

ace  
double

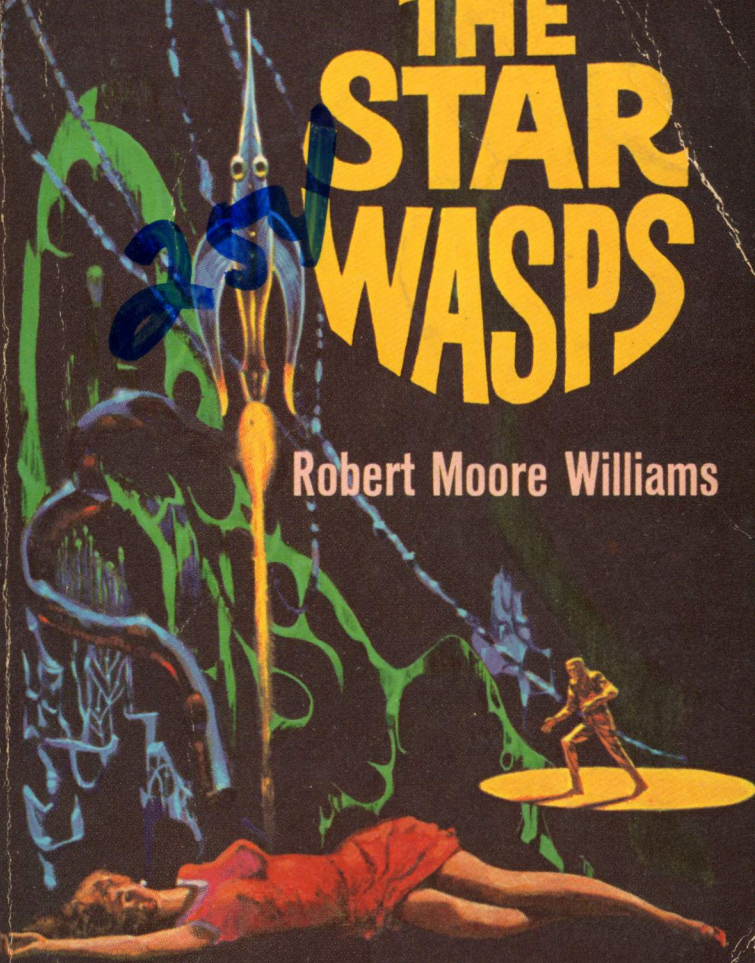
F-177 40¢

Cybernetic men versus the invisible monsters

# THE STAR WASPS

Robert Moore Williams

First Book Publication





## REVOLT OF THE ENERGY-EATERS

The Super Corporation Building loomed one hundred and forty stories high, dominating the city of Denver. It was a towering monument, built by slaves who once called themselves men, to the fanatical greed of one man, Erasmus Glock.

Johnny Derek set out to smash this well-guarded empire with a small band of brave men and one simple weapon—a little glass sphere. But in setting free the primitive instinct of men for freedom, he loosed a holocaust of alien horrors.

For Glock's retaliation lay in the twinkling blue lights from the sky. And their invisible dance could well be the dance of death for all mankind.

---

Turn this book over for  
second complete novel

---

ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS has been a prolific and high-rated author of science-fiction stories for several decades. His tales have appeared in virtually all the magazines in the field and have been reprinted in a great many distinguished anthologies. He accounts for his talents this way:

“Writing seems to be in my blood; it’s the only occupation I enjoy. I’ve been at it ever since I was a kid. If I may parody Mark Twain, who apologized because there was a certain amount of information in *The Innocents Abroad*, and said he was sorry but that “information appeared to stew out of him like the precious ottar of roses out of the ottar,” words appear to stew out of me. There is really nothing I can do about this except direct them at a typewriter and hope they will emerge in the form of stories or books.”

# THE STAR WASPS

by

ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

ACE BOOKS, INC.  
1120 Avenue of the Americas  
New York 36, N.Y.

THE STAR WASPS

Copyright ©, 1963, by Ace Books, Inc.

All Rights Reserved

*Ace Books by Robert Moore Williams:*

DOOMSDAY EVE (D-215)

THE BLUE ATOM (D-332)

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS (D-427)

THE DAY THEY H-BOMBED LOS ANGELES (D-530)

THE DARKNESS BEFORE TOMORROW (F-141)

KING OF THE FOURTH PLANET (F-149)

---

WARLORD OF KOR

Copyright ©, 1963, by Ace Books, Inc.

---

Printed in U.S.A.

## CHAPTER ONE

“HEY, BUD! Wanta be free?” Derek asked.

Derek was lounging against the guardrail of the third-level mawk. A big man, he carried his size with an easy calmness that hid any trepidation that might be lurking within him.

The man to whom he spoke had just stepped off the moving portion of the sidewalk and was trying to light a cigarette. In the chill wind that always blew around the lower levels of the sky-high Corporation Building, he was finding this a difficult task. Before speaking, Derek had glanced keenly at the man, wondering if the fellow would serve his purpose. Almost anyone would do to light the fuse.

The fellow had stooped shoulders. The pallor of the office worker was on his face. His hands were shaking too much for him to bring the flame of the lighter to the end of the cigarette. Apparently realizing the meaning of this tremor, and its presumed solution, he reached into his pocket and took out a small pill box, carried by everyone in this enlightened era. From it he took a small pellet, one of the hundreds of different tranquilizers on sale in every store and given free to every office worker. He gulped the pill and seemed to find in it an immediate cure for the tremor in his hands. Now, however, another problem appeared. His lighter would not work. Swearing at it and flicking it in his fingers,

## THE STAR WASPS

he suddenly realized a large brown hand was holding another lighter in front of his face. At this point, he remembered he had been spoken to. He looked up.

"Oh. Ah, yes, thanks." The cigarette caught from the lighter Derek was holding. "Thanks. Ah . . ." A frown wrinkled the man's forehead. "What was that you said?"

"I asked you if you want to be free," Derek repeated.

The words seemed to touch some sensitive spot deep within the man. The tremor appeared again in his hands. A frown ruttled his forehead. To see if anyone had heard the question, he looked quickly around. The moving sidewalk was carrying its heavy load of office workers upward to the landing from which the elevators would take them higher. The eight o'clock shift was on its way to work. No one was paying any attention to the two men talking at the edge of the mawk. Most of the workers were looking down. Did they have enough spirit to lift their heads and look at the blue Colorado sky above them, at the snow-covered summit of Long's Peak in the distance? Or had all spirit gone from the race of men? These workers did not have to walk. The mawk carried them. Freeing them from the necessity of walking, the mawk should have given them the opportunity to be aware of the color in the sky, of the height and the depth of the Universe. It hadn't worked this way. These workers looked down.

The man's eyes came back to Derek's face. Something of wonder came into his eyes as a long repressed chain of thought came into existence in his mind.

Derek had waited for this sense of wonder to appear in the man's eyes. When it appeared, he knew he had his cue.

"Here," Derek said, holding out his hand.

Into the man's cupped palm, slightly beaded with sweat even on this brisk morning, Derek dropped a small glass sphere. It looked very much like a taw such as children might have used in the ancient, forgotten days of long gone past, before they had been tranquilized out of their heritage of games.

"What is it?" the man said. Something close to eagerness showed in his voice.



## THE STAR WASPS

"The key to freedom," Derek answered, smiling. The smile vanished and his voice grew firm. "I want to warn you, though, that freedom is not and can never be given free to any man. Every man must earn it for himself. But this will help." Derek nodded. The smile came back to his face.

"Freedom? I've longed and hungered for it." For an instant, an eager smile showed through the tranquilizer the man had gulped. Then, realizing what he had said, the smile vanished. A look that was almost terror replaced it. Again he glanced at the moving mawk, to see if anyone was noticing. When he looked back at Derek, his face was in mild shock. Something of resentment was on his features too.

"What kind of a gag is this?" the man spoke sharply. "We are free. We have the greatest civilization that ever existed on earth. Look around you if you don't believe it."

Derek did not look around him. Already familiar with the scene, he did not need to do this. He knew the Corporation Building towered one hundred and forty stories into the bracing air of Colorado. He knew this vast building was set back ramp on ramp, with helicopter landings on every ramp, that it formed a whole suburb in North Denver. Made of steel, spun aluminum, and glass, he knew it seemed to float like a dream in the air of the planet.

Past generations had dreamed of buildings such as this. The year of 2470 knew them as reality. Could the dream of past generations, held past its time, turn into a nightmare? Derek thought it had. He thought this in large part because at the very top of the building, in a superstructure that glistened like silver, the Super Corporation had its headquarters. Derek did not like the Super Corporation. He liked even less the man who owned it.

"I know what the Corporation Building looks like from the outside," Derek said. "I know that every corporation of any importance has its main offices here. I also know that those companies that do not have their main offices here are owned through stock control by corporations who do. I know that all of these different companies are owned and controlled by the Super Corporation. I also understand what has happened

## THE STAR WASPS

to the men and women who work in this building. They are slaves, all of them, including you."

Derek was careful to keep all harshness and all criticism out of his voice. As he saw it, this man, and many others, were victims of forces too powerful and too insidious for them to control or combat. This man was not an enemy of Derek. The forces that had made him what he was were enemies.

Vaguely, the man understood he was not being criticized. His face showed dim traces of understanding. But something more powerful than understanding was moving in him—fear. This moved him. "You . . . you're mad. . . . I can't talk to you. I might get into trouble." The fear grew stronger in him. "I . . . I've got to get to work. Can't be late, you know. Get demerits for being late. Got to . . ." The fear moved him to the edge of the moving walk. This tripped him. He jostled the other workers being carried upward. They swore at him. He righted himself and put his feet firmly into position on the mawk. As it carried him away, he did not look back at the big man who lounged at the railing.

Derek sighed. The trouble with men was that they were all afraid. But this one still had the little glass sphere. Involuntarily, Derek glanced upward toward the silver structure on top of the building, wondering how long it would take the little glass sphere to be relayed to the top of the Corporation Building. The efficiency inside the building was such that not much time would be needed. He did not wish to be here in this exposed position when the little glass sphere reached the main office of the Super Corporation.

Turning to leave, he almost walked over the young woman who had stepped off the mawk and was standing directly in front of him.

She held a cigarette in her hand. "Got another light?" she asked.

She did not deceive Derek for an instant. He knew she had heard what he had said to the man and had stopped to ask questions which he did not want to answer. Even more important was something else that could have come with her. Derek glanced quickly around.

## THE STAR WASPS

No tiny flickering blue lights were showing in the air.

He turned his attention back to the young woman. She was the most attractive woman he had ever seen, yet even as he realized this fact, he also knew he would be hard put to state in what way she was attractive. She was tall, for a woman, but she still had to look up to him. Her eyes said she was accepting this fact, that perhaps she was even finding a certain security in it. He also saw that her eyes were gray with enough blue in them to make them resemble the high sky at sunset when there is no smog, no smoke, and no haze in the air. In their depths, he caught a glimpse of something she had never known but had always longed for and which she still hoped would come to her some day. Inside him, Derek felt a gulp as he saw the longing in her eyes, knew it to be akin to the longing in his own soul.

But he also knew he could not take chances with her. Or not now. Perhaps tomorrow . . . but who was he to think of the meaning of tomorrow?

"Get lost, Sis," he said. "If I want a woman, I'll buy one."

Her face tightened but she did not seem to be deceived at his harsh language. "Of course, you can buy a woman," she said. "But you can't get the one you want that way."

"Then how do you get her?"

"You have to *earn* her." The gray eyes were utterly sincere. "And when you earn her, then she works with you as an equal but free companion—also a very beloved one, she hopes." A catch appeared in her voice.

Things come to the woman. The man, following the hunting pattern as old as the human race, goes out after things, smelling the wind and watching the sky, alert for trouble. The woman waits—and hopes to be earned.

"When you earn her, she follows you to the ends of the earth and even farther, freely, because it is her own will as well as yours, her will to be with you. Do . . ." Again the catch appeared in her voice. "Do you have another one of those little glass spheres?"

"You listened?" Derek said quietly.

Signs of embarrassment showed on her face as she nodded.

## THE STAR WASPS

"I . . . I hope you don't mind too much. You are the first man—indeed, the only man—I have ever heard talk like that." Her voice went into confusion but her eyes longed for him to say he did not mind too much.

Things come to the woman. A pretty dress, a pair of earrings, a man. Most of all, a man.

Derek studied this young woman. What he saw of her, he liked. What she said, he also liked. But—his eyes went upward again to the tower of the Super Corporation. Women in its employ had led men to their death. He hesitated knowing he could not hesitate too long. The man with the glass sphere had long since passed into the entrance of the building.

"My name is Jennie Fargo. This is my day off and I came here just . . . just to look. If I do say it myself, I'm a good kid." Her face colored at this touch of self-praise. "But I hope that women can be free too. Perhaps freedom is not something that a woman can really and truly have except in a relationship with a great man. The very nature of her sex makes real freedom difficult for her. But she can dream and perhaps hope . . ."

"Dreaming within limits is very important to everybody," Derek said. "We build the future out of our dreams. Sometimes the future doesn't come out the way we dreamed it. Long ago, men dreamed of this." He nodded toward the Corporation Building.

"I know there are always those who will try to turn the dreams of men to their own advantage!" Her words were hot little gusts of sound. "I know that those who tell us how free we are are lying to us, turning our greatest dream to their own gain. I hate it. From the very bottom of my heart, I hate it." The little gusts of sound had vehement protest in them, protest that was all the stronger because it was futile.

Derek was silent. He had not come here to recruit women. He was not at all sure what he would do with one if he did recruit her.

"I don't know who you are. We'll never see each other

## THE STAR WASPS

again." Pleading appeared in Jennie Fargo's voice. "Please, may I have one of those little glass balls?"

Derek was still silent. The impulse to move was rising strong within him. Out of the corners of his eyes he was watching the air.

"No harm can come to you because of it. I swear it," she continued. "I . . . I want a taste of freedom too. I live in a little apartment all alone. I have a good job, an excellent job, with much free time. Many women envy me. But in spite of my good working conditions and fine salary and really very nice apartment, it is all a weary routine somehow, a drudgery which has no heart in it. I want . . ."

"You told me a woman has to be earned," Derek said.

"Yes . . ."

"So does freedom," he spoke again. "Sometimes those who seek it find death instead. And even if you find it yourself, it is not something you can force upon your neighbor."

"I know that. But . . ."

"The worst kind of death is reserved for agents provocateur. They rarely get to die easily."

Her face showed tautness at his words but when she spoke, her words were firm and clear. "I am not a spy of the Super Corporation, sir. And if you ever even hint again that I am, I shall hit you in the teeth with my fist." She made a fist out of her hand as she spoke.

Derek grinned at the fist. He could catch it in one big hand and hold it prisoner completely. "You're a good kid, Jennie. Better stay in the life you know. It may be dull but it's also safe."

She looked as if she was going to cry. "Please."

"You don't know what you're asking, Jennie. You don't know how tough it is to run, and then run again, and to have no home anywhere in all the Universe. You don't know what it means to have a price on your head which any so-called honest man can collect just by giving information about you, this because your only sin is to try to give men the opportunity for freedom."

She did not hear all he said, only part. "You have no home?"

## THE STAR WASPS

You have no one to take care of you, to boss you a little when you are bad and to obey you utterly all of the time, to . . ." She came a step closer to him. Her eyes had warm depths in them.

"I . . ." Derek knew he was faltering in his dismissal of her. He tried to find firmness within himself, knowing that he had no heart to find this firmness. "I . . ." Again he lost heart.

Then, out of the corner of his eyes, he became aware of a sparkle in the air on his left. It was a slight thing, a color as evanescent as the reflection of a sunbeam on the thin film of a bursting soap bubble. Before he could really be sure he saw it, it had vanished, like a bursting soap bubble leaving nothing behind it.

The sight set off a chain reaction of tension in his nervous system. He glanced upward at the tall tower. Surely not enough time had passed for the sphere to have been passed upward through channels! Surely this must be coincidence. He was staring to step onto the mawk, hoping to pass unnoticed in the moving throng, when he realized that Jennie was speaking to him.

"You can see them too?" she asked.

It was a question that John Derek had never expected to hear from anyone.

"Can see what?" The roughness was back in his voice.

"Those little sparkles of blue light," she answered.

"Do you mean the viral?"

"I don't know what they are called. I have never heard anyone give them a name. I didn't know they had a name!" The surprise in her voice was very real.

Derek made up his mind instantly.

"Come on, Sis," he said roughly. "We can't stand here talking all day. We're going to be late to work if we don't shake a leg. Neither of us can stand any more demerits."

Taking her firmly by the elbow, he shoved her onto the moving surface of the sidewalk.

"Quarrel with me," he whispered into her ear. "Act a little drunk. Try to break loose but don't try too hard."

She caught his meaning instantly. In a second her natural

## THE STAR WASPS

dignity was gone from her. Instead she was a tipsy woman. Not really drunk, she was having a minor spat with her boy friend. The quarrel was half in serious and half in fun. Derek responded in kind.

They were still quarrelling when the moving sidewalk deposited them inside the vast lobby of the Corporation Building. Here the workers could transfer to other moving belts which would lift them to the stories immediately above them, or to elevators, if they worked for a corporation big enough and important enough to have offices on the higher floors. The sound of feet was strong in this lobby. They were not the light steps of men and women going eagerly to their tasks. Instead the sound was that of shuffling slaves moving slowly to tasks they hated.

Derek did not use the elevators or the escalators going up. Instead, scolding her for being drunk, he steered Jennie to an alcove. Careful inspection of the air here revealed no glimmering blue lights.

"All right, Jennie. You don't have to act drunk any longer," Derek said, breathing again.

She was instantly sober.

"How does it happen that you can see the viral?" Derek asked.

"I . . . well . . . the *viral*? I don't know how it happens that I can see them. Can't everyone?"

"No."

"Well, I can. But I have no idea what they are. Are they dangerous?" Her face showed stress. "I haven't seen them very often—usually just when walking in the little park near my apartment building—but they always seemed rather pretty to me."

"Pretty?" Derek echoed the word. Sand appeared in his voice. "I have seen men, and women too, who have died as a result of the work of those pretty little sparkles in the air. They can suck the life energy out of a human being, suck it away like leeches sucking blood, drain it away until nothing is left of a man but flesh and bones. They can take the strength out of a man until he can no longer move a muscle

## THE STAR WASPS

in his voluntary system and keep on taking it until the muscles of his heart no longer have the strength to contract. *Pretty! Pretty little devils!*" The sand in his voice changed to gravel as he spoke.

Jennie Fargo's face went from gray to white as she listened. "I didn't know this!" she gasped.

"Nor does the average man know it," Derek continued. The gravel was making lumps in his vocal chords now. "He doesn't even know these things exist. He can't see them, he can't hear them, and he can't feel them. If they attack him, he merely thinks he is feeling a little tired. He takes a pep-up pill. When this doesn't work, he takes another. When this doesn't work, he lies down. He never gets up again. When a doctor is called, he writes out the death certificate as heart failure. The doctors themselves don't know any better. All they know is that a high incidence of heart failure is developing. They have no idea what is causing it."

The gravel finally became so heavy in Derek's throat that it stopped his voice.

In a white face, Jennie's eyes had become pools of terror. "One of my friends died. The doctor said it was heart failure. Was . . ."

"I don't know if the viral did it," Derek answered. "There are plenty of reasons for heart failure in this culture without the viral."

"I know." Her voice was tight and taut. "But, if no one can see these things, how can anyone protect himself?"

"That's the point," Derek answered.

"How does it happen that you can see them?" Jennie continued.

"I can see them because I trained myself to do it." Bitterness came into his voice as his memory recalled the nature of this training. "Six months I spent living in total darkness eight hours a day. If this wasn't enough, I also wore special goggles designed to filter out the normal range of radiation to which the eye is sensitive. These goggles would pass the frequencies that the viral use. The whole purpose of this



## THE STAR WASPS

training was to force the eyes to learn to see in a range of frequencies that are normally invisible to them.”

“That must have been difficult!”

“My eyes thought it was damned hard on them. Several times they almost stopped seeing anything.”

“You almost went blind?”

“I was blind, for a few weeks. Gradually my normal vision came back. With it came the ability to see the frequencies of the viral. That’s why I can see them!” His voice changed. “I don’t know how it happens that you can see them. I guess some few people can see into these higher frequencies. To them such vision is normal. But to most of us . . .” He shook his head, then, aware of her white face, dropped his voice. “I’m sorry if this is frightening you.”

“It isn’t what you are saying that is frightening me,” Jennie whispered.

“Then what is it?”

“Right behind you, I just saw a little flicker of blue light. That is what is frightening me!”

Derek made his big body turn slowly. First out of the corners of his eyes, then full before his vision, he saw a pattern of tiny dancing blue lights.

At the sight, he felt his breath catch in his throat.

## CHAPTER TWO

JERRY FALCON was the name of the man to whom Derek had given the little glass ball. His name did not matter, to him or to anyone else. He heard it so seldom that he had almost forgotten it. He was known to his superiors and to his fellow workers as R-133, which was the number of the intricate accounting machine at which he worked.

In the year 2470, men were named after machines instead of machines being named after men.

R-133 had been married four times. Each marriage had ended in divorce on the easy grounds of incompatibility. Each marriage failure had left him a little more unhappy and

## THE STAR WASPS

a little more resentful deep down inside where the fears and the hates hide. For this, and for other reasons, R-133 came to work each morning with the dim hope in his mind that this day he would drop down dead.

This was a hope that was hidden deep within the hearts of many who worked in this building. Their whole lives were ordered for them, both at work at home. All advertising media told them how lucky they were. As long as the demerits did not catch up with them, they had job security, also medical, hospital, and retirement benefits. The question often asked by those above them was what more could men want? The answer, which was never clearly formulated for them, and hence always remained an inarticulate feeling in their hearts and which few ever found out for themselves, was that a man would like a measure of real freedom in his life. No matter how many dangers freedom brought, with it a man was alive. Without it, no matter how secure he was otherwise, he dimly felt he would be better off dead. Tranquilizers might bring a false feeling of well-being, but they could not bring freedom, and pep-up pills gave only an unreal euphoria. The only real sense of well-being came from the hope and the fact of freedom.

R-133 took off his coat and hung it beside the accounting machine with its vast bank of keys. The clock told him he still had two minutes left before beginning work. Remembering the little glass ball, he took it from his coat pocket and sat down in front of his machine. He examined the sphere. So far as he could tell, it was empty. Obviously the man who had given it to him had been a lunatic. He thought, with some trepidation, that lunatics were increasing in numbers these days.

Around him, the clump of feet told him that the other workers were hurrying to their machines. There were 150 machines in this huge room, with 160 operators always on duty. The ten extra operators were kept as a reserve force in the event that somebody became too ill to handle his keyboard.

This extra force of ten operators was not kept ready because

## THE STAR WASPS

of humanitarian impulses on the part of Machines, Inc., which owned the equipment here, but because the company's efficiency experts had proved that it was cheaper to keep ten extra men on duty at all times than to have a single important machine out of operation for one hour.

Men were cheap but machines were dear!

"What've you got there?" R-133 heard his neighbor at the next machine ask. "What's the little glass ball?"

"Nothing," R-133 answered. "Something some nut gave me on the way to work. He said it would make me free."

"Then he was a nut!" his neighbor said, grunting.

R-133 opened his private drawer and dropped the glass ball into it.

Each machine was equipped with such a drawer six inches wide and an inch deep. In it, he was allowed to keep his personal possessions. Some critic had commented that the life of a machine operator was about as wide and as deep as his private drawer. The drawer contained a broken ball-point pen, three sticks of chewing gum that also contained a laxative, one small bottle of tranquilizer pills and three small bottles of pep-up pills. R-133 considered for a moment the desirability of taking one of the pep-up pills to offset the tranquilizer he had taken while talking to the nut outside, then decided to wait fifteen minutes.

