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ADVENTURES ON OTHER PLANETS

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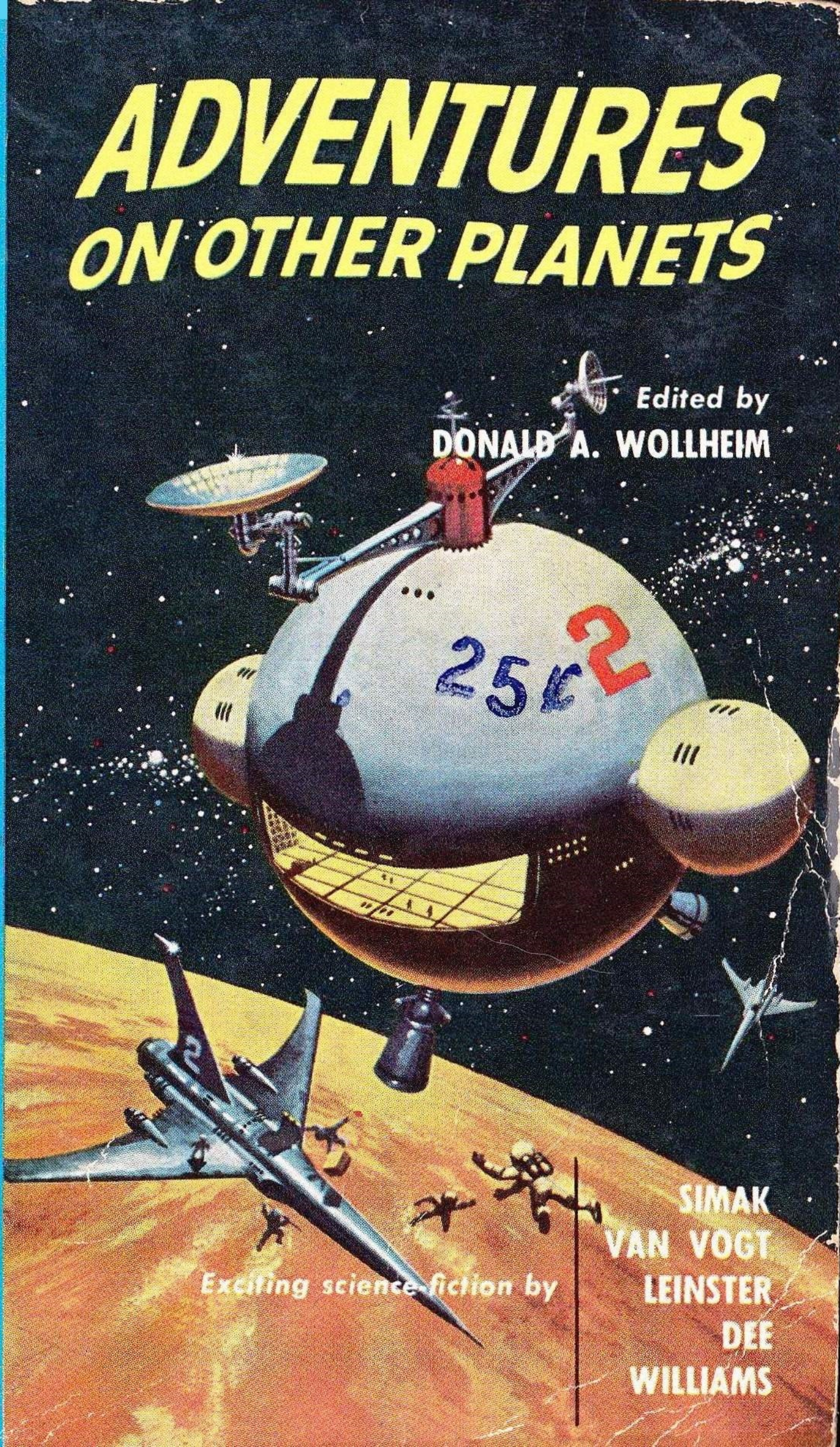

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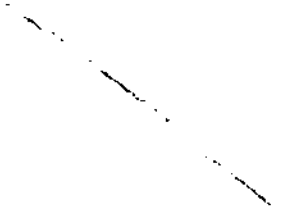

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ADVENTURES ON OTHER PLANETS

Edited by

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

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ADVENTURES
ON OTHER PLANETS

THE OBLIGATION

by
ROGER DEE

THE KORNEPHORIAN ROBOT-SHIP came in low over the raging sea. Arrowing down against the full sweep of Venusian hurricane, it dropped toward the supply dome in obedience to the Surveyor's will. It settled gently to the bare rocky escarpment, and its long bulk blocked from its waiting master's sight the rain-lashed dome and the man shouting incoherencies from the dome's open lower port.

The ship's airlock opened. The Surveyor flowed inside with a multi-legged rush, discarded its limp human burden and set automatic controls that would send the ship arrowing back to Kornephoros. Its thought touched delicate receptor mechanisms, filing the report it had compiled during the brief and catastrophic period of its survey.

Cseth Abrii of Pselpha, deferring Galactic Canvass 12953 to rectify injury resulting from intervention in native affairs under investigation. . . .

There was no lagging process of sequential transcription. The report in its entirety was filed instantaneously beginning with the moment when the Surveyor, chart-ship safely hidden in sea-bottom ooze, first swam up to investigate this latest unexplored world . . .

For minutes after surfacing, the Surveyor had maintained a wary shapelessness, adopting the soft gray hue of the water while it probed with senses keener than sight for possible danger. The sea swarmed with a myriad of improbable life forms whose rudimentary mentalities radiated nothing but terror against an imminent climatic disturbance; the Surveyor ignored them, searching for conscious intelligence and finding none.

The water was warm and pleasantly saline, vibrant with a faint premonitory quivering that traveled ahead of the approaching storm. The Surveyor extended its perception toward the sunspot hurricane raging in the east and dis-

missed the threat to itself as negligible, an insignificant squall to one born on a planet whose fantastic extremes of climate made perfect adaptability the first necessity of existence. The howling tempests of Pselpha, when the double suns Kornephoros stood so, were something else again.

Satisfied, the Surveyor flowed sinuously and fashioned itself to a squid-like shape that drove it swiftly toward shore.

Probing ahead, it discovered a fog-hung coastal marshland that sloped gently up to bleak mountains whose peaks were invisible in mist. On a dark promontory that jutted far into the surf was a building, a hemispherical shelter joined to the sea by a long, smooth incline clearly intended to bear a vehicle of some sort.

A flat-bottomed craft emerged from the dome while the Kornephorian watched and shot down the incline, driven by crude reaction engines. The alien waited, understanding that the creature controlling the machine was intelligent and that it was coming out to investigate the survey ship's plunge into the sea. The Surveyor reached out across the intervening distance and touched the pilot's mind, cautiously at first and then with assurance when it found that the creature had neither ability to sense the probing nor power to resist it.

The pilot was a mammal, bipedal and moderately intelligent. It thought of itself as a man, and it was the dominant species not only of this colonial world but of another. The discovery interested the Kornephorian; this creature's kind, patently a young and clumsy race, still had achieved the beginning of interplanetary flight.

The man's mind housed a surprising welter of conflicting emotions: fear of the approaching sunspot storm, hope that he might rescue some survivor of the ship he had seen fall, and a desperate anxiety for another of his kind remaining in the dome ashore. Sexless itself, the Surveyor had some difficulty in grasping the relationship between the two—this other was subtly different and idealized, a female and mate to the one approaching.

The boat made a wide sweep and returned; its pilot,

sighting the floating alien, registered consternation. At that instant the storm struck, and with its impact the Kornephornian understood for the first time that the man had gambled his life and that he had failed.

The roaring water-wall capsized the boat instantly, plunging its pilot helpless into the sea.

The Surveyor's first intent was to let him drown. To tamper even fractionally with the course of native life under observation was contrary to Galactic policy; moreover, the man's death presented an excellent opportunity to enter the dome and study his fellows at first hand. (The duplication of simple life forms, complete with memory and personality, was standard procedure in survey work—to mingle with them in masquerade followed logically and usually without difficulty.)

The drowning man's final thought before unconsciousness came deterred the alien, however; it was charged with an altruism so powerful that it awoke in the Surveyor a seldom-felt sense of kinship and shamed it from its inaction.

Dying, the man was torn by an agony of regret, not for himself but for the woman he had failed.

Above its professional interest the Kornephorian felt a strong compassion, a sympathy compounded equally of respect and understanding. It intervened on the instant, in direct disregard of Galactic policy.

Extruding a tentacle ending in a powerful seven-fingered hand, the alien caught the drowning man by the shoulder and hauled him clear of the bellowing water. With the touch it completed a total mental linkage that permitted it to exist for the time as a dual entity—as Cseth Abrii of Pselpha from the binary suns Kornephoros, and as Bruce Lowry, dome-keeper of a Venusian Fisheries supply station.

Lowry had been standing in the front entrance of the supply dome when the ship came down. He had been watching the bobbing lights of the Pascals' eight-wheeled crawler hurrying up from the coastal flatland toward the safety of the dome, and the meteoric arc of the falling ship's exhaust jarred him badly by its unexpectedness.

There was nothing in its brief actinic glare to tell him whether it was a government freighter from Earth or a Venusian Fisheries cargo collector in trouble. Certainly there was nothing about its steaming plunge into the plankton beds offshore to tell him that it was neither of these but an alien.

"Gail!" Lowry called. The static-blurred squawking of the station's radio drowned his voice, and he stepped inside to call again.

His wife came at once, her dark hair touseled above its confining ribbon, her gray eyes anxious. She had been winching down the retractable communications antenna at the dome's top against the coming sunspot storm, and her simple one-piece garment was smudged with oil and rust. A faint shine of perspiration glistened on her forehead.

"That will be Marvin and Nadine," she said, catching sight of the machine climbing the rocky slope toward them. "They got the storm warning in time, then . . . Bruce, they'll be here ahead of the howler, won't they?"

"They'll make it," Lowry said. He liked and respected Nadine Pascal, but the prospect of being cooped up with her surly, unsocial husband for a week of fifty-hour Venusian days brought a frown to his face.

"There's another crawler!" Gail said, her voice rising in surprise. She had turned away from the Pascals' crawler and was looking upcoast; a crawler, tiny in the distance, was moving along the marshy beach. As they watched, it turned up the slope. "Who—Bruce, do you suppose Walt Griswold has changed his mind about leaving Venus?"

"I wish he had," Lowry said. "But he left his dome for Sea City a week ago, if you remember. He's taking the next ship to Earth."

Gail gave him a troubled look. "He went because of Nadine, didn't he?"

Lowry shook himself, forcing personal concerns aside.

"A ship just crashed out there in the plankton beds," he said. "And it didn't come up. I'll have to take the skimmer out and see if there are any survivors."

She cried out sharply and caught his arm. "Bruce, you

can't! There isn't time—the howler is due any minute!"

He disengaged himself gently.

"I'm not trying to play the grim-jawed hero," he said. "But someone may have bailed out at the last minute. I'll have to give them a hand, Gail."

She stood biting her lip helplessly while Lowry went down the outside personnel ladder and let the big flat-bottomed craft slide out of its port at the dome's base. From their elevation the skimmer chute dropped steeply to the dark water of the bay, as still and glassy at the moment as a pool of molten lead.

"Don't worry," Lowry said. "I'll be back."

I hope, he added silently, and released the brake.

He went down the incline in a mounting rush of speed, not glancing back because he knew exactly how Gail would look. Gail was thirty-one, four years younger than himself, not particularly pretty but infinitely comfortable and satisfying. They had been married for eight years, the last three spent with Venusian Fisheries, and the intimacy between them had long ago grown past any consideration of convention or reticence. It was characteristic of their relations that Gail had not argued against his present decision, because she had known that nothing she could say would stop him. And he had gone without displaying sentiment, because the closeness between them made demonstration unnecessary.

Lowry looked back once, just before the skimmer left the chute and shot across the bay. Gale was looking after him, one hand shading her eyes against the dome lights, her slender figure outlined against the open port.

"Good girl," he said aloud, and waved.

The bobbing lights of the first crawler rounded the dome while he watched. The second was only minutes behind it, beating its way upward more rapidly now that it had left the boglands. Sight of them brought a measure of relief to Lowry; at least Gail would not wait for him alone.

The skimmer picked up speed, orange fingers of jet exhaust churning the water. Lowry looked toward the eastern

horizon where the storm gathered blackly and felt the skin tighten between his shoulders.

An ominous glow of sunspot radiation stained the darkness there, driving sullen red streamers of light flickering downward. There was a feel of strain in the air, an electric uneasiness that breathed along the water ahead of the approaching howler.

Ten minutes, Lowry thought. *Maybe a little less. I'll have to hurry. . . .*

Half a mile out he slowed the skimmer, searching for traces of the sunken ship and finding none. There were no dying ripples, no prismatic shine of oil slick. No sea-beast disturbed the still surface.

The first booming drone of the storm sounded then, a deep bass howling that gave the sunspot hurricane its name. The horizon vanished, folded over upon itself in a titanic wall of rushing gray water. Spume flew before it in driving white clouds, ripped and torn by the wind. The water about Lowry trembled, stippled and laced by a million fantastic vibration patterns.

He swept the skimmer about, knowing already that he was too late, and heeled the power lever all the way down. The boat leaped forward, half out of the water under its boiling jet thrust.

The water wall was looming over him when he saw the thing keeping pace beside the skimmer.

He had a fleeting impression of red eyes watching him contemplatively from a blank, tendriled face, a suggestion of tentacles spread web-fashion upon the water and a squid-shaped body beneath dwindling into the gray depths. Then the howler struck with a cataclysmic confusion of screaming wind and chill water. The skimmer heaved skyward, swept up on the water wall and whirled end over end.

Lowry was flung overside. He went down like a stone, salt water burning his throat and choking back the breath in his lungs. His last thought was a curious mingling of deep regret for Gail and an irrelevant conviction that the thing in the water beside him was neither unintelligent nor unfriendly.

Consciousness came back to Lowry slowly, between alternate sieges of pain and numbness. His right shoulder ached dully, as if it had been struck a heavy blow. His lungs were on fire. He coughed violently, drawing each breath with an effort.

He should be dead, and he knew it. From the moment the vast bass drone of the howler sounded he had known that he would never reach shore. He had not really tried.

For a time he lay with the wind and rain tearing at him and nursed an improbable conviction that he had not come ashore by his own efforts; but the howl of the storm banished the thought. Nothing could have helped him through that.

He struggled to hands and knees, trying to orient himself, and found that he had somehow reached the fused-rock ramp leading to the vehicle entrance at the rear of the dome. The double metal doors of the port curved vaguely up before him, not six feet away.

Their presence stunned him with the utter impossibility of his being where he was.

He had not only escaped the sea. Miraculously, he had worked his way through the full force of the hurricane to collapse in the comparative calm of the dome's leeward side.

Light glowed from the personnel port at the second level above him, outlining dimly the steel ladder that dropped away from the curved glass panel of the lock. He turned from it, knowing that he could never fight his way up the rungs against the wind, and set himself instead to crawl to the wider haven of the vehicle port.

Beyond it lay a service garage for crawlers, and past that the storage level, a circular hundred-foot vault tiered with plankton freezing tanks and rows of barrels and boxes and bales of supplies for the dome and for outlying stations.

If he could pull himself erect against the storm long enough to open the doors, the rest was assured. In the second-level living quarters the alarm bell over his communications desk would clang out, and a warning light under it would call attention to the opening of the rear

port. Gail and the others would come down for him, and he would be safe.

He dragged himself upright against the wind and found the lever that controlled the port doors. Water poured down from the rounded slope of the dome above and drenched him icily. The wind all but tore him away before he could tug the lever down.

