlled robot was superior to a programmed mechanical in many ways. The brain controlling a superior mech could evaluate and make changes in procedure when essential. The supermech was its hands.

A household mech, confronted with an unprogrammed obstacle or a domestic emergency, blew a fuse and emitted a distress signal. An industrial mech, programmed in a thousand and one duties and certain emergencies, would yet fail to perform a slightly altered and unorthodox task that might prevent the production of scrap.

A blind man, using the men-

trols and a supermech, could see once again and perform useful work. In the most dangerous tasks, requiring body armor and radiation shields, a mentally controlled robot could perform more efficiently and with less danger.

The legless and the armless could walk and work. The paraplegic could quit his wheelchair for many hours, by proxy, and move among his fellows.

And in space flight and in the exploration of alien worlds the controlled supermechanicals could make repairs and move about in almost any hostile environment . . .

Allson came quickly to see that his controlled robots could become a boon to thousands of humans. What he had selfishly devised for one helpless woman's use would be a boon to all his race.

In the ensuing days he found time to wonder why Philip Arkham had not rejoined him. But he was too engrossed in his further development of the mentrolled robots to attempt locating him.

"Ruhl!"

He had not heard the small passenger hoptor come to ground on the cement apron outside the laboratory. Through bleary, grease-stained glasses his lone eye made out the tall narrow shape of his dour-faced old friend, Arkham. Arkham was hurrying to-

ward him, hand outstretched and a peculiar expression on his long face. Allson had never seen the ageless old engineer in so strange a condition.

Had something happened in one of the eastern or southern plants on which he had not been briefed? Some violent emotion must have triggered so grotesque a grimace.

"Ruhl!" gasped out the older man, grasping Allson's good hand convulsively. "Wait until I tell you! You conceded too soon."

"What has happened, Phil? . . . And where have you been these past weeks?"

"Weeks?" gasped Arkham. "You crawled back here two months ago . . . I've been busy. I've been doing what *you* should have remembered to attempt.

"Remember how every five years we must have recordat tracings of our memory cells made at a government hospital? The greatest deterrent to committing a crime since the invention of the so-called truth serum? Remember the mental hospitals where the hopelessly ill are stripped of all memories and re-educated?"

Allson saw and understood in that instant. Arkham's strange expression, unlike any he had ever seen before, had been a triumphant grin. He had thought the old man incapable of an outward expression of pleasure. But Arkham had seen to the blanking of

Lisl's memory banks and their re-education from her personal recordat tracings.

No wonder the old man was smiling. He must have brought the controlled mech of Lisl, the prosthetic-woman proxy . . .

"Turn around, Ruhl!" It was the well-remembered voice he had thought never to hear again. She had come up with them while they talked.

Allson turned, the week's growth of uneven, patchy beard and the scarred, twisted face and body he possessed no longer re-

membered in his joy at seeing Lisl so lithe and beautiful again.

There was no revulsion or shrinking in her warm gray eyes or on her smiling face. He felt the warmth of her body and her soft cheek was against his stubbly face. The electric red tendrils of her hair snagged his glasses and jerked them free. He heard them fall.

And he held her close. What mattered that her body was made of metals and plastics and pseudo-living tissues? Directing it all, ruling this graceful prosthete, was the undamaged mind of Lisl. ▼

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(continued on page 130)