The warning buzzer sounded. This indicated the machine would begin operations within thirty seconds. R-133 closed his personal drawer, flexed his fingers, glanced at the stack of symbol-covered papers already in place for him to translate into the machine, and prepared his mind for the morning grind. As the buzzer sounded again, the accounting machine lit up and the music and perfume machines awakened to soft operation. The morning music had the tempo of a marching song. The efficiency experts employed by the company had discovered that men worked faster when music in the background talked softly in the tempo of marching songs. Later in the day, in accordance with fixed times, the music would change, but always it would eventually come back to a marching tempo.

## THE STAR WASPS

The perfume machine fed the aroma of pine forests into the air, the fragrance of spring-blooming flowers, and the tang of wind-driven salt spray. Other, more subtle essences were also fed through the perfume machine, including drugs that had a tranquilizing, hypnotic effect. Because of these subtle, air-borne drugs, men dreamed as they worked, men were more content to work and could even forget that they were men and could imagine themselves as being extensions of their machine, its arms, its eyes, its brain.

The big room was full of the sound of marching music. The soundless closing of thousands of keys on the banked accounting machines was only a faint whisper in the background. Long rows of silent men became robots that served as the eyes and the fingers of the machines.

The symbols which they fed into the machines meant nothing to any operator. These were the product of some other machine. Sorted and rearranged by the supervisors, they formed the basis of new computations which the machines would produce. These results in turn were fed into some other machine somewhere, perhaps into the accounting machines of individual corporations, where they became the data that controlled human lives.

Space flight, the scent of a real pine forest, the beauty of a real jonquil blooming in the spring, were things R-133 could dream about. He could never know them in reality. He belonged to his accounting machine. If the chains that tied him to it were invisible, they were none the less real.

Through long experience, R-133's fingers moved mechanically over the keyboard. Supervisors carrying stacks of data sheets moved from machine to machine. In the ready room, the reserve force of operators waited behind a glass partition. To keep their fingers limber and their brains free of the mischief of thinking, they practiced on dummy accounting machines.

The sound of marching music had hardly gotten started when R-133 made his first mistake. He did not know how it happened or when it happened. He was thinking about

## THE STAR WASPS

something—what, he never could remember—when a finger missed a key.

The machine emitted an indignant burp. Startled, R-133 looked up. The red light which indicated an error was flashing. A supervisor was hurrying to him.

“An error, R-133!” The supervisor’s voice was as cold as the north wind.

“I’m sorry,” R-133 said hastily.

“Being sorry doesn’t correct errors. This will cost you one demerit.”

“It won’t happen again,” R-133 fervidly promised. Visions of losing his job and being unable to find employment danced through his mind. When one corporation fired a man, other corporations were often reluctant to hire him. If he could not find work as operator of an accounting machine, the only work he knew, he might have to go down to the lower levels of the Corporation Building, down among the basements and the sub-basements, and live with the cast-offs of civilization! They didn’t even have any tranquilizers down there!

R-133 turned back to his work. He concentrated on his task now and his fingers faithfully obeyed him, But, little by little, the concentration failed. Dimly he realized that some foreign thought was seeking entrance to his mind. He turned it aside. It kept coming back. Now it brought a mental image with it. He recognized the image as the visual recall of the big man who had given him the little glass ball.

His fingers started to stray into another error. He caught them just in time!

“Damn that fellow!” he thought. Now he realized it was this straying of his mind to the memory of the big man that had caused his first error.

He put the mental image out of his mind.

It came back. With it came—thoughts of freedom. What was life like on the moon or on Mars? What did men do there? For that matter, what did they do on the far places of the Earth where freedom still lingered?

*Bzzzrt!*

This time he did not see the red light go on. This time the

## THE STAR WASPS

warning buzzer of the machine coughed indignantly at him before he even realized he had made an error.

Glancing down at the sheet of symbols, he saw in horror that he had transposed a whole line of them!

"You have not been at work five minutes and you have made three errors, the last a most serious one," the supervisor said, behind him.

R-133 tried to turn and look up. He wanted to say that he would cut a new tape and correct this error. Turning in the swivel chair, he had the vague impression that it was sliding out from under him. Then the floor seemed to move upward toward him. He tried to reach for his private drawer, for another, stronger tranquilizer, but the drawer was now above him and out of his reach. Only then did he dimly realize that he had fallen out of his chair and was lying on the floor.

He tried to get up. The effort was too much for him. He thought, "To hell with it! I'll just lie here on the floor." Somehow this thought seemed to stir up the image of the big man in his mind. It also stirred up ideas associated with rebellion. Then he fainted.

R-133 did not see his supervisor bend over him, he did not see the reserve operator hastily summoned from the ready room. Nor was he aware that an emergency squad hastily put him on a stretcher and carried him away.

The men at the other machines hardly noticed any of this. It was so common an event that it attracted little attention. Either too many tranquilizers or too many pep-up pills could produce it.

R-133 got four demerits on his record but he did not know this either.

When he started to recover consciousness, a dream was in his mind. It was bright with glowing colors and alive with warm, hopeful emotions. He did not see the dream clearly but he vaguely realized it had something to do with the moon. It also had something to do with personal freedom, for him, for R-133, who had a name but who had almost forgotten it. Personal freedom for him! Deep in his heart the thought glowed like a burning coal.

## THE STAR WASPS

When he recovered consciousness, R-133 looked into the face of a man wearing a white jacket whom he dimly realized was a doctor. The clock on the wall told him he was ten minutes late for work. Muttering that he was late, he tried to sit up. The doctor told him to lie back down. In the doctor's mind was the thought that this was merely another case of fainting, to be given a shot and sent home. But the doctor was also young and very much aware of his responsibility to the social order which had paid his expenses through medical school. In college, he had listened to many lectures on his responsibility to the social order. He had also heard lectures on the doctor's responsibility to his patient but these had been fewer in number than the lectures on the responsibility to the social order. The explanation for this disparity, if any explanation had ever been sought, was that every right-thinking medical student knew his responsibility to his patient without being told. The fact was that few of them did know it. In the educational system, as it existed in 2470, few of them ever had a chance to find it out.

"You fainted," the doctor said. He prepared the needle for the shot. "You'll be all right, This will fix you up." The needle bit home. "By the way, who was the big man you were talking about while you were unconscious?"

"Big man?" R-133 was startled. He had not known he had been talking aloud. Memory came back. "He is the man who is going to help me become free."

"Oh," the doctor said. He did not tell R-133 that his talk while he was unconscious had excited the doctor's curiosity and that the shot R-133 had just received was actually a truth serum designed to loosen his tongue completely. All R-133 knew was that he wanted to talk. The doctor encouraged him. When he showed signs of halting, the doctor showed him the little glass ball.

"Did the big man give you this?"

"Yes. How'd you get it?"

"You mentioned it while you were still unconscious and I had my nurse get it from your private drawer. "What is it?"

"I don't know. I just don't know. Something he gave me."

## THE STAR WASPS

The doctor probed this area until he was sure that R-133 really did not know the nature of the little glass ball. Then the doctor began asking very casual questions about the big man. When he sent R-133 home, he had a complete description of Derek.

He sent this report, plus the little glass ball, up through channels. The doctor marked the report URGENT. At the next echelon above the doctor, the report was marked TOP SECRET and was sent by special courier up to the very top of the Corporation Building. Here it received the personal attention of the president of the Super Corporation, Mr. Erasmus Glock.

Mr. Glock sat alone in a huge office so completely sound-proofed that the ears grew tired just trying to catch a whisper of noise. No one ever came here, unbidden. If Mr. Glock pressed one button, one secretary promptly appeared. If he pushed another button, another secretary came. If he pushed still another button, the president of the biggest corporation in the country appeared, to walk on trembling legs up to the front of the mahogany desk with a top so big that football games could have been played on it, almost, there to wait until Mr. Glock deigned to notice him. At the right was the disguised housing of a machine that synthesized the product of all the machines housed in the floors below. The beat of the commercial heart of the whole nation was revealed by this machine. If the heart was not beating in a way that pleased Mr. Glock, he could punch other buttons which would slow it down or speed it up, as the prospect for profits indicated.

Very few people knew that Mr. Glock existed. He received no publicity, his face did not appear on the TV screens, and his name was never set in type in any magazine story. He liked it this way. The way Mr. Glock liked things was the way things were.

He was an enormous man. Tipping the scales close to 300 pounds, he had short arms and fat, puffy hands. Set deep within his head, tiny blue eyes glared out at a world that they had never understood. In his mind, understanding was



## THE STAR WASPS

not nearly as important as control. If you controlled a thing, whether it be a machine, a man, or the biggest corporation on earth, this was all you needed to understand about it.

In spite of his appearance, Mr. Glock was not soft. There was enormous strength in the muscles under the fat. If his muscles had strength in them, this was nothing compared to the strength that was in his will. What he willed to be came into existence. What he willed not to be passed from the eyes of men.

Men did not know it was this way. They thought that fate and business cycles and bad years unmade them. They did not know that behind the scenes, as president of the Super Corporation, Mr. Glock was the fat spider who wove his webs of securities and profited from their profits and from their losses. If a small corporation went broke, Mr. Glock picked up the pieces and made the wreckage show a profit for him. If a big corporation made fat profits, Mr. Glock siphoned off a large share of those gains through excessive charges made for services that were not rendered.

Mr. Glock was a bonafide genius in the field of finances. He had an intuitive grasp of financial matters that had made him one of the most powerful men on earth. No one knew how much he was worth. His situation was such that he was worth what he said he was worth. To a large degree, he controlled the values of securities and of real estate. He was a financial colossus. He knew neither moral scruples nor the meaning of honesty. He defined the meaning of honesty.

No woman had ever entered his life, to temper and soften it and to give it emotional overtones that might have made it meaningful. He had decided early in life that women were nuisances who distracted men from their real calling, which was ways and means to achieve power and control.

Mr. Glock made and unmade presidents. Laws slipped smoothly and easily through state legislatures and through Congress because he wished it. Senators asked permission from one of his secretaries to talk to him. Congressmen wistfully wished for his approval.

Mr. Glock was a state within the state.

## THE STAR WASPS

When Mr. Glock read the doctor's report on R-133 and studied the little glass ball, he began to shiver. Beads of sweat appeared on his face. His little blue eyes darted around the room as if they were expecting an enemy to come upon them out of nowhere.

Mr. Glock got out of his big chair behind his huge desk and headed for a private door concealed in the wall of his office. No one but him ever went through this door. No one but him even knew it existed. The door and what was beyond it was a secret within a secret.

He did not open the door. At the last moment, his courage failed. The sweat grew stronger on his face. He stood before the door, trembling, irresolute, as he had often seen corporation presidents stand before his desk.

Turning from the door, he ran back to his desk. Here he pushed a button. Wiping sweat from his face, he seated himself in his chair and tried to compose his emotion.

The buzzer was answered in less than thirty seconds. The man who entered in response to it was short and fat. Like Mr. Glock, he looked flabby but in fact was not. His name was Hollow. He had absolutely no expression on his face. If there were emotions anywhere within him, they never reached expression on his features.

Hollow was completely bald.

Mr. Glock gestured toward the doctor's report and to the tiny glass ball on his desk.

"Derek is back on earth," he said.

"Yes, sir," Hollow answered, without a change in the expression on his face.

"Get him," Mr. Glock said.

"Yes, sir," Hollow answered. His face still expressionless, he turned to leave, only to turn hastily when he realized his chief was shrilling at him to stop.

"I don't mean kill him, I mean bring him up here," Glock said.

"Here?" Hollow said. Now for the first time an expression appeared on his face. The expression indicated surprise bordering on shock.

## THE STAR WASPS

"I want to talk to him," Mr. Glock said.

"*Talk to him?*" Hollow repeated the words as if he did not believe his own ears.

"That's what I said, that's what I meant!" Mr. Glock screamed. "Now get to hell out of here and find him!"

"Yes, sir," Hollow answered. It cost him an effort but he managed to get all signs of surprise and shock from his face before he left the room.

### CHAPTER THREE

DEREK TOOK his eyes away from the spot where the little blue lights flickered in their invisible matrix.

"You're drunk!" he said to Jennie Fargo. "I'm going to take you . . ."

Jennie Fargo was instantly drunk. "Not home!" she giggled. "Home is where you go when everything else is closed up."

"All right," Derek said. "I'll take you some place and buy you another drink."

He whopped her on the bottom. She gasped, then giggled, and promptly took the arm he offered.

They moved toward the down mawk. Neither looked behind. Both knew that the pattern of tiny dancing lights was following them.

The down mawk had very few passengers. This was not the time of day for heavy traffic. It found its way down through the crisscross of roadways where little cars darted like electric bugs to the ground level of the sprawling Corporation Building. At the top, Derek and Jennie glanced downward. Neither looked behind. To all intents and purposes, all they had on their minds was finding some new pleasure spot to spend the morning.

Both knew they were being followed, knew it without looking, knew it deep inside where the subtle fears hide. Derek knew sweat was forming on his upper lip. He felt Jennie's hand tremble on his arm.

The worst part of the situation was that Derek knew and

## THE STAR WASPS

Jennie suspected that they were completely helpless. There was nothing they could do to defend themselves! If the vira chose to move in, they had no means to resist.

He helped Jennie on the down mawk. As he stepped or behind her, he glanced around.

The dancing blue lights were not five feet away.

The mawk, groaning in its gear and electronic innards carried them downward. From below, the stinks of the lower levels became stronger. Chlorine was prominent among them but there was an oppressive stink which came from the lower levels themselves and which the chlorine was supposed to eliminate. The chemical always failed at its task. Something happened to the air when too many humans lived too close together, something that no amount of purification could remove.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Derek saw that Jennie's face was set resolutely ahead. Her brown hair was blowing past her head. As if she was aware that he was watching her she turned her head and giggled.

Her eyes held horror.

Flickering blue colors moved past Derek on his left and took up a position directly ahead. Matching the speed of the mawk, they hung in the air there. Whether the viral was studying them, or somebody else, Derek had no way of knowing. So far as he knew, no one knew how the vira contacted their environment, whether they had eyes and ears or the equivalents of these sensory organs, or how they concentrated their attention. For all he knew, the viral might not even be aware of their existence. It might be after some one else entirely.

He really did not believe that enough time had elapsed for a reaction to have come from the top of the building as a result of the glass ball he had given to the office worker.

A teenage messenger boy in a bright blue uniform hurried past them. The mawk was too slow for him. He was running. He ran past the glimmering pattern of blue lights and was not aware of their existence.

Derek wondered what would have happened if the boy

## THE STAR WASPS

had run through them. At the thought, a shudder came into existence deep inside him. The boy would never have known what had happened to him.

Looking ahead, he saw that the blue lights had come closer to them. Now not over three feet separated them from the viral.

"Do you suppose we could—ah—talk to it?" Jennie whispered.

"They can be controlled and are controlled but no one has as yet succeeded in talking to them," he answered.

"Then how . . ."

"Shhhh!" he answered. "You're too drunk to ask questions."

"I'm not that drunk!" Jennie answered indignantly. Her grip tightened on his arm.

The viral was within two feet of them.

He was aware that she was tugging at his arm in an effort to attract his attention to the right.

Coming from behind them, flickering *green* lights were slowly moving past them.

Derek gulped. A green viral he had never seen.

The green lights moved like a lightning flash.

The blue lights darted upward. Flashing like chain lightning, the green lights followed.

"They're fighting!" Jennie's fingers dug deep into Derek's arm.

"They can't be!" Derek answered.

"Humans fight each other," Jennie said. "Why can't different viral fight too?"

Derek hardly heard the question. He was watching the two light patterns. He had the impression of jungle cats feinting for an opening. However, even the leopard was slow in comparison to the speed of these patterns. Now they circled each other, now the blue glow darted to one side, now the green pattern moved swiftly forward only to stop short of contact with the blue glow at the last split second.

Without knowing how he knew it, Derek was sure deep inside that this was the beginning of a battle to the death. He did not understand this. He watched. Tiny flickering lights

## THE STAR WASPS

moved so fast that nothing except a conditioned visual system would detect them. Now a point of blue light vanished, now a point of green light disappeared as the two viral came into momentary contact with each other. Derek had the vague impression that the viral were destroying each other light point by light point.

Swooping downward, they passed in front of the man riding the mawk directly below them. He slapped at his face as if a crowd of invisible gnats had passed near him, then looked around, searching for something that he could not see. Apparently deciding that the wind was the source of his irritation, he pulled his hat down over his eyes.

Derek felt sorry for the fellow. Death had passed on lightning wings within inches of the man and he had thought it was the wind.

The flickering blue and green lights moved again. This time they passed through the man. He jerked his head around to glare at Derek

The lightning swarms were moving toward Derek.

He jerked Jennie down.

The viral passed over their heads.

"What are you dodging?" the man below them demanded. "What's . . . what's after . . ."

He was falling as he spoke.

He fell on the mawk. The expression on his face went completely blank.

The mawk carried him downward.

Jennie stared in horror at Derek. "Why did you jerk me down?" she whispered. Her eyes went to the man ahead of him. "Why . . . why . . . *he's dead!*" Her voice was a little gasped gust of sound. "The viral passed through him. I jerked you down to keep them from passing through you," Derek answered.

Lifting Jennie, he got slowly to his feet.

A dog fight between blue and green lights was taking place in the air ten feet above their heads.

The two fighting viral stayed where they were. The mawk carried Derek and Jennie away from them. Ahead of them, on

## THE STAR WASPS

a landing, a guard had moved out. The guard pulled the body off the mawk. He looked inquiringly at them.

"I don't know him. I never saw him before," Derek said.

The guard grunted. A dead man was not an important matter. He would report it to the police. They would take the body away. Somewhere a bored intern would examine it and would sign a certificate that death had been cause by heart failure.

At the ground level, Derek slipped from the mawk and turned left. Jennie kept up with his long strides. If there was turmoil in her heart, this was a fact that she was keeping strictly to herself. If she had found something this morning that she had hungered for, she was well aware of it. She also knew she had found something else—danger. She looked up, through the network of interlaced roads and ascending and descending mawks, to the vast bulk of the building slipping back tier on tier into the clear blue sky above her. A shudder passed through. Something was in that sky, something that she had seen and had not recognized, something that few people knew existed.

Derek patted her arm. "Are you sober now?"

"Completely," she answered.

"You haven't asked where I am taking you?"

"Does it matter, as long as you are taking me?" she answered.

He patted her arm again.

The ground level here on this street was not the bright, gleaming building that rose into the air so high above them. In fact, this street was not a part of the Corporation Building. People lived here, worked here, bought and sold goods here. The street itself resembled in many ways one of the streets under the elevated railroad in Chicago in days long gone. Filled with electric trucks, with the grumble of gears from the roads in the sky above, with the mawk itself making a protesting grumble, there was a constant undertone of noise. The smells that had been faint up above were stronger here, more pungent, and more biting. It seemed to Jennie that every other door had a neon light above it advertising that

## THE STAR WASPS

alcohol in some form could be purchased on these premises. She wondered if only alcohol made life possible down here in this slum world. The Super Corporation might have its home in a spire rising high into the sky so that men might see it from afar and be inspired by it but the building itself had its roots in stink, in noise, and in people who lived on booze.

Derek, his flesh still crawling, turned abruptly into the swinging doors of a place that was an anachronism in 2470, an old time saloon, complete with a mahogany bar, a big bar mirror, and with sawdust on the floor. A dozen men were drinking beer at rough wooden tables scattered around the big room. At the rear, men were sitting on long wooden benches.

An oldtime player piano, obviously a reproduction of an instrument that had been popular in an earlier age, was banging out an oldtime tune.

The only concession to the modern age in this place was the footrail at the bar, which was made of spun aluminum instead of brass. The place even had spittoons!

A bartender wearing a white apron, with his hair parted in the middle, was behind the bar. The only customer at the bar was a skinny little man who was staring sadly at an almost empty beer mug in front of him.

Jennie stared doubtfully around her.

"This is an accurate reproduction of an oldtime western saloon," Derek said. "Don't be alarmed. We're a lot safer here than we were up above." The jerk of his head upward indicated the Corporation Building.

Derek moved to the bar. The bartender with the hair parted in the middle gave him an inquiring look. "Two beers," Derek said.

The bartender nodded. His eyes flicked to the young woman.

"This is Jennie," Derek said.

The bartender nodded again.

Jennie was aware that around the big room all the men were listening. She had the dazed impression that she had



## THE STAR WASPS

been introduced not only to the bartender but also to every man in the room. She also felt that this introduction was very important. There was no question in her mind that the bartender knew the big man who had brought her in here. She also had the impression that every other man in the saloon knew him.

The little man standing next to her at the bar lifted his mug to his lips. He looked past her at her companion.

"John Derek!" the little man said. He set the empty mug on the bar with a thump.

The room was instantly still. In this silence, the noise of the player piano was suddenly excessively loud.

Derek did not move a muscle. It was the bartender who acted.

"Go sit down in the back, Joey," the bartender said. His voice was calm but very firm.

The little man did not move. Apparently he had not shaved in weeks. His eyes were fixed on Derek's face. A happy glow was coming into existence in them.

The bartender's right hand went under the mahogany.

"Go away, Joey," the bartender said. "Go away and sit down."

The little man did not seem to hear him.

"I want to talk to you," he said to Derek. "I want to talk to you very much."

His voice was precise, with hints of an excellent education in its tones. There was no drunkenness in it.

"I see . . ." The bartender began.

"I'll listen to him," Derek said.

"He's a drunk who has been hanging around here for months!" the bartender protested.

"I'll listen to him," Derek repeated.

"Yes, sir," the bartender said. "I only wanted you to know . . ."

"I understand. Thanks," Derek said. He turned his attention to the little man, who was now standing beside him.

"It's true I've been hanging around here for months but I am not a drunk," the little man said, indignation in his voice.

## THE STAR WASPS

"The reason I have been hanging around a place like this is because I had a hunch that sooner or later I would find you here."

Jennie, listening, had conflicting impressions. One thing was sure, every man in the room was listening. Now a man arose and flipped a switch that shut off the player piano.

"Why were you looking for Derek?" Derek asked.

"Because I need his help," the little man answered impetuously.

"Ah," Derek said. "Why did you think you would find him here?"

"A hint there, an impression somewhere else. A drunk talking to himself at the spaceport, a teenage boy trying to run away to the moon. This was poor data but it was the best I had. Most of all, my own intuitive feeling told me that if I would search long enough in places such as this, I would find John Derek. I have found him, haven't I?"

Behing the ragged whiskers, the little man's eyes were alive with hope.

"Ah!" Derek said softly. The toneless sound was a question.

Around the room Jennie Fargo was aware that the men were listening very intently. Inside herself, she knew she was stifling an impulse to scream. In a quite different way, she sensed that this situation was far more threatening than had been the encounter with the viral. She also realized that it was totally unexpected so far as the big man was concerned.

"I have found him, haven't I?" the little man repeated.

"What's your name?" Derek asked.

"Around here, they call me Joey," the little man answered. "If I give you my real name, and you reveal it, I am a dead man."

"Um," Derek said. "In this place, I doubt if you can claim distinction on that score, sir."

The little man winced. "I know, I know. These men here are wolves, your wolves, Derek, each with a price on his head, and each vowed to take your orders until death. I know these things . . ."

## THE STAR WASPS

Derek blinked in startled surprise. "Few men would care to repeat what you have just said, sir."

"I've already got a price on my head!" the little man spoke with fierce intensity. "Death waits for me on any street corner. I want to be one of your wolves, John Derek, and if any death merchant collects the price that is on my head, I want to make certain that he is paid in full."

Outside electric motors hummed softly in the street. Inside there was not a sound.

"My name is Joseph Cotter," the little man said. "I am the man who discovered the viral and unintentionally loosed them on the human race."

John Derek choked on his beer.

### CHAPTER FOUR

THE BARTENDER, with one hand held down by his side, started around the bar. Derek shook his head.

"But he's a nut," the bartender said. "I've seen these winos before. The last one in here insisted he was Mahomet."

"I'm not a nut," the little man insisted, fiercely. "And I'm not Mahomet."

"You are Joseph Cotter?" Derek asked.

"Yes."

Derek took a deep breath.