Machinery took over inside, powerful gears inching the doors open against the storm. He clung to the lever for support, and released it only when the opening loomed large enough to admit him.

He released his hold then and let the wind fling him headlong inside.

For a time he lay quietly, weak and panting with reaction. The gears that drove the doors reversed themselves and closed the port, and their reversal told him that those upstairs had understood and had taken over. They would be down soon.

With the closing of the port the insulated quiet of the storage level settled upon him, a tangible weight of silence that made his ears ring. Sensation came back slowly to his chilled body; with the last of wind and water gone, the place seemed suddenly hot and close.

For what seemed an eternity he lay waiting and listening to the storm building up outside, the violence of it beating up through the cold stone floor and vibrating inward from the wall beside his head. He knew that it might go on for as long as ten days—dragging, endless fifty hour Venusian days—before it reached its peak and subsided.

He heard them coming, a quick rush of feet and Gail's sudden incredulous cry rising above a babble of lesser voices. He tried to sit up, and exhaustion turned his bones to wax.

It did not matter. Gail clung to him with warm arms, laughing and crying together.

He blacked out for the second time with the feel of her hair brushing against his face. . . .

And woke to find himself stretched out on a pneumatic lounge in the dome's common room, a 30-foot chamber

fitted out with an approximation of Earthside comfort designed to make its off-duty occupants forget the smell of fuel oil and fish.

Without opening his eyes he could picture the setting perfectly, every item of its furnishings made familiar by the three years of his and Gail's possession. There would be another couch under the wide-curving front port where Gail spent a large part of her time with binoculars, watching him while he worked the skimmer back and forth across the bay and dragged with spiral metal nets for plankton. A tiny bar stood along one wall beside a glass-fronted case that held a worn miscellany of books; a miniature piano filled a corner, and a phonovision console with one door standing open to show its racks of wire spools.

One door led to the kitchen, a neat cubbyhole shining with shelves of unbreakable chinaware. Another led to his and Gail's bedroom. Others, sealed until needed, waited for visitors forced periodically here for shelter against the inevitable howlers.

There was no wasted space. Access to the transmitter and beacon room on the cramped third level was gained by a staircase spiraling upward about the main supporting column at the center of the room. Another stairwell, dropping steeply from the rear of the common quarters, led to the storage level and garage space below.

There was a warm haze of light and security about him when he opened his eyes. Gail was kneeling beside him anxiously, waiting for him to show signs of consciousness. He drew her down beside him, laughing, and for the moment they were alone, the two of them apart from the rest of the world.

"Somehow I knew you'd come back," Gail said. "I don't know how—maybe because I couldn't give you up even to a howler."

"I was a fool to take a risk like that," Lowry said. He released her, sighing. "I'm glad that's over with!"

Someone put a drink into Lowry's hand. It was whisky and hot water, a fiery combination that burned his throat and sent a glow of strength through him. He sat up and

swore softly when he saw that it was not one of the Pascals but Walt Griswold who had brought the drink.

"I thought you were leaving us," Lowry said. "What happened? Lose your taste for the Earthside fleshpots?"

Walt laughed and took back the glass. He was a lean, pleasant man in his late twenties, slighter of build than Lowry and as blond as the other was dark. Lowry had known him for three years as a competent fisher and an unfailing friend.

"I never got farther than Sea City," Walt said. "I lost my nerve, Bruce—when the time came, Earth didn't seem like home any more. Everything there is already cut and dried and laid away in mothballs. It's too damned *quiet* there."

"I know," Lowry said.

He did know. Venus was treacherous and unpredictable with her steaming marshland bogs and torrential floods and sudden howling sunspot hurricanes, but she offered a commodity obtainable nowhere on Earth—isolation.

"You and Walt are kindred souls," Gail said. "In the old days you'd have been frontiersmen, beating your way about with a flintlock rifle and a bag of salt. Bruce, I think you *like* the kind of risk you just ran!"

She lit a cigarette for him and the three of them sat in comfortable silence. Neither questioned Walt's explanation, though neither was deceived by it; their ready acceptance of the situation as it existed was characteristic of the understanding between them.

Marvin Pascal came in from the kitchen with a bottle of Lowry's slender whisky stock in one hand and a half-filled glass in the other, and his entrance shattered the easy feel of companionship in the room. Pascal was a big sandy man, taller and heavier than Lowry, a restless egotist ridden by a perpetual discontent that kept his heavy shoulders stirring under his open-collared shirt. He met Lowry's look and chuckled without humor, his light blue eyes curiously bright and aggressive.

"You're a fool for luck," he said. "You should have known

better than to buck a howler, Lowry. I wouldn't have tried it myself, even."

And if you couldn't do it, Lowry thought, nettled, *then no one can. Braggart!*

Aloud he said, "I wasn't too lucky. Venusian Fisheries will have some pretty pointed things to say about the skimmer I lost."

Pascal stared. "Don't try to tell me you *swam* back—no one could make headway against a sea like that! How the hell—"

Walt Griswold said wearily, "Take it easy, Pascal. Bruce has had a rough time. He'll tell us about it when he's ready."

Lowry stubbed out his cigarette, his taste for tobacco gone. He had never liked Pascal. The big man's pointless arrogance had made him universally despised among the fishers; it had alienated him long ago even from the regard of his wife, whom he treated in a cat-and-mouse fashion that had driven her to look elsewhere for understanding.

Lowry was considering how he should tell his improbable tale when Nadine Pascal came in from the kitchen and brought him coffee. He watched her speculatively, feeling a touch of pity when her eyes went first to Walt Griswold, shyly, and then to her husband to gauge his present temper. It must go hard with her, he thought, to be cooped up for weeks on end with that sullen devil.

He took the coffee and relaxed, putting away all outside concerns.

"A ship went down out there," he said. "Gail will have told you about that. I took the skimmer out to pick up any survivors who might have bailed out, and found none. The howler struck before I could turn back, and the skimmer went down."

He put down his coffee cup, frowning faintly when they waited without comment. He was on the point of saying, "And that's all," when it came to him belatedly that it was not all. There was still the near-miracle of his escape.

It was not until then that he remembered the sea-beast

he had seen in the water, and recalled his odd conviction that it was not hostile.

"There was a creature of some sort floating in the water just before the skimmer went under," he said slowly. "It ignored the howler completely, something I've never known a Venusian sea-beast to do. I never saw anything like it before, for that matter—it was something pretty outlandish."

He broke off, understanding at last what quality it was about the thing that had caught his attention at so tense a moment.

"It was intelligent, too," he said. "I couldn't mistake that. It had the look."

Gail put a light hand on his shoulder, her face suddenly concerned. Walt Griswold said uncertainly, "What happened to it, Bruce? Did you see it after the howler struck?"

"I didn't see anything after that," Lowry said, "But I know what you're thinking. Whatever the thing was, it could take care of itself even in a howler, believe me. And I think it brought me ashore—God knows I'd never have made it alone!"

Pascal laughed scornfully. "Why make a mystery of it? Why not admit that you passed out from fright and were washed up by accident? Don't take us for fools, Lowry—"

In spite of himself Lowry lost his temper. He stood up—and fell back heavily when Gail's hand pulled at his shoulder, detaining him. The trifling pressure against his bruised flesh brought a disproportionate agony that made the room spin dizzily.

Gail knelt beside him, her eyes enormous with strain. "Bruce, what is it? Are you hurt?"

"My shoulder," he said numbly. "I must have struck something in the water. Will you take a look at it?"

She stripped off his shirt and cried out sharply at the circle of purple bruises that marked the point of his shoulder. Walt Griswold bent to look and cursed softly.

"They look like finger marks," he said. "But whoever made them would have had to squeeze hard enough to

crush the bones—and he'd have needed seven fingers, besides!"

They looked at each other blankly. Pascal laughed, and the sound fell harsh and jarring on their silence.

"The mystery deepens," he gibed. "The two of you sound like Chapter Nine of a juvenile phonovision thriller: *What alien form lurks in these dark waters? What sinister being. . . .*"

Walt turned on him angrily. "Do you have to play the bumptious ass always, Pascal? Why don't you sober up?"

Pascal's smile was an empty grimace stretching his face to no purpose. He glanced sidewise at his wife and laughed grittily at the entreaty in her eyes.

"Perhaps I'm not the ass you think," he said. He dropped his attempt at derision and began to tremble violently. His voice shook. "We'll go into that later, Griswold, when the time is right. When I'm sure enough about you and Na—"

Lowry stood up, brushing Gail aside when she tried to hold him back again.

"This has gone far enough," he said. "Shut up, Pascal. I won't have you making trouble here."

Nadine had not been watching them; her eyes, embarrassed and unhappy, had wandered to the dome's forward port. Suddenly she started back and cried out shrilly. Lowry whirled, wondering vaguely if a long-delayed hysterical reaction to her husband's boorishness had at last struck her. Walt Griswold moved toward her.

"The port," she whispered. "Outside. . . ."

They recoiled in unison from the thing that clung to the outer surface of the port, spread-eagled against the smooth glass by the hurricane's force. Water sluiced over it, distorting its grotesque outlines but doing nothing to soften the enormity of its alienness.

Walt found his tongue first. "Good God," he breathed. "Bruce, *what is it?*"

"It's my sea-beast," Lowry said.

Through the port it looked exactly as it had in the water of the bay, red eyes glowing contemplatively against

its blank, tendriled face. Its multiple flippers clung to the wet glass, holding the pinkish body snail-fashion to the smooth curving surface. Its single boneless hand made a curious insistent motion, a repeated gesture of grasping and twisting.

Gail held Lowry's good arm, pressing so tightly against him that the trembling of her body was transmitted to his. "Bruce, what does it want?"

"It wants to come inside," Lowry said. He shook himself, throwing off the first shock of its appearance. "It pulled me out of the howler. Now it wants inside, out of the storm—a favor for a favor—and I think it's earned the right to ask."

They turned on him incredulously.

"You can't be serious," Walt protested. "Bruce, you don't know what the thing is—you can't know what it might do! You don't even know that it helped you."

Lowry pulled back his shirt to show the bruises on his shoulder.

"A seven-fingered hand made those marks. The creature out there has a hand with seven fingers, and it was on the spot when I went down. What if it isn't human? I've got to give it shelter."

Gail shivered. "But it's a sea-creature, Bruce! Why should it want inside the dome?"

"It's no sea-beast," Lowry said patiently. "It's something from Outside, Gail. Maybe the pilot of the ship that crashed in the plankton beds. It's tougher than we are or it couldn't have lasted this long out there in the howler, but nothing can take that sort of punishment forever. It wants shelter."

Marvin Pascal said forcibly, "I won't allow that brute in the dome, Lowry. If you won't consider your own wife's safety—"

"It wouldn't have helped me if it had been hostile," Lowry cut him off. "I'm going to let it in. If you don't feel safe you can lock yourself in your bedroom."

Pascal moved back, his face working with temper. "I warn you, Lowry. I won't permit it!"

Lowry ignored him and went to the port. He had to

raise his head a little to look up into the alien face outside.

"I can't open the port," he said. "The wind would turn the dome inside out. You'll have to come around to the rear entrance, where you left me."

It slid aside and was gone from the glass. Gail's stifled cry reinforced the chill that prickled Lowry's scalp: "Bruce, it *understood* you!"

Walt Griswold let out his breath shakily. "She's right, Bruce. You know what that means?"

"I know," Lowry said, and wondered if he did. "It means that the thing is intelligent. Probably a hell of a lot more intelligent than we are."

He saw then that Pascal had left the common room, but he had no time to wonder where the big man had gone.

The port alarm over his communications desk rang stridently. Lowry turned on it in frozen disbelief, and found the bulb under the clamorous bell glowing redly. A rush of damp air whispered up from the storage level, bringing with it the powerful bass howl of the storm.

"It's keener than we thought," Lowry said. "It didn't wait for us—it's let itself in."

He ran for the lower level stairwell, throwing an order back to Walt Griswold: "Close the port and stay with Gail and Nadine. I'll go down and check."

He had reached the foot of the stairway when Pascal came out of the crawler garage. The big man had taken a hand gun from his machine, a heavy lead-pellet belt pistol of a type used against smaller Venusian land animals.

"I warned you," Pascal said. "When it comes inside under the lights I'm going to kill it."

He worked the slide that threw the weapon into firing order. His eyes watched the dark garage doorway warily, their stare curiously bright and fixed.

"Put the gun away," Lowry ordered. "The thing is inside already—you fool, do you want to get us all killed?"

The alien came out of the darkness of the crawler ga-

rage and stood in the full glare of overhead light, its single seven-fingered hand raised toward them.

It had changed shape greatly during the short time elapsed. Lowry had a disturbed impression of a squat bipedal body without tendrils or flippers, its dripping skin glistening with the raw, wet pinkness of a freshly skinned carcass. Its round red eyes stared without blinking, mirroring the play of thought as alien as its outlandish form.

Pascal opened fire wthout warning.

The storeroom racketed to the sound, explosions reverberating deafening from metal walls. Lowry cried out in horror and ran at Pascal, knocking up his arm.

He was too late—three of Pascal's bullets had caught the alien squarely in the middle. It went down slowly while Lowry closed in and wrestled with Pascal for the gun.

There was no reason left in the man. He fought first to break free and finish the writhing thing on the floor; failing that, he turned on Lowry, screaming incoherencies, and struck at him viciously with the pistol.

Lowry did not hesitate. He drove a knee with all his strength into Pascal's groin and let him fall, retching, at the foot of the stairwell. Lowry stepped over his twitching body to the alien on the floor.

It was motionless when Lowry knelt beside it. The feel of it under his hands was like tough gelatin, a fibreless and utterly plastic stuff held in shape by a thin transparent membrane. From the holes in its middle oozed a thick pinkish liquid, a viscous flow that dwindled and ceased while Lowry watched.

The wounds closed. The thing did not breathe— Lowry had a disconcerning conviction that it never had—but there was inside it a powerful beat of life, a pulse unaffected by the tearing shock of Pascal's bullets.

Walt Griswold came from somewhere to kneel beside Lowry and stare palely at the thing on the floor.

"It didn't die," Lowry said. "Maybe it won't. We'll have to get it upstairs and see what can be done."

At the stairwell Pascal groaned and sat up unsteadily.

He had lost his gun in the fight; he made no move to find it now. but sat and watched Lowry with sick, too-bright eyes, hating him.

"We can't take this thing up to Gail and Nadine," Walt said protestingly. "Bruce, if bullets won't kill it. . . . "

"It meant no harm," Lowry said. "If it lives, maybe it will understand that we mean none. Walt, don't you see what this may mean? This is no sea-beast—it's the first intelligent alien ever to show itself to men, and we can't afford to let it die! We've got to find out where it came from, what its culture is like, a thousand things . . . This could be the beginning of something bigger than we ever dreamed of—*interstellar* flight."

Walt moved uneasily. "I don't know . . . Bruce, I've great confidence in your judgment, but this—I say it's too damned weird! How can we trust a thing that looks like that?"

"How would you expect an alien to look?" Lowry countered. "You can't apply ordinary human prejudice in a case like this! Will you help me get it upstairs now, or must I call the women?"

Walt flushed and stiffened. "I'll help."

Together they lifted the limp body, shrinking a little in spite of themselves at the cold gelatinous feel of it, and carried it up the stairway past the silently glaring Pascal.

In the common room they found the two women waiting, standing close together as if drawing reassurance each from the other's uneasiness.

"We heard the shots," Nadine said hesitantly. "Bruce, did Marvin—is he all right?"

Lowry caught the tightening of Walt's face as they stretched the limp alien on the couch, and it occurred to him that Walt, perhaps without formulating the idea wholly, had half hoped that Pascal would be killed. The understanding left Lowry with a firmer sympathy for his friend and fired his impatience against Pascal.