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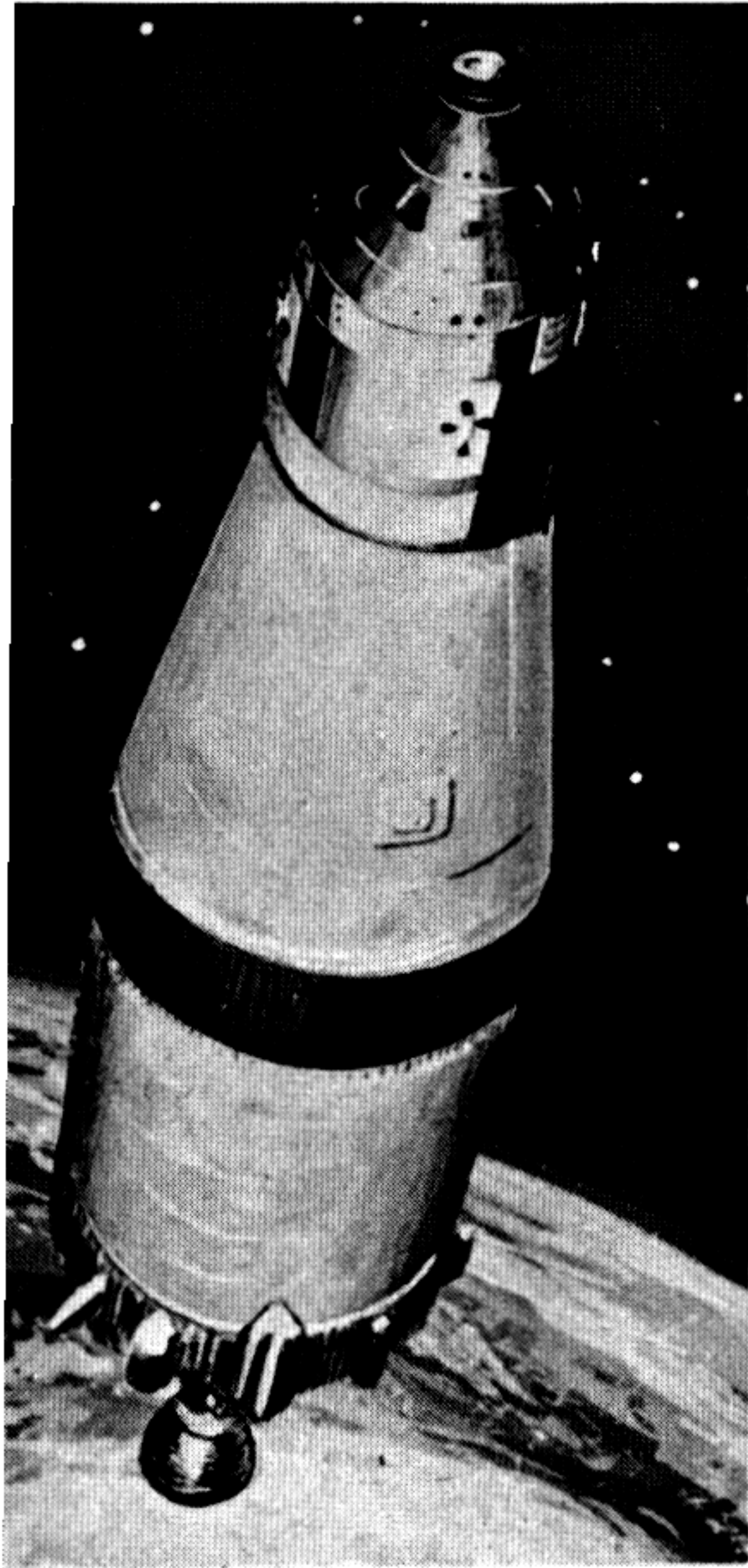
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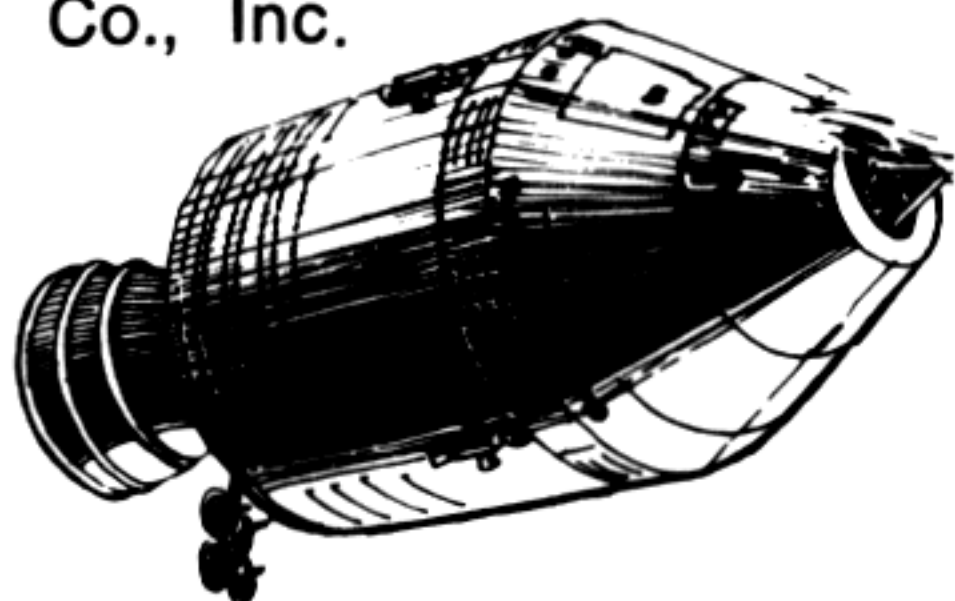


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