"And you have been looking for a man by the name of John Derek?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever consider the possibility that Derek may have also been looking for you?" Derek asked.

Joey, the little man, looked startled. "Derek looking for me!" he gasped. "But I'm just an obscure astrophysicist!"

"Derek has been looking for you," Derek continued. "He has had men hunting for you all over Earth, for two years."

Joey was owl-eyed. In his own mind, he had always seemed unimportant. Feelings of inferiority had always

## THE STAR WASPS

harassed him. He did not know whether or not he could quite believe what he was hearing.

"But why would Derek be looking for me?" he asked, bewilderment in his voice.

"For the reason you just gave—because you are the man who discovered the viral," Derek answered.

"You . . . you actually believe me?" Joey stuttered.

"Yes."

"And you really are John Derek?"

"Yes," Derek said.

The expression on Joey's face was that of a man whose fondest dreams have finally come true.

"I want to talk to you, Mr. Cotter," Derek said. With his eyes, he picked out two men in the room. Taking Joey's elbow with one hand and Jennie's with the other, Derek moved both of them toward the back of the room.

As they passed through the doorway and glanced back, Jennie saw that the two men Derek had picked up with his eyes were following them. The others were sitting quietly around the saloon. As the door closed, the player piano began again. Somboddy had remembered to switch it back on.

"Derek's wolves," she remembered the odd little man had called these men in the saloon.

Behind the bar, the bartender had a slightly glazed look in his eyes. He was probably one of Derek's wolves too, she thought.

She did not question the use of the word *wolves* to describe these men. Somehow it fitted them perfectly. She knew, after what had happened with the viral, and then finding herself in these surroundings, she ought to be scared to death.

She was very pleased to discover she was not frightened at all, or not now. The big man holding her elbow accounted for this, she supposed.

In a narrow passage that led to the rear, Derek took the lead. Behind them, on silent feet, the two men he had picked up with his eyes followed them.

The air here had the smell of stale beer and toilets in-

## THE STAR WASPS

adequately flushed and chlorine in it. Derek moved fast. Both Joey and Jennie had to trot to keep up with him. This made her feel like a small girl hurrying to keep up with the big boys. She rather liked this feeling. Like the small girl, she was in the company of someone who was big. That the big boys might lead her into danger, she well understood. She did not object to this. Danger was the price one paid for life. The greater the danger, the sweeter was life.

The passage ended in a door with a combination lock. Derek spun the knob and the door opened. They went through. One of the two men following them stopped here, to lean against the wall. The other came with them. Derek closed the door. Jennie gasped as the floor abruptly dropped under their feet, then realized they were in an elevator. It took them down, down, down. When it stopped and the door opened, she saw they were in complete darkness.

"This is one of the tunnels used in excavating the sub-basement for the Corporation Building," Derek said, in the darkness. The beam of a pencil flashlight in his hand cut into the murk, revealing concrete walls and ceiling that dripped with moisture. A small river was running down the floor of the tunnel. Rough boards made a walkway above the water.

Joey and Jennie followed the beam of Derek's flashlight. The one man followed them. They went down a flight of wet, concrete stairs, then forward again, then down another flight of stairs. The walls of the tunnels were covered with moisture and the air was heavy with it. Great columns of concrete a hundred feet in diameter came down from above.

"These support the building," Derek explained. "They are footed deep in the bed rock below us."

As dimly revealed by the beam of the flashlight, the great columns of concrete looked like a forest of stone trees. The air here was heavy with an oppressive feeling as if the enormous weight of the building above them was somehow crushing everything below it.

Derek stopped before one of the columns, studied it carefully in the beam of his flashlight, then reached a long arm

## THE STAR WASPS

upward and applied pressure on one spot. A click sounded, air hissed softly, and part of the column swung inward. Inside was a room.

Derek chuckled. "The wolves have become mice to gnaw a hole in the very foundation of Raz's towering building," he said. "Step in, Jennie. You too, sir. Jupe, you stay out here and keep watch." The last was spoken to the man who had followed them.

"Yes, sir," Jupe answered. He had a voice as deep as a bullfrog.

As the door closed, Jennie saw that Jupe had taken up a position against the concrete column.

The room inside was small. A bunk bed sat against one wall; there was a small electric hot plate and a cabinet full of packaged foods. Rough wooden boxes were piled on top of another almost to the ceiling. On the floor one box was open. Jennie saw that it contained weapons with ammunition.

"Small caliber gas-operated pistols," Derek said. He offered no explanation for the presence of the weapons or for the room or its contents. Neither Joey nor Jennie felt that any explanation was needed.

Derek turned to Joey. "I'm curious, Mr. Cotter, to find out how you managed to stay alive."

A shiver passed through the body of the little man. He shook his head violently, as if to indicate that this was a mystery to him too.

"Glock must want you dead," Derek continued.

"At the very least, he wants me dead," Joseph Cotter answered. "I have often wondered how I managed to evade the killers who must be hunting for me. Accident, luck, fate. How can any man know the pattern of his life which brings him inexplicable death or equally inexplicable life? How can I explain the pattern that brought me the viral? I was not looking for them, you can bet on that! I did not even know they existed!"

His voice grew vehement with protest. "I am a scientist. I sought to better the lot of men, to give them more knowledge about the universe in which we all live. Pough! Like that, I

## THE STAR WASPS

had the tiger by the tail" He spread his hands in an expressive gesture.

"And when you told what you had found, you discovered you had two tigers by the tail," Derek said.

"My friend, how right you are!" Cotter answered. "I never saw the second tiger but I found out who he was eventually. Erasmus Glock!" The shiver that passed through his body now had elements of a shudder in it. "That man, that fat monster! He stayed out of sight. All I ever saw were the men who worked for him. They were bad enough. When they were not brain-washing me, they were threatening me with torture!"

"I know," Derek said. "Raz stays out of sight and uses other men to do his dirty work."

"Raz?" Cotter questioned.

"That's what I have always called him. It's short for Erasmus," Derek explained.

"You talk as if you know him very well."

"I do," Derek answered. "We grew up together in the tough world of Chicago's slums. Raz was fat and scared then, scared and greedy and sly. A first-class brain. The man can think circles around most men. But that brain is twisted and distorted. Raz thinks he is the most important man who ever lived. He is going to prove it no matter how many men he kills on the way up."

Listening, Jennie was aware of the deep anger in the big man's voice. She was also aware of something else that was there, a kind of sadness which said that the heart of this man was as big as his body, so big that it could bleed a little even for his enemies.

"I understand. It's too bad but that's the way it sometimes is," Cotter answered. Now the touch of sadness was showing in his voice too. The sadness came from his own knowledge that it was a sick world in which a scientist had to hide for his life.

In the dream world of this little man, it would not be this way.

Across all human history, men have dreamed of this better

## THE STAR WASPS

world. In the Twentieth Century, when the big bombs were going off, they had thought it would come into existence in the future.

It had not come into existence in 2470. Even the possibility of realizing it seemed to have receded into some dim future so far away that no man could believe in it.

"Well," Joseph Cotter shook his head, "I am willing to be a little sorry for Erasmus Glock but at the same time I have to be much sorer for other men. The fact that I am even a little sorry for him will not keep me from killing him!" The look of eagles came into the eyes of the little scientist.

"Why?" Derek asked.

"He took the viral from me!" Cotter answered. "Before I had even begun to understand them, his men took them. They took all of my equipment, all my notes, all of the men who had worked with me. When I tried to protest, I suddenly realized that probably my life, certainly my liberty, was in danger."

"That's very clear," Derek answered. "Why did you seek me?"

Cotter dropped his voice. "They say that you have a hideout on the moon. They say that there you have a few trusted men. Is this true?"

"It is true," Derek answered.

Cotter became excited. "They say that there you have laboratories. I thought if I went there and worked . . ." Excitement tangled his vocal chords and bulged his eyes.

"I have such a laboratory," Derek said.

Cotter's excitement grew stronger. "Will you let me go there, and continue my work. On their home planet, the viral must have some natural enemy. Perhaps if I can bring this enemy through . . ."

Derek was silent, his face quiet. "Not so fast, my friend," he said.

Cotter's face fell. "You mean you will not let me go there . . ."

"I did not say that, either. But before I make up my mind one way or another, I want to know more about the viral."



## THE STAR WASPS

Joseph Cotter began to talk. Listening, Jennie Fargo heard many words used which she did not understand. As he talked about his success, Cotter became almost inarticulate. As he mentioned his failure, he again had difficulty in speaking. But between the success and the failure, one fact was clear, that in this little man with the straggled beard, in this little man who looked as if he had crawled out of some gutter somewhere, was a mighty spirit. Cotter might look like a bum. But he dreamed dreams that spanned the stars.

"I do not know nearly as much about the viral as I would like to know," Cotter said. "For instance, I do not know their method of reproduction. They must reproduce their species in some way. How? Also, I do not know what frequencies of energy they use nor the wave forms it takes. At the physical level, a human being is a complex machine that is partly chemical, partly electrical, and partly mechanical in its operation. A human being uses electrical energy at many frequencies. Also, I suspect, he uses forms of energy that can perhaps be called magnetic. The body of a human being is designed to operate in a physical universe, to see physical objects, to feel them with the tactile senses, to hear them if they are vibrating in a certain range, to smell them if they are vibrating in another particular range, to taste them under certain conditions. These are the senses by which a human is aware of his environment, by which he locates himself in his world and guides himself through it. He also has other, inner senses, an awareness of emotion, for one, an awareness of form and of harmony and of beauty in that form, for another. In him, in every man, also is an impulse to do good, by which he means to live in harmony with his environment and with his universe, so far as this is possible to him."

Cotter was waving his hands in growing excitement.

"The viral," Derek said, gently.

"Oh yes, I was wandering, wasn't I?" the little man said, grinning. "I can't help this. It's such a big universe and all of it is so fascinating. But back to the viral. As you know, I am an astrophysicist. Most of my work has been with electronic

## THE STAR WASPS

telescopes—huge, parabolic antennae which collect radiations coming in from space. These can be trained in any direction and focused on any particular star. I was studying one star, Ross 154, SGR, which is located approximately nine light years from our Solar System. For many years now, scientists have known that specific, high frequency radiations have been coming from this particular star. What I did was to concentrate these radiations on certain chemicals, of which cobalt was the most important, and *bingo!*—” Cotter’s voice faltered and his eyes grew big.

“What happened?” Derek asked.

“Out of the combination of these chemicals and these radiations, the viral were born,” Cotter continued. “*Born* may not be the right word to use. Perhaps it would be better to say that I opened a channel which permitted a life form incredible to us to traverse space from Ross 154 and that with my chemicals, I set up a medium suitable for it to use to build a kind of body that would enable it to grow and to thrive on our planet.”

He became inarticulate as he sought for words to describe what he knew had happened and shook his head violently at the thoughts moving in his brain. “Perhaps humans, perhaps all life, came to Earth in this way. Perhaps billions of years ago life came to our planet over the star beams, and finding a suitable chemical medium existing here, began to build bodies.”

“There is such a thing as evolution,” Derek said quietly.

“I know, I know,” Cotter answered quickly. “Evolution is a way to describe the growth and the changes in bodies over billions of years. What I am talking about is the *life principle* itself, the organizing, energizing function that brings bodies into existence and maintains them after they start. There are millions, billions of different forms of life on this one planet. How did they all start?”

“Mutations, adaptations . . .” Derek said.

“These account for part but do they account for all of the incredibly varied forms life takes here on our world?” Cotter asked, excitedly. “Many thoughts went through my

## THE STAR WASPS

mind when I discovered that little flickering blue lights were forming a pattern above my chemicals. Not in the chemicals, mind you, above them!"

"You can see these little blue lights?" Derek asked.

"Of course I can see them! My eyes see in that range of the spectrum. If I could not have seen them, how could I have stayed alive?" The little scientist became even more excited. "Glock has my method of controlling them, a method of using high frequency radiations in the radio spectrum, which I worked out with much pain. He has been using them to hunt for me just as he uses them to hunt for any man he thinks is an enemy. If I could not have seen them, and thus evaded them, I would have been dead long ago!"

Derek glanced at Jennie. She was listening quietly.

"These viral are intelligent," Cotter continued. "Their sense of what is valuable and what isn't is entirely different from ours. Like Glock, they have no concern for the life of any other creature. My friend, it would have been better if I had never been born than to be born to loose this life-form here on Earth."

Sincerity was deep in the voice of the little man.

"And so, if you will take me to the moon and let me use such laboratory facilities as may be available there, I will do my best to correct the grave mistake I have made. On their native world there must be something that holds the viral in check. Everywhere, nature works by the method of holding everything in balance. When one form of life suddenly begins to increase in numbers, another form appears to hold it in check."

"There was the green viral." Jennie spoke suddenly.

Her words got her the instant attention of Joseph Cotter. "A green viral? I never saw such a thing. Only the blue ones, young lady."

"But we saw a green one," she insisted. "In fact, it seemed to save our lives."

She described what had happened on the mawk.

Now Joseph Cotter really became excited. "Then the life form that holds the viral in check has either come through

## THE STAR WASPS

from Ross 154 or has appeared here as a result of mutation!"

He turned to Derek. "My friend, I *must* get to the moon. Or to an adequate laboratory somewhere. I must find out more about this green viral which fights and destroys the blue ones. My friend . . ." Surprise crossed his face as a buzzer hummed softly in the room. "What was that?"

"A warning buzzer from the saloon," Derek answered. "We have a direct line TV circuit running up there."

He moved across the room, lifted a wooden case, took from it a tiny portable TV receiver. He flicked it on. The two inch screen came to life, revealing the oldtime saloon. Audio coming along revealed the player piano still banging away at the oldtime tunes.

The wolves were still quietly drinking beer. The bartender was standing behind his mahogany bar.

A man with a completely bald head was standing at the bar gulping at a mug of beer.

As they watched the baldheaded man wiped copious quantities of sweat from his head and face. He spoke to the bartender, apparently for the second time.

"I want to talk to John Derek. Don't tell me that you don't know how to get in touch with him."

The bartender shook his head.

Beside her, Jennie Fargo was aware that the big man was suddenly standing very still. He seemed to have stopped breathing.

"He is asking for you," she spoke. "Who is he? Do you know him?"

"His name is Hollow," Derek said, slowly. "Yes, I know him. He is Glock's killer."

"What?" she gasped. "But how would he know where to find you?"

"This means that Glock has already spotted this place. When he found out I was in town, he knew where to look for me." He glanced down at her. "We must never make the mistake of thinking that Glock is stupid. He isn't."

"But . . ." Fear was suddenly in her voice.

## THE STAR WASPS

The tiny TV screen revealed that the baldheaded man was leaning across the bar and speaking.

"Tell Derek I want to speak to him," his voice whispered from the little speaker. "Tell him the big man sent me. Tell him the big man personally guarantees Derek's safety."

Glancing at Derek, she saw that surprise amounting almost to shock was on his face.

"Glock wants to talk to me!" Derek whispered. "He wants to *talk!* He guarantees my safety! What in heaven has happened to shake him up like this?"

"Glock is not to be trusted!" Cotter said.

"I know."

"This is a trap of some kind. He does not know where you are and is trying to lure you into showing yourself," the little man said.

"It may be," Derek answered. He moved to the door, opened it, and beckoned to the man on guard outside. As this man entered, he glanced at Cotter.

"You're going to get your wish, Mr. Cotter. You're going to the moon. Jupe will take you there." His eyes went on to Jennie. "Both of you!"

She stared at him in sudden dismay.

"But what about you?" she demanded.

"I'm going upstairs and talk to Hollow," Derek answered.

"But . . ." She tried to say.

"You were looking for adventure," Derek said. "You're going to get it."

## CHAPTER FIVE

"JUPE?" Derek said.

"Yes, Johnny." The voice as deep as that of a bullfrog had respect in it in spite of using Derek's first name. It had other tones too, including admiration, and a longing to be like Derek.

"We're going upstairs. We have a guest up there, a man named Hollow."

## THE STAR WASPS

"Do I get to strangle him, sir?" Jupe's great gnarled hands formed clutching talons.

"No," Derek said.

"But this Hollow, this man has killed many of our fellow-ship!" Tones of protest were in the bullfrog voice.

"I know, Jupe. But the time for killing him is not yet." Protest was now in Derek's voice as a hard, grim bitterness. He found his own hands were forming talons for the stranglehold. "You come along with me and sort of protect my rear."

"I'll do that, sir," Jupe said, eagerly.

Hearing the eagerness, Derek realized again that he had the ability to command the loyalty of men. They followed him, they looked up to him, instinctively they selected him as their leader, without knowing why. If a secret was involved in this—and it was a secret for which many men would have given fortunes—Derek did not know the secret. The ability to command the loyalty of men had built empires. No one knew its nature beyond the fact that it was a magnetic quality of the personality which some men had and some didn't know. Derek knew it as a responsibility which required him to be as loyal to the men he led as they were to him.

Going through the dark tunnels, with Jupe following him like some huge, faithful hound, Derek did not look back. Reaching the second guard, called Moon Man, he stopped.

"Take the woman and the man to the moon," he told Moon Man.

"But I was supposed to take them, Johnny," Jupe protested.

"I know but I've changed my mind. I want you with me in case Mr. Hollow needs a little attention."

"Good," Jupe said.

"Are they prisoners?" Moon Man asked, meaning Jennie and Cotter.

"They are *not*," Derek answered emphatically. "They are on our side, they are with us as new recruits. They are to be treated with every possible respect and consideration. Take

## THE STAR WASPS

them in our ship. I'll use space radio to let you know when to return and where to pick me up."

"I'll do it, Johnny," Moon Man said. Like Old Jupe, he was prepared to follow this big man anywhere.

Derek turned away, then stopped and came back. "Take . . . take . . ." He found himself almost stuttering as he tried to speak. "Take good care of the woman, Jennie," he told Moon Man.

"Yes, sir," the astonished man answered.

"Did you hear what he said?" Moon Man asked Jupe as Derek's tall figure slipped into the darkness.

"I sure did," Jupe answered.

"But . . . but I never heard Johnny say anything like that before."

Jupe wagged a thick, reproving finger at his companion. "It can happen to anybody, Moon Man, it can happen to anybody."

"But it has never happened to Derek before."

"Maybe he has never met the right woman before." Old Jupe glanced into the darkness where Derek was vanishing. "I gotta go, Moon Man. We've got an *old friend* waiting up above for us. We wouldn't want to keep *him* waiting." The slight accent on certain words indicated his meaning. He hastily followed the big man ahead of him.

Derek did not go directly to the saloon. He took another route out of the subterranean maze of tunnels under the Corporation Building, one that took him into an alley, then through the back door of a pawnshop where the proprietor watched him and the old spaceman waddling along behind with alert, quick eyes, but said nothing.

Outside, in the doorway of the pawnshop, Derek paused. Overhead mawks grumbled and rumbled to themselves. Overhead on the maze of crisscrossing aerial freeways, little sport cars buzzed like eager bugs. Outside in the street itself traffic muttered softly as electric motors groaned at the load they were carrying and gear trains whined in protest.

The time was now moving past noon. The sun was high

## THE STAR WASPS

in the clear blue of the mountain sky. The air stank with the odors of the ground level.

But even if the air stank, it had no sparkles of blue light in it. Or none at this time. Derek made very certain on this point, then went out of the pawnshop entrance and turned right. Down here where there were no mawks, men still used their legs.

The outside of the saloon was quiet. No suspicious loungers were in the neighborhood. There were no sparkles of blue light in the air. Derek went through the swinging doors of the saloon and paused there.

One man was standing at the bar. The bartender's expression was frantic. Around the room men drank beer and played cards quietly. Instantly aware that Derek had entered, they gave no indication that they even saw him. They were expecting attack, and possible death, from any direction at any moment and were trying to ready to meet it. It was not easy for even these wolves to face death. When Derek came through the door, they relaxed a little. If there was not safety in his presence, there was at least a feeling of security in the face of danger. Now that he was here, he would give the orders. This helped.

If they had been giving the orders, the man standing at the bar would have been dead for many minutes. They would have been scattering on the run for holes to hide in until the heat was off, holes in the Earth's crowded cities, holes in Earth's lost mountains, holes in the sides of the craters of the moon.

Derek's tread was so noiseless that he was standing beside Hollow before the squat, baldheaded man noticed his presence. Out of the corner of his eye, Hollow first became aware that someone had silently entered his vision on his left. He did not turn his body, he acted as if he could not turn it. But he did turn his eyes. As he did this, he became aware of the identity of John Derek.

A shudder that was almost a shock wave passed through his body. It told a story of over-taut nerves. Hollow knew quite well that in this place his life hung on a thread. He



## THE STAR WASPS

would not have come here on the orders of anyone except Erasmus Glock, then only because coming here was the lesser of two dangers. What he did not know was whether Derek had come to talk, or to order the thread of his life snapped.

"I didn't see you come in, sir." Startled words poured out of the squat man. Pulling a handkerchief from his jacket, he mopped at his forehead, then removed his hat to mop the bald pate there.

Derek did not even glance toward him. Instead, he looked steadily at the bartender.

"Beer," Derek said. He jerked his thumb toward Hollow. "Draw one for this man too."

The oldtime steins, overflowing with white foam, slid across the bar. Derek paid cash, sliding a bill across the mahogany, then watching closely while the bartender rang up the sum and gave him his change. To fail to pay would intimate he was known here. Hollow might know this fact, and might not. Derek intended to give the squat man no information he did not already have.

Hollow looked at the beer in front of him. He had watched the bartender draw it from the same tap as Derek's stein but this did not prove it was good to drink. A tap might be rigged so that the slightest touch in one direction would send knock-out drops into one stein, a touch in the other direction would cut off the flow. Perhaps some of the subtle poisons that the vastly improved chemistry of this age had produced might go into the beer. Hollow knew a dozen such poisons, insidious, colorless liquids that killed without leaving any residue in the tissues that even the most complete autopsy could detect. He had used these poisons, on occasion, but he did not want to be a victim of one of them himself.

"How's Raz?" Derek drawled at his left.

"Raz?" Hollow had difficulty in saying the word. He knew it to be a nickname of Erasmus Glock but he also knew that if he ever dared use it in Glock's presence, perhaps if he even dared *think* it, he would be taking the first step that would eventually lead to oblivion. Mr. Glock tolerated no impertinence from anybody! The slightest whisper of dis-

## THE STAR WASPS

respect from a subordinate, even the suspicion that it existed as a secret attitude, and a head would roll.

Hollow knew about such things. When Glock gave the orders, it was Hollow's job to roll the heads!

He also knew that his own head was not safe on his shoulders.

To find Derek, whom he knew to be a hunted man, using the name of *Raz*, caused something in the nature of a psychic shock in Hollow.

He swallowed before he could speak again. "Do . . . do you mean the big man?" He could not bring himself to use Glock's name.

Derek nodded indifferently. "Sure. Raz Glock. Your boss." Derek was silent for a moment, apparently thinking of nothing, then spoke again. "It seems such a damned shame that hanging has gone out of style."

"I . . . I don't follow you, sir."

"Both you and Raz are big enough to stretch ropes real good," Derek said. "And if I do say it, both of you would look good at the end of a rope. That's why it's such a shame that hanging has gone out of style."

Hollow was aghast. "Sir! Mister—the big man—is one of the foremost citizens of this country, of the world! His philanthropies, his humanitarian deeds, his unselfish service, his giving of his time and of his wealth to aid the poor and the unfortunate . . ."

"Skip it!" Derek said. "You talk like one of Raz's publicity boys who are paid to write fine things about him. You and I know better than to believe any of that hot air."

"But . . ."

Hollow lost his voice. He glanced over his shoulder, searching the air of the room. He had long suspected the viral might be used for spying on him. He saw no viral, in fact, he could not see them, and knew it, but he could not keep from looking for them. But he did see the men in the room. The sight of their faces did not make him happy.

"So you know about them?" Derek said.

Hollow jerked his head back to look at the big man

## THE STAR WASPS

lounging beside him. Derek was slowly sipping his beer. The expression on his face indicated he was enjoying both the tang of the malt and the coolness of the drink.