"I had to rough your husband up a little," Lowry said. "But he's not hurt. He'll be around soon, in our hair again."

He turned back to the pinkish, pulsating body on the

couch, but could not recall the thousand speculations the thing had aroused in him before the shooting. Thoughts of Pascal's unaccountable violence kept recurring; remembering the fixed glitter of his eyes, Lowry wondered if he might have committed a dangerous blunder in leaving the big man alone on the lower level.

The dome's slender arsenal was there, occupying its own small niche among the rows of freezing tanks and supply crates: explosive grenades for discouraging the titanic seabeasts that harassed fishers at their nets, gas-powered harpoon launchers for coastline hunting, and the blunt two-handed electrobolt guns that fired high-voltage charges at fantastic amperages.

Pascal's sidearm had proved ineffective against the alien. If the fool should break out one of the electrobolt guns and come back—

As if on cue to the thought Pascal came up out of the stairwell, an electrobolt gun in his hands. His eyes had a savage glassy shine, and his face was strained tight with purpose.

"I warned you," Pascal said thickly. "Stand away from that monster, Lowry—I'm going to burn it."

Lowry moved back, cursing himself for his stupidity. The others stood frozen behind him, sensing that Pascal's obsession had run past the point of sanity. Only Nadine tried to reason with him.

"Please, Marvin," she begged. "It isn't dangerous! Bruce says—"

"Bruce says too damned much," Pascal cut her short. "Stand back, all of you, unless you want—"

The alien came off the couch too fast for the eye to follow, struck the floor without straightening and darted in a blurred pinkish streak behind the communications desk. Lowry, stunned, was left with a vague impression that it had moved on a double row of short, scuttling legs that could have sprouted only at the instant of its spring.

Pascal fired involuntarily, unable to halt the constriction of his finger on the firing stud. The blue-white electrobolt discharge crashed across the room, thunderously; the air

reeked of ozone, blinding the eyes, searing the nostrils.

The couch burst apart in a shower of charred fragments. The alien, as if understanding that Pascal's gun was single-fire and must be recharged, broke from behind the communications desk and rushed past him down the stairwell.

Caught in a confusion of relief and dismay, Lowry found himself thinking: *It wasn't really hurt from the first. It lay there and studied us, maybe reading our minds. . . .*

Pascal jammed a fresh charge-hull into his gun and went after the alien down the stairwell. Lowry followed them both.

Pascal had found the master switch for the storage room lights before Lowry reached the bottom of the stairway. The harsh white glare made the place brighter than any Venusian day, throwing surrealistic patterns of black angular shadows between ordered rows of plankton tanks and supply crates.

Lowry spotted Pascal at once, prowling down an alleyway with his electrobolt gun held at ready. The big man was bent far over in a crouch, searching the shadows with a feral side-to-side swinging of his head. Lowry caught a glimpse of his eyes, pale and unnaturally intent, and shivered in spite of himself.

There was no trace of the alien.

Pascal moved on, alternately vanishing and reappearing through random patterns of light and shadow. The storage room lay silent as a vault, the only sounds a faint hissing from the refrigeration units and the soft scrape of Pascal's shoes on the stony floor.

Pascal disappeared into shadow and did not emerge again. Lowry followed cautiously. If he could get close enough to take him from the rear—

He became aware that the scraping of Pascal's feet had ceased. He halted, straining his ears, and heard nothing but the hiss of pumps, the fainter bass drone of the storm vibrating up through the solid rock. Lowry began to sweat, wondering whether Pascal had only stopped to listen or maniac caution had prompted him to take off his shoes.

Pascal came upon him without warning from a side

alleyway, creeping soundlessly on bare feet. The weapon in his hands bore straight at Lowry's head.

"It grows legs and fins and changes its shape," Pascal said. His voice was slurred and indistinct, barely intelligible. "Why shouldn't it look like a man—"

Lowry stepped back involuntarily, and at the same instant Pascal fired.

Accident saved Lowry, the split-second chance of treading upon the particular shadow in which the alien had chosen to hide. It had spread itself inches thick on the floor, assuming the shape and shade of the shadow that contained it—under Lowry's weight it convulsed and shot away with galvanic suddenness, throwing him heavily.

The blue-white lance of the electrobolt raved over his head, crisping his hair by its nearness.

He had a dizzy glimpse of the alien scuttling away into the maze of alleys, its body flowing and changing shape as it fled. Pascal's obsession took on a certain fearful logic that left Lowry amazed and uneasy—the perfect mimic, it could take any shape it chose. Perhaps even his own?

The clatter of Pascal's empty charge-hull on the floor roused him. He got to his feet and ran at top speed into the canyoned shadows of the storeroom, knowing that Pascal followed with the electrobolt gun freshly charged.

He might have known that Gail and the others would not wait indefinitely on the upper level. Lowry saw them before he was halfway to the stairwell, the three of them sharply outlined against the stairway lights while they peered about for him.

"Get back upstairs!" Lowry shouted. He halted and hugged the shadow of a frost-rimed plankton tank, searching the maze for a sight of Pascal. "Pascal's gone mad—he's shooting at anything that moves!"

He was too late. Walt Griswold had already started for the sound of his voice, Gail and Nadine at his heels.

"Marvin!" Nadine called. Her voice echoed through the big room, ringing back in hollow volleys from the metal walls. "Marvin, it's Nadine! Please—"

Pascal appeared from the last direction Lowry had anticipated, creeping between a peripheral row of plankton tanks and the stairwell. The weapon in his hands moved jerkily, following the shift of his eyes from one to the other while he chose his target. There was not the slightest spark of reason behind the wild shine of his eyes.

Without hesitation Lowry sprang out of his concealment into the full glare of light, shouting to attract Pascal's attention.

Pascal turned on him, and Lowry threw himself flat. The blue lightning of the electrobolt shattered a crate over his head, spilling an unrecognizable jumble of debris. Lowry lay half stunned by the dispersion shock, a pungent stink of charred leather burning his throat. *Swamp boots,* he thought with a sort of detached irritation. *A whole year's stock, shot to hell. . . .*

He shook off the giddiness of near electrocution and shouted at the three frozen by the stairwell: "Upstairs—run, for God's sake, before he reloads!"

They ran, the storeroom echoing to the rush of their feet. Walt reached the stairwell first, half dragging Nadine Pascal with him, and vanished upward. At the bottom tread Gail turned to look for Lowry in the darkness, stumbled and fell headlong.

Lowry burst out of his shelter and caught her up.

The click of Pascal's reloading cut him off from the stair as effectively as a barbed wall. He could not go up; the seconds needed to climb to the upper level would give Pascal time to fire and to spare.

The inner doorway to the vehicle garage yawned invitingly. Lowry turned without pausing and lunged through it into a darkness dominated by the shadowy hulks of the three crawlers. If he could shut the doors in time behind him—

When he turned he found Pascal bulking huge in the opening, silhouetted blackly against the glare of storage room lights.

The one chance that had been open to him came to him

then, and he cursed himself bitterly because it was too late to use it.

But not too late, perhaps, for Gail.

He faded back into the darkness and lifted her high over the metal rim of the nearest crawler's bucket seat. "Keep down," he whispered urgently. "I'll try to open the outside port and let in the howler. It's the only way to stop him."

He threw a glance toward the doorway and saw Pascal move warily in a few inches and stop, the electrobolt gun raised. "Don't worry about me," he begged. His lips brushed Gail's ear; she was crying softly with terror, and he could feel her trembling in the darkness. "I'll be all right. . . ."

The outer port creaked sharply behind him. A sudden humming of gears sounded, laboring to force the heavy curved plates of the vehicle lock open against the outside wind. The port cracked, widened, let in the hurricane's spume-wet breath. The high scream of wind through the narrow opening drowned all other sound.

The alien hovered amorphously in deeper shadow by the port, crouching ready while the opening grew.

In the confusion Lowry had forgotten the creature completely; his first reaction at seeing it now was a quick rush of hope. If Pascal burned it down he would be left with an empty gun, and Lowry might have a chance of beating him down before he could reload.

Then Lowry placed himself with characteristic empathy in the alien's place and felt a sick heat of shame in his face. The thing hadn't asked for this. It had pulled him out of the howler and had done its best to meet them in friendly fashion. It had not once turned on Pascal, even in the darkness of the storage room when it must have had every opportunity; and it made no move now, but waited quietly for the port to open enough to let it through. Lowry saw at once that it would be too late; the port mechanism worked with agonizing slowness against the pressure of the howler outside.

Pascal found the switch by the garage doors then, and the lights blazed on.

Pascal came inside, skirting the front shock-rail of the crawler where Gail hid. His pale eyes blinked against the glare of light, almost immediately found the alien by the port and went intent. Even above the rising howl of the storm Lowry heard the big man's indrawn *ahhh* of satisfaction.

Pascal sidled between crawler and wall, moving toward the alien.

Lowry stepped between them.

"Wait, Pascal," he said.

He had to shout to make himself heard above the wind. He kept his hands down, forcing himself to stand quietly before the wild erratic current of intention that twitched at Pascal's face. "Think a minute, man! You can't know—"

Pascal took another step forward. The electrobolt gun in his hand bore equally on Lowry and on the alien behind him.

Gail's crawler lurched into sudden motion, turbines howling. Lowry had a stunned glimpse of his wife standing up recklessly, wheeling the heavy machine straight at Pascal.

It was over so quickly that Lowry was never certain later just what really happened. Pascal whirled, his elecbolt gun flicking from Lowry to Gail. The blue lightning of its discharge deafened Lowry and blinded him briefly.

He took with him into his momentary blindness a dull nightmarish memory of Gail tumbling headlong from the crawler's seat, her slender body twisting grotesquely before it struck the floor.

Out of the darkness he heard the crawler's grinding crash of collision, a grating of metal on metal hardly muffled by the obstruction of Pascal's body between shockrail and wall. Pascal managed only the beginning of a scream; then the air from his collapsing lungs surged up through throat and mouth with a wet, explosive sound. The turbines roared and stalled. The breath of the hurricane screamed in through the wide-open port like a vast echo of Pascal's dy-

ing; it plastered Lowry's shirt against his back and dissipated the stench of ozone and exhaust fumes.

When his sight returned, Pascal's body hung over the shock-rail of the crawler, cut almost in two. There was no sign of Gail nor of the alien.

Somehow he forced himself through the rush of wind to brace himself against the rim of the port. He looked outside. Light from the garage illuminated the storm-washed ramp with stark, merciless clarity.

The alien was 30 yards away, loping swiftly against the full sweep of the hurricane. It was not alone. It had extruded a pinkish coil of tentacles to hold the burden it carried—Lowry made out a wild fluttering of Gail's white blouse, the familiar dark banner of her hair whipping in the wind. . . .

"Gail!" he screamed. *"Gail—"*

He fought the wind like a madman, but its bellowing weight overpowered him and drove him back. He clung finally in shivering impotence to the cold metal framing of the port and watched with the rain lashing his face and streaming over his numb body.

The ship came in low between alien and dome, settling so close that he could make out the stains of sea-bottom mud still clinging to its under side. Above the howl of wind he heard the faint metallic clang of an airlock opening and closing.

The ship blasted up with a white actinic glare that left him blinded again, his vision reduced to a darkness shot with whirling prismatic pinwheelings of light.

When he could see again Gail was stumbling through the port with the storm at her back, her bare white arms reaching out toward him for support. Stunned to dumb acceptance by repeated shock, he caught her and drew her inside.

". . . . not hurt," her voice sobbed incoherently in his ear. "Hostage . . . released me. . . . "

Someone on the second level closed the port behind them.

"It's all right now," Lowry said into the warm silence

that fell upon them. "The thing's gone. It's all over."

After that they held each other tightly without further need of speaking, the two of them apart from the rest of the world.

. . . . *period of reparation will be short,* the Surveyor ended its recording. *Return for me on call, when the brief life-span of the male shall have canceled my obligation.*

It turned away from the broken body on the floor and went outside into the storm, the plastic flow of its transformation already under way. Before the ship cleared the dome it was hurrying back to the man in the dome's open port, its new form complete to the minutest detail of dark flying hair and white blouse fluttering in the wind.

THE END

THE SOUND OF BUGLES

by
ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

THE SHIP FROM EARTH arrived in midafternoon. Kennedy, working himself and his two assistants into nervous exhaustion setting up recording instruments around the rectangle of white sand, saw the ship come in. At first he was afraid it was going to land in the rectangle where the Martians, at this moment, were forbidding even a fly to trespass, but the pilot changed course slightly and set it down, with much blowing of landing jets, less than a quarter of a mile away.

Kennedy was relieved. It had taken a lot of talking and, considering the language difficulties involved, a lot of arm waving and picture drawing, to get Tryor to give him permission to set up his recording instruments so near the rectangle.

The Martian had not fully liked the idea of the record-

ing instruments and Kennedy suspected that if Tryor had really understood their purpose, which was to trace the lines of force flowing from the machinery that *must* be hidden somewhere here in this city, and thus locate the machinery itself, he would have liked it even less. Kennedy wondered what the Martian would have said, and done, if some blundering human had landed a space ship in this restricted area.

For that matter, why had the ship landed here at all? Traxia was a small, unimportant city, well off the routes of even the tourists rich enough and hardy enough to make a trip to Mars.

Watching, he saw the port swing open. Three men emerged.

For a few minutes they stared around, looking at the city set like a small jewel in a cup in the desert, looking at the sand and the sun and at the range of low hills off to the south, accustoming themselves to the lesser gravity of the Red Planet, then they spotted Kennedy and his two assistants. One flung up an arm to point. Kennedy swore. Of course, newcomers would head straight toward the nearest humans in sight, in fact, the only humans in the city of Traxia.

"Probably to ask us for a road map!" he said. He had no time to answer questions. And no interest in answering them. But the three men were moving toward him with sure purposefulness.

They came up, three stalwart fellows in trim uniforms, straight to him. "Beg pardon," their leader said. "We're looking for Mr. John Kennedy. Could you tell us where to find him?"

Kennedy stared at them. He had never seen them before. But he had seen the likes of them brawling in the streets of the New York Space Port, drunk and raising Cain, and in Mars Port, and in Moon Port, where the glass of the enclosed city area looked up at the frozen sky. The breed was the same all over.

"I'm John Kennedy," he said. "What do you want?"

"Mr. Doak's compliments, sir. He will see you in his cabin, immediately," said the spokesman.

"Mr. Doak? And who is he? Your captain?"

Varying shades of surprise showed on the faces of the three men. "You don't know Mr. Doak? He—he's the owner." The speaker seemed astonished to learn that anybody lived in the system who didn't know Doak.

"I don't know him," Kennedy said. "I don't know that I want to know him—"

Behind him, he heard Blount stir protestingly. Blount and Anders were his two assistants.

"I've heard of him," Blount said. "He's a financier, or something like that. He put up the money to finance Threlkeld's investigation of the ultra-drive for UN."

"Come to think of it," Anders spoke for the first time. "I think he put up part of the money to finance *us.*"

"Uh," Kennedy said. He was a field man for the UN Council of Science and he was responsible to the Council and to nobody else. The Council paid him and furnished the money for his work. It was their job to find the money and his job to do the work, a division of labor which satisfied him. But if Doak had put up part of the money, he felt he had to be nice to the fellow, for the sake of the Council.

"I'm busy now," he said, his eyes straying to the rectangle of sand where the Martian guards stood elbow to elbow. "Tell Mr. Doak I'll see him tomorrow." He turned back to his instrument.

It was a magnetic detector and it was designed to detect and to trace lines of magnetic flux now present—or soon to be present—in this area. He was aware of the man speaking again.

"But Mr. Doak said *immediately.*"

"I'm busy now. He'll have to wait."

"Mr. Doak is not used to waiting."

"Then he'll have to get used to it."

"But this is important," the man from the ship insisted.

"I'll say it is!" Kennedy said, glancing up at the rectangle of white sand.

Blount cleared his throat. "I don't want to urge you, but Anders and I can take care of everything here."

"*Et tu, Brute,*" Kennedy said. He was perplexed and indignant. It was most important that he stay right where he was, but it was also important that he do nothing that might shut off part of the flow of funds to the Council. He glanced at his watch. Thirty-three minutes before the deadline Tryor had set.

"All right," he said, impatiently. "But I've got to be back here in 20 minutes."

Swearing under his breath, he stalked off across the sand toward the waiting ship. The three men followed him. The lines of Martians guarding the rectangle watched without obvious curiosity. What were the doings of this brawling race to them, who had inherited a thousand centuries of traditional wisdom? And something else, which they had never revealed to any man.

Doak was a big man with heavy shoulders and a thick neck on which his bullet-like head sat like an impatient gargoyle. His face was the face of a frog that had huffed and puffed and huffed and puffed and blown himself up until he was as big as a man. They shook hands. Doak seemed to think it was the thing to do.

The cabin was richly furnished, with a big desk with a row of push buttons on it, and a swivel chair, both bolted to the floor. There was a viewport with the sun screen open, so that the city of Traxia and the rectangle of sand and the Martian guards and Blount and Anders were visible.

"You wanted to see me?" Kennedy said. He would be polite if it killed him.

"Yes, yes. I read a copy of your report."

"You read my report?" Kennedy repeated the words, in a whisper, to make certain he had heard them just right.

"Yes. Your report to the executive committee of the Council on your preliminary investigations on Mars." Doak gestured toward the viewport. "It was very interesting. In fact, it was the reason for my coming here."

"I'm glad you found it interesting," Kennedy said. "It

was also marked TS—Top Secret. Or I thought it was marked that way."

"It was so marked," Doak said.

"Are you on the Executive Committee? Any report marked TS and addressed to a committee is usually read only by the members themselves."

Doak showed no signs of embarrassment.

"That is true. However a few of us—" he hesitated.

"VIPs," Kennedy supplied. "Very Important Peoples. I get it." His voice took on a cutting edge and he stared with obvious distaste at the man sitting across the desk from him. In the back of his mind, a cloud no bigger than a man's hand, was the sudden feeling of fear.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he could see the rectangle of sand, and beyond that the city of Traxia.

A garden spot, a city of bright crystal domes of rose and amethyst and coral and sky blue, a city of winding walks that curved in and around the low domes in eye-delighting variety. A flower garden, where bloomed in carefully tended plots every exotic flower that had ever put forth blossoms into the thin air of this ancient planet.

Running along each walk were streams of bright clear water, irrigating the flowers, adding freshness and beauty to a spot already so beautiful that an artist would go mad trying to catch the color tones and the balanced symmetry of dissymmetry expressed in changing curve and shifting straight line. Beyond the city was the main canal going off to the low hills which once had formed the shed from which this city drew its water.

The reservoir was still there, the hills were there, all open to the sky from which no rain had fallen for a hundred centuries. And the water was there too, in the reservoir. It was always there, flowing through conduits that had been built when water fell from clouds the way water was supposed to fall.

Kennedy had seen the watershed, the reservoir, the canals. He had studied everything—and the result of his study had been baffled, bewildered perplexity. Moses,

where art thou? he thought. Moses, with thy staff to strike the rock!

The block of pure white sand was there too, like unexposed picture film, like clay waiting the touch of the modeler's fingers, like marble awaiting the sculptor's chisel, like—Kennedy shook his head. Tryor had permitted him to examine the blueprints, complete in every detail, every curve of every walk, every flower bed, every rounded dome of pearl or coral. Yes, Tryor had said, the population increased. Slowly to be sure, but it increased. And increased living quarters were needed—Doak spoke again.

"I was greatly interested in your account of the Martian eating habits. You said they eat essentially the same basic foods we do, with perhaps some variation in the subtle vitamins."

"That's right," Kennedy said.

"But you added that you had not been able to discover the source of the Martian food supply."

For a second, Kennedy hesitated. That, of course, was the essence of the report. It was also, in essence, the secret of Traxia, and of every other city on the Red Planet. He nodded slowly.

"Nor have I been able to discover the source of their water," he said.

"But hang it, man, they eat, don't they?"

Kennedy nodded.

"They drink water, don't they?"

"They do."

"It's got to come from somewhere, hasn't it?"

"Has it?" Kennedy said.

Doak's face revealed that he liked neither the answer nor the attitude of this field man. "What about farms?" he said. "Don't they raise their grain on farms?"

"I haven't seen a farm on Mars," Kennedy answered.

"Hydroponics, then?"

"Once they used such a system," Kennedy answered. He had asked Tryor the same question at least fifty times, before the Martian had finally understood and had answered. "But not in the last five thousand years."

He looked at his watch. He could give Doak five more minutes.

"But they manufacture their food from grain, don't they?"

"They certainly do," Kennedy answered. He had studied that too, as he had studied the water supply, with much the same result. "They have storage bins in every city in which they keep their grain, the greater part of which consists of a cereal much like wheat. They mill it much as we do on earth, and it comes out a very good grade of flour. From there it goes to the individual homes and is baked into a hard bread which they call *yussa—*"

"But how does the grain get into the elevators?" Doak demanded.

"That is what I have never been able to discover," Kennedy said. He rose to his feet. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Doak. I imagine I'll be seeing more of you before you leave."

He held out his hand.

Doak didn't rise to speed the parting guest. He didn't seem to see the extended hand. His eyes came up to Kennedy's face and his gaze was cold.

"Sit down," he said.

Kennedy lifted one eyebrow an eighth of an inch. He had always described himself as one part scientist, one part mystic, and one part adventurer. The remaining quarter of him was pure cutthroat. He was a combination of qualities and character-traits that would have driven a psychiatrist cock-eyed trying to follow the curves and twists and angles and knotty knobs of his personality.

As a field man for the Council, he had had need for every knotty knob on his personality, as well as a need for the knowledge of how to use a pair of brass knuckles expertly in a knock-down drag-out fight, with the loser getting a pair of spaceman's landing boots on his head the instant he was knocked down.

Doak, apparently, had only read his report and had not gone to the trouble of checking on the man who had written it, automatically assuming that a scientist good enough

to be a field man would be hollow chested, have flat feet, wear glasses, and would possess the daring of a rabbit whose mother had been frightened by an atom bomb.

The fact that Kennedy was none of these things, that he stood a good six feet tall and was broad in proportion, that he had hot gray eyes and did not wear glasses, did not seem to mean anything to Doak. So the financier said, "Sit down."

"Go chase yourself," Kennedy said.

Doak blinked. "I—"

"That's from me, personally," Kennedy said. "It is entirely unofficial."

Doak sat up very straight in his chair. Kennedy, the cutthroat in him very much in control, knew he shouldn't do this. But he knew he was going to do it. Reaching across the desk, he placed one big hand on Doak's shoulder—and shoved down.

When he finished shoving. Doak was sitting very low in the chair. The financier looked like a surprised frog that had tried to duck hastily under water but had forgotten to close his mouth as he went under. Kennedy grinned at him, sweetly.

"Again unofficially, but so far as I am concerned, you can jump in the lake!"

Doak tried to shove the chair out of his way, forgetting it was bolted to the floor. He kicked at it and got to his feet. Kennedy, already thinking the man looked like a frog, had no difficulty in imagining the frog spewing water from its mouth as it came up.

"Do you know who I am?" Doak said.

"I don't give a cuss," Kennedy said. "Take it easy, big shot. And if you discover the source of the Martian grain supply, and of their water, and their homes and everything else they possess, let me know, will you? I'm curious myself." He turned to the door.

Doak opened the drawer of his desk. The gun there was an automatic, flat and thin, but no doubt efficient. Kennedy, looking at the gun in Doak's hand, saw that he had made a mistake. Or maybe it wasn't a mistake. He had at least

forced the issue to a head and knew exactly where he stood —in front of a gun.

"Do you know who I am?" Kennedy said.

"I know," Doak answered. "And I don't give a hoot, either. Sit down, Kennedy. I want to talk to you."

"I'm a field man—" Kennedy started to say, then shut up. He had intended to say that, as a field man for the UN, he packed a little weight himself. But, looking at the gun, he realized that all the weight he actually packed was concentrated in his ability to write a report which would be read by somebody back on Earth, and, presumably, after going through the proper channels, would be acted on.

All of which would take a year. Presuming he was able to write the report in the first place. Presuming he had a chance to send it back to Earth. And presuming Doak wasn't able to interfere with the operation of the proper channels, which was doubtful, in view of his ability to read a TS report.

Kennedy looked at the gun again. From his position at this moment, Earth was a long way off. The gun was right here. He sat down.

Doak grinned. "I read your report with great interest. In it, you hinted that a miracle was responsible for the Martian food and water supply."

"I hinted at no such thing. A miracle involves the contradiction of known natural laws. So I did not talk of a miracle. But I did hint that the Martians seemed to know the secret of spontaneous generation of matter." Angry tones sounded in his voice as if he had tried to understand and had failed and was angry at his inability to grasp the solution.

But he knew it was not a solution you just reached out and grasped, as a hungry man reaches for a hamburger.

"Something from nothing?" Doak said.

Kennedy shook his head. "Shall we say that something tangible to our senses comes from something intangible to our senses. It makes a little more sense if you put it this way. Though not much more." He shook his head again.

"I don't understand this," Doak said.

"I don't either."

"I want to understand it."

"So do I," Kennedy answered. His tone was flippant. Deliberately so. Doak's eyes glinted.

The financier toyed with the pistol. "You are a competent scientist; otherwise you would not be a field man for the UN. You have been here almost two years, spending my money, investigating this phenomenon, without results? How do you explain your failure?"

"I don't explain it. I have a hunch I can easily spend the rest of my life here, without results."

"I think you're lying," Doak said. "I think you have made important discoveries and are attempting to conceal them." He sounded outraged.

"You're welcome to your opinion," Kennedy said. He glanced at his watch, then toward the viewport. "In just a couple of minutes you will know as much as I do. Look."

Involuntarily Doak turned toward the port, then spun quickly back to face Kennedy, jerking up the gun as he did so. The field man hadn't moved from his chair. Kennedy laughed.

"Did you think I was trying to trick you? I wasn't. Watch that rectangle."

Doak's face was alive with suspicion. "But nothing is there, except guards around a patch of sand."

"Watch!" Kennedy said. . . .

In the sunlight the sand was smooth and even. It had been smoothed and resmoothed during the preceding weeks, in preparation for this event, until Kennedy had had the impression that every grain of sand had been counted. The thought made him uneasy, vaguely apprehensive. Machinery that took into consideration every grain of sand—What kind of machinery was that?

Outside the guards, the inhabitants of Traxia had gathered and were quietly watching. Kennedy could see Blount and Anders, busy with the recording equipment designed to trace that hidden machinery. Where was it? Under the city? Or elsewhere on the planet? Blount was looking often toward the ship, watching for Kennedy to return.

Came the blue haze.

It came from nowhere. It came suddenly, with no sign to indicate it was on the way. It looked like woodsmoke on far-off hills. It fitted the rectangle of white sand, exactly.

Kennedy came to his feet. Doak snatched up the muzzle of the pistol to cover him but he strode to the viewport without noticing the weapon. And Doak, after glancing at him, let the gun fall to his side. Doak watched too.

The blue haze thickened. Far-off came a soft crystalline chiming like glass bells ringing as they blew in a gentle breeze. The sound of the bells entered the ship. Kennedy wondered how that fragile chiming penetrated the insulated steel hull, but penetrate it did, a distant muted chiming, like atoms rearranging themselves within a crystal lattice. Within the blue haze the sand began to move. Nothing moved it. But it moved.

Blount and Anders were working with feverish speed. The instruments they were operating were enormously more sensitive than human senses. Kennedy wondered if they were sensitive enough to catch a glimpse of the sand movers. He was cold, cold. In the blue haze, shapes were taking outline. Like mushrooms, they grew. They firmed and their outlines hardened.

"Domes!" Kennedy whispered.

Somewhere ringing bells exulted. The walks began to take form.

"Where are those things coming from?" Doak gasped.

"Shut up," Kennedy growled, deep in his throat.

Unnoticed, the conduits along the walks had gone in—and had been connected with the regular conduits from the city. Water flowed now along the walks. It moved along the porous conduits seeking—the shrubs, the plants, the flowers, came out of nowhere. Kennedy held his breath.

The swirling crystal notes leaped up in a flood—and died. The blue haze vanished. Before Kennedy's eyes, on what had been a rectangle of white sand, was—a new subdivision of the city.

The domes were dwelling places for a dozen families, perhaps more, perhaps less. Each complete with a flower

garden. Soil and water where there had been sand. Flowers blooming in the desert.

The guards moved from their positions. During the time when the blue haze had been in existence, the watching Martians had not moved. Not an inch. Now they began to file through the newly created section of their city, examining the workmanship, seeing that everything was right, checking up to see if the sand movers had done their job well. Or were they admiring the beauty of the place? Kennedy did not know. Blount was looking desperately toward the ship.

"How'd they do that?" Doak croaked.

Kennedy shrugged. "You saw it. You know as much as I do. But that is the way they get their grain—and their water. The storage bins and the reservoirs—just fill up."

"But you must know something of the process," Doak said, desperately. "You've been here two years. You're a competent sci—"

"Blast it, man, that's what I've been trying to discover!"

Doak hesitated, his eyes on Kennedy. The frog face was labored with thought. A tongue flicked out and ran along the dry lips.

"How would you like to continue, on my pay-roll?" Doak said.

"What?" Kennedy gasped.

"At a hundred thousand a year!" Doak said.

"A hundred thousand dollars!"

"With a bonus of half a million dollars, if you solve the secret," Doak added.

Kennedy laughed. He couldn't help it. It was time to laugh. The offer was so silly it was ridiculous.

"I'll make the bonus a million," Doak said.

Kennedy gestured toward the viewport. "You idiot! If I knew that secret, what would a million dollars mean to me? Or ten million?"

Doak's face hardened. "I was afraid you would think of that," he said. He moved quickly, to place the desk between him and Kennedy. "So I prepared another inducement. I

believe that back on earth, in Miss Guthrie's private school, you have a 12-year-old daughter?"

"What?" The sound from Kennedy's throat indicated vocal cords in danger of being torn out by the roots.

Holding the gun ready, Doak took a newspaper clipping from his desk. He shoved it toward Kennedy.

CHILD MISSING FROM EXCLUSIVE SCHOOL

Joan Kennedy, 12-year-old daughter of a UN employee, was reported missing yesterday. The child, whose mother is dead and whose father is reported to be on Mars on an exploring trip, has been living with an aunt. No evidence of violence was found.

The muscles in Kennedy's neck became ropes. The veins stood out on his forehead. His face turned dull gray. "You rat! Is it worth that, to you?"

"Yes," Doak said.

"Why?"

Doak's eyes glinted. "If they can create water and grain —and a complete subdivision—they can create other things."

"What things?"

"That's my business. Your business is to find out how. That's all. My salary and bonus offer still holds good. In addition—" the gun centered on Kennedy's stomach, "—you will get your child back, unharmed."

Kennedy cursed softly. He wiped sweat from his face, and wished there were some way to wipe sweat from the human soul.

"We're working on it, right now," he said. "Those two men are my assistants. The equipment they have set up is designed to trace the machinery that created the new homes."

Doak's eyes became alive. "There is machinery?"