"Know about what?" Hollow asked.

"Know about what you turned to look for."

"I . . . I thought I heard someone enter."

"You're a good liar. But not good enough."

"Sir . . ."

"Skip the fancy talk too," Derek said. "What does Raz want with me?"

The easy way in which Derek shrugged off the viral—and omnipresent death—shook Hollow again. The question that followed so quickly left him with no thought in his mind except to answer it.

"I don't know, Mr. Derek. I just don't know. He doesn't tell me the *whys* of anything. It's just go do this, go do that, go see this man . . ." Sweat was popping out on his face now.

"I know how it is," Derek answered. "I remember Raz. He was some older than I was, but even when he was a kid, he always had a gang of smaller kids around him. He wasn't teaching them the Boy Scout code, either. He gave them their orders. If they were caught stealing something, Raz never admitted he had given these orders."

"I know, I know," Hollow said. Something close to gratitude flicked across his normally unexpressive face. Until now, nobody had ever understood how it was with him. He appreciated the fact that the big man had understood him.

But the expression was instantly gone as he realized that gratitude under these circumstances was a very dangerous emotion for him.

"I was one of those little kids," Derek continued.

Hollow was utterly astounded.

"You . . . you admit theft?" he gasped.

"That was when I was little and thought Raz was big and didn't know any better than to listen to him," Derek answered.

"But if you have a record, the law can still follow you."

"I didn't get a record as a kid," Derek said. "I quit running with Raz, quit taking his orders. He has probably not for-

## THE STAR WASPS

gotten and never will forget that I defied him, quit him cold. He would kill me for it yet, if he could."

"Oh, Mr.—the big man is a peace-loving . . ."

"He hasn't been able to get the job done, neither legally nor by hiring killers like you."

For the first time, Derek looked Hollow full in the eye. The squat man winced at the impact of that gaze.

"Did he send you to kill me now?" Derek asked.

"Oh, no, sir! He said you were not to be harmed in any way. He wants to talk to you. He said he would guarantee your safety and for me to guarantee it too. He won't break his word, sir."

If Derek had reservations about Glock breaking his word, he kept them to himself.

"What does he want to talk to me about?"

"He didn't say," Hollow answered. "He just told me to find you and tell you he wanted to talk to you, that he guaranteed your safety."

Derek glanced casually around the saloon. Old Jupe lingered just beyond the swinging door, alert for anyone that Hollow might have left out there. The air of the saloon was free of little sparkles of blue light. He pondered the problem of Raz, who had sent this killer with a message that he wanted to talk. There was danger in talking to Raz. Derek considered this danger, accepting it deep down inside him as a feeling tone. He did not dislike it. In fact, there was a kind of a thrill in it. The feeling of danger and the thrill that went with it were old companions whom he regarded as warm friends. He was also aware of some vague pressure warning him of additional danger. The image of Jennie Fargo crossed his mind in explanation of this pressure. If he did not come back from his talk with Raz, he would never see her again. He shrugged at the thought. A woman could not be allowed to dominate the life of a man, nor did a real woman ever want to do this. A real woman was man's true companion who had come with him along all the trails his feet had trod, faced all of his dangers with him, and who went forward into the future with him, a helpmeet shar-

ing his life. He knew his heart had selected this woman. She would wait for him on the moon, if he could get there.

He brought his mind back to Raz Glock. What did the fellow want? What could he want? Raz already had everything.

"I'll go see him," Derek said, making up his mind.

At his words, Hollow's face lost some of its anxiety.

"Good! We'll leave right now."

"Not so fast!" Derek said sharply.

Hollow had already started toward the door. Derek's words stopped him.

"I said I would go see him," Derek explained. "You're staying here."

The anxiety came back to Hollow's face. He was suddenly very much aware of the men in this room. He was supposed to stay here with them!

"Call Raz and tell him I'm coming," Derek said. "Don't say you haven't a walkie-talkie hidden somewhere in your clothes. I know better."

"Well . . ."

"Get it out."

It was a tiny combination transmitter-receiver that could be held cupped in the palm of one hand. The transmitter was tuned to be received by one station only. Hollow knew who would answer this call. He was sweating as he flicked the tiny lever that put this little instrument into operation.

A harsh voice snarled at him.

"Mr. Glock, sir . . ."

So far Hollow got when a big hand reached out and lifted the radio from his hand. It was done so swiftly and so smoothly that the squat man could not even grab at the little radio as it was taken from him. Then Derek was talking into it.

"Hi, Raz," Derek said.

The little speaker sputtered garbled sounds at this voice.

"I'm coming up to see you," Derek said.

The radio sputtered an unintelligible answer.

"I'm keeping Hollow as a hostage," Derek continued. "As for you, Raz, have your flunkies sweep off the front steps of your big building and roll out the red carpet for me. Tell 'em to hide all the knives and all the guns, Raz. There is a truce between us while we talk. And I don't want you or any of your flunkies breaking the truce."

Inarticulate sounds came from the radio. Somewhere a man was greatly surprised. He was trying to speak but was only succeeding in stuttering.

Derek cut off the radio. He looked at Hollow.

"Raz sounds all shook up," he said.

The squat man could not speak.

Derek gestured toward the bar. "Drink your beer. It's not poisoned and it'll be good for you."

Hollow was trying to find the handle of the mug with a shaking hand as Derek went out the door. There Old Jupe waited like a faithful shadow.

"You stay here and help the boys entertain our guest," he said.

Old Jupe's face lighted.

"No brass knuckles," Derek said. "No knuckles of any kind. I want him alive and able to breathe when I get back."

Jupe's face dropped.

"Unless he tries to escape, that is," Derek said. "Also, you had better relieve him of his guns. He's carrying so many he's almost topheavy."

"Yes, sir," Old Jupe said.

Derek found a mawk leading upward. He went up out of this place of stinks and dangerous men into the clear blue sky of Colorado, into the clean mountain air, into a region where the men were much more polite—and no less dangerous. In the high sky, he caught a glimpse of a ship moving, a spaceship outbound. This was not his ship but his ship would go this way. Into his mind came thoughts of Jennie Fargo and of Joseph Cotter. The little scientist could strike a mighty blow for freedom. But where was freedom, really? It was always outside a fence, somewhere. Sometimes nature had built the fences, sometimes men had done it. The fences men

## THE STAR WASPS

had built could be torn down. The ones nature had built took more time—and more thought and effort.

The little ship that would carry Jennie Fargo and Joseph Cotter would take off from a deep canyon in western Colorado sometime during the night. It would not be registered, it would show no markings, and it would not report its flight plan. The Space Force would be greatly interested in it, if they ever saw it. It would take off from an area where the Space Force had one of its secret bases, but if they saw it, they would think it was one of their own.

Derek doubted if the Space Force would even notice it.

But there was something he had to notice. This was the air around him. Bright blue or bright green? How friendly were the friends? Were they friends at all? He did not know. Joseph Cotter did not know for sure. Both hoped the green viral were friendly. Men had always built a bridge of hope. Sometimes the bridge had stood, sometimes it had gone down. Who knew the load the bridge of hope would carry until he walked over it?

He saw no sparkles in the air.

A young man, impeccably dressed, was waiting for him in the lobby of the vast Corporation Building. The young man was sweating, but he had his orders, and he was going to carry them out. He stepped up and asked Derek's name and got a nod for his answer.

"I have been asked to show you upward, sir," the young man said. "If you will come with me."

"Glad to," Derek said. For a moment, he wished he had another little glass sphere, to give to this young man, but he did not have it. As he followed his guide to a bank of private elevators, Derek was aware that other young men were lounging in the lobby. One was reading a magazine, two were chatting with each other, a fourth seemed to be doing nothing. He was not deceived by them. They were dogs. He was a great gray wolf come in among them. The dogs would like nothing better than orders to pull him down.

The perfectly dressed young man did not take Derek to the tower at the top of the building. His domain did not

## THE STAR WASPS

extend this high. He took his charge to the second level and turned him over to a middle-aged man, who took Derek to the third level. Here Derek was turned over to a young woman. Sleek, perfectly groomed, with a manicure, hairdo, and a complexion that cost a fortune each morning, the look in her eyes said, "I'm not busy tonight. How about you?" Derek ignored this look. When she put the look into words, he ignored them too.

"I'm busy, honey," he said, gently.

She looked disappointed. Reluctantly, she turned him over to his next escort, who was also a woman but was not young, not beautiful, and not slender—but who looked damned efficient. Derek judged from the way her dress bulged at her thigh that she had a gun hidden on the inside of her leg. Its purpose was not to protect her virtue. This she had lost long ago, when she had been young and slender.

This last woman sat behind a big desk with banks of electronic switchboards all around her, in a big circular room. From behind the doors that circled this room came the soft whisper of the keys of many accounting machines. There were no perfume machines in operation here and no soft music in the background. It was as if the sound of the keys of the accounting machines provided all the music that was needed. Perhaps this was music here!

"Mr. Glock is waiting for you, sir," the last woman said. "Just walk through the door marked PRIVATE."

She did not get up from her desk but merely pointed to the door she meant. Derek had the impression that she did not dare leave her communications center even for a second.

"You will find a small lobby and another door at the end of it," this last woman told him. "In that little lobby, your body will receive a final scanning to make doubly certain you are carrying no weapons. But you're clean. You have nothing to fear."

"I have already been checked?" Derek asked.

"Several times." The last woman almost smiled as she answered.

Derek walked through the door marked PRIVATE, waited



## THE STAR WASPS

a moment for the high frequency radiations to scan his body, then walked to the next door. Before he could knock on it, a harsh voice spoke from a hidden speaker, bidding him enter.

He walked into a huge room. On the east and the west, for the morning and the evening sun to enter, were windows. On the north and the south were doors leading to other rooms. From behind the doors to the north came the steady hum of one accounting machine, the master machine that took all the data from all the machines below and produced a synthesis that reported the financial pulse of the country, probably of the world as well.

Behind the doors to the south there was silence. The doors to the south had wire shields in front of them. Derek glanced at these shields. They had been newly installed. He suspected he knew the reason for their existence.

Erasmus Glock was an enormous man. Sitting behind a desk that was as big as a football practice field, he made even the desk look small. His head was big in proportion to his body but his eyes were small, close-set, gray, and unwinking as he stared at John Derek.

Most men took one look at these eyes and began to tremble. The eyes radiated cold, calculating hostility. Most men who were summoned here—no man came here without being summoned—stood in front of the desk and stammered and sweated as they tried to talk. A single chair sat beside the desk but few men were ever invited to sit in it and no one sat in it uninvited.

Derek sat in it. He leaned back in it. He lifted his feet and put them on top of the polished desk.

"Hi, Raz," he said. "It's a damned shame to see you again and to be forced to accept the fact that you're still alive."

The monstrous face of the fat man turned red. Then the red went away. Gray replaced it. Then, down the fat cheeks, tears began to trickle slowly.

Derek looked at these tears with great interest. Out of the corner of his eyes, lying beside a sheaf of written reports on

## THE STAR WASPS

the far side of the desk, he saw something that interested him more than the tears—a little glass ball. He looked back at Glock.

The tears were bigger now, the cheeks were working, the muscles twisting.

"I didn't mean to do anything wrong," Glock blubbered. "I swear I didn't. Why do you have to try to ruin me when I'm not doing anything wrong?"

Glock reached into his jacket pocket. The handkerchief that came out of hiding was pure silk, a produce of the remnant of the once-great silk producing industry that had existed in the Orient but which had been almost eliminated by plastics. Only multi-millionaires could afford silk now.

Blowing his nose with great violence, Glock dropped the handkerchief in the waste basket beside his desk, then began to blubber again.

"Everybody's against me. *Everybody!*"

Opening a drawer of his desk—while Derek tensed—Glock lifted another silk handkerchief from the stack neatly folded there. Derek relaxed at the sight of the handkerchief. Glock blew his nose on it and it went to join its predecessor in the waste basket.

"We were friends long ago," Glock said. "But you turned against me. Why did you turn against me, Johnny?"

Derek, sitting with his feet on the desk, did not answer.

"Why do you want to hurt me, Johnny? I haven't done anything to you. I've always been your friend, always spoken kindly of you, always tried to help you."

Derek cleared his throat. Glock looked at him with eager interest.

"The boys loafing in the lobby downstairs want to help me too." Derek said. "Hollow wants to help me. That over-dressed receptionist one floor down also wants to help me."

"I . . . I don't know what you're talking about," Glock said. Again he began to blubber.

"The trouble, Raz, is that I have a good memory," Derek said. "I remember once, when you were a kid, you found the courage to try a little stealing on your own. You were

## THE STAR WASPS

caught cold, with your hand in the cash register of a second hand store. The owner called the police. You put on your bawling act. The cops knew you and wanted you. They didn't pay any attention to your tear-stained face, knowing it was only an act, but you bawled so long and yelled so loud how everybody was against you that the store owner began to feel sympathetic. He refused to prosecute."

Derek shook his head slowly.

"This crying act, it won't work with me, Raz. I remember you as a big lard-bottomed kid who made a speciality of crying his way out of trouble. You're grown up now, Raz. Crying will get you nowhere."

Derek's words were calm and spoken without bitterness.

An astonishing change came over Glock's face. The tears vanished instantly. The flesh became hard and firm. A glitter appeared in the small eyes. The breathing changed and the enormous paunch began to work like a bellows blowing up a flame in a forge within.

Derek regarded this change with detached interest.

"How mad you can get, Raz!" Derek said. "You used to scare hell out of the little kids by getting mad at them. This won't work with me."

Derek shook his head.

"No, Raz, you can't cry your way out of the trouble you're in and you can't get mad and scream your way out. In fact, there's nothing left you can do except face the consequences of your own actions!"

"Goddamn you, Johnny Derek!" Glock screamed. "I'll have you . . ."

Derek shook his head again.

"No, Raz, you won't have me killed. You don't dare do it, not as long as that is on your desk and you don't understand it."

Derek pointed to the little glass ball.

The anger growing in Glock's eyes abruptly faded. Fear replaced it. This time the emotion was real.

"What is that damn thing, Johnny? On top of everything else, this is simply too much. You've got to call off your

## THE STAR WASPS

dogs, Johnny. You've got to! You've got to be my friend, for your own sake if for no other reason. Got to, Johnny! Got to!" Pure terror was now in the voice of Erasmus Glock.

### CHAPTER SIX

DEREK TOOK his feet off of the polished wood. He walked around the desk that was big enough to serve as a practice football field and picked up the little glass sphere. Out of the corner of his eyes, he watched Glock. The huge fat man was scared of the little glass sphere but he was even more scared of something else, Derek thought. Perhaps the little glass ball had been the straw that broke Glock's back!

Derek sat back down and put his feet back on the desk. He felt a little like apologizing to the mahogany, which was a fine piece of wood, but he did not feel in the least like apologizing to Erasmus Glock.

Holding the little sphere up to the light, he looked at it. Across many centuries some men and some women had gazed into crystal balls and had claimed to see in them the past, the present, and the future, that which was and that which was still to be.

"This is a magic ball," he said.

"I don't believe in that magic stuff," Glock grunted.

"You should believe in it, Raz. It shows the future."

"Hunh?" Glock grunted. "Talk sense. Nobody can see the future."

"I can," Derek said calmly. "When I look into this little crystal ball, I can see the future that is going to come into existence right here in your own private empire, Raz."

His voice changed. The note of a great bell came into it.

"I can see men beginning to find freedom again, Raz. I can see them begin to realize their secret longing to stop being cogs in your financial empire. This nation was founded by free men, Raz. They built it out of their toil, their sweat, and the tears of their women. The rulers of the old world they had defied called them traitors. This threat did not

## THE STAR WASPS

stop them. They faced freezing cold and burning heat, they faced famine, they faced the wilderness. They wanted to be free and they were willing to pay the price of freedom, for themselves and for their children."

"That's a pipe dream!" Glock grunted. "Nobody is free. Nobody would know how to use freedom if he had it."

"If it is a pipe dream, it is this because you and other men like you have made it such. It is the dream that built this nation. It is the dream that must build the future. It is a dream that I am glad to serve!" Derek answered. "If serving this dream means that I have to sweat the lard out of men like you, I'll do it!"

Derek's voice was firm with purpose. Glock flinched at this tone. He had heard it before, when a little kid called Johnny Derek had told him to go to the devil.

"The people who work here in this building are dead, Raz," Derek continued. "All of them, even the corporation presidents. They're dead to the finer things of life, dead to justice, dead to fair play, dead to the needs of their fellow men, dead to beauty, dead to real life in a living, growing world, dead to the fact that all around them is a big wonderful universe."

Derek held up the little sphere. "You are right to be scared of this, Raz, scared of it and of what it will do. These little spheres are going to bring the dead people in this big building back to life. Radiating at a very high frequency, these little spheres send out waves that touch deep and long-buried parts of the human psyche, of the human soul. In the deep heart of all men the yearning for real freedom still exists. These little spheres will bring this yearning to life and will give it a voice to speak. The tumult of these little voices speaking will become a great roar, Raz, that will bring your financial empire down around you."

Derek let his voice go into silence. Holding up the little sphere, he stared into its crystal depths. In this moment, in this big man, there was something of the mystic before a sacred shrine, a mystic who looked beyond the chained men

## THE STAR WASPS

he sees around him to a world of freedom—and of joy—that is to come.

"We've already got freedom!" Glock shouted.

"You have it. Others pay the price!" Derek answered. "Every man and every woman in this building is paying the price, Raz. They may not know they're paying but they're doing it just the same. You have your chains well hidden, Raz. I'm going to show your chains to your slaves and help them take them off their legs."

Glock's cheeks puffed with anger. "Every corporation and every man and woman in this building is free!"

"Free to take your orders, yes," Derek answered. "Free to run on your leash like dogs at the end of chains."

"But . . ."

"I'll tell you the names of the corporations I know you have taken over in the past month," Derek interrupted. "You set up the situation that broke them, then you came in and saved them. In the process you gained control of them."

He gave the names of various companies. At each one, Glock winced.

"Of course I have taken over these companies," the fat man admitted. "In each case, it was a salvage operation. Everything was done legally."

"I don't doubt it was all legal. You must have hundreds of lawyers on your staff making certain everything is legal. Other men who take orders from you made these laws in the first place. It's all arranged for your benefit, Raz."

"That a goddamned lie!" Glock shouted.

Derek took his feet off the desk. He stood up. He slipped the little glass sphere into his pocket.

"Call one of your flunkies to see me out!" he said. His voice was as cold as the north wind in January.

Glock's anger turned to alarm. He puffed himself to his feet.

"You . . . you're not leaving!"

"Of course I'm leaving." Derek answered. "I can't waste time on you."

"But . . ."

## THE STAR WASPS

"When my little glass spheres start appearing by the millions all over the city and men find them and start thinking for themselves again and in thinking for themselves discover their hunger for individual freedom—don't say I didn't warn you, Raz," Derek interrupted.

"You . . . you wouldn't do that!"

"I can and I will!"

Derek moved toward the exit. "Buzz your very efficient secretary and tell her to arrange an escort for me," he said. "And no treachery or your boy, Hollow, will tell everything he knows. And the little glass spheres will still appear to encourage your slaves to pull your building down over your head."

"No, no, no!" Glock said. Sweat was on his face again. "You're the only man in all my life I ever really trusted, who ever told me the truth. I'm in trouble, Johnny; deep trouble. I want you to work for me, Johnny. I want you to help me. I'll pay any price you ask, Johnny. I'll give you full control of your own work. You can write your own ticket."

Derek, watching and listening, saw that Glock had put on a new disguise, that of a supersalesman. The fat man was actually very good at it. However, Derek liked this supersalesman even less than he had liked the crying Glock, the raging Glock, the whining Glock.

"You can have a million a year, two million a year, five million a year . . ."

Derek shook his head.

"Ten million a year. I can fix things so you won't have to pay taxes on it. It'll all be gravy train."

"No," Derek said.

"I'll give you the first year in advance, to prove my good faith," Glock said.

"I admit your good faith needs proving, Raz, always," Derek said. "I like money, in moderate quantities. I need it, for myself and for my bunch, my fellowship as Old Jupe calls us. But what good would money be to me if I earned it working for you?"

"Eh?" Glock said. "Money is always good."

## THE STAR WASPS

"I would never live long enough to spend it," Derek said, as if he had not heard. "Also I'd lose my self-respect. I'd lose the respect of my own men. They would probably shoot me. If they didn't, they should!"

"I'll put all your men on my payroll too," Glock said. "Listen, Johnny, I'm serious."

He began to pull at Derek's coat, to pat Derek's shoulders with overfat hands. In spite of himself, Derek was curious. What *did* Glock want?

"What do you want of me?" Derek asked.

"Find Joseph Cotter for me," Glock answered.

Derek felt his mouth sag open as surprise hit him. All this to find a little lost wino!

"Why do you want Cotter?" He asked.

Glock took a deep breath.

"Because the viral are out of control!" he answered.

As he spoke, he stopped patting Derek on the arms. His role of a supersalesman slipped away from him. His shoulders sagged. He waddled around his desk and sat down heavily in his overstuffed chair. Opening the drawer, he pulled out another silk handkerchief. When he spoke again, his voice had become a rasp.

"Let's drop pretense, Johnny. All that you have said about me is true. I admit it. But the fact that I deserve to be hung doesn't make me in any less of a spot. Nor you either, Johnny. Nor a lot of other people. I've got to have Joseph Cotter right away. I've had my own men hunting for him, quietly and carefully, for months. I think you know where he is. I don't see how he could have stayed in hiding so long unless he had gone over to you."

Glock's breathing became noisy.

"Now I've got to have him. He's the only person who can solve the problem. This morning, during the last few hours, the viral have gone mad. They've rebelled. They've thrown off my controls. I'll pay any price for Cotter, any price you choose to name."

"All of the viral have rebelled?" Derek asked. Involuntarily, his eyes began to search the air of the room. At this moment,



## THE STAR WASPS

he did not dare let his mind focus on the meaning of the words Glock had just spoken.

"All of them!" Glock answered. "There have always been a few strays who seemed to revolt and take off on their own. But these were in the minority. With their short life span of perhaps a month, the strays did not matter. Perhaps a few people were killed, by accident, but the strays didn't do any real damage. But now . . ."

Glock's breathing became more labored and more noisy. Sweat stood in globules on his face.

"Now they no longer respond to my radio controls. Each one seems to do just as it damned well pleases. I'm scared to go into the anteroom and watch them, even if it is shielded. I'm scared to sit here at my desk. I'm scared to death of the moment when I have to go out of this room. This room is shielded too but I can't stay here forever. Sooner or later I'll have to go out. And then . . . if they are waiting for me . . ."

"Show me this anteroom, Raz," Derek said.

Glock was hardly able to lift himself from his chair. As he walked toward the doors to the south, his stride was that of an ancient elephant lurching reluctantly on its last walk to the graveyard of the pachyderms. Pausing before the middle door, he stood hesitating and irresolute, then frantically punched a button on the wall. Shielding and all, the door opened inward.

Glock peered into the small room beyond, then jerked back. He made futile efforts to close the door.

"Leave it open, Raz," Derek told him.

Glock left off his efforts to close the door.

"I . . . I guess it is still safe in here," he faltered. "The anteroom is shielded too. I was afraid the shielding might have leaked. I . . ." He wiped at the sweat on his face. "I'm awfully scared, Johnny. Awfully."

"You're not half as scared as you're going to be," Derek told him. "Walk into the anteroom ahead of me, Raz!"

And Glock defied him.

Derek's right hand swept down to his shoe, It came up

## THE STAR WASPS

holding something that looked a little like broomstraw that he had pulled from a hiding place in the sole of his shoe. He held the point of this straw an inch from Glock's stomach.

Glock pulled back from it. Derek followed him.

"I knew you would have scanners that would catch any metal object on me," Derek told him. "So I brought along this little plastic straw that your scanners wouldn't find. The straw has a little something on the end of it, Raz, a little something that only a few chemists know how to make."

Glock stared at the straw. A slight discoloration showed on the end of it. He seemed to find this discoloration an object of fascination.

"It . . . it's poisoned?"

"Yes," Derek said. "I can either jab it or I can throw it. It won't hurt and you won't feel it, Raz. As soon as the point is in your bloodstream you won't feel anything."

Glock stared at the point of the straw.

"Turn around and put your hands on the wall," Derek told him. "I don't want you to get nervous and try to use one of the guns you've got hidden in your pants, Raz."

Like a reluctant elephant, Glock obeyed. Derek took a small gas gun from the right-hand pocket of his jacket, a tiny automatic from the left. From the pocket that had held the silk handkerchief, he took a derringer. From an inside holster, he took a high-powered automatic pistol. From the lapel of the jacket, he took a tiny sliver of steel that was ice-pick long and ice-pick sharp. All of these, he put into his own pockets.

"You were a regular walking arsenal, Raz. Do you just like guns, is that why you had so many of them?"

"A man in my position has to take steps to protect himself," Glock answered in a sullen voice. "I wasn't going to use any of them on you."

"Not unless you thought it was necessary, Raz. You would have been the sole judge of that before and after I was dead. Now walk ahead of me into the anteroom of the viral, Raz. And don't make any sudden moves because you might still have another gun hidden somewhere about you."

## THE STAR WASPS

Sweat was in great globules in the fat man's face. "There may be death in there, Johnny."

"Death is no stranger to either of us, Raz," Derek answered. "Walk in ahead of me."

Looking like a man who knew death was behind him and who feared it was ahead, Glock lurched into the anteroom. Derek followed him. The front wall of the little room was made of glass into which fine wire shielding had been moulded. Glock nodded toward a shelf that held a cumbersome pair of thick-lensed goggles.

"You . . . you have to use those goggles to see what is in the next room."

"I don't have to use them," Derek answered.

"You mean you can see . . . can see . . ."

"I trained my eyes to see them. Yes, Raz, I can see the viral. I wouldn't be alive if I couldn't have seen them."

In the next room, obvious to ordinary vision, were what seemed to be long vats of chemicals. Above them, feeding down over them, were what looked like radar antennae that were focusing invisible radiations on the chemicals in the vats.

The equipment in the other room did not hold Derek's attention. The air did. It was alive with tiny sparkles of blue light which seemed to shift and twist and writhe as they formed thousands of squirming matrices.

In there, the viral spun. They danced, they twisted, they squirmed, they flashed in pinwheels of light, they exploded like sky rockets on the Fourth of July, they formed twisting patterns like neon advertising signs in the old times. They seemed to flare into existence, then to pass out of existence.

Remembering what Cotter had told him, Derek looked down at the vats. Blue viral were appearing there, were apparently being born there, were coming into existence as the radiation concentrated on the chemicals gave lift to their exploding life force.

A new brood was hatching as Derek watched!

The big man felt his skin crawl. In this age, snakes were almost creatures of the past. They were to be seen in zoos and

## THE STAR WASPS

perhaps they still existed in the rain forests of the tropics. But deep levels of his mind, his genetic heritage from the race, still remembered jungle days and the snakes that crawled. Something about the sight of the viral brought up a loathing from the deep levels of the race mind in Derek, brought up horror from the old hidden caves of the ancient mind.

If the room had been crawling with snakes, if they had been twined in bunches in a muddy jungle hole under trees that dripped with rain, if they had been drooping down from tree limbs, the effect would have been similar.

Horror and loathing were in John Derek, not only from the impressions coming up in him from the heritage of countless centuries but also from the sight of the viral themselves. They were aliens here on Earth, spawn of another star. They didn't belong on Earth, they didn't fit the Earth pattern, they had not evolved here on this green planet. In part the horror came from the instinctive distrust of an alien but it came in larger part from the number of the viral. There were so many of them beyond the glass panels with the wire shielding. Hundreds, thousands, perhaps tens of thousands were in the next room. A special opening had been made in the window at the far side of the room. They were passing out this opening and were returning. The impression they gave was that of a hive of bees about to swarm.

Glock nodded toward impressive radio equipment in the room of the viral, the controls being here in the anteroom on a wall panel.

"I've always been able to control them with this radio before. But not any more." His voice was a hoarse whispering croak.

At his words, the horror grew stronger in Derek's mind, for another reason. It was tinged with something close to guilt, a new feeling for him. The guilt came as he remembered giving the little glass sphere to a man on the mawk. The purpose of the sphere had been to intensify the longing for freedom in the human soul.

Had the radiations from the little sphere infected the viral? Glock had said he had controlled them by radio. The radia-

## THE STAR WASPS

tions from the little sphere were similar to radio. Had the viral picked up these radiations?

Had he, quite unintentionally, turned the viral loose?

"God!" Derek whispered. "Did . . . did I do this?"

The sense of guilt grew stronger in him. Deep in his heart was the urge to help men free themselves from the economic and educational chains that bound them. He also wanted freedom for himself and for his fellowship, freedom to land at any city on Earth and to go about their business as they wished, freedom to have homes and families if they wished to have them. Since Glock was the chief barrier to this freedom, he had had to take steps to change Glock. Since Glock had had the viral, he also had to do something about these wasps from another star.

He had done something about them! He had freed them instead of men!

What would freedom mean to the viral? He did not dare imagine an answer to this question. Humans through long association with each other had learned to respect the rights, the dignities, and the property of other humans, at least a little. True, they forgot easily and had to be reminded often that the other man also had rights, that he was also a human being. The viral had had no such history. Perhaps they knew nothing whatsoever of respecting the rights of another and to them an alien life form. If this were true, then what must follow would be a battle to the death.

In the next room a buzzer sounded. Derek did not hear it. The buzzer sounded again. Derek was now aware of the sound, also that Glock was nodding toward the next room and was speaking.

"Let 'em wait." Derek said.

"But this is an emergency," Glock protested. "I gave orders I was not to be disturbed while I was talking to you. Believe me, my secretary won't put through any calls until I tell her to do so, unless it's an absolute emergency."

Sweat had streaked and leached his face. Strain had put lines in the fat jowls.

"All right, we'll go see about this emergency," Derek said.

## THE STAR WASPS

Glock waddled out to his big desk. Derek closed the door of the anteroom that led to the viral and followed. Glock slid into his chair and punched a hidden button. On the wall, a view screen of a wired-circuit television system came to life.

The grim face of his last secretary appeared on this screen. "What is it, Bess?" Glock asked.

"Something . . . something . . ." The words stuck in her throat as she tried to talk, then came with a rush. "Something has gone wrong down below, Mr. Glock"

Her voice wheezed and gasped into silence, then came again.

"Something horrible!"

## CHAPTER SEVEN

TO JOHN DEREK, the sights that followed during the hours when the day died were more horrible than anything he had ever witnessed or imagined. He hardly realized that over the mountains to the west, the sun was slowly setting.

This same sun, looking down on its third planet, had seen earthquake and flood down there, it had seen new continents born, had seen them grow old, and had seen them slide down into hungry seas in vast devastations in the long past. It had seen pestilence wipe out vast populations, it had seen the conqueror wipe out whole nations to build his empire, it had seen wars come and wars go. None of these events seemed to have amazed the sun. Its children down on its third planet must learn how to cope with these things. And with each other.

No matter what happened down on its third planet, the sun was prepared to continue with its business of setting. If it found nothing in its western continent when it rose in the morning—well, other continents had also lost temporarily their contingent of the life force it had sent to them. The history of the ages could be written in five words: *Here today*

## THE STAR WASPS

*and gone tomorrow.* If all of its children passed from the scene, it would start anew the process of creating life on its third planet.

Patience, the sun had, and the long view of things.

Derek did not have this long view, did not have this patience. His view was short focus and was distorted by the fact that he wanted to stay alive.

Glock shared the same desire. While sharing the same desire did not make them friends, it gave them enough in common for a better understanding of each other.

The fat man sat at his desk that was as big as a practice football field. Sweat poured down him in rivers. The best spy system that money could buy and brains could design had been built into this room. Hidden TV cameras were in every room of the vast Corporation Building, including the women's rooms.

He wasn't watching this now. Nor was he watching and listening to men under him try to plot against him. He was shivering and shuddering and sweating. And switching from one TV camera to another, hoping that in some room down below he would find a sight that would give him a little comfort.

Nothing that he saw was comforting.

In one room that passed across the view screen in the wall, showing the very expensive private office of the president of one of the bigger corporations in this huge building, a tall, white-haired man had laid his head down on his desk and had died.

His secretary had opened the door of his private office and something had come in with her.

She had tried to run.

She had gotten back into the reception room before she had fallen. After she had gone down, she had tried to crawl. There had come an end to crawling.

A beautiful blonde, with long, slender legs and polished fingernails, red lips and hair that was the color of corn silk, was still lying on the floor.

Each time Glock shifted to another camera hidden in the

## THE STAR WASPS

vast building below him, the sound of sirens came over the speaker.

Derek went to the window. Down below, he could see tiny red ambulances and fire engines and police cars. They were so far away they looked like bugs. At a little higher level, helicopters were fluttering in the air.

The mawks were still running. People were falling from them and had already fallen from them. At the bottom of each down mawk were piles of twisted, distorted bodies. Those who had been in the greatest panic had tried to shove the slower ones out of the way. Derek could see people still falling. Some were simply jumping. He saw one man come out on the parapet immediately below him, look at the air, walk to the edge, climb over the rail—and leap outward. His body turned over and over and over as it fell more than a hundred stories.

Little blue lights followed the body down.

Many had died on the mawks themselves, died as the viral overtook them, died as the viral passed through them, died as the viral became aware of them, and killed without mercy.

The freeways in the high air where the little bug cars had passed so bravely in the morning were scenes of added horror. Derek tried to ease his mind by counting the number of accidents he could see in which the cars had remained on the freeways and were piled up in multiple accidents. He found his mind refused to count this high at this moment.

There was too much horror in his mind for it to remember such big figures.

Other cars had gone over the guard rails and had smashed on top the buildings below the freeways. He saw several that hung half-on, half-off the freeways, supported like the sword of Damocles by a hair, the drivers already dead at the wheel.

These drivers had been lucky. They had died without taking the long plunge.

The forces of the city, police and fire, were trying to take hold in this bewildering emergency that had come upon them.



## THE STAR WASPS

They weren't having much luck. Police and firemen are human too. They stop when their hearts stop. When a viral passed through them, their hearts stopped.

Derek turned back into the room.

"Tune that thing to the news, Raz."

Glock obeyed. A local television station appeared on the wall screen. A slick-haired announcer was selling soap. Glock turned to another station. A slick chick was selling panty-girdles. A third station had an auction of automobiles.

"Damn!" Derek said. "You'd think they'd stop selling girdles long enough to put something about this on the air."

"The program directors can't get to me," Glock said.

"What do you mean by that crack?"

Glock flicked another button. The scene that came on the screen was his own reception room. The hatchet-faced secretary was lying just inside the door that opened out into the hall. She was obviously dead. The dress was pulled up high enough to reveal that she had had a gun in a leg holster.

"Anybody who talked to me has to clear through her," Glock explained. "The program directors can't get to me. They don't dare put anything on the air about this building without first clearing with me."

Glock looked again at the scene in his reception room.

"She opened the door. There was a viral on the other side. I guess, no matter what door you open in this building, there's a viral on the other side of it now."

His eyes went to the door that opened into the reception room where the hatchet-faced secretary with the leg-gun lay dead. His face was greenish white from which oozed globs of yellow sweat.

"I was smart enough to have this room shielded: walls, ceiling, floor, windows, and door. But don't open that door to my reception room."

"You had your private office shielded. Now you stay alive while thousands die outside! You're like the people who built fallout shelters. You would come out of your shelter, to find the world poisoned all around you and all of your neighbors dead!"

## THE STAR WASPS

Again Derek walked to the windows. The sun was gone. As if it could not stand the sight of what was happening here in this mile-high city any longer, it had dived over the edge of the mountains. Perhaps in the Orient it would see happier sights, sparkling seas, green islands, and tilled fields. Perhaps on the other side of this planet it might even find a happy face!

Fewer cars were visible on the high freeways now. Perhaps a police radio alert had warned the drivers to take the low streets. Around the huge building, the lights had not come on. In the darkness of the street canyons down below he could see searchlights probing fingers of light upward.

The operators of the searchlights seemed to be very nervous. They didn't leave the searchlight beams on very long. Perhaps they were afraid of what the light would reveal!

Off in Aurora, off in the other towns of what was now Denver, the lights were gleaming. Out there in the suburban areas the men were home from work, home to the wife and the kids, home to a good dinner, then maybe to see a show or go bowling or play bridge. They were doing all the old, dear, familiar things.

How long would they continue doing the old things? How long before all of the mile-high city was under blackout?

"Better you should never have been born than that you should have turned this horror loose on the world," Derek said.

"I didn't do it!" Glock screamed. "It was Joe Cotter who did it! He invented these horrors."

"Cotter brought the viral through from their home star," Derek answered. "He didn't intend to use them to harm anyone. You stole them from him, to use for your own gain."

"You're the one who actually did it!" Glock's voice became more shrill. "I had everything nicely under control until you brought that damned glass sphere into my building and stirred them up. You did it with your damned meddling!"

"I had to meddle, Raz. You were using the viral to make your slave empire stronger. Somewhere in your crooked mind was the intention to use them to make yourself a bigger

## THE STAR WASPS

boss than you already are. You're already a billionaire. But you wanted to use the viral to become a trillionaire!"

"I had no such intention. You're trying to put words into my mouth that I never said."

"Just because you never said the words aloud doesn't mean you didn't have them in your heart."

"You're the one who did it," Glock answered. "You'll have to pay for it, too!"

"There's no use in trying to make me feel guilty," Derek answered. "You might as well blame the dead down below for their own deaths—because they had the kind of hearts that would stop beating when a viral touched them!"

Derek shook his head. Savagery was rising in him. He was growing all the more savage because he saw nothing he could do about the situation. They were trapped here in the Corporation Building. To go out of the room they were in was to die. Perhaps they were the only ones left alive in the whole building.

"Get me in touch with Hollow," Derek said.

Glock looked surprised.

"Why do you want him?"

"Never mind why I want him, just get him!"

Glock shifted the controls on the complex equipment. "Hollow," he spoke sharply.

He waited for an answer. It did not come.

"Maybe . . ." Glock began.

"I know. Maybe he's dead. Maybe my boys killed him. Maybe they have taken his radio away from him and are scared to answer it themselves, thinking you are calling. Maybe they're dead too. Maybe the viral are down there in the lower levels. One thing is certain, Raz, if my men are dead, I'm going to shove this right into your rotten heart!"

He held up the plastic needle he had taken from his shoe. Glock stared at it. His eyes went from it to Derek's face.

"I . . . I feel sick at my stomach," he whimpered.

"Puking won't save your life now," Derek told him. "You will just get to die in the stench of your own vomit, which is exactly what you deserve!"

## THE STAR WASPS

Derek turned away. Darkness like the murk at the bottom of a well lay around the building. One of the searchlights had left off its restless probing and was staring fixedly at the sky like a single-eyed idiot that had forgotten who and where he was. Derek's guess was that the operator had forgotten this important data about himself—and would never remember.

When the censorship lid went off, how would this story be written? Headlines might read:

### CORPORATION BUILDING NOW GHOST TOWN

The Colorado Rockies had hundreds of ghost towns. Most of them had been rebuilt and now served as tourist traps. In the old days of the great gold rushes, these towns had sprung up overnight. When the gold or the silver that had brought them into existence had played out, the miners had wandered on. The ghost towns served as mute reminders of the swarming, brawling, bustling life that had once passed this way.

Perhaps all of Denver would become a ghost town! Perhaps the United States would become a ghost country! Perhaps North America would become a ghost continent, with daring expeditions coming over from Europe or from Asia to try to find out what had happened!

Would the world ever know the true story? Derek doubted that it would. Had the world ever been told the true story about anything? Derek suspected that what was called history was mostly lies colored to suit national pride or interest. Of course, true scholars knew better, but who listened to them? What pride would be uplifted by the true story of the viral, what interest would be served by giving it to the world? For that matter, who would write it, even if the true story was known?

To know the true story of the viral was to know how to run. No reporter would be silly enough to write this story. As soon as he knew the truth, he would start looking for a hole to hide in. The newscaster who tried to put this story

## THE STAR WASPS

on the air would quit his job as soon as he realized he was telling the truth. The prime censorship, that of the individual serving his own best interests, would keep this story hidden.

Glock turned back to his private spy system. Now and again he tried to put through a call to Hollow. These calls did not go through his receptionist. He soon reached the point where he did not expect to have an answer.

"We have to find Cotter," Glock said, over and over again. "He's the only man who knows enough about the viral to lick them."

"If you found him, he would probably shoot you on sight," Derek said.

"Why does everybody hate me so?" Glock wailed.

"Because you have made yourself into something that deserves to be hated," Derek answered. "You have broken the law . . ."

"I never broke any laws," Glock answered. "I always stayed on the legal side. My attorneys . . ."

"I'm talking about the law of balance, the law of compensation, the law of karma. This law says that nature always brings everything back to balance. You've got too much money. You're out of balance in this direction. Too many poor people have too little money. You have so much freedom you can do just as you please. Too many people have so little freedom they hardly dare to breathe. You're like the absolute monarchs in the old days of this planet. Your word is law. Or it *was* law. It's not law any more."

In the distance around the huge building, he could see police cars setting up road blocks. The area was being sealed off.

"Wait until the news of this hits your accounting machines in the morning," Derek said. "That is, if anybody can reach this building to operate the machines. That is, if morning ever comes again."

Glock's face alternated between green and a sticky gray.

"I . . . I hadn't thought of that," he choked out. "I'll be ruined, completely wiped out."

## THE STAR WASPS

"That's what the law of balance says should happen," Derek told him bluntly.

"There isn't an important corporation on Earth who doesn't have its headquarters here in this building," Glock said. "This will be wiping out the brains of most of the companies on Earth. Chaos will result."

Derek nodded. That the fat man was telling the truth he knew only too well. This huge building was the financial heart of the world. The financial control mechanisms for food, fuel, water, clothing, medicines, transportation, insurance, mining, and manufacturing were all here. Only the primitive areas of the Earth, only the jungles, only the deserts would be unaffected by the chaos coming into existence here.

Men would go back to hunting and fishing and food gathering to stay alive. Men would form into small bands to raid the food supplies of their neighbors or to defend their own. As they tried to stay alive, men would watch the sky for little sparkles of blue light that marked the coming of the viral.

"We've got to find Joseph Cotter," Glock moaned again.

Derek made up his mind.

"All right, we'll go to him—if we can get there," Derek said.

"You . . . you do know where he is?"

"Yes. The first thing we have to do is to get out of this building alive. The second thing is to get out of the city. The third thing . . ." Derek paused. "We'll take the first thing first. To get out of this building, we have to get out of this room. This means that you have to reveal your secret way in and out of this place."

"What?" Glock said.

"A rat like you always has a way out of his own trap," Derek answered. "Get up and show me where it is."

He held the little sliver of plastic between his thumb and forefinger. It was like an ice pick ready for stabbing.

Glock looked at the little plastic needle. "Well . . ."

"Get up and walk," Derek said.

Glock waddled his way to the wall to the north. He

## THE STAR WASPS

pushed against it. The wall slid back. Revealed behind the concealed door was a small elevator.

"It'll take us to the sub-basement," Glock said. "But it's too small for both of us."

"We'll squeeze our way into it," Derek said.

He pushed Glock ahead of him. The elevator had been built for one man but that man was Glock. The fat man could be squeezed. Derek squeezed him.

Once the two were in the elevator, Glock pushed a button. It dropped downward at a sickening speed.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

WATCHING the Earth from the rocketship, Jennie Fargo had the strong impression that the ship was standing still in space and the planet was moving away. She thought this was a nonsensical way for a piece of real estate as big as a planet to be acting. All of her life, it had been a feeling of sureness under her. Now that it was fleeing from her, her sureness of herself was also fleeing.

She was aware of psychological upheavals taking place within her. Most of all, she wanted to cry. As she watched the Earth fall away, this impulse became stronger and stronger. It seemed to her that she was a part of the green planet now dropping away into space, that it was a part of her, and that both she and the planet were torn by the pangs of separation. The planet was losing a daughter. It was sad about that. But it was not nearly as sad or nearly as upset as the daughter was to be losing it. Her body, with all of its wonderful chemistry, its bones, its muscles, and its nerves, had been built out of minerals eaten as food which had come from Earth. At some deep level, these minerals resisted being taken from their home world.

Their resistance formed the foundation of her impulse to cry.

Strapped in a bunk beside her, Joseph Cotter wept like a baby, wept with no sense of shame, wept in part for the

## THE STAR WASPS

same reason she did, and in part for another reason. The other reason was happiness.

"This is like a dream coming true!" the little man who looked like a bearded wino said, over and over again. "I've wanted to go out into space so many times, wanted to see the worlds of the sky, wanted to feel them under my feet, wanted to smell them—where there was air for smelling, of course. Somehow Earth was both home and not home to me. It was my planet, my body was born of it, but deep down inside me, I always felt I belonged somewhere else, in some cleaner, brighter, finer place. But I was on Earth and I tried—or I hoped—to make it into the cleaner, brighter, finer place where I longed to be, at least a little."

Tears from his eyes ran down his whiskered cheeks.

Jennie Fargo stared curiously at him. She had gathered from the talk she had heard that he was one of the world's great scientists. To see him cry like this disturbed the image of a great scientist she had carried in her mind. She had always thought of them as being dignified and aloof, distant from ordinary people, with their heads in Olympian clouds, people without emotions. Perhaps such scientists as this actually existed. She did not know the answer to this question. But she did know that this little man had all the keen emotions of ordinary people and was not in the least ashamed to express them. Perhaps his emotions were even keener than those of ordinary people! Perhaps this was one of the reasons why he was great!

This idea startled her. In her thinking, emotions were forces that ran away with a girl and had her in bed with a man before she really knew what was happening. For this reason, if for no other, they had to be carefully guarded. Or so she had thought. She had not fully realized that men had emotions too. Yet here was a great man who had emotions and the freedom to express them, to let them flow through him like rivers of cleansing, life-bringing water.

"I guess all I really succeeded in doing was to make Earth dirtier," Cotter whispered.

He did not cry again. The thoughts that were in him now



## THE STAR WASPS

were too deep for tears to express and release. He shook his head.

"The dream I had was used by venal men to make a trap for fools, it was used to forge chains for the legs of lesser men! Must it always be this way? Must the dreamer always turn his finest and best dream over to those who seek only to make a profit from it? Must the dream always be distorted?"

Sadness as deep as the seas of the planet that was still falling away from them appeared in his voice.

Then his voice changed. A growl appeared in it.

"No! It won't be this way always! Somewhere, in some infinity, in some frequency range, men will grow up!"

If in the old Greek myth, Prometheus had challenged the lightning and had brought fire down to Earth to warm the hearts of men, this little man in this moment was of the same strong breed as Prometheus. Joseph Cotter could not bring the fire down to men. This had already been done. But he would bring some gift!

His eyes narrowed. A faraway look appeared in them. He seemed to see beyond the alumna-steel walls of the spaceship cabin to worlds and to times that still lay afar.

"We cross a river. We do it one by one. We cross it as individuals. No man can cross this river before he has learned how to swim, no man may force another to cross, no man may carry another in his back. We cross the river as individuals, on the strength that is in us, the strength we have built ourselves. But some day, in some time, each of us will cross this river successfully."

His voice grew stronger as hope flowed out of her ancient hiding place and into him.

"Even . . . even such men as . . ."

"As Glock?" The growl came back to Cotter's voice, then faded and became a sort of wonder. "I suppose this is true for him too, if he ever decides for himself that he wants to be something better than he is. This, also, is a decision each man must make for himself. Does the bull ape want to be an ape forever? No. There comes a time for him when he wants to be a man. Does a man want to be a man forever? No. To

## THE STAR WASPS

him there also comes the time when he wants to be something better than a human. What is this something . . .”