"There must be."

"But it is hidden?"

"Well hidden!"

"Do you think your men have succeeded in locating it?"

"I don't know," Kennedy answered. "But even if they have got a line on it, we may need time to locate the hiding place."

"How much time?"

"A week, a month, six months. Man, I don't know!"

"Go ask them what they have discovered. Report back to me here at noon tomorrow. And one more thing—" The eyes in the frog face were like shiny beads. "Don't try anything, Kennedy. This ship is well armed. My men are loyal." He nodded toward the clipping lying on his desk. "And even if you tried to kill me, and succeeded, there would still be this."

In the strained silence, Kennedy could hear himself breathing. "Suppose what we saw—was actually a miracle?"

"Miracles result from the operation of unknown laws. Just take the *un* out of that word, Kennedy."

"But what if I can't?"

Doak considered the question. "The Martians know where the machinery is located and how it operates," he said at last. "I can get the information from them, if you fail." He pressed a button on his desk. Behind Kennedy a door opened.

"Show this gentleman out," Doak said to the guard who entered.

Kennedy left the ship and walked over to where Blount and Anders were fussing with the instrument. They seemed to be disgruntled and confused. When he asked them what they had discovered, they paid no attention. He repeated the question and Blount swung around with outstretched hands.

"But we didn't get a thing," Blount said. "Not a single thing." His voice was angry. Kennedy could see he was afraid.

"What?" Kennedy said.

Blount made a quick gesture. "Oh, we got a lot of stuff, before and after pictures, a partial spec analysis of that blue smoke, but we didn't get a single tracer on the source."

"But that's impossible!" The pressure of the emotions in

Kennedy turned his normal voice into a shout. "We saw matter manipulated. That means titanic forces were at work. The magnitude of the energies flowing in that area while those domes were being constructed was great enough to strain space itself. The control forces did not have to be equally strong but they had to be powerful enough for our instruments to detect them. You blundered."

Blount shrugged. He was hurt at what his chief said and at the tone used. But more than anything else, he was scared. His fingers were trembling and his left cheek was developing a tic.

"We've got to find that machinery," Kennedy continued. "Got to! I was depending on getting a line on it from the creation of this subdivision."

"I know," Blount said. "But we didn't. Either the control forces bypassed our detectors or our equipment wasn't sensitive enough to catch them. You can look at the recordings yourself."

Kennedy turned away. If Blount said the recordings were blank, then there was no use in anyone else looking.

In the west the sun was setting in a cloudless sky. Long shadows reached out from Traxia. The new subdivision was already in shadow.

The population had increased, Tryor had said. So new housing had been provided. It was as simple as that. And as complicated. Back on Earth, building a new subdivision was also a complicated process, though the complications were different. They involved capital and labor, the work of skilled men, conformity with a building code, and the subtle factors of profit. And other things.

Trees were chopped down and the trunks sawed into lumber. Clay was dug and pressed into bricks. The lumber and the bricks were fitted together, each in its proper place. Copper was dug for electric wires and iron for nails. Gravel and cement for the foundation. If plastics were used, the manufacturing processes were different, but the end-product was the same and had the same function—a house where people lived.

On Earth you could follow every step of the process if

you wished. You could watch the trees being cut, the brick clay being dug. You could see the raw materials with your eyes, feel them with your fingers, taste them, smell them. You could watch the men building the house, hear the ring of hammers driving nails, the rasp of the saw cutting boards to exact lengths.

Here on Mars you saw figures moving in a blue haze, you heard atomic bells ringing. Then the haze was gone and the end product was before your eyes. Dazed, you talked of miracles.

In a ship from Earth was a man who wanted the secret of that miracle. Kennedy did not doubt that he knew the reason why Doak wanted that secret. It was not wealth. Doak already had the secret of wealth. It was power. The same process used to create a new subdivision could also be used to create a fleet of space ships. The machinery would have to be modified, the blueprints changed. That was all. The man who knew that secret would have power over all men.

At the thought, Kennedy knew he would cheerfully cut Doak's throat from ear to ear and spit in the man's face as he bled to death. When he thought of the 12-year-old child, kidnaped back on Earth where such things could happen, he knew he would gladly use his fingernails to tear Doak's jugular vein from his throat. Fingernails were the far-removed remnants of the claws that men had needed once, to live, and needed still, and would need as long as there were Doaks in the universe.

A step sounded in the sand. Blount was there beside him.

"What's wrong?" Blount said quietly. "I know something is."

With Blount was Tryor. The Martian's ears, large for picking up every sound transmitted by the thin atmosphere, were turned toward Kennedy, questioningly. His figure was almost identical with the human figure, except for the larger, movable ears and the slightly smaller eyes with their extra membrane to cut out the sand glare in the daylight.

With slight variations, nature had apparently almost du-

plicated the human body here on Mars. As to whether or not nature had duplicated the human mind, no one knew. Kennedy suspected it had not. Ever since he had arrived here he had felt that the Martian mind was different but where that difference lay, he did not know.

Kennedy looked at the Martian. In his mind a slow thought turned. Tryor knew where the machinery was hidden. If he could reach the Martian's mind, convince Tryor of his desperate need! His eyes went to the ship, dull in the growing twilight. The hate in his eyes was a living thing.

Tryor's ears stood straight up. "Help," the Martian whispered. "You want—you need—" He fumbled with unfamiliar sounds and with alien concepts back of them. "You —need help?" he questioned.

"Yes!" Kennedy breathed. He told them what had happened.

"It's not possible!" Blount, instantly angry, blurted out. "He can't get away with this. Kidnaping and extortion are felonies. I don't care who Doak is, he can be put in jail for the rest of his life."

"He can be, but will he be?" Kennedy answered. "The courts and the jails are on Earth. Doak is here. Tryor—"

The listening Martian had not understood one word in ten. His ears drooped and he appeared to meditate. Kennedy waited. Wild thoughts of shaking the information from the Martian mind flashed through his brain. Hopeless thoughts. There was no way of shaking comprehension from a mind. And comprehension was what was needed.

Kennedy had discussed both the source of the water supply and the grain with Tryor. The result had been embarrassment on both sides. Tryor had tried to explain. He had tried hard and long. Kennedy had been embarrassed because he had begun to suspect he didn't have the mental equipment to understand the explanation.

Tryor's embarrassment, he had suspected, had resulted from the unwillingness of the Martian to point out the deficiency of the human brain. The Martians were the politest people he had ever known, much too polite to embarrass a

guest by saying or hinting that he was actually only a high-grade moron.

"Again?" the Martian whispered.

Kennedy told it again. He included the fact that his equipment had been set up with the idea of locating the hidden machinery. Tryor seemed not to mind that at all. Kennedy was relieved. Though there might have seemed to be an element of trickery in his own actions, he knew in his heart that he had been motivated by the desire to know, and by nothing else. Tryor seemed to understand, and to approve.

But the rest of it—

"*Mond notal te?*" the Martian said. ("Can you draw me a picture?")

Kennedy sighed. Always the Martians wanted a picture.

"Come my house," the Martian said. "Draw picture."

"You stay here," Kennedy said to Blount. "I'm going to try to draw a picture of the word 'help.'"

"You don't need to draw a picture for me," Blount said, hotly.

"I know. But you can't work miracles either." He looked at the ship and again the hate in his eyes was a living thing. Doak, you made a mistake, he thought.

Side by side, Kennedy and the Martian walked toward the city. They passed through the new section that had been added. The residents were already in their new homes, preparing the evening meal.

On a plot of grass, a child was playing with a ball. He left off to wave at the strange alien striding along the winding walk. Kennedy waved back. In the thin soft air was the fragrance of flowers, blooms growing where an hour earlier had been the sand of the desert. A musical instrument was tinkling.

"This is Paradise," Kennedy whispered.

"Paradise?" Tryor sought the meaning of the word. "Picture?" he said, hopefully.

"There are no pictures of Paradise. It's only a dream of a land without hunger and without cold, without fear, where all men have enough and none too much. You've

got it here in this city. Or you had it." He looked back at the space ship resting on the sand. "Now the serpent is at your gate—in a space ship."

"Serpent?" Tryor questioned.

Kennedy uttered an exclamation of despair and sighed.

Tryor lived in a rose-colored dome. Red flowers bloomed beside the door. On the walk, Kennedy paused. "This house?" He made gestures with his hands. "Was it made like the domes I saw yesterday?"

"Yes," Tryor said. "Of course. How else?"

The question seemed to astonish him. The fact that he had understood it astonished Kennedy and gave him hope. Not much hope, perhaps, but a little. They entered the dome. Soft lights sprang into existence as they crossed the threshold. Kennedy had never ceased being amazed at the feeling of comfort in this simply furnished place. Even more than comfort, the feeling here was of fitness, of rapport with ancient unities.

He knew that Tryor spent much time here, reclining on the low couch again the wall, apparently asleep. But actually not sleeping. Dreaming would be a better word for it. Dreaming seemed to be the main occupation of all Martians.

A people who lived in a land where manna fell from heaven and housing problems were solved by miracles could afford to dream. But humans could not. Humans still had to get things by hard work. They still had to fight and sweat, to know neither security nor peace of mind. Bugles always blowing! The challenge of soil and weather, of desert, mountain, and sea, the challenge of the atom and of space, these men had met. Did the bugles ever cease?

Here on Mars they had ceased. Or had never blown. But Kennedy knew that was not the correct answer. The slow failure of the water supply over the centuries had been in itself a supreme challenge. The Martians had solved it. And had solved all other problems with it.

Somewhere there was machinery!

Many times Kennedy had imagined the nature of that machine. It was not a mechanical device of turning gears

and sliding valves. That was much too crude. Nor spinning generators nor grunting atom giants. Still much too crude. It was a machine in which the moving parts were molecules or atoms or parts of atoms. Maybe it was electrical, maybe it utilized some form of energy that men had not discovered. Out from it flowed subtle lines of force that transformed sand, or perhaps the intimate fabric of space itself, into pre-determined forms.

"Picture?" Tryor said, hopefully.

Kennedy tried to draw a picture of the word *Help.* True, Tryor had used the word but the Martian had not really understood it. All he had got was an impression of need. It was Kennedy's task to translate that impression into concrete terms. Once Tryor got that much it would be necessary to translate Doak and Doak's purpose into terms that Tryor could grasp.

Kennedy drew a picture of two men, one drowning in a pool, the other standing on the bank. The man in the pool was reaching up a despairing hand to the man on the bank.

Tryor studied it and looked up brightly to Kennedy. He got the idea. "Water?" he said, happily. "You want water?"

"No!" Kennedy said.

"Bath?" Tryor said.

"No," Kennedy said.

He drew another picture, this time of a woman and child, gaunt and starved. Beside them a fat man gobbled food from an overloaded table. They held out their hands to the eater, begging for crumbs, for life, for help.

Tryor studied the picture. He shook his head. "Wait," he said. He left the house.

When he returned, he had six Martians with him. One by one they examined the pictures while Kennedy tried in every way he knew to tell them what he needed and what they needed. If he failed, they were in danger. Before Doak was through with them, they too, would need help.

Not one of them got the idea. Suddenly Tryor brightened and left the room. He returned with the child that had been playing ball. At sight of the youngster the Martians nodded to each other.

The child studied the pictures. He shrugged, bounced his ball on the floor, and spoke rapidly in the ringing bell tones of the Martian language, bell tones with sound nuances so subtle that no human ear had ever been able to grasp them. The Martians listened. They turned to Kennedy. He saw comprehension in their eyes.

"A kid gets the idea where they don't get it," he mumbled. He was acutely uncomfortable.

"Help," Tryor rolled the word around his tongue. He had the idea now and was shocked by it. His face showed pain. Kennedy could see the Martian testing the word for its fringe meanings, following the idea out from its basic root meaning to its subtle secondary implications. If you needed help you were in danger, if you were in danger it was because something threatened you. What threatened Kennedy?

The field man drew a picture of Doak and of the space ship, he put a knife in Doak's hand, and drew another picture of himself with the knife threatening him. The child looked frightened. But he translated this picture too. And the Martians understood at least that Doak threatened Kennedy, and them.

They whispered to each other. Tryor spread his hands. "What do?"

Kennedy, with sweat on his hands, drew what he hoped was his last picture—of the new subdivision coming into existence. From it he drew lines of force radiating to the source of that construction miracle.

"The machines," he whispered. "The machines that can create a subdivision can also create weapons, forces powerful enough to disintegrate Doak and his space ship. Where are the machines?"

This was his plan, to use the titanic energies involved in the miracle his own eyes had seen, to obliterate the enemy at the gate.

"Machines?" Tryor's voice wondered over the meaning of the word. "What machines? There are no machines."

"No machines?" Kennedy gasped. Deep in his heart he knew that Tryor must be lying. There had to be machines.

Perhaps Tryor had not actually grasped how vital was the compulsion that drove him.

Kennedy drew his last picture then, of Doak with a knife in his hand. But now the knife was presented at the throat of a child.

Crude and melodramatic as was the drawing, it was no more so than life itself. And it was presented on a level so low as to prevent misunderstanding of its meaning. Basic concepts were here, the rawness of a knife and of death. The voice of the Martian child translating the drawing was the plaintive note of a frightened bird awakening in the night and crying out in fear. The child understood the meaning of that picture, too well. His soft whimper filled the room.

Instantly Tryor was on his knees beside the child, whispering to him, patting him, telling him everything would be all right. The other Martians crowded around. Kennedy was forgotten. The Martians patted the child. He would not be comforted. Finally in desperation one took him by the hand and led him from the room.

Tryor, his eyes blazing, rose to his feet. Never before had Kennedy seen an angry Martian. He saw one now.

"You frightened child!" he hissed. "Because of you, child grow crooked all his life. Child never forget."

It sounded like a damning indictment. Kennedy's voice was a choked and wretched thing.

"I'm sorry. I was trying to show you the pressure that is on me."

He pointed to the picture he had drawn. "This is *my* child," he said.

Tryor grasped the meaning. Apparently he had not fully understood the meaning of the child in the last picture. Now he saw it. The rage began to go from his face. And little by little a warm sympathy replaced the anger. Tryor understood!

Kennedy wiped the sweat from his face. He had won a battle. The lines of communication were open at last.

Outside in the night was the sound of a man running

and a voice calling, hoarsely, "Kennedy!"

Blount's voice.

Kennedy opened the door.

"Eight men from the ship!" Blount panted. "They jumped us. I think they killed Anders. I got away."

Something had gouged a groove down the side of Blount's face. Blood still flowed from the edges of the cut.

In the darkness a human voice called. Running footsteps sounded. Blount turned a startled head in the direction of the sound.

"They followed me," he whispered.

"Come in this dome," Kennedy said. "Quickly!"

Blount moved but the running footsteps moved faster. From the soft darkness a powerful flashlight jutted a sudden stream of blinding light.

"Stand where you are!" a voice ordered.

"They've got guns," Blount whispered.

"I don't doubt it," Kennedy answered. He turned his head and called within the dome. "Tryor!" There was no answer. The running feet came up the walk.

"Get your hands up!" Guns prodded them. They lifted their hands. Fingers probed their pockets. "They're clean," a voice said.

"Tryor!" Kennedy called again.

"Shut up, you!" A fist smashed against his mouth. "Mr. Doak? Here they are, sir."

"You've got Kennedy?" Doak called from the darkness.

"Got him!"

Kennedy hit the man who had struck him. All the pent-up emotional storm raging in him gave strength to the blow. The man turned a double somersault backward.

"Tryor!" Kennedy called again.

There was no answer. The flashlight poured over him and Blount. Soft clicks sounded in the darkness, safeties being released.

"Stand still, you! If you don't, I'll blow you in two."

Kennedy stood still. Blount stood still. Doak came out of the darkness. Doak seemed pathetically glad to see the field man.

"I almost made a mistake," Doak said.

"Uh!" Kennedy said, "So you finally thought of that?"

"I thought of it," Doak said. He spoke to his men. "Find out what is in this house." There was suspicion in his voice. And fear.

Kennedy knew that Doak had realized that the machines which could create a new subdivision could also create weapons. Doak was afraid of those machines, desperately. But Tryor had said there were no machines and Tryor had failed to answer.

A man stepped inside the door of the dome. His voice came back. "Just a bunch of goonies squatting in a circle. That's all." The voice was contemptuous of the Martians.

Then the voice came again. "There's something going on here that I don't understand. Come and look at this, Mr. Doak."

Doak moved forward. Kennedy followed. Doak stepped into the room. Kennedy halted in the doorway.

Tryor and the six Martians were squatting in a circle. The sound of the clamor outside, the pound of Doak's footsteps must have been clear to them, but they did not turn. In the center of the room, like a ball, floated a sphere of blue haze. As Kennedy watched, the haze seemed to thicken and become a darker shade of blue. He felt his pulse leap. The blue haze of the sand movers!

There was no obvious origin of the blue sphere. It appeared to come from nowhere. Something from nothing, he thought. Then his own phrase came back to his mind. "Something tangible to our senses comes from something intangible to them." This was happening here.

The blue haze thickened, became a ball a foot in diameter.

"What is that thing?" Doak said.

The Martians did not answer. Their gaze was concentrated on the ball with a steadiness that nothing seemed capable of penetrating. The ball lifted a foot in the air. It was above the heads of the squatting Martians.

From his pocket, Doak jerked the flat automatic. It

spouted three shots at the ball. The blue haze flickered with three tiny points of glistening light.

Doak looked at the ball and then looked beyond it, trying to see where his bullets had struck the wall of the room.

"They went in," he said slowly. "But they didn't come out."

He seemed to be trying to grasp the significance of something that went in but didn't come out. With a slow, almost imperceptible drift, the ball began to move toward him.

"Keep that thing away from me!" he shouted.

The squatting Martians seemed not to hear him. The ball continued to move. The pistol in his hand swung to cover Tryor.

"I'll shoot you!" Doak yelled.

The ball darted toward him. He pulled the trigger of the gun. In the quiet room the roar was thunderous. The bullets went into the ball. Turning, Doak fled through the door.

Like a maddened bull, Doak plunged from the dome. Kennedy got quickly out of his way. Behind Doak, moving far faster than he could move, came the blue ball. After he left the open doorway, it caught him.

He screamed, a sound wrenched from a throat in mortal pain and fear, as the ball touched him, then he was gone.

Gone in a direction that no eye could follow, gone from the space he had occupied to some other space, perhaps gone from something tangible to the senses to something intangible to them.

Kennedy thought he saw coruscating pinpoints of light flare in the outlines of Doak's body, he believed he saw the mouth gulp once, like a frog going hastily and unwillingly under water. Then the frog mouth was gone and Doak was gone and there was nothing in the doorway of Tryor's dome except a floating ball of blue haze.

"Ah!" one of Doak's men gasped. They ran, like crazy men, and they looked back over their shoulders as they ran, to see if the ball was following them. It floated serenely in the doorway. The running footsteps died in the silence of the Martian night.

"Come," Tryor whispered. "Come, friend."

Kennedy went into the dome. The ball preceded him. It took up its position again above the circle of squatting Martians.

"Tryor?" Kennedy said, huskily.

"No talk," Tryor answered. "Listen."

On the Martian's face, the lines of concentration deepened. The seven stared at the ball. There was silence in the room. The silence grew. There was a click, as of a door being unlocked somewhere.

"What is it?" Kennedy whispered. Somewhere a child was crying.

A man was trying to comfort her. The sobs turned into words.

"Where'd the man go?" the child's voice came. 'He was here just a minute ago. You're a policeman, aren't you?"

"I'm a policeman," the man's voice said.

"I want my daddy," the child's voice said. "I want my auntie. I want to go home."

From Kennedy's throat came wild words. "Joan! Joaniel I'm here, Joan. Are you all right, Joan?"

"Daddy!" the child's voice was a shout of glee. "I'm all right, Daddy. Where are you? I can hear you but I can't see you!"

The gruff voice spoke again. "Now, now, child. Your daddy ain't here. He's on Mars. But I'm here and everything will be all right. Don't you worry none. I'll take care of you." A gruff but soothing voice, it was, a kindly voice, but a startled voice too.

"But my daddy *is* here," the child protested. "I just heard him. Daddy!"

"Go with the policeman, Joanie," Kennedy said in choked tones. "Go with the policeman. I'll be home by the next space ship. Go with him."

"What the devil is that?" the startled policeman gasped. "Who are you? Where are you?"

The blue ball vanished. It went into nothingness, vanished into nowhere. The voice of the policeman was silent.

The squatting Martians relaxed. The concentration disappeared from their faces. Tryor smiled.

"That was my child!" Kennedy whispered. "I heard her." Tryor waved his hand in a little gesture that indicated the spot the blue haze had occupied. "Through that we reach all space," he said.

Kennedy sighed. "I knew you had machines, somewhere," he said. He did not in the least understand how this squatting group had reached the operators of the machines or how they had made their wishes known or how they had translated their wishes into effective action across even the void of space. But it was not too important to know, now. Later he could learn.

Tryor shook his head. "No machines," he said, smiling. "It is here." He tapped his forehead and groped for words. "A something you have not yet, a piece of tissue, a lobe—" The faltering words went into silence. "Here, through this lobe, we touch all things, change all things. How say? How say?"

The words groped into silence.

"Good grief!" Kennedy whispered. A piece of tissue, a brain lobe, that was the ultimate machine. No spinning generators or grunting atom giants. No wheels, no cogs, no levers. Moving atoms, shifting bits of ultimate matter. The lobe of a brain.

"But how did you develop such a thing?"

Tryor knew the answer. Tryor tried to explain. When in the long ago the clouds had stopped forming and the reservoirs had stopped filling, when the desert had come up over the fat farmlands, when the Martians had faced death and extinction, there had been born a mutation, with the extra lobes.

"We are his sons," Tryor said, smiling. . . .

Outside, in the star-bright Martian night, Kennedy tried to understand what he had learned. In an extra brain lobe, the Martians had found the secret of Paradise.

It was a secret the human race could probably never probe, and almost certainly could never duplicate. A freak, a sport, a mutation. The chances of nature ever duplicating it again were ten times ten high ten—against.

For a moment, he was sad. Then the sadness was gone.

He straightened his shoulders. For one race there was one destiny, for another race there was another destiny. What the Martians had received as a gift of the gods, humans would have to achieve with the work of their own calloused hands.

Ahead of him, ahead of *all men,* were bugles blowing.

THE END

OGRE

by

CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

THE MOSS brought the news. Hundreds of miles the word had gossiped its way along, through many devious ways. For the moss did not grow everywhere. It grew only where

the soil was sparse and niggardly, where the larger, lustier, more vicious plant things could not grow to rob it of light, or unroot it, or crowd it out, or do it other harm.

The moss told the story to Nicodemus, life blanket of Don Mackenzie, and it all came about because Mackenzie took a bath.

Mackenzie took his time in the bathroom, wallowing around in the tub and braying out a song, while Nicodemus, feeling only half a thing, moped outside the door. Without Mackenzie, Nicodemus was, in fact, even less than half a thing. Accepted as intelligent life, Nicodemus and others of his tribe were intelligent only when they were wrapped about their humans. Their intelligence and emotions were borrowed from the things that wore them.

For the aeons before the human beings came to this twilight world, the life blankets had dragged out a humdrum existence. Occasionally one of them allied itself with a higher form of plant life, but not often. After all, such an arrangement was very little better than staying as they were.

When the humans came, however, the blankets finally clicked. Between them and the men of Earth grew up a perfect mutual agreement, a highly profitable and agreeable instance of symbiosis. Overnight, the blankets became one of the greatest single factors in galactic exploration.

For the man who wore one of them, like a cloak around his shoulders, need never worry where a meal was coming from; knew, furthermore, that he would be fed correctly, with a scientific precision that automatically counterbalanced any upset of metabolism that might be brought about by alien conditions. For the curious plants had the ability to gather energy and convert it into food for the human body, had an uncanny instinct as to the exact needs of the body, extending, to a limited extent, to certain basic medical requirements.

But if the life blankets gave men food and warmth, served as a family doctor, man lent them something that was even more precious—the consciousness of life. The

moment one of the plants wrapped itself around a man it became, in a sense, the double of that man. It shared his intelligence and emotions, was whisked from the dreary round of its own existence into a more exalted pseudo-life.

Nicodemus, at first moping outside the bathroom door, gradually grew peeved. He felt his thin veneer of human life slowly ebbing from him and he was filled with a baffling resentment.

Finally, feeling very put upon, he waddled out of the trading post upon his own high lonesome, flapping awkwardly along, like a sheet billowing in the breeze.

The dull brick-red sun that was Sigma Draco shone down upon a world that even at high noon appeared to be in twilight, and Nicodemus' bobbling shape cast squirming, unsubstantial purple shadows upon the green and crimson ground. A rifle tree took a shot at Nicodemus but missed him by a yard at least. That tree had been off the beam for weeks. It had missed everything it shot at. Its best effort had been scaring the life out of Nellie, the bookkeeping robot that never told a lie, when it banked one of its bulletlike seeds against the steel-sheeted post.

But no one had felt very bad about that, for no one cared for Nellie. With Nellie around, no one could chisel a red cent off the company. That, incidentally, was the reason she was at the post.

But for a couple of weeks nows, Nellie hadn't bothered anybody. She had taken to chumming around with Encyclopedia, who more than likely was slowly going insane trying to figure out her thoughts.

Nicodemus told the rifle tree what he thought of it, shooting at its own flesh and blood, as it were, and kept shuffling along. The tree, knowing Nicodemus for a traitor to his own, a vegetable renegade, took another shot at him, missed by two yards and gave up in disgust.

Since he had become associated with a human, Nicodemus hadn't had much to do with other denizens of the planet—even the Encyclopedia. But when he passed a bed of moss and heard it whispering and gossiping away, he

tarried for a moment, figurative ear cocked to catch some juicy morsel.

That is how he heard that Adler, minor musician out in Melody Bowl, finally had achieved a masterpiece. Nicodemus knew it might have happened weeks before, for Melody Bowl was half a world away and the news sometimes had to travel the long way round, but just the same he scampered as fast as he could hump back toward the post.

For this was news that couldn't wait. This was news Mackenzie had to know at once. He managed to kick up quite a cloud of dust coming down the home stretch and flapped triumphantly through the door, above which hung the crudely lettered sign: GALACTIC TRADING CO.

Just what good the sign did, no one yet had figured out. The humans were the only living things on the planet that could read it.

Before the bathroom door, Nicodemus reared up and beat his fluttering self against it with tempestuous urgency.

"All right," yelled Mackenzie. "All right. I know I took too long again. Just calm yourself. I'll be right out."

Nicodemus settled down, still wriggling with the news he had to tell, heard Mackenzie swabbing out the tub.

With Nicodemus wrapped happily about him, Mackenzie strode into the office and found Nelson Harper, the factor, with his feet up on the desk, smoking his pipe and studying the ceiling.

"Howdy, lad," said the factor. He pointed at a bottle with his pipestem. "Grab yourself a snort."

"Nicodemus has been out chewing fat with the moss," he said. "Tells me a conductor by the name of Alder has composed a symphony. Moss says it's a masterpiece."

Harper took his feet off the desk. "Never heard of this chap, Alder," he said.

"Never heard of Kadmar, either," Mackenzie reminded him, "until he produced the Red Sun symphony. Now everyone is batty over him. If Alder has anything at all, we ought to get it down. Even a mediocre piece pays out.

People back on Earth are plain wacky over this tree music of ours. Like that one fellow . . . that composer—"

"Wade," Harper filled in. "J. Edgerton Wade. One of the greatest composers Earth had ever known. Quit in mortification after he heard the Red Sun piece. Later disappeared. No one knows where he went."

The factor nursed his pipe between his palms. "Funny thing. Came out here figuring our best trading bet would be new rugs or maybe some new kind of food. Something for the high-class restaurants to feature, charge ten bucks a plate for. Maybe even a new mineral. Like out on Eta Cassiop. But it wasn't any of those things. It was music. Symphony stuff. High-brow racket."

Mackenzie took another shot at the bottle, put it back and wiped his mouth. "I'm not so sure I like this music angle," he declared. "I don't know much about music. But it sounds funny to me, what I've heard of it. Brain-twisting stuff."

Harper grunted. "You're O.K. as long as you have plenty of serum along. If you can't take the music, just keep yourself shot full of serum. That way it can't touch you."

Mackenzie nodded. "It almost got Alexander that time, remember? Ran short on serum while he was down in the Bowl trying to dicker with the trees. Music seemed to have a hold on him. He didn't want to leave. He fought and screeched and yelled around . . . I felt like a heel, taking him away. He never has been quite the same since then. Doctors back on Earth finally were able to get him straightened out, but warned him never to come back."

"He's back again," said Harper, quietly.

"What's that?"

"Alexander's back again," said Harper. "Grant spotted him over at the Groombridge post. Throwing in with the Groomies, I guess. Just a yellow-bellied renegade. Going against his own race. You boys shouldn't have saved him that time. Should have let the music get him."

"What are you going to do about it?" demanded Mackenzie.

Harper shrugged his shoulders. "What can I do about it? Unless I want to declare war on the Groombridge post. And that is out. Haven't you heard it's all sweetness and light between Earth and Groombridge 34? That's the reason the two posts are stuck away from Melody Bowl. So each one of us will have a fair shot at the music. All according to some pact the two companies rigged up. Galactic's got so pure they wouldn't even like it if they knew we had a spy planted on the Groomie post."

But they got one planted on us," declared Mackenzie. "We haven't been able to find him, of course, but we know there is one. He's out there in the woods somewhere, watching every move we make."

Harper nodded his head. "You can't trust a Groomie. The lousy little insects will stoop to anything. They don't want that music, can't use it. Probably don't even know what music is. Haven't any hearing. But they know Earth wants it, will pay any price to get it, so they are out here to beat us to it. They work through birds like Alexander. They get the stuff, Alexander peddles it."

"What if we run across Alexander, chief?"

Harper clicked his pipestem across his teeth. "Depends on circumstances. Try to hire him, maybe. Get him away from the Groomies. He's a good trader. The company would do right by him.

Mackenzie shook his head. "No soap. He hates Galactic. Something that happened years ago. He'd rather make us trouble than turn a good deal for himself."

"Maybe he's changed," suggested Harper. "Maybe you boys saving him changed his mind."

"I don't think it did," persisted Mackenzie.

The factor reached across the desk and, drawing a humidor in front of him, began to refill his pipe.

"Been trying to study out something else, too," he said. "Wondering what to do with the Encyclopedia. He wants to go to Earth. Seems he's found out just enough from us to whet his appetite for knowledge. Says he wants to go to Earth and study our civilization."

Mackenzie grimaced. "That baby's gone through our

minds with a fine-toothed comb. He knows some of the things we've forgotten we ever knew. I guess it's just the nature of him, but it gets my wind up when I think of it."

"He's after Nellie now," said Harper. "Trying to untangle what she knows."

"It would serve him right if he found out."

"I've been trying to figure it out," said Harper. "I don't like this brain-picking of his any more than you do, but if we took him to Earth, away from his own stamping grounds, we might be able to soften him up. He certainly knows a lot about this planet that would be of value to us. He's told me a little—"

"Don't fool yourself," said Mackenzie. "He hasn't told you a thing more than he's had to tell to make you believe it wasn't a one-way deal. Whatever he has told you has no vital significance. Don't kid yourself he'll exchange information for information. That cookie's out to get everything he can get for nothing."

The factor regarded Mackenzie narrowly. "I'm not sure but I should put you in for an Earth vacation," he declared. "You're letting things upset you. You're losing your perspective. Alien planets aren't Earth, you know. You have to expect wacky things, get along with them, accept on the basis of the logic what makes them the way they are."

"I know all that," agreed Mackenzie, "but honest, chief, this place gets in my hair at times. Trees that shoot at you, moss that talks, vines that heave thunderbolts at you—and now, the Encyclopedia."

"The Encyclopedia is logical," insisted Harper. "He's a repository for knowledge. We have parallels on Earth. Men who study merely for the sake of learning, never expect to use the knowledge they amass. Derive a strange, smug satisfaction from being well informed. Combine that yearning for knowledge with a phenomenal ability to memorize and co-ordinate that knowledge and you have the Encylopedia."

"But there must be a purpose to him," insisted Mackenzie. "There must be some reason back of this thirst for knowledge. Just soaking up facts doesn't add up to any-

thing unless you use those facts."

Harper puffed stolidly at his pipe. "There may be a purpose in it, but a purpose so deep, so different, we could not recognize it. This planet is a vegetable world and a vegetable civilization. Back on Earth the animals got the head start and plants never had a chance to learn or to evolve. But here it's a different story. The plants were the ones that evolved, became masters of the situation."

"If there is a purpose, we should know it," Mackenzie declared, stubbornly. "We can't afford to go blind on a thing like this. If the Encyclopedia has a game, we should know it. Is he acting on his own, a free lance? Or is he the representative of the world, a sort of prime minister, a state department? Or is he something that was left over by another civilization, a civilization that is gone? A kind of living archive of knowledge, still working at his old trade even if the need of it is gone?"

"You worry too much," Harper told him.

"We have to worry, chief. We can't afford to let anything get ahead of us. We have taken the attitude we're superior to this vegetable civilization, if you can call it a civilization, that has developed here. It's the logical attitude to take because nettles and dandelions and trees aren't anything to be afraid of back home. But what holds on Earth, doesn't hold here. We have to ask ourselves what a vegetable civilization would be like. What would it want? What would be its aspirations and how would it go about realizing them?"

"We're getting off the subject," said Harper, curtly. "You came in here to tell me about some new symphony."

Mackenzie flipped his hands. "O.K. if that's the way you feel about it."

"Maybe we better figure on grabbing up this symphony soon as we can," said Harper. "We haven't had a really good one since the Red Sun. And if we mess around, the Groomies will beat us to it."

"Maybe they have already," said Mackenzie.

Harper puffed complacently at his pipe. "They haven't done it yet. Grant keeps me posted on every move they

make. He doesn't miss a thing that happens at the Groombridge post."

"Just the same," declared Mackenzie, "we can't go rushing off and tip our hand. The Groomie spy isn't asleep, either."

"Got any ideas?" asked the factor.

"We could take the ground car," suggested Mackenzie. "It's slower than the flier, but if we took the flier the Groomie would know there was something up. We use the car a dozen times a day. He'd think nothing of it."

Harper considered. "The idea has merit, lad. Who would you take?"

"Let me have Brad Smith," said Mackenzie. "We'll get along all right, just the two of us. He's an old-timer out here. Knows his way around."

Harper nodded. "Better take Nellie, too."

"Not on your life!" yelped Mackenzie. "What do you want to do? Get rid of her so you can make a cleaning?"

Harper wagged his grizzled head sadly. "Good idea, but it can't be done. One cent off and she's on your trail. Used to be a little graft a fellow could pick up here and there, but not any more. Not since they got these robot bookkeepers indoctrinated with truth and honesty."

"I won't take her," Mackenzie declared, flatly. "So help me, I won't. She'll spout company law all the way there and back. With the crush she has on this Encyclopedia, she'll probably want to drag him along, too. We'll have trouble enough with rifle trees and electrovines and all the other crazy vegetables without having an educated cabbage and a tin-can lawyer underfoot."

"You've got to take her," insisted Harper, mildly. "New ruling. Got to have one of the things along on every deal you make to prove you did right by the natives. Come right down to it, the ruling probably is your own fault. If you hadn't been so foxy on that Red Sun deal, the company never would have thought of it."

"All I did was to save the company some money," protested Mackenzie.

"You knew," Harper reminded him crisply, "that the

standard price for a symphony is two bushels of fertilizer. Why did you have to chisel half a bushel on Kadmar?"

"Cripes," said Mackenzie, "Kadmar didn't know the difference. He practically kissed me for a bushel and a half."

"That's not the point," declared Harper. "The company's got the idea we got to shoot square with everything we trade with even if it's nothing but a tree."

"I know," said Mackenzie, dryly. "I've read the manual."

"Just the same," said Harper, "Nellie goes along."

"Just to be sure you don't forget again."

The man who back on Earth had been known as J. Edgerton Wade, crouched on the low cliff that dropped away into Melody Bowl. The dull red sun was slipping toward the purple horizon and soon, Wade knew, the trees would play their regular evening concert. He hoped that once again it would be the wondrous new symphony Alder had composed. Thinking about it, he shuddered in ecstasy—shuddered again when he thought about the setting sun. The evening chill would be coming soon.

Wade had no life blanket. His food, cached back in the tiny cave in the cliff, was nearly gone. His ship, smashed in his inexpert landing on the planet almost a year before, was a rusty hulk. J. Edgerton Wade was near the end of his rope—and knew it. Strangely, he didn't care. In that year since he'd come here to the cliffs, he'd lived in a world of beauty. Evening after evening he had listened to the concerts. That was enough, he told himself. After a year of music such as that, any man could afford to die.

He swept his eyes up and down the little valley that made up the bowl, saw the trees set in orderly rows, almost as if someone had planted them. Some intelligence that may, long ago have squatted on this very cliff edge, even as he squatted now, and listened to the music.

But there was no evidence, he knew, to support such a hypothesis. No ruins of cities had been found upon this world. No evidence that any civilization, in the sense that Earth had built a civilization, ever had existed here. Nothing at all that suggested a civilized race had ever laid eyes

upon this valley, had ever had a thing to do with the planning of the bowl.

Nothing, that was, except the cryptic messages on the face of the cliff above the cave where he cached his food and slept. Scrawlings that bore no resemblance to any other writing Wade had ever seen. Perhaps, he speculated, they might have been made by other aliens who, like himself, had come to listen to the music until death had come for them.

Still crouching, Wade rocked slowly on the balls of his feet. Perhaps he should scrawl his own name there with the other scrawlings. Like one would sign a hotel register. A lonely name scratched upon the face of a lonely rock. A grave name, a brief memorial—and yet it would be the only tombstone he would ever have.

The music would be starting soon and then he would forget about the cave, about the food that was almost gone, about the rusting ship that never could carry him back to Earth again—even had he wanted to go back. And he didn't —he couldn't have gone back. The Bowl had trapped him, the music had spun a web about him. Without it, he knew, he could not live. It had become a part of him. Take it from him and he would be a shell, for it was now a part of the life force that surged within his body, part of his brain and blood, a silvery thread of meaning that ran through his thoughts and purpose.

The trees stood in quiet, orderly ranks and beside each tree was a tiny mound, podia for the conductors, and beside each mound the dark mouths of burrows. The conductors, Wade knew, were in those burrows, resting for the concert. Being animals, the conductors had to get their rest.

But the trees never needed rest. They never slept. They never tired, these gray, drab music trees, the trees that sang to the empty sky, sang of forgotten days and days that had not come, of days when Sigma Draco had been a mighty sun and of the later days when it would be a cinder circling in space. And of other things an Earthman could never know, could only sense and strain toward and wish he

knew. Things that stirred strange thoughts within one's brain and choked one with alien emotion an Earthman was never meant to feel. Emotion and thought that one could not even recognize, yet emotion and thought that one yearned toward and knew never could be caught.

Technically, of course, it wasn't the trees that sang. Wade knew that, but he did not think about it often. He would rather it had been the trees alone. He seldom thought of the music other than belonging to the trees, disregarded the little entities inside the trees that really made the music, using the trees for their sounding boards. Entities? That was all he knew. All anybody knew. Insects, perhaps, a colony of insects to each tree—or maybe even nymphs or sprites or some of the other little folks that run on skipping feet through the pages of children's fairy books. Although that was foolish, he told himself—there were no sprites.

Each insect, each sprite contributing its own small part to the orchestration, compliant to the thought-vibrations of the conductors. The conductors thought the music, held it in their brains and the things in the trees responded.

It didn't sound so pretty that way, Wade told himself. Thinking it out spoiled the beauty of it. Better to simply accept it and enjoy it without explanation.

Men came at times—not often—men of his own flesh and blood, men from the trading post somewhere on the planet. They came to record the music and then they went away. How anyone could go away once they had heard the music, Wade could not understand. Faintly he remembered there was a way one could immunize one's self against the music's spell, condition one's self so he could leave after he had heard it, dull his senses to a point where it could not hold him. Wade shivered at the thought. That was sacrilege. But still no worse than recording the music so Earth orchestras might play it. For what Earth orchestra could play it as he heard it here, evening after evening? If Earth music lovers only could hear it as it was played here in this ancient bowl!

When the Earthmen came, Wade always hid. It would

be just like them to try to take him back with them, away from the music of the trees.

Faintly the evening breeze brought the foreign sound to him, the sound that should not have been heard there in the Bowl—the clank of steel on stone.

Rising from his squatting place, he tried to locate the origin of the sound. It came again, from the far edge of the Bowl. He shielded his eyes with a hand against the setting sun, stared across the Bowl at the moving figures.

There were three of them and one, he saw at once, was an Earthman. The other two were strange creatures that looked remotely like monster bugs, chitinous armor glinting in the last rays of Sigma Draco. Their heads, he saw, resembled grinning skulls and they wore dark harnesses, apparently for the carrying of tools or weapons.

Groombridgians! But what would Groombridgians be doing with an Earthman? The two were deadly trade rivals, were not above waging intermittent warfare when their interests collided.

Something flashed in the sun—a gleaming tool that stabbed and probed, stabbed and lifted.

J. Edgerton Wade froze in horror.

Such a thing, he told himself, simply couldn't happen!

The three across the bowl were digging up a music tree!

The vine sneaked through the rustling sea of grass, cautious tendrils raised to keep tab on its prey. The queer, clanking thing that still rolled on unswervingly—came on without stopping to smell out the ground ahead, without zig-zagging to throw off possible attack.

Its action was puzzling; that was no way for anything to travel on this planet. For a moment a sense of doubt trilled along the length of vine, doubt of the wisdom of attacking anything that seemed so sure. But the doubt was short lived, driven out by the slavering anticipation that had sent the vicious vegetable from its lair among the grove of rifle trees. The vine trembled a little—slightly drunk with the vibration that pulsed through its tendrils.

The queer thing rumbled on and the vine tensed itself,

every fiber alert for struggle. Just let it get so much as one slight grip upon the thing—

The prey came closer and for one sense-shattering moment it seemed it would be out of reach. Then it lurched slightly to one side as it struck a hump in the ground and the vine's tip reached out and grasped, secured a hold, wound itself in a maddened grip and hauled, hauled with all the might of almost a quarter mile of trailing power.

Inside the ground car, Don Mackenzie felt the machine lurch sickeningly, kicked up the power and spun the tractor on its churning treads in an effort to break loose.

Back of him Bradford Smith uttered a startled whoop and dived for an energy gun that had broken from its rack and was skidding across the floor. Nellie, upset by the lurch, was flat on her back, jammed into a corner. The Encyclopedia, at the moment of shock, had whipped out its coiled-up taproot and tied up to a pipe. Now, like an anchored turtle, it swayed pendulum-wise across the floor.

Glass tinkled and metal screeched on metal as Nellie thrashed to regain her feet. The ground car reared and seemed to paw the air, slid about and plowed great furrows in the ground.

"It's a vine!" shrieked Smith.

Mackenzie nodded, grim-lipped, fighting the wheel. As the car slewed around, he saw the arcing loops of the attacker, reaching from the grove of rifle trees. Something pinged against the vision plate, shattered into a puff of dust. The rifle trees were limbering up.

Mackenzie tramped on the power, swung the car in a wide circle, giving the vine some slack, then quartered and charged across the prairie while the vine twisted and flailed the air in looping madness. If only he could build up speed, slap into the stretched-out vine full tilt, Mackenzie was sure he could break its hold. In a straight pull, escape would have been hopeless, for the vine, once it fastened on a thing, was no less than a steel cable of strength and determination.

Smith had managed to get a port open, was trying to shoot, the energy gun crackling weirdly. The car rocked

from side to side, gaining speed while bulletlike seeds from the rifle trees pinged and whined against it.

Mackenzie braced himself and yelled at Smith. They must be nearing the end of their run. Any minute now would come the jolt as they rammed into the tension of the outstretched vine.

It came with terrifying suddenness, a rending thud. Instinctively, Mackenzie threw up his arms to protect himself. For one startled moment he knew he was being hurled into the vision plate. A gigantic burst of flame flared in his head and filled the universe. Then he was floating through darkness that was cool and soft and he found himself thinking that everything would be all right, everything would be . . . everything—

But everything wasn't all right. He knew that the moment he opened his eyes and stared up into the mass of tangled wreckage that hung above him. For many seconds he did not move, did not even wonder where he was. Then he stirred and a piece of steel bit into his leg. Carefully he slid his leg upward, clearing it of the steel. Cloth ripped with an angry snarl, but his leg came free.

"Lie still, you lug," something said, almost as if it were a voice from inside of him.

Mackenzie chuckled. "So you're all right," he said.

"Sure. I'm all right," said Nicodemus. "But you got some bruises and a scratch or two and you're liable to have a headache if you—"

The voice trailed off and stopped. Nicodemus was busy. At the moment, he was the medicine cabinet, fashioning from pure energy those things that a man needed when he had a bruise or two and was scratched up some and might have a headache later.

Mackenzie lay on his back and stared up at the mass of tangled wreckage.

"Wonder how we'll get out of here," he said.

The wreckage above him stirred. A gadget of some sort fell away from the twisted mass and gashed his cheek. He swore—unenthusiastically.

Someone was calling his name and he answered.

The wreckage was jerked about violently, literally torn apart. Long metal arms reached down, gripped him by the shoulders and yanked him out, none too gently.

"Thanks, Nellie," he said.

"Shut up," said Nellie, tartly.

His knees were a bit wobbly and he sat down, staring at the ground car. It didn't look much like a ground car any more. It had smashed full tilt into a boulder and it was a mess.

To his left Smith also was sitting on the ground and he was chuckling.

"What's the matter with you," snapped Mackenzie.

"Jerked her right up by the roots," exulted Smith. "So help me, right smack out of the ground. That's one vine that'll never bother anyone again."

Mackenzie stared in amazement. The vine lay coiled on the ground, stretching back toward the grove, limp and dead. Its smaller tendrils still were entwined in the tangled wreckage of the car.

"It hung on," gasped Mackenzie. "We didn't break its hold!"

"Nope," agreed Smith, "we didn't break its hold, but we sure ruined it."

"Lucky thing it wasn't an electro," said Mackenzie, "or it would have fried us."

Smith nodded glumly. "As it is it's loused us up enough. That car will never run again. And us a couple thousand miles from home."

Nellie emerged from a hole in the wreckage, with the Encyclopedia under one arm and a mangled radio under the other. She dumped them both on the ground. The Encyclopedia scuttled off a few feet, drilled his taproot into the soil and was at home.