He broke off as the door of the cabin opened. Moon Man stood there. A tie-down harness dangled from his plastic shoulder straps. His face was as round as that of the full moon, which was how he had gotten his name. He looked at his two passengers closely, to see if they were all right. Johnny would bite his ears off if they weren't! Reassured that they were safe, his round face broke into a grin that revealed a mouth with no teeth.

“Tie-down time, folks. We're going in for a landing. You may get jolted some.”

They had never been fully untied but the harness had been loosened. Moon Man helped them make it all secure again. Since this was the first space hop for each, tie-down was judged to be necessary. Moon Man himself had all the disdain of the true spaceman for such frippery. His disdain for such aids was what had cost him most of his teeth, in past landings, but he hadn't minded this. No true spaceman ever deigned to notice anything less than a broken leg. Tucking them into their bunks, he left the cabin.

Through the small viewport, Jennie caught a glimpse of the moon. She gasped at the sight. The moon seemed to be rushing at them at a speed of thousands of miles an hour. The jagged, sharp peaks of the lunar mountains were like the fangs of monsters lying mouth open to gulp them down as they came in from space.

As she brought her nerves under control, she felt the ship slow from jet thrusts, then yaw as other jets took up the load. She had the impression that the moon was no longer rushing upon them but had begun to circle them. Her rational mind told her that the ship was turning but her eyes insisted that it was the moon that was going in circles. She felt her head begin to spin.

“Stout heart, girl!” Cotter's voice came to her from the depths of his protective padding. “Frail heart never yet landed on the moon.”

## THE STAR WASPS

"The heart of this frail is going there whether it knows it or not!" she answered.

"Good girl," Cotter said, laughing.

His laugh helped to break the tension rising in her. She saw the moon again. It seemed to have grown much larger. Part of it seemed to be missing, lost in some kind of a strange darkness, and she realized this was the dark side. Directly below the ship was what looked like a huge hole. She realized that this hole was actually a deep moon crater which lay just at the edge of the lighted side of the satellite.

She saw the mile-high walls rise up about them, then, with a vast blowing of jets, the ship came to rest on what looked to be a sandy plain. The nose of the ship was pointed toward the high wall that towered upward into the bleak sky.

A hole appeared in this wall. Out of this hole came something that looked like a long snake to reach with great fangs toward the nose of the ship.

She screamed and pointed at this thing.

The door of the cabin opened again. Moon Man entered. He heard her scream, then followed the line of her finger pointing at the long snake—and broke into laughter.

"That's a cable with a hook on the end of it. It will catch the nose of the ship and pull us through the doors you see opening and into the airlock inside."

"Oh," Jennie said, in relief. "Then we will live like cave people!"

"Sort of," Moon Man grinned. "These tremendous caves are home to us outlaws, the only home we've got, maybe the only home we want. You just settle down girl, while I release the catches on your harness, and the ship and all of us will be safely inside the airlock before you really know what's happened. And you'll have the moon under your feet!"

"That's what I want," Cotter said.

The snake had already caught the nose of the ship and the vessel was moving. Huge doors opened slowly. The ship went between them. Ahead was a huge cavern with its lights gleaming up at its ceiling. As the outer doors closed, people began to appear around the ship, men and women who called this

## THE STAR WASPS

place home. Jennie's eyes fixed on a tall, white-haired woman, who stood as straight as a tree looking with longing eyes for the lock of the ship to open.

Locks opened in the ship. Hissing sounds passed through the vessel as air pressures equalized. Laughing like men who had returned home after a long voyage, the crew moved out of the ship to greet their comrades in the cavern with whoops and insults.

The tall, white-haired woman still watched the lock. When Jennie appeared, she looked startled, then came quickly forward.

"My dear . . ." she said to Jennie.

"Mr. Derek sent me," Jennie said.

"He did, did he? And where is he?"

"Still on Earth."

"Oh." The tall woman's face was grim as some ancient pain moved through her mind, then it relaxed into a smile.

"My dear, you are welcome here. Just call me Mom. I'm Johnny's mother."

"Oh!" Jennie said. Then "Oh," again. "His mother? But he's an . . ."

"Outlaw?" Mom supplied the word. "I know he is. I taught him to be one."

"Oh," Jennie said. The trip from Earth had not surprised her as much as this.

"In a world run by Erasmus Glock, what else can you be except an outlaw? I'm not ashamed of him. I'm proud of him."

Jennie did not quite understand how it happened but suddenly she was in the tall woman's arms. They were friendly arms, with a warm and protecting quality in them. Then she was asking questions, wanting to know if they had heard from Derek, by space radio. And Mom's face was turning to granite.

"We haven't heard from Johnny. Space is distorted by a magnetic storm. A little news from Earth is leaking through, none of it good. All that comes over the air is a hint now and then of some new disease that has appeared in Denver."

Her face became bleak and cold.

## THE STAR WASPS

"It's not a disease that has broken loose there. It's the viral. Damn the viral. Damn Erasmus Glock."

The emotional storm swept through the tall, white-haired woman and was gone. Smiling again, she was concerned about the feelings and the welfare of this woman her son had sent to her across space. Jennie found herself walking across the floor of the moon cavern to the place that she would now call home. Her mind was giddy, her emotions were tumultuous, as Mom led her to a row of hammocks slung under an overhanging shelf of rock in the wall of the cave.

"These hammocks are the women's section," Mom said. "The men sleep on the floor or in the ship. Some have cots at the atomic generator that is supplying us with power, others sleep in the tank cave where we grow much of our food. But we women are pampered creatures. We get to sleep in hammocks, until we have a man of our own. Then we sleep with him on the ground, or wherever he sleeps. . . . If you are wondering where the drinking fountain is, there isn't one. You get a pint of water a day. You can use it for drinking or for bathing as you wish. There are no bathrooms, no hot tubs, no stinging cold showers, no perfume machines—and almost never is there any soap."

She broke off speaking at the sight of Jennie's face.

"My dear, I am sorry if you are disappointed. Didn't Johnny tell you what to expect here?"

"There wasn't much time for him to tell me much," Jennie answered. "And you don't need to apologize. This does seem a little primitive at first sight, but I'll adjust to it."

"Good girl," the tall woman said. "Actually we live like troglodytes in a cave system a couple of miles below the surface of the moon. It isn't easy here. But perhaps someday we can live again on the surface of our own world, on Earth, or on some other world somewhere. If life is hard here, the truth is, these are the only conditions under which we can have it at all."

"I don't quite understand that."

## THE STAR WASPS

"We are all outlaws. If we are captured, we will be executed."

"Oh," Jennie said.

"I hope I do not shatter your delusions about the real nature of that soft, easy life you had on Earth. There's a hand of steel in that velvet glove. If you try to break away from the established order, you will feel the hand of steel. All of us here have broken away from it, and we're outlaws."

"I understand," Jennie said. "And Mom, I would rather be here than there. At least I won't have to listen to propoganda all day and all night telling me how good things are for me."

"You won't hear that kind of talk about this place," Mom answered. "This is a place of refuge, and if we're lucky, it may also be a stepping stone to real freedom for us and for millions of others like us on Earth, if they can learn to accept freedom."

"Of course they can accept it."

"I'm not so sure about that," Mom answered. "People learn to like their chains. Sometimes they fight you when you try to take their chains away from them. Now, my dear, I have many duties that require my attention. Make yourself at home as best you can. When others come around, just tell them your name and that Johnny sent you. The fact that Johnny sent you will solve all problems though some of the women here, who have been trying to get him themselves, may want to scratch your eyes out when they learn that he sent you."

"He never said a word about . . . about anything like that," Jennie said hastily.

"I know. But you're the only woman he ever sent here. Now if you will excuse me . . ."

As she watched the tall, tree-straight woman walk away, confused emotions tumbled over themselves in her breast. She had exchanged a small but beautifully furnished apartment in Denver for a sleeping bag and a hammock on the moon. She had traded the security of a good job for the clothes on her body, the shoes on her feet, the lipstick in her purse.

Somehow, deep inside her, she was glad she had made the

## THE STAR WASPS

trade. But what was happening in Denver? What had happened to Derek?

During the days and the nights that followed—day and night here were the result of brightening or dimming the huge flood lights suspended from the roof of the cavern—this question was often in her mind. She did not speak about it. She knew it was on the minds of the others too, but they did not speak about it either. She knew that one man was always on duty at the space radio, waiting for a call from Derek that would put the ship back into space to pick him up on Earth. She knew this call did not come and the ship did not move though its crew was standing by and ready to leave as soon as the outer doors were opened. She knew that repeated efforts were being made to reach Derek via their space radio, using their own scrambler system, the receiver being located in a hidden canyon in western Colorado from which they had blasted off.

There was never an answer to the space radio calls. The people in the caves told each other that the strong magnetic storm raging in space was interrupting their communication. Certainly, it was still playing havoc with radio transmission from Earth but each one was sure that more than the storm was responsible for Derek's silence. The ship would not leave until he sent for it.

Mom stayed close to the TV screen that watched the sky over the cavern. The men kept themselves busy about their work, keeping the atom power plant running, keeping the air and water synthesizers in operation, seeing that the huge electric heaters that warmed the air in the cavern were in good order. The women were busy with the traditional tasks of women; gathering food from the tanks and preparing it, cleaning up afterwards. Jennie joined the women. She had never prepared a meal in her life. She found she could learn to do this and that there was a sort of happiness in preparing food for hungry men.

She hardly ever saw Joseph Cotter. He had taken over a smaller, higher cave, and was building equipment there. At his orders, men in spacesuits had gone up to the surface of

## THE STAR WASPS

the moon and had installed huge parabolic antennae which they had carefully focused on the star called Ross 154. Radiation collected from these antennae were piped down into the cave where Cotter was assembling vats, chemicals, and electronic equipment. The men obeyed his orders without question. Hadn't Johnny sent him?

Johnny was the heart of this place, the soul of it, the legs and arms of it, the guts of it, the courage of it, the success of it. When Derek was here, men had faith in the future, faith in themselves as builders of their future, faith that they could overcome any obstacle in their way. Without Derek, this faith would leak away.

Space radio picking up news broadcasts from Earth worked in spurts and flashes.

"Federal troops have established a precautionary cordon around Denver. Public Health Authorities believe . . ." The radio statted itself into blurred noises.

"Anyhow we have one thing to be thankful for," Jennie told herself. "There are no viral on the moon."

Space TV came back as the magnetic storm worked itself into a momentary lull. Pictures from the Earth came through. TV cameras in helicopters were hovering over Denver. The scenes they showed were not pleasant.

Denver was deserted. Denver was dead. Denver was like the great cities of the past that had once existed in Asia which archeologists uncovered from the sands of the desert. Denver was in the process of becoming another Baalbek, another Karnak, another Thebes. The human life that had built Denver and which had given it bustle, zest, and go—had gone!

As the zoomar lenses in the helicopters reached down for a closer view, what had happened to this life could be seen in wrecked cars, in fires that lifted along columns of smoke to the sky now that no fire department men remained to check them, and in unmoving bodies that strewed the streets.

Although the announcers did not mention this, an awful stench must have been rising from the city, a stench worse than that coming from a thousand pogroms in old Russia,



## THE STAR WASPS

from a thousand battlefields where the dead had lain unburied for many days, from Indian massacres when the first settlers were crossing the plains of western America.

Watching Mom's face, Jennie saw the tall, white-haired woman often pass a hand across her eyes. She knew that Mom was thinking about her son. She also knew that Mom was looking less and less like a tall tree. Mom was beginning to stoop.

One of the caves in the fast labyrinth here led to the outer wall. Here a thick plastic window had been installed so that those inside the caves could not only watch the floor of the crater but also keep an eye on any ship of the space force that might land here looking for them. Jennie went often to this window. There was a kind of a relief in watching the floor of the crater under different intensities and different angles of sunlight. Although the landscape as seen from this window was bleak and bitter, there was a kind of beauty about it.

She was watching from this window when she saw the blue lights come drifting down the wall of the crater. At the sight, her heart began a wild pounding. She told herself that this was a delusion, then as she looked more closely, she realized she was actually seeing little blue lights dancing in a matrix in the almost airless space outside.

The viral were on the moon!

## CHAPTER NINE

DEREK WAS not among the piles of dead in Denver. Unable to return to the spot where his own ship landed, unable to use the space radio there to summon the ship, Derek was lying under a stunted cedar tree. He was hugging the ground and was hoping desperately that the stream of burning hot lead that was passing inches above him could not be depressed any lower. A rock ledge was protecting him at the moment but the stream of lead was tearing chips out of the soft limestone rock.

## THE STAR WASPS

The gun firing the lead was one of those new automatic weapons that the new alloys had made possible. These guns fired at a terrific rate. At this moment, Derek was wishing that such improved metals had never been invented. The gun was located in a concrete blockhouse on top of a rocky ridge that guarded the southern approach to a long canyon that was used as a landing field by ships of the Space Force.

Derek knew that the guard in the blockhouse could not have caught more than a glimpse of him. The guard had asked no questions but had swung the gun around and had started firing.

Guards that did not challenge were guards who had orders to shoot first and ask the questions of a corpse afterwards. This meant that rumors of what had happened in Denver had already reached them. It also meant that orders had come down the chain of command to establish a Red Alert.

Derek could understand why the guards were jumpy. After what he had seen getting out of Denver, he was still jumpy himself. He also considered that only a miracle had enabled them to get out of the devastated city alive. A stolen helicopter had got them this far. When it had conked out, they had had only one choice:

To steal a spaceship.

They wanted to reach the moon. That part of the Earth around Denver was not a good place to be. Only Derek's ability to see the viral, and hence to dodge them, had kept them alive this far. But he couldn't see the machine gun slugs and if he could have seen them, this wouldn't have helped him.

Abruptly, the gun was silent.

The gunner might have run out of ammunition. Or he might simply be waiting to see if his fire had left anything alive in the path of the slugs.

Derek moved his head an inch. This gave him a glimpse out of one eye of the blockhouse. Made of concrete, it had turned as gray as the rocks of the mountains during the years since it had been placed here to guard an approach to the spaceship landing area. A gunport looked out at him.

## THE STAR WASPS

He did not know how many men were in the squat structure but his guess was that there was only one. No armed forces outfit had men to waste.

As he looked at the blockhouse, he caught a glimpse of something that moved with all the speed and agility of a rat scramble out of the bushes and dart up to the gunport. The rat lifted itself and flung something into the gunport, then slid out of sight around the squat concrete structure.

"Good for you, Rat!" Derek thought. The rat was a man whom everybody called Rat. Derek waited. He knew this rat. Within three minutes a hand waved at him from the gunport, beckoning to him to come on. He got to his feet and ran to the blockhouse, then ran around it. The door was ajar. As he entered, he heard a voice speaking rapidly.

"Yes, sir. Yes, lieutenant. I made a mistake, sir. But the orders from the captain were . . . I know you know the captain's orders, sir. Yes, sir, I am listening, sir."

Derek closed the door. A body, out from the gas cartridge was lying on the floor beside the machine gun. Rat was talking into the telephone that connected this blockhouse with a command post somewhere. Apparently the phone had rung just after he had entered, calling the unconscious guard, and he had been forced to answer it.

"Actually, sir, I . . . I was shooting at a damned porcupine, sir!" Rat sounded very apologetic. "Yes, sir, I know a porcupine when I see one, sir. Yes, I know these mountains are full of them, sir. But I only caught a glimpse of this one, sir. Yes, sir. Thank you sir. I'll be more positive in my identification in the future, sir!"

The rat hung up and turned to Derek. He ran a quick eye over the big man and saw that Derek was unhurt. A grin, revealing broken teeth, came over his face.

"Mighty leaded up out there, wasn't it, Johnny? He saw you and started shooting before I was ready. Then, when I started up, the damned rocks were slippery. I just couldn't get the gas in here sooner."

"You did fine, Rat," Derek said.

"Thanks, boss." The tone of Rat's voice said that he lived

## THE STAR WASPS

and found reason for living in the hope of receiving praise from this big man.

The smell of gas was still in the air but it was fading. This gas puffed out of its container, got a man with one whiff, then faded quickly.

"Also, the lock on the door held me up longer than was really necessary," Rat continued.

"The lock hasn't been invented yet that you can't pick in two minutes," Derek said.

Rat was a criminal. He was a sneak thief. He was also an expert at picking locks. Now he stole and picked locks only for the fellowship.

He glowed again at Derek's praise. The glow faded as a memory crossed his mind. Alarm replaced it.

"That officer I was talking to, he said he was sending out a patrol to relieve me."

"A patrol? How many men, I wonder?" Derek stepped over the body of the unconscious guard to the gunport. From this spot, he could see the long canyon widening into a valley in the far distance. He could also see the rocky ledge that had saved his life as he had attracted the attention of the guard to give Rat a chance to get the gas cartridge into the blockhouse. A winding path leading down into the canyon caught his eyes. Presumably the patrol would come along this path. The men coming would be alert but they would be expecting nothing more dangerous than a porcupine.

One reason the landing field for the Space Force had been built here lay in the fact that very few people lived in these mountains, hence there would be few complaints from irate citizens about rocket blasts and sonic booms. Also, if a ship exploded in the air, there would be fewer people on the ground to inherit a rain of red-hot metal from the sky. Another reason lay in the fact that in case of enemy attack, an H-bomb would have to hit directly in the canyon to damage the base.

From the gunport, Derek could see the nose of a ship projecting from a hanger cut into the side of the canyon. It was on the ready ramp. It was the ship he wanted.

## THE STAR WASPS

He also caught a glimpse of the patrol moving along the twisting path. Four men and a corporal. He glanced around at Rat.

Rat was already removing the uniform from the unconscious guard.

Approaching the blockhouse, the corporal was alert but not really suspicious. He had heard rumors of bad things happening in Denver but he had also learned that what the space force had in maximum supply were rumors.

Reaching the blockhouse, a voice inside told them to enter. The door was partly open. The corporal entered. He saw a man in uniform cleaning a machine gun. The sight of the uniform reassured him. He beckoned to the four men to follow him.

When the last one was inside, the door was slammed shut.

Rat got the corporal with one short jab of his stiff fingers at the midriff. Since Rat was wearing a uniform, the corporal didn't really notice the jab coming until it got him. Rat shoved the corporal back into the next man in line, then reached around and jabbed his stiff, extended fingers into the solar plexus of the second man.

This man said, "Oof!" and bent double.

The third man in the file that had followed the corporal into the blockhouse tried to bring his gun up. He was hampered by the fact that two men were falling against him. He didn't get the gun up.

The last two men in the file had a little more time. They had time to realize that something was wrong but not time enough to find out what it was. Thinking, deciding what was wrong, deciding what to do about it, took time. Time was what they didn't have. A big man came like a silent shadow from the wall next to the door. His right hand came down in a chopping blow across the neck of the last man. The fellow's knees collapsed.

The fourth man in the file, now very much aware that he and his companions were being attacked, tried to turn. The downward chopping stroke struck him on the side of the

## THE STAR WASPS

neck, stunning him. He gulped, dropped his weapon, and grabbed at his neck.

Within about one minute, Derek and Rat, working as a fast-moving team, had five automatic weapons in their possession. They also had three dazed and two unconscious men on the floor, not counting the original gunner, who was still sleeping from the gas. Derek and Rat were grinning at each other. And the telephone was ringing again.

Rat, after glancing at Derek, answered it.

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir. I'll put him on, sir." Rat said.

"The lieutenant wants to speak to you, corporal," Rat said, handing the phone to Derek.

Looking startled, yet knowing he had no choice, Derek accepted the phone.

"Yes, sir," Derek said. "Everything here is in good order, sir, though a lot of ammo was used on a porcupine. Yes, sir; yes, sir. Very well, sir."

Derek started to hang up, then pulled the phone back to him. "There is one other thing, sir. One of my men slipped and hurt his leg. You know these trails are slippery, sir. No, sir, I don't think it's broken but only a medical officer could determine that. Could we have two men and a stretcher, sir? Good, sir. Thank you, sir. I'll take the injured man straight to the dispensary for examination, sir."

Hanging up, Derek winked at Rat. "Two men with a stretcher will be heading this way."

"Fine, sir, fine," Rat said, glowing. He made a hasty count of the men on the floor. "Counting the two who are coming, that will make eight uniforms, sir . . . I mean, Johnny."

"That's the way I figure it, Rat. But there are nine of us. However, we'll throw a blanket over the lucky guy who gets to ride on the stretcher. He won't need a uniform."

"Good, sir," Rat said.

The two men with the stretcher wore the shoulder patches of the medical corps. Derek and Rat did not care what kind of shoulder patches they were wearing. They laid the medical corpsmen down gently then Derek went to the gunport and waved a beckoning hand at the rocky slope below.

## THE STAR WASPS

Shadows came out from behind stunted cedars and out from behind boulders and began to climb the slope. Some darted from rock to rock, others moved more slowly. One substantial shadow puffed, panted, wiped sweat from his face, moved with reluctance and had to have help to climb the slope.

The help he got was a foot in the middle of his fat bottom.

Another shadow was baldheaded and squat in build. He also had trouble climbing the slope—and was helped by a foot against his bottom.

When the shadows were in the blockhouse, Derek grinned at them. It was the fat man who had got the firm foot in his bottom and who was still smarting from this indignity who took one look around and began to protest.

"These are soldiers, Derek! This is treason, this is the use of force to attack men in the armed forces! They'll shoot you for this!"

"Shut up, Raz," Derek said.

"We'll all be hung!" the fat man shouted.

"I've already told you, hanging has gone out of style. I also told you what a shame I thought this," Derek said.

Eramus Glock was in a state of nerves. The revolt of the viral had shaken him badly. The talk and the actions of Derek had shaken him more. Meeting Derek's men in the sub-basement of his own building had left him in a state bordering on apoplexy. Derek's men were not pleasant in appearance, as Hollow had already discovered. They were wanted criminals! They were not such men as even the president of a minor corporation would associate with! The one called Rat looked capable of killing his grandmother. Old Jupe looked even meaner. The one called Slim never spoke above a whisper but he had a knife up each sleeve.

"We're going to the moon, Raz," Derek said. "Cotter is there—I hope!"

"I'm not going," Glock answered. "I've changed my mind. A man has a right to change his mind."

He looked at Hollow for support. Hollow glanced quickly

## THE STAR WASPS

at the men filling the blockhouse to overflowing and paled visibly.

"If you don't mind, sir, I . . . I think I'll go to the moon," Hollow said.

Glock's cheeks puffed with indignation at this insubordination. He started to speak to Hollow again, firmly, when he became aware of Old Jupe standing right behind him. Old Jupe was practically breathing down his neck. The old spaceman had his gnarled hands open. He looked at Derek and spoke.

"I get him," Old Jupe said.

"I get to help," the one called Slim spoke in a whisper. Slim moved his wrist. As if by magic, a long pointed blade appeared in his hand.

"I want a piece of him too," Rat spoke.

There was another man present, a man who had joined the group in the saloon and who had insisted on going to the sub-basement with them. This man did not know his name but he did know his number—R-133. He had been trying to remember his name, without success. Feeling R-133 was a good man, Derek had permitted him to come with them.

"I want some of him too," R-133 said.

"Who the hell are you?" Glock demanded of R-133. "I never saw you before."

"You may never see him again, Raz." Derek said.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, we're going to the moon, Raz. Look around you and make up your mind whether or not you're going with us."

Glock took another quick look at Old Jupe, at Rat and at Slim. "All right," he said hastily. "I'm going with you."

"Then lay down on the stretcher, Raz," Derek said. "You're lucky as hell you're so damned fat. Because we can't stuff your fat carcass into one of these Space Force uniforms, we're going to carry you on the stretcher."

"Oh," Glock said.

"Jupe will be carrying the back end of the stretcher, right next to your nead," Derek added. "If you make even a whimper, Jupe will break your neck."



## THE STAR WASPS

"Yes, sir," Jupe said. "I'll be glad to!"

Glock laid down on the stretcher. They spread a blanket over him, all nice like, "To have it handy in case they need it later for a shroud," Old Jupe explained.

Derek talked briefly to one of the dazed men, learning from him the location of the command post for this blockhouse. As they left the place, Rat dropped another small gas grenade on the floor, making certain the men in there would continue sleeping for a couple of hours at least, then slammed and locked the door. If another patrol came along, the lock would have to be forced.

With the stretcher bearers carrying an unconscious man covered by a blanket, the patrol stepped out smartly. If their marching was a little ragged, if they did not quite keep in step, if they did not carry their weapons in the best military manner, all of this could be explained by the roughness of the narrow trail they were following.

Ahead of them went a big man in the uniform of a corporal of the Space Force.

Now and then the man on the stretcher dared to open his eyes a slit. One look at the face of the man carrying the stretcher was enough to get the eyes closed again. The sweaty face of Old Jupe was not a pleasant sight. Slim's back, on the front end of the stretcher, did not look much nicer.

The patrol went down the mountain on the double. Taking the lower path, they came to the edge of the landing field at the bottom of the canyon. Here the corporal paused for a moment, squinting his eyes against the sun glare in this high altitude.

Rat came up to stand beside him.

"I did a duty turn here, once," Rat said. "When they set a ship there, it's ready to go. And that's one of the new models, Johnny, with wheels on her belly and stubby wings so she can take off or land flat if there's a big enough field, or can back in on her bottom if there's no field at all."

Derek nodded. His voice roared out a command. On the double, the patrol and the two stretcher bearers moved straight across the upper end of the landing field. Curious

## THE STAR WASPS

men of the space force stared at them. A major came out of the hangars and started toward them.

Derek saluted the major on the run.

"Simulated rescue on a hostile planet, sir. My orders are to get the wounded man into the ship as quickly as possible!"

Answering the salute, the major nodded. The patrol kept moving on the double.

The lock of the ship was open. Stopping outside, Derek motioned the stretcher bearers and the men of the patrol inside. They vanished into the ship like shadows trying to evade the sunlight.

Inside, a startled mechanic looked up. "What's going on, Joe?" he asked.

"Simulated space rescue, Mac," Rat told him.

"Oh," the mechanic answered, understanding the situation. "They're playing that game today."

"Yeah, Mac," Rat answered. "We're acting like we're taking over the ship. Head for the PX and have a cool beer."

"Sure thing," the mechanic said, grinning. "Sometimes these games are fun even for enlisted men."

He was whistling as he dodged the other members of the patrol.

In the radio room two technicians were repairing the radio equipment. They had most of it strewn on the floor but at Rat's polite request they paused only long enough to tell him that the main transmitter was in the base shop.

"What the hell difference does that make?" Rat asked. "Go get a couple of beers at the PX."

The radio technicians got out of the ship just as the big corporal was preparing to close the outer door of the air lock. They glanced at him and wished him happy war games and he grinned in reply. There were times, Derek thought, when he absolutely loved the quick-thinking Rat. Closing the two doors of the lock, he went inside.

Glock, dazed by the way he had been dropped in the main passage, was trying to get off the stretcher. Hollow was standing sweating. R-133 looked hopefully at Derek for

## THE STAR WASPS

orders. Knowing R-133 was not a spaceman, Derek told him to watch Glock and Hollow.

"Even if I don't know my own name, I can watch them," R-133 answered. The fact that he could not remember his name was worrying him.

No one else was in sight. Derek did not give the absence of the others a thought but went forward to the control room. A glance at the control and communication systems told him that this was a hot, much improved ship, but the old essentials were still present. As he strapped himself in the control chair, the communications system had already begun to buzz with Old Jupe reporting from the rocket and jet room.

"They're already warmed up, Johnny. The fuel tanks are full of solid fuel."

"Be ready to blast," Derek told him. "We're going out on our belly."

"Right," Jupe said. Jupe had worked in engine rooms of rocket ships since he had been old enough to sign articles. His gnarled and twisted—but very powerful hands—had come from turning heavy, very-hot valves on engines that had used liquid fuel. Jupe knew rockets. In his own way, he loved these awkward but very powerful engines.

Rat's voice came from the main communications room, saying the space radio was out of order. Slim's voice whispered softly from the gyro room, saying he was revving up the gyros. A hoarse voice came from the electronics room, saying they had a new type generator in there but that he understood it and that the units that cooled the hull were in operation.

The chair for the space navigator in the main control room was empty. They didn't have a space navigator, they didn't have a cook, they didn't have a steward. But a voice said the frozen food lockers were full. Derek was certain he knew enough about space navigation to get them to the moon. After all, with enough fuel, it was hard to miss so large a celestial object!

Derek pressed the stud that fired the stern jets. A roar came from behind him and the ship throbbed with power

## THE STAR WASPS

as it began to move. Behind, Derek caught a glimpse of men running from the hangar under the side of the canyon. Probably the major was trying to tell him that a take-off was carrying a simulated rescue on a hostile planet much too far. Pressing the button that fired the stern rockets, he thought that so far as he was concerned, he was actually being rescued from a hostile world. Earth was it!

With rocket roars booming through the mountains, the ship lifted itself into the air, then, as more power was poured into it, the vessel screamed its way beyond the atmosphere.

With the exception of one passenger, a huge fat man, its occupants were very well pleased with themselves. Even R-133 left off worrying about his name for a time. However, there was one problem. They had no radio.

"We'll surprise our friends on the moon," Derek said. "Probably Mom will want to spank me, for sneaking up on her, but maybe since we've been gone, she has decided I'm too big a boy to be spanked any longer."

He laughed at his own joke, then turned his full attention to reaching their destination.

Derek set the ship down in a belly landing in the huge crater just at the edge of the dark side of the moon and brought the hose of the ship up to the double doors where the cable could easily make contact. As the ship stopped moving, he felt relief well up within him. He knew that every other man on the ship was also relieved. Not only was a space hop over but they were also in the one place in the Solar System that was a place of refuge for them, a home where they could relax and let go of the tensions they had built up on Earth and in space. Inside the ship, he heard sounds of jubilation, and he realized again that no matter how much experience any man had with space, it was always with a sense of relief that he found himself at rest on any planet.

Then, as Derek waited for the snake-like cable, the sounds of jubilation began to die out in the ship. Silence replaced

## THE STAR WASPS

them. With the silence came a sense of growing unease. Slowly, Derek realized the source of this unease.

The cable had not come out of the double doors.

Derek stared at the heavy doors. They were not damaged. No stray meteor had struck here. There was no evidence that the Space Force had paid a call.

Then what was wrong?

Slowly, he realized that he was seeing something in addition to the doors of the hangar and the towering wall of the side of the crater.

What he was seeing were blue lights dancing in an invisible matrix. The lights were not dancing in the air. There was almost no air here. They were dancing in space, dancing in an unholy matrix of twisting, squirming, revolving horror just outside the inches-thick plastic viewport of the ship.

The viral were here too.

Derek had the dazed impression that the little blue lights were knocking at the door of the ship, asking to be admitted.

## CHAPTER TEN

JENNIE FARGO recoiled from the thick plastic window that gave a view of the great crater at the edge of the dark side of the moon. Terror was in her long legs as she fled down the winding natural cave that led back to the main cavern. Mom, Moon Man, and Cotter had to be told about this. All of the others had to be warned that death was now wearing wings of blue on the moon.

Using her flashlight, Jennie ran like a deer along the twisting cave. There were thousands of tunnels here, she had to be careful to pick the right turn. Vague memories of pictures illustrating Dante's *Inferno* in an old book flashed through her mind. Some of the people in the depths of hell the poet had visioned had been doomed to flee forever through dark and twisting tunnels like these caves under

## THE STAR WASPS

the moon's surface. There was something nightmarish about this situation. She felt like she was having a bad dream in which she was doomed to flee forever from something. There was also in this situation something of that terror that sometimes comes into the minds of young girls when they dream of snakes.

She fell heavily over something on the floor. The flashlight slipped from her fingers. When she found it, the spray of light revealed what she had stumbled over.

It was one of the men of the cavern, which one she was not quite certain. He was lying quietly on his back on the stone floor. One arm was thrown across his face as if he were trying to shield his eyes from something he did not want to see.

Jennie's first thought was that he was asleep. Then she realized he must be sleeping very soundly, otherwise he would have awakened when she stumbled over him.

Turning her flashlight on his face, she saw that it was too calm for that of a sleeping man. Out of the corner of her eyes, sliding away down a dark tunnel, she caught a glimpse of blue.

Fear tied a knot in her stomach. Fear clamped a ring around the bottom of her heart.

If she had run like a deer before, now she ran like an antelope.

Ahead, she saw the lights of the cavern. Reaching it, the first thing she saw was another dead man. Like the one she had found in the tunnel, this man seemed to be resting but she knew it was the rest that would last forever.

The whole cavern was silent. It was as quiet as a tomb, as still as all the places where the dead are buried, as silent as an alcove containing urns which hold the ashes of the dead. Then, from up above somewhere, came the whisper of a scream. It was quickly choked off.

She had to grab her throat to keep from screaming an answer.

A spiral of blue lights was drifting lazily in the air in the middle of the big cavern. It was the biggest viral she had

## THE STAR WASPS

ever seen. Like a human floating in water, it seemed to float lazily in the air in this place.

It was a lazy spiral. It looked like a heat mirage in the air of some forlorn, forgotten desert. It looked like death on wings.

While she watched it, too paralyzed to move, the spiral changed. It became a blue circle. The circle was just as lazy as the spiral had been. It floated just as easily. As Jennie watched, with terror tightening the band around the bottom of her heart, the circle changed and became a ball of tiny dancing blue lights.

Under other circumstances, she would have thought the lights and the changing form and the color were beautiful.

Now she knew they were death.

Was death beautiful? Not to her. She wanted life.

Somewhere in the distance, and up above her, the hoarse voice of a man shouted instructions to someone, to whom she did not know. She did not move to look up the inner wall of the cave, she could not move.

The viral floated off to the far end of the cave, to slide easily down a tunnel that led to the cave that held the vast tanks where food was grown.

The hoarse voice from up above came again, clearer now. It was calling her name.

Somehow she found the courage to venture into the cavern and look up.

From a high ledge, Moon Man was calling to her. She had never been up there but she knew that Cotter had his laboratory in a series of caves up near the roof of the cavern and that men working with him went up the twisting path to the high ledge where Moon Man was now beckoning to her.

Jennie Fargo went up the twisting path that had been chopped from ledge to ledge in the inner surface of the main cavern. She had never known she could climb so well or so rapidly. She could see Moon Man's round, worried face looking over the edge at her. He caught her as she reached the

## THE STAR WASPS

top. It was well that he did. There was no more strength left in her legs.

Since she did not have the strength to walk, Moon Man picked her up and carried her through a narrow opening that led into a long cave. She saw that the opening was growing narrower each minute. Inside the cave, she saw that two men were hastily shoving boulders and loose rocks into the opening, to close it permanently.

"Shut it up tight, boys," Moon said.

The two men nodded and continued working. Only later would Jennie realize that these two men were going to remain here to keep this opening blocked.

"How . . . how did the viral . . ." she asked.

"Joey got his stuff working," Moon Man said. "He brought them through from that damned star. For some reason, they stopped on the surface. Only a few have got through into these tunnels as yet."

"Is . . . is Mr. Cotter alive?" Jennie gasped.

"Yes. He's in his lab." Moon Man answered. He shook his head. "I'm not blaming him for this. A lot of this science stuff has to go by guess and by grunt, 'specially when they're working on something new. But if they guess wrong, the rest of us grunt. Are you able to walk now, girl?"

"I think so," Jennie answered. Set upon her feet, she told him about seeing the viral outside the plastic window that looked out on the crater and about finding the dead man in the tunnel.

"That was probably Keller," Moon Man answered. "He went to look for you. I guess a viral found him before he found you."

The round face took on added strain as he spoke. Moon Man had lost most of his teeth and his face was lined with age. Keller had been his bosom companion for many years. Keller was dead. And Moon Man, somehow, was a little less alive because of this. His voice rumbled on.

"How'd they get inside the main cavern? This whole region is honeycombed with caves and tunnels that twist and bend and turn and go everywhere. Nobody has ever



## THE STAR WASPS

explored all of these tunnels. Some open on the surface of the moon, some come out on the wall of the crater, some go down deep, some open at the base of the crater. Long ago we stopped most of the higher openings, to keep our air from escaping—it's held here in the cavern like a huge bubble—but we didn't bother about the lower tunnels. At the base of the crater, the viral could find a hundred holes they could come through. Since they don't need air themselves, they can live on the surface or in the crater. They can go where we can't go."

They had reached a narrow place in the tunnel. One man was waiting here, to close the opening. After they had passed through, he closed it.

"How about the two men up ahead?" Jennie asked.

"We'll pass food and water through to them." Moon Man explained.

"But they will have to stay there in that dark hole."

Moon Man nodded. "They're used to the dark. Why should they be afraid to go home in the dark, if they have to?"

"Oh, no!" Jennie said, as she grasped his grim meaning.

"We don't enjoy leaving our friends behind to set up road blocks that give us another chance at life," Moon Man said. "They don't enjoy it either. They're doing it so that others may have another chance to live."

"Oh," Jennie said, in a falling voice.

"For thousands of years, men who were real men have died that others might live," Moon Man said. "When it comes my turn, I'll die too. There won't be any monuments erected over me, or over the two men behind us, if we die. A lot of real men behind us don't have any monuments to mark their graves either!"

"But isn't there some other way?"

"If there is, we haven't found it yet. If Johnny Derek were here . . ." Hope sounded in his voice as the thought of Derek crossed his mind. To the men here, Derek was a sort of minor god who could do anything that had to be done.

"But he's not here," Jennie whispered.

## THE STAR WASPS

"Well, wherever he is, one thing is sure: if he's still alive, he is fighting for us."

Moon Man's lined face brightened as he spoke.

"You love him, don't you?" Jennie said.

The old voice snapped a hot answer at her. "Love him? We worship him! There isn't a man here who isn't alive because Johnny Derek made life possible for him! There isn't a man here who wouldn't give his life for what Johnny Derek has already done for him."

Ahead, the twisting tunnel was broadening into a big chamber where lights were burning. This chamber had already been set up as a place of refuge where men might find safety for the last few hours after all the road blocks had gone down. Men were moving here, working feverishly. Jennie caught a glimpse of Mom's tall figure. Mom was no longer as tall as a tree. She had sagged, she had bent at the middle. She looked as if the weight of centuries now bore down upon her, the weight that millions of women have known across all time, the burden that comes from wondering about the lives of their lost, strayed children.

Mom took one look at Jennie, hugged her, then put her to work. Jennie found that activity relieved some of the enormous tension that had developed inside her. Time passed. She did not know how much. She knew she worked until her legs would no longer bear her weight, then slumped somewhere into a nightmare tortured sleep that had no rest in it. Around her, other men and women groaned as they slept and awakened to work again. So did Jennie.

Now and then she was able to watch Joseph Cotter in the adjoining cave where he had set up his equipment. Now the little man looked more like a wino than ever. He had still not shaved—there had never been time for it. Now there was no time at all. He looked like a wino who has added drug addiction on top of chronic alcoholism. Jennie caught snatches of his words as he talked continually to himself.

"They came through on the surface. They came through up above. The blue ones came through. Only the blue ones.

## THE STAR WASPS

The combination of chemicals on the surface up above must be congenial to the blue ones."

As he talked to himself, he kept working. He had set up vats of various chemicals. Radiations that were still being gathered from parabolic antennae located above them on the surface of the moon were being piped down into this room. In the ranges of ultra-frequency, these radiations were far beyond the frequencies seen by the human eye. Only very sensitive equipment, most of which had been designed and built by this little man who looked and acted like a drug-ridden wino, could detect their radiations.

"I want the green ones, I want the green ones, I want . . ." Like some disciple of Coue, he kept repeating these words over and over again. The way he spoke, the words sounded like prayer. She was not quite certain what he meant until she remembered the strange battle she had seen on the mawk just after she had met Derek.

Green was the color of vegetation on Earth, the color of growing things, perhaps the color of life itself on the green planet. Was green also the color of hope? Jennie thought his a very silly idea. Hope had no color. Hope was an impulse springing from deep wells within the human mind, springing and falling away, then springing up again like a fountain that never runs dry.

Here on the moon, the fountain was running dry.

She watched Cotter work over vats of liquids containing chemicals, over long boxes which contained minerals in all kinds of combinations, minerals which had been collected here in the caves under the surface of the moon.

The right combination of acids and alkalis, the right combination of minerals, was what the little scientist was seeking. Perhaps life itself was the result of the right combination of minerals. The right key! The right combination, the right synthesis! That life at the human level was much more than the right combination of minerals was obvious, but perhaps it rested on such a combination. Who knew the great secret of life, what it was, where it had come from, where it was going?

## THE STAR WASPS

Who knew the secret of life's opposite and twin brother, death? Men came, they stayed a while, they went. No one knew for sure from when they came or where they went, only that they were sustained on the physical part of their journey by something called life. Perhaps, beyond the physical, life still went on!

Men wanted life, they sought it desperately. They wanted freedom because freedom meant a better opportunity to use the life they had, a better chance to let life express itself, a better opportunity to let life flow and grow.

Joseph Cotter was a very frantic little man. Worry had etched great lines on his forehead and had put a permanent sag in his shoulders. Worry was doing the same thing to all of the others. The atomic generator that supplied electric current for light, water, air, and heat was in the lower cavern where no one could reach it now. What if it stopped operating? The spaceship was also in the lower cavern where they could not reach it.

Cotter worked with chemicals, with minerals, and with high frequency energies, looking for something that was green. What if the result he got was blue?

The little scientist did not know the answer to this question. The blue viral had come through at the surface of the moon. There was a chance they might appear in the very vats on which he was working.

He kept right on working anyway.

Jennie went away from Joseph Cotter. Two men were walking from one of the dark tunnels into the main cavern. Between them, they carried the limp body of a third man.

Mom started toward them.

"He was just a-laying there," the lead man said. "Just a-laying there."

Moon Man went to them, to take one look at the man they were carrying, then to jerk a thumb toward another tunnel that led down and away. The two men nodded and kept on walking. Moon Man and Mom stood watching them.

Jennie knew they were taking the body to its last resting place. Down that dark tunnel somewhere was a hole that

## THE STAR WASPS

dropped away into nothing. Here men who had sought freedom and had found death could rest for an eon or two.

Jennie went up to Moon Man.

"I'll take his place at guard," she said.

Moon Man looked at her, then looked again as he realized what she had said. He shook his head vigorously.

"Just because I'm a woman . . ." she began.

"I'm not trying to keep you alive because of your sex," Moon Man said. "I'm trying to keep you alive because Johnny sent you here."

"Is that . . ."

"He'll want you alive, when he gets back," Moon Man said.

In spite of the dark mood that was on her, hope tried to come alive somewhere inside her.

"Then you think he will return?"

"I'm not thinking," Moon Man answered. "Long ago, I lost the ability to think. I'm just breathing and walking and . . ."

He broke off to stare toward the tunnel where the two men had disappeared. They had reappeared and were running into the cavern. They pointed behind them in the direction of the dark hole.

"Lights!"

In the direction they pointed, flickering lights showed in the dark tunnel. Jennie caught her breath, then let it go as she realized these lights were a bright white instead of blue, also that they burned steadily.

Behind the lights, she saw great gray figures moving forward. Waddling clumsily as they walked, they looked like giants.

Mom saw them too, then began running toward them. She saw the leading giant catch the white-haired woman in one arm and clumsily hug her.

Then she knew the truth. These giants were Derek and his men, in space suits.

She found herself running too, toward him, to discover that she was caught in the embrace of his free arm. Clumsy as the space suit hug was, it felt good to her.

## THE STAR WASPS

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

"THE ONLY solution I see at this moment is to get out of here," Derek said, to the semicircle of faces that watched him here in this place of cold dry air and artificial illumination. "I have a ship outside. We'll all leave in it. Of course, we will need space suits for all of us to get to it, but we have suits here."

His eyes sought Moon Man.

"Our suits are in our ship. We can't get to them because of the viral," Moon Man answered. "We were going to try to reach the ship, if you didn't come."

Moon Man's face had shed many of its wrinkles. Johnny was here. This meant that all problems would now be solved. Perhaps Moon Man did not see how they would be solved but Johnny would find the answers, Moon Man was sure.

"Then we'll get suits from my ship," Derek said. "We'll send out as many people as we have suits, then bring the suits back."

He glanced at Rat, who had opened the visor of his space suit and was looking around this place.

"Sure, Johnny," Rat said. "I'll go back to the ship and pick up some of the boys and we'll carry the suits back in here."

Waving jauntily at them, Rat turned and walked out of Cotter's laboratory. He was whistling as he went away. The sound of his whistle came back from the dark tunnel where the dead men were.

Although he had no intention of letting anyone know it, Johnny Derek was tired. Fatigue was in him to the very marrow of his bones. One of the prices he paid for leadership was never letting anyone know when he was tired or when he saw no solution. Men took heart from him. He had to have heart to give them.

After the first landing in the crater, Derek had tried to land on top of the plateau. Cotter's antennae were there, parabolic suction cups pulling something from the vast deep.

## THE STAR WASPS

What they were pulling was obvious. The whole surface of the plateau, to Derek's conditioned eyes, had gleamed like a field of blue lupin in the spring from the viral hovering there.

Derek had brought the ship down again, to the bottom of the crater, to a different location, and had entered through one of the lower passages. He had brought Rat, Glock, R-133, and Old Jupe with him.

Derek looked around at the semicircle of faces. He asked no questions about the faces he did not see. Men had died here and he knew it.

Glock had removed his helmet and was sitting down. The fat man's face was the color of an overaged fish. He looked sick outside and he was probably very sick inside. Derek had brought Glock with him because he did not want to let the fat man out of his sight. He knew Glock to be very competent at corrupting men and while Derek did not think any of his men would turn traitor, he wished to take no chances. Also any of them might knife Glock unless Derek was present to prevent it.

Derek still had one arm around his mother and the other arm around Jennie. There had never been a woman in his life until, at the edge of the mawk moving into the huge Corporation Building, he had met this one. She had liked his talk of freedom and he had liked her. She had gone ahead of him into what she had hoped would be freedom. He did not want her to find death instead.

"I guess that's all for right now," Derek said. "We'll begin to move out of here as soon as the boys get back with the suits from the ship. I don't need to tell you that all we can take with us is what we can carry in our hands."

They nodded in understanding, knowing from previous flights that all that they could take with them anywhere was what they could carry in their hands. And not much of that! He saw relief on their faces. He also saw that now and then they glanced at Glock. It was Moon Man who spoke, jerking his thumb toward the fat man.

"Are we taking this with us, Johnny?"

## THE STAR WASPS

"For the time being," Derek said. "Remember, he's the richest man on Earth."

"I just want him to be the deadest man on the moon!"

"I share your feelings," Derek said. He shook his head. Moon Man moved away.

"That man would have killed me, except for you," Glock said.

Derek nodded. "They would all kill you, Raz."

"What for? I didn't do anything. I didn't invent the blue viral. I didn't turn them loose."

Beneath the fatigue, Derek's face showed pain. "I turned them loose, Raz, but not intentionally. All I was trying to do was to give slaves a little additional push toward freedom."

He glanced at R-133, who had also removed the helmet from his space suit. The man's mind was still searching for his lost name.

"You took that man's name away from him, Raz, you and the system you headed. You made a machine out of him; you gave him a number instead of a name. You forced him to trade his birthright of freedom for a number and for pep-up pills to keep him going and for tranquilizer pills so he could sleep at night."

"Well . . ." Glock gulped.

"Better he was an ape chattering in a tree—but a free ape—than a man chained to a machine," Derek said.

"The machine gave him security," Glock answered. "He was never hungry working for me. The ape might fall out of the tree at any time. The python lay in wait for him on the ground and the leopard came at him through the trees. He was free—to be eaten!"

"Because of the danger of the python and the leopard, the ape had to sharpen his wits. Danger made him aware that he had to be better than an ape. Danger helped him grow into a man. But he was free to grow. Freedom means danger, Raz, always. The false security that comes from the absence of danger is a blind alley!"