Nellie glowered at Mackenzie. "I'll report you for this," she declared, vengefully. "The idea of breaking up a nice new car! Do you know what a car costs the company. No, of course, you don't. And you don't care. Just go ahead and break it up. Just like that. Nothing to it. The company's got a lot more money to buy another one. I wonder some-

times if you ever wonder where your pay is coming from. If I was the company, I'd take it out of your salary. Every cent of it, until it was paid for."

Smith eyed Nellie speculatively. "Some day," he said, "I'm going to take a sledge and play tin shinny with you."

"Maybe you got something there," agreed Mackenzie. "There are times when I'm inclined to think the company went just a bit too far in making those robots cost conscious."

"You don't need to talk like that," shrilled Nellie. "Like I was just a machine you didn't need to pay no attention to. I suppose next thing you will be saying it wasn't your fault, that you couldn't help it."

"I kept a good quarter mile from all the groves," growled Mackenzie. "Who ever heard of a vine that could stretch that far?"

"And that ain't all, neither," yelped Nellie. "Smith hit some of the rifle trees."

The two men looked toward the grove. What Nellie said was true. Pale wisps of smoke still rose above the grove and what trees were left looked the worse for wear.

Smith clucked his tongue in mock concern.

"The trees were shooting at us," retorted Mackenzie.

"That don't make any difference," Nellie yelled. "The rule book says—"

Mackenzie waved her into silence. "Yes, I know. Section 17 of the chapter on Relations with Extraterrestrial Life: '*No employee of this company may employ weapons against or otherwise injure or attempt to injure or threaten with injury an inhabitant of any other planet except in self-defense and then only if every means of escape or settlement has failed.*'"

"And now we got to go back to the post," Nellie shrieked. "When we were almost there, we got to turn back. News of what we did will get around. The moss probably has started it already. The idea of ripping a vine up by the roots and shooting trees. If we don't start back right now, we won't get back. Every living thing along the way will be laying for us."

"It was the vine's fault," yelled Smith. "It tried to trap us. It tried to steal our car, probably would have killed us, just for the few lousy ounces of radium we have in the motors. That radium was ours. Not the vine's. It belonged to your beloved company."

"For the love of gosh, don't tell her that," Mackenzie warned, "or she'll go out on a one robot expedition, yanking vines up left and right."

"Good idea," insisted Smith. "She might tie into an electro. It would peel her paint."

"How about the radio?" Mackenzie asked Nellie.

"Busted," said Nellie, crustily.

"And the recording equipment?"

"The tape's all right and I can fix the recorder."

"Serum jugs busted?"

"One of them ain't," said Nellie.

"O.K., then," said Mackenzie, "get back in there and dig out two bags of fertilizer. We're going on. Melody Bowl is only about 50 miles away."

"We can't do that," protested Nellie. "Every tree will be waiting for us, every vine—"

"It's safer to go ahead than back," said Mackenzie. "Even if we have no radio, Harper will send someone out with the flier to look us up when we are overdue."

He rose slowly and unholstered his pistol.

"Get in there and get that stuff," he ordered. "If you don't, I'll melt you down into a puddle."

"All right," screamed Nellie, in sudden terror. "All right. You needn't get so tough about it."

"Any more back talk out of you," Mackenzie warned, "and I'll kick you so full of dents you'll walk stooped over."

They stayed in the open, well away from the groves, keeping a close watch. Mackenzie went ahead and behind him came the Encyclopedia, humping along to keep pace with them. Back of the Encyclopedia was Nellie, loaded down with the bags of fertilizer and equipment. Smith brought up the rear.

A rifle tree took a shot at them, but the range was too

far for accurate shooting. Back a way, an electro vine had come closer with a thunderbolt.

Walking was grueling. The grass was thick and matted and one had to plow through it, as if one were walking in water.

"I'll make you sorry for this," seethed Nellie. "I'll make—"

"Shut up," snapped Smith. "For once you're doing a robot's work instead of gumshoeing around to see if you can't catch a nickel out of place."

They breasted a hill and started to climb the long grassy slope.

Suddenly a sound like the savage ripping of a piece of cloth struck across the silence.

They halted, tensed, listening. The sound came again and then again.

"Guns!" yelped Smith.

Swiftly the two men loped up the slope, Nellie galloping awkwardly behind, the bags of fertilizer bouncing on her shoulders.

From the hilltop, Mackenzie took in the situation at a glance.

On the hillside below a man was huddled behind a boulder, working a gun with fumbling desperation, while farther down the hill a ground car had toppled over. Behind the car were three figures—one man and two insect creatures.

"Groomies!" whopped Smith.

A well-directed shot from the car took the top off the boulder and the man behind it hugged the ground.

Smith was racing quarteringly down the hill, heading toward another boulder that would outflank the trio at the car.

A yell of human rage came from the car and a bolt from one of the three guns snapped at Smith, plowing a smoking furrow no more than ten feet behind him.

Another shot flared toward Mackenzie and he plunged behind a hummock. A second shot whizzed just above his

head and he hunkered down trying to push himself into the ground.

From the slope below came the high-pitched, angry chittering of the Groombridgians.

The car, Mackenzie saw, was not the only vehicle on the hillside. Apparently it had been pulling a trailer to which was lashed a tree. Mackenzie squinted against the setting sun, trying to make out what it was all about. The tree, he saw, had been expertly dug, its roots balled in earth and wrapped in sacking that shone wetly. The trailer was canted at an awkward angle, the treetop sweeping the ground, the balled roots high in the air.

Smith was pouring a deadly fire into the hostile camp and the three below were replying with a sheet of blasting bolts, plowing up the soil around the boulder. In a minute or two, Mackenzie knew, they would literally cut the ground out from under Smith. Cursing under his breath, he edged around the hummock, pushing his pistol before him, wishing he had a rifle.

The third man was slinging an occasional, inexpert shot at the three below, but wasn't doing much to help the cause along. The battle, Mackenzie knew, was up to him and Smith.

He wondered abstractedly where Nellie was.

"Probably halfway back to the post by now," he told himself, drawing a bead on the point from which came the most devastating blaze of firing.

But even as he depressed the firing button, the firing below broke off in a chorus of sudden screams. The two Groombridgians leaped up and started to run, but before they made their second stride, something came whizzing through the air from the slope below and crumpled one of them.

The other hesitated, like a startled hare, uncertain where to go, and a second thing came whishing up from the bottom of the slope and smacked against his breastplate with a thud that could be heard from where Mackenzie lay.

Then, for the first time Mackenzie saw Nellie. She was striding up the hill, her left arm holding an armful of stones

hugged tight against her metal chest, her right arm working like a piston. The ringing clang of stone against metal came as one of the stones missed its mark and struck the ground car.

The human was running wildly, twisting and ducking, while Nellie pegged rock after rock at him. Trying to get set for a shot at her, the barrage of whizzing stones kept him on the dodge. Angling down the hill, he finally lost his rifle when he tripped and fell. With a howl of terror, he bolted up the hillside, his life blanket standing out almost straight behind him. Nellie pegged her last stone at him, then set out, doggedly loping in his wake.

Mackenzie screamed hoarsely at her, but she did not stop. She passed out of sight over the hill, closely behind the fleeing man.

Smith whopped with delight. "Look at our Nellie go for him," he yelled. "She'll give him a working over when she nails him."

Mackenzie rubbed his eyes. "Who was he?" he asked.

"Jack Alexander," said Smith. "Grant said he was around again."

The third man got up stiffly from behind his boulder and advanced toward them. He wore no life blanket, his clothing was in tatters, his face was bearded to the eyes.

He jerked a thumb toward the hill over which Nellie had disappeared. "A masterly military maneuver," he declared. "Your robot sneaked around and took them from behind."

"If she lost that recording stuff and the fertilizer, I'll melt her down," said Mackenzie, savagely.

The man stared at them. "You are the gentlemen from the trading post?" he asked.

They nodded, returning his stare.

"I am Wade," he said. "J. Edgerton Wade—"

"Wait a second," shouted Smith. "Not *the* J. Edgerton Wade? The lost composer?"

The man bowed, whiskers and all. "The same," he said. "Although I had not been aware that I was lost. I merely

came out here to spend a year, a year of music such as man has never heard before."

He glared at them. "I am a man of peace," he declared, almost as if daring them to argue that he wasn't, "but when those three dug up Delbert, I knew what I must do."

"Delbert?" asked Mackenzie.

"The tree," said Wade. "One of the music trees."

"Those lousy planet-runners," said Smith, "figured they'd take that tree and sell it to someone back on Earth. I can think of a lot of big shots who'd pay plenty to have one of those trees in their back yard."

"It's a lucky thing we came along," said Mackenzie, soberly. "If we hadn't, if they'd got away with it, the whole planet would have gone on the warpath. We could have closed up shop. It might have been years before we dared come back again."

Smith rubbed his hands together smirking. "We'll take back their precious tree," he declared, "and will that put us in solid! They'll give us their tunes from now on, free for nothing, just out of pure gratitude."

"You gentlemen," said Wade, "are motivated by mercenary factors but you have the right idea."

A heavy tread sounded behind them and when they turned they saw Nellie striding down the hill. She clutched a life blanket in her hand.

"He got away," she said, "but I got his blanket. Now I got a blanket, too, just like you fellows."

"What do you need with a life blanket?" yelled Smith. "You give that blanket to Mr. Wade. Right away. You hear me."

Nellie pouted. "You won't let me have anything. You never act like I'm human—"

"You aren't," said Smith.

"If you give that blanket to Mr. Wade," wheedled Mackenzie, "I'll let you drive the car."

"You would?" asked Nellie, eagerly.

"Really," said Wade, shifting from one foot to the other, embarrassed.

"You take that blanket," said Mackenzie. "You need it. Looks like you haven't eaten for a day or two."

"I haven't," Wade confessed.

"Shuck into it then and get yourself a meal," said Smith..

Nellie handed it over.

"How come you were so good pegging those rocks?" asked Smith.

Nellie's eyes gleamed with pride. "Back on Earth I was on a baseball team," she said. "I was the pitcher."

Alexander's car was undamaged except for a few dents and a smashed vision plate where Wade's first bolt had caught it, blasting the glass and startling the operator so that he swerved sharply, spinning the treads across a boulder and upsetting it.

The music tree was unharmed, its roots still well moistened in the burlap-wrapped, water-soaked ball of earth. Inside the tractor, curled in a tight ball in the darkest corner, unperturbed by the uproar that had been going on outside, they found Delbert, the two-foot high, roly-poly conductor that resembled nothing more than a poodle dog walking on its hind legs.

The Groombridgians were dead, their crushed chitinous armor proving the steam behind Nellie's delivery.

Smith and Wade were inside the tractor, settled down for the night. Nellie and the Encyclopedia were out in the night, hunting for the gun Alexander had dropped when he fled. Mackenzie, sitting on the ground, Nicodemus pulled snugly about him, leaned back against the car and smoked a last pipe before turning in.

The grass behind the tractor rustled.

"That you, Nellie?" Mackenzie called, softly.

Nellie clumped hesitantly around the corner of the car.

"You ain't sore at me?" she asked.

"No, I'm not sore at you. You can't help the way you are."

"I didn't find the gun," said Nellie.

"You knew where Alexander dropped it?"

"Yes," said Nellie. "It wasn't there."

Mackenzie frowned in the darkness. "That means Alexander managed to come back and get it. I don't like that. He'll be out gunning for us. He didn't like the company before. He'll really be out for blood after what we did today.

He looked around. "Where's the Encyclopedia?"

"I sneaked away from him. I wanted to talk to you about him."

"O.K.," said Mackenzie. "Fire away."

"He's been trying to read my brain," said Nellie.

"I know. He read the rest of ours. Did a good job of it."

"He's been having trouble," declared Nellie.

"Trouble reading your brain? I wouldn't doubt it."

"You don't need to talk as if my brain—" Nellie began, but Mackenzie stopped her.

"I don't mean it that way, Nellie. Your brain is all right, far as I know. Maybe even better than ours. But the point is that it's different. Ours are natural brains, the orthodox way for things to think and reason and remember. The Encyclopedia knows about those kind of brains and the minds that go with them. Yours isn't that kind. It's artificial. Part mechanical, part chemical, part electrical, Lord knows what else; I'm not a robot technician. He's never run up against that kind of brain before. It probably has him down. Matter of fact, our civilization probably has him down. If this planet ever had a real civilization, it wasn't a mechanical one. There's no sign of mechanization here. None of the scars machines inflict on planets."

"I been fooling him," said Nellie quietly. "He's been trying to read my mind, but I been reading his."

Mackenzie started forward. "Well, I'll be—" he began. Then he settled back against the car, dead pipe hanging from between his teeth. "Why didn't you ever let us know you could read minds?" he demanded. "I suppose you been sneaking around all this time, reading our minds, making fun of us, laughing behind our backs."

"Honest, I ain't," said Nellie. "Cross my heart, I ain't. I didn't even know I could. But, when I felt the Encyclopedia prying around inside my head the way he does, it

kind of got my dander up. I almost hauled off and smacked him one. And then I figured maybe I better be more subtle. I figured that if he could pry around in my mind, I could pry around in his. I tried it and it worked."

"Just like that," said Mackenzie.

"It wasn't hard," said Nellie. "It come natural. I seemed to just know how to do it."

"If the guy that made you knew what he'd let slip through his fingers, he'd cut his throat," Mackenzie told her.

Nellie sidled closer. "It scares me," she said.

"What's scaring you now?"

"That Encyclopedia knows too much."

"Alien stuff," said Mackenzie. "You should have expected that. Don't go messing around with an alien mentality unless you're ready for some shocks."

"It ain't that," said Nellie. "I knew I'd find alien stuff. But he knows other things. Things he shouldn't know."

"About us?"

"No, about other places. Places other than the Earth and this planet here. Places Earthmen ain't been to yet. The kind of things no Earthman could know by himself or that no Encyclopedia could know by himself, either."

"Like what?"

"Like knowing mathematical equations that don't sound like anything we know about," said Nellie. "Nor like he'd know about if he'd stayed here all his life. Equations you couldn't know unless you knew a lot more about space and time than even Earthmen know.

"Philosophy, too. Ideas that make sense in a funny sort of way, but make your head swim when you try to figure out the kind of people that would develop them."

Mackenzie got out his pouch and refilled his pipe, got it going.

"Nellie, you think maybe this Encyclopedia has been at other minds? Minds of other people who may have come here?"

"Could be," agreed Nellie. "Maybe a long time ago. He's awful old. Lets on he could be immortal if he wanted to be.

Said he wouldn't die until there was nothing more in the universe to know. Said when that time came there'd be nothing more to live for."

Mackenzie clicked his pipestem against his teeth. "He could be, too," he said. "Immortal, I mean. Plants haven't got all the physiological complications animals have. Given any sort of care, they theoretically could live forever."

Grass rustled on the hillside above them and Mackenzie settled back against the car, kept on smoking. Nellie hunkered down a few feet away.

The Encyclopedia waddled down the hill, startlight glinting from his shell-like back. Ponderously he lined up with them beside the car, pushing his taproot into the ground for an evening snack.

"Understand you may be going back to Earth with us," said Mackenzie conversationally.

The answer came, measured in sharp and concise thought that seemed to drill deep into Mackenzie's mind. "I should like to. Your race is interesting."

It was hard to talk to a thing like that, Mackenzie told himself. Hard to keep the chatter casual when you knew all the time it was hunting around in the corners of your mind. Hard to match one's voice against the brittle thought with which it talked.

"What do you think of us?" he asked and knew, as soon as he had asked it, that it was asinine.

"I know very little of you," the Encyclopedia declared. "You have created artificial lives, while we on this planet have lived natural lives. You have