Glock was silent. His face had gone from white to green again. He looked puffed and bloated. Conflicting idea-emo-



## THE STAR WASPS

tional systems were at war within him. He hung his head in his hands.

Derek turned to Cotter. The little scientist was so busy studying the chemicals in his vats that he did not know the big man had entered. As Derek walked up to him, the little man was startled, then a smile lit his face in a way that erased all of the wrinkles.

"Derek! I'm so glad you're back! Everybody here had been looking for you. I can't thank you enough for sending me here."

"You don't need to thank me," Derek said. "We're not staying long."

Cotter's face showed lack of understanding, then amazement. As he listened to Derek's explanation, his face slowly resumed its matrix of deep wrinkles.

"I think that's fine," Cotter said, slowly. "I'm glad you're going to take the others to some safe place."

"We're all going," Derek said.

Cotter shook his head. "I'm not," he said.

Derek was silent. He knew the meaning of the words he had heard but he was trying to grasp the hidden meaning that lay behind them. Few men had ever stood against him. But this little wizened man was trying it.

"I don't understand you," Derek said.

"It's all very simple," Cotter said. "All of my equipment is here. If the problem of the blue viral is to be solved anywhere, it must be done here. So I must stay." He smiled as he spoke, a wan expression that begged for understanding and indicated fear he did not have it.

"But you would be left here alone," Derek said.

"Yes. I understand this, Now if you will excuse me . . ." Cotter started to turn back to his work.

"I won't excuse you!" Derek's voice grew bleak. "We can't leave you here. We—the whole world—needs you."

"Thank you," Cotter smiled shyly at the recognition of being needed. "But I am the man who is responsible for bringing the blue viral into the Solar System. I did it. True, it was an accident, but I consider myself responsible. The

## THE STAR WASPS

weight of the people who have died rests on my shoulders. The fate of the people who may still live rests in my hands. I must do my best to undo the damage I have done and to build something better out of the chaos I have brought about."

The little man who looked like a wino smiled again, at the thought of something better that was to come.

The pressure of time was on Johnny Derek. He did not have time to persuade this little man, to bring the forces of logic to bear, to point out the road that was best to follow. Knowing Cotter had a first-class mind, he expected the scientist to understand him.

"I don't want to use force . . ." Derek began.

He was interrupted. "You have talked much about freedom?" Cotter said.

"Yes," Derek admitted.

"Then you must give it to me too!"

"But I'm trying to . . ."

"It must also include the freedom to die, if need be, to undo the damage I have done." Cotter said.

He was quite calm. He had looked at death so often that he had come to regard it as a friend.

"Of course," Derek said. "But if I give you the freedom to die here, then many others may die because you claimed your freedom at the wrong time. Time is always a part of the life situation, sir."

"I realize this," Cotter answered. "I also realize what you perhaps have not had the time to grasp yet—that I am done, that I have no strength left for running, no will for it. I know you will promise to set up another lab for me. I know you will do it, if you can. But this may be months away. You would have to find a place for a new lab, then find equipment . . ."

"We will work as fast as we can," Derek promised.

"I know you will. But my heart has already worked too fast too long. I have enough left in me to continue working until I die. No more than this. This is the end of the long road for Joseph Cotter, for Little Joey, as the winos called him. Here I undo the damage I have done—or here I die."

## THE STAR WASPS

"You would defy me?" Derek said haltingly.

"I don't want to but I will if I have to," Cotter answered. "But I warn you, to use force on me is to carry a corpse out of here."

For a long time, John Derek was silent. He had seen something here that he appreciated and loved—pure courage. His hand went out to Cotter.

"By God, I have seen a man!" Derek said, explosively. "*I have seen a man!* Mr. Cotter, we will send the others to safety, and you and I will stay here to undo the damage we have both done!"

Cotter shook Derek's hand, then, grinning clear down to the run-over heels of his scuffed shoes, turned back to work. Choking a little but happy too, John Derek turned back to his task of supervising the evacuation of this cavern. And found he was facing his mother.

"If you stay, I stay, Johnny," the tall white-haired woman said. The stoop that had appeared in her back was gone. Now she stood as straight as a tree again.

Derek stared at her.

"I gave you birth, I gave you life," his mother said. "Who has a better right to die with you than me?"

John Derek knew he had no answer to this question. He knew also that the choke in his throat was growing larger. His eyes went to Jennie.

She came to him and stood looking up. There was something about her that was tree-tall too.

"If you have seen a man, so have we," Jennie said.

"But . . ."

"I might have borne your sons, if things had worked out differently," Jennie continued. "They would have been tall, straight sons, with the bold blood of free men in their veins. And because they stood so tall, we would have stood a little taller too, just as your mother does now. So I am staying too, Johnny."

She found she was calm as she spoke. It was in her mind and in her heart that this was the thing to do. So she did it. She also reached up and kissed him.

## THE STAR WASPS

"But somebody has to stay here and help little Joey. That somebody has to be me!" Derek shouted.

"And somebody else has to stay and see that both of you remember to eat," Jennie said. "The feeding of the men dear to her heart is the oldest task—and the oldest freedom—that any woman knows or wants."

The choke in Derek's throat was over-large. He found he had to shout to get words past it.

"You're not using sense, either of you!"

Shouting, he turned away from them. Now he saw that all of his men had stopped scattering to gather their treasured possessions—such little personal things as a hunted man could carry in his hands—and had formed again the semi-circle of watching faces looking up to him.

"Don't tell me that you are going to defy me too!" he shouted.

Their faces grew even more grave. But they did not move. It was Moon Man who stepped forward.

"You always talked to us about freedom, Johnny," the old man said. "We know you meant freedom to live. We honored you for your talk, we honored you for your deeds, we honored you because we knew you were on our side . . . but if freedom to live is to mean anything, Johnny, it also has to include the freedom to die as we choose. I am sure I speak for all of us when I say that we choose to stay here with you and with Little Joey."

Voices rumbled assent, faces nodded grim approval.

Derek started to speak and found that the choke in his throat had grown much stronger. His eyes fell on R-133.

"Moon Man has no right to speak for you," he said to R-133.

R-133 withdrew his gaze from the blankness inside in which he sought his forgotten name.

"Moon Man has spoken for me," he said. "If the python swallows the ape, if the leopard eats him, there is still no other road for the ape except to take his chance on freedom gained through danger."

"I didn't think you were even listening," Derek faltered.

## THE STAR WASPS

"I guess everybody listens when you talk, Johnny," Jennie Fargo's voice came clearly in the stillness. "Your greatest problem, and your greatest opportunity, and your greatest glory, is that people listen to you. You awaken their deepest and their best dreams. They follow their dreams—and you."

John Derek knew he had heard the finest words of praise ever spoken. He also knew in his heart he had just seen the finest expression of loyalty ever given to any man. No man had ever commanded greater loyalty than this—that men would stay and die with him.

Yet he knew it was not just loyalty to him. Jennie had spoken the truth. It was also loyalty to the dream.

For he had volunteered to stay because Little Joey had stayed. These men would not have followed Little Joey alone. They followed—all of them, including Little Joey—a dream that was in part a hope for freedom and was in part a hope for those as yet unborn, those who stood waiting outside the womb of time for entrance on the stage called Earth, for their part to play on the bigger stage called the Solar System.

Somehow in this moment he knew that even after the whole Solar System had been dissolved in the attrition of life, in the process of entropy, somewhere on some far star men would still be carrying the banner of this dream. They might be on some solar system circling some lost and forgotten star, they might be in another galaxy, but they would *be!* This moment which existed here in a cave on the moon would become another in the vast series of moments that had rolled across the stage since Earth felt the first pulse of life in it, another moment in which men laid the foundation for a better life to come, laid it by dying, if need be, laid it by living, if they could, *but laid it.*

Death might come up from the seas—it often had in the long history of the race; it might come down from the skies—it often had done this too; it might ride the light beams from another star—as it had done in the viral; but however it came, free men would always be there to meet it face to face.

The ape had risked the python and the leopard. The python and the leopard still lived in the jungle.

## THE STAR WASPS

But the ape had become a man!

This was the way the picture went. Always something risked its life to become something better!

In the stillness, Derek was aware of the rasped, heavy breathing of man. As the men in front of him also heard the sound, the semicircle of faces in front of him suddenly parted.

The sound of heavy breathing was coming from Rat. Rat crawling, Rat pushing himself along on his belly.

As Derek got to him, Rat stopped crawling and lifted proud eyes up to the big man on his knees beside him. God alone knew how Rat had managed to crawl this distance. Life had long since gone out of him. But something had remained after life had gone. This something was the will to keep going until he could tell his friends, his bunch, his fellowship, of things coming against them.

"They . . . they found the hole we came through," Rat whispered. "One got me. I . . . I didn't have time to close my helmet. Back there . . . back there . . ." He tried to wave his hand to indicate the direction he meant, and collapsed trying.

Rat laid his head down on the cold stone floor of this moon cavern, laid it down in a way which said he would never move it again.

But John Derek had seen the proud look in Rat's eyes. And Rat knew it had been seen and understood. It had meant that when a man had nothing left in him, a man could still crawl to warn his friends. And would become a better man by crawling! Knowing that Derek knew these things, Rat died happy.

Derek lifted his head to stare into the darkness.

Far off there, like a will-o-wisp of death, a blue glow flickered in an invisible matrix, then vanished.

## THE STAR WASPS

### CHAPTER TWELVE

THIS WAS the way the dead men had gone, this was the way one dead man, Rat, had come, crawling, with life gone out of him but crawling anyhow until he had delivered his message to the fellowship to which he had belonged.

The air had the odor of death in it. The noses of the men twisted, trying to shut out the foul smell. A dark hole branched off.

"Close that hole too," Derek said, pointing.

Two men moved to obey him, digging hastily with a crowbar into the hard rock, tearing at it with their hands, using the chunks to block the opening. Derek and those with him moved on.

Of the viral that had killed Rat, he had as yet seen nothing. It might be anywhere in this vast honeycomb.

"The trouble is . . ." Derek said, then caught the rest of the words before he spoke them. Those with him knew the trouble as well as he did. There were hundreds of holes through which the viral might come. In time, they might find and stop all of the holes. Did they have time? Had Rat had time in which to crawl? Rat had crawled anyhow.

Moving on, he pointed to another hole, then to another, telling men to stop them and then to catch up with him as quickly as they could. His men were dwindling but he had hardly noticed this as he came to another hole.

A glance down it and he drew back.

In the darkness there, the black that seemed to lead away into death itself, blue lights danced.

He could not tell how many of the viral were in this tunnel. A glance told him that there were hundreds. They were moving toward this opening.

"Close this one, quick! This is their main path into the caves!"

Turning, he saw that a bulky figure in a space suit with the helmet open was standing behind him. All the other men were busy elsewhere. Glock was breathing heavily.

## THE STAR WASPS

A glance at the fat man told Derek he could expect no help from this source. Glock was so completely fatigued and so scared that he could hardly move his massive weight.

A large boulder that had fallen from the roof of the tunnel in some past age was lying half-buried in the dust of the passage. It was big enough to block the hole. Derek put his shoulder behind it and shoved with all his strength, intending to use it to block the hole into the tunnel where the viral were moving toward them.

Derek shoved until he thought his muscles were going to burst their sheaths, until his breath here in this world of low pressure air began to come in great gasping sobs.

Glock stood staring at him.

"Help me, Raz!" he whispered.

The fat man did not move.

"Raz, I need help!"

Glock put his hands on his hips.

"You want help from me?" Amazement, and something beyond amazement, a sort of groping, bewildered wonder was in the fat man's voice. It was as if all of his life Raz Glock had thought of himself as being small and of Johnny Derek as being big and he could not understand how a man as big as Derek could want help from someone as small and as mean as Raz Glock.

"Yes," Derek gasped, shoving against the boulder.

Wonder came over Glock's face. He had been asked to help!

"All right, Johnny, I'll be glad to help you."

Glock added his bulk to the lithe strength of Derek. Glock was not all fat, by any means. There were powerful muscles beneath his bulk. He shoved until his eyes threatened to burst from his head.

The boulder refused to budge.

"Try it again, Raz!" Derek grunted. "We've got to move this rock!"

The boulder lifted an inch, then settled back into place.

"Again!" Derek whispered.



## THE STAR WASPS

Glock did not move. Glancing toward the hole, he spoke three words.

"No time left!"

Here in this place of darkness and of horror, for the first time he had caught a glimpse with his naked eyes of little blue lights dancing in a shifting matrix. He had seen them before, with special glasses, in the room off his office in the Corporation Building. Now in this black place, he could catch glimpses of them with his naked eyes. He knew what they were.

Derek glanced around the boulder. He saw that the viral were very close to the opening. A sense of failure came up in him. With it, somehow, was a sense of fear. He had striven so hard, he had fought so many battles, that the fellowship of men which he led might survive and go forward. Now he saw failure coming toward him, and more than this, he saw death.

"We've got to stop that hole!" Derek whispered. He did not know he was speaking. "We've got to!"

"All right, Johnny," Erasmus Glock said.

The man who was president of the Super Corporation and through it controlled the lives and destinies of millions, the man who used corporation presidents as office boys to run errands for him, the man who had always seemed so big to others, who had always thought of himself as being small, mean, and unwanted, took three steps forward and turned so that his back side was to the hole through which the viral would come. He backed into the hole.

His great bulk filled it. He was wearing a space suit but both he and Derek knew that even this stout fabric would not protect him long.

Derek stared at him.

"Raz! They'll . . ."

"I know what they'll do," Glock answered. A strange calm was on him. Though he spoke slowly, he no longer stuttered.

"I found something here, Johnny, something that I have secretly wanted all my life, something I did not dare tell any man about until now. I'm going to tell you, Johnny, because I know you will understand . . ."

## THE STAR WASPS

"Razi!"

"What I always wanted was to be accepted as a man among men," Glock went on. "This was the real reason I piled dollars so high around me. I thought that because I had so much money, men would accept me. I discovered that to be accepted as a man among men, you have to be a man."

He shook his head at hidden memories of his past. "I was richer than any hundred men, I could make or break the greatest of them. I was feared, I was flattered, I was praised unceasingly by men who thought such praise would help their cause, but I was not a man among them."

"I understand," Derek whispered. "Inside, you were still the fat kid with all of his fears and all of his hidden hungers."

"When I burst into tears when you came swaggering into my office, I wasn't just putting on an act. I would have given anything to be able to do what you did but I wasn't man enough to do it. I had to hire my killers. I didn't have the courage to do the job myself."

Glock's voice went into silence, then came on again.

"Here in these caves I found something I had not known existed. I found you staying to die because a little wino stayed to die. I found men staying to die with you, men and women, to serve you. I saw a criminal, a rat of a man, crawl a long mile just to tell you of danger, and do this because you were his friend and he was your friend."

Glock's body was actually closing the opening. Though he was wearing a space suit, the helmet was not in place. The way his head was jammed against the top of the opening there was no way to replace the helmet. Replacing the helmet would not have made much, if any, difference.

"I want to join your fellowship, Johnny," Glock whispered. "I'm more of a criminal than Rat was, if the truth be known. I want to be one of the men who are willing to die for or with you—and for the dream you follow, the dream that is greater than any of us."

His face had been calm. Now a spasm of pain passed through it as if something had stung him on the back side

## THE STAR WASPS

which was exposed in the other tunnel. But whatever had touched him, he did not budge from the opening.

"Raz, we've got to get out of here," Derek whispered. He stepped toward the fat man, then stopped as Glock's hand swept swiftly to the open neck of his space suit. It came away with a tiny weapon in it. The weapon covered Derek.

"Stand back, Johnny." Glock said. "So help me, if you try to pull me out of this hole, I'll kill you!"

Derek stared at the gun.

"Yes, I've had it all along," Glock said. "Neither you nor your men searched me quite good enough."

"Why . . . why didn't you use it?"

"I've already told you," Glock answered. "I didn't use it because of the secret need within me, to be a man among men, to join your fellowship, Johnny."

Again the pain went across Glock's face. Again he reached toward the neck of his spacesuit. This time he pulled out a package of wadded papers which he tossed on the rough ground at Derek's feet.

"Here, Johnny. This is for you."

Derek picked up the papers.

"Don't read them now," Glock said. "Right now I want you to do just one thing, and that is to get the hell out of here. Get back to your people. Lead them on, Johnny. Lead them on."

"Our fellowship, Raz," Derek whispered. "It's *our* fellowship now. You have earned the right to belong to it too."

At these words, a smile came over Glock's pain-twisted face. It was a real smile, the kind that told of inward happiness flowing into the vast inward areas where fear had once dwelled.

Fear dwelled there no longer! It was being washed out forever.

"Get walking, Johnny. Back to your . . . *our* fellowship . . . and lead them on."

Glock's voice had lost all of its harshness and had become warm with the feeling of real friendship.

## THE STAR WASPS

He winced as something touched his back, then pushed his body even more firmly into the hole.

"Move away, Johnny."

Derek moved. The last he saw of Glock, the huge body was still firmly lodged in the hole. The head was sagging now, but there was a smile on the face of Erasmus Glock.

Glock was dying, but like Rat, and others of this fellowship, he was dying happy.

As he tried to return to Cotter's laboratory, Derek's legs suddenly buckled under him. He pushed his back against the wall and sat there, breathing slowly of the thin air, and hoping that strength would come back into him. In Erasmus Glock, he knew he had seen a tremendous character transformation. From the depths of his soul, this pleased him. He would have killed Glock if this had become necessary. But he was much more pleased to have destroyed his enemy—by making a friend of him! And Glock had been pleased too. If he had lived as a rat, he had died as a hero.

Derek was still trying to get some strength back into his body when Mom and Jennie found him. He did not rise. He could not. He pulled them down beside him, one to sit in the circle of his right arm, the other in the circle of his left. These were the only two women who had ever mattered to him. It seemed to him in some way in this moment they were one woman.

"If we had won this battle, I would have asked you to marry me," he said to Jennie.

"I know," she answered. "And I would have accepted you."

He pulled his arm closer about her. She came closer willingly.

A blue light came along the corridor. Perhaps Glock had fallen from the opening after he had died, perhaps the viral had found some other entrance. How they had gotten here did not matter. They were here. Derek and Jennie watched the blue lights that both could see.

The viral changed its form, becoming a ball, then an

## THE STAR WASPS

hourglass, then a circle. It did not look dangerous. It was only little blue lights flickering and shifting and changing in an invisible matrix. Each knew that death lurked within this alien from another system. Each held his breath.

Out of the darkness on their right came another viral. The two met and went through a kind of a dance with each other, then, as if they had finally sensed the existence of prey near them, they began to move slowly toward the three humans sitting against the wall.

Out of the darkness on the left came—a green streak. The two blue viral rose to meet it. Instantly, in the still air of this cave miles below the surface of the moon, a strange fight began.

“Remember—on the mawk going down—we saw a green viral”

Jennie whispered.

Derek watched the dog fight in the thin air of this ancient place. He saw the green viral dart toward one of the blue viral. He saw sparkles of white light flare out of the blue viral, he saw the second blue viral try to flee.

The effort was not successful. The green viral caught the blue one.

The blue viral died.

The green viral came to the three humans. Derek got to his feet.

“It’s friendly,” Jennie whispered. “Accept it as a friend.”

Derek made no move against it. At the distance of about a foot, it circled his head. With the two women in the circle of his arms, he moved toward Cotter’s laboratory. The green viral followed them like some faithful dog protecting them.

Now other green viral were appearing, dozens of them. They seemed to be coming from some source that was opening wider and wider to admit more and more of them.

Now they saw Cotter’s lab. And gasped at what they saw. The whole laboratory seemed to be filled to overflowing with green light.

Now they saw Cotter. He was sitting slumped in a make-shift canvas chair that had been his only bed.

## THE STAR WASPS

Green viral covered him from head to foot, covered him so thickly that he seemed to glow with green illumination.

"Is . . . is he dead? Have the green viral turned against us?" Derek said.

As if he had heard the words, Cotter stirred in his canvas chair. He got to his feet. Catching a glimpse of the three humans, he came toward them.

"I finally brought the green viral through," he whispered. "I finally succeeded."

The smile on his face was a beautiful thing.

"And you're covered with them," Derek said.

"I know I am." The smile on Cotter's face grew stronger. "And the strange thing is, they have revived me, brought me new strength. I feel like a young man again. The green viral are the life bringers. They have brought new life to me from another star."

Derek was silent.

"When they have cleaned up the blue viral here on the moon, we'll send the green life-bringers on to Earth," Cotter continued. "Those who remain around Denver, or in any stricken area, will find the very air has suddenly filled with green, the color of life, as the life-bringers repair the damage their blue cousins did."

The smile on Cotter's face became a glow.

"Think of it! New life for an old planet, for our planet, for Earth!"

He seemed to be looking into the future, to be aware of great sweeps of time, as the dream he and the fellowship had followed opened before him, showing him its wonders.

"And some day, when our ships reach Ross-154, we will return the gift of new life to that star, made brighter and more colorful and more wonderful because of the gift which we on Earth have added to it. I can see the great ships now, going forth from our world to their world, taking them the things they need there, giving them back tenfold the life they have given to us."

He paused. His eyes came to rest on Derek.

## THE STAR WASPS

"And all of this because of your fellowship, Johnny. All of it because of you!"

Derek started to answer. Again the choking was in his throat. What could he say? It had all been said, it had all been acted out, even to death itself, by the men of his fellowship. He knew his legs were growing weak again.

"Sit down, Johnny," Cotter urged. "Sit down and rest. You've earned the right."

Derek let his legs collapse under him. He sat on the floor. His arms were still around the two women, the one who had given him the gift of life, the other who would carry that gift forward to the future.

The green viral came to them, green, the color of vegetation, the color of life itself. While Joseph Cotter, as happy as a child, watched, the green viral covered the three of them. As the green viral touched him, Derek found new strength begin to flow into him. It came slowly and gently, like the sap rising in a tree, but it came with irresistible force.

Life! Life itself! Life from another star bringing a gift to another world!

He got to his feet. It was true then, what Little Joey had said. The green viral were life-bringers!

He saw now that they were coming into existence in the vats where the high-frequency radiations were focused. Cotter, happy, with new strength in him, wanted to describe all of the technical details of this miracle. But Derek had other things on his mind.

The men of his fellowship were returning. They came to tell of green lights and of life itself and of a strange miracle they had seen and felt. He saw Moon Man and Old Jupe. Both were grinning. He saw R-133, dazed but happy.

But not all of the fellowship returned. Some would never come.

Glock would not come. Derek knew that Raz would never return. He also realized that he still held in his hands the wadded papers that Glock had forced on him. He unfolded them and began to read.

## THE STAR WASPS

"The Last Will and Testament of Erasmus Glock . . . All of my possessions, real and personal, wherever located, I devise and bequeath in fee simple to *my fellowship* . . . and I name as sole executor and administrator, to use as he sees fit for the advancement of my fellowship . . . John Derek."

"He . . . he gave me the Super Corporation. *He gave it to us! We own it now. We own it! And how we will use it!*"

Something like a cheer went up from the listening few. He saw their faces. They were covered with green viral. The fatigue was going from them as the life-bringers worked. Moon Man and Old Jupe looked as happy as kids.

And R-133, with a smile on his face, was coming up to him.

"I have decided I will have a new name," R-133 said. "In the future will you please call me Ed?"

"Sure," Derek answered. "Sure, Ed."

Ed, who had once been R-133 and a slave to a machine, grinned even more broadly. Ever since he had been a kid, he had longed to have a name instead of a number. Now he had it. He was Ed. To him, there was a good sound and a good feeling about the name of Ed.

Derek found his mother was still on one arm and Jennie was on the other. He pulled them to him, hugging them impartially. Through one of them life had flowed to him. Through the other life would flow on beyond him into the future, into the days when Joseph Cotter's dream would come true, when men went back to the far-off star, returning the enlarged gift of life to the world of the viral.

This was in and for the future.

Life was in John Derek again, life and a contentment such as he had never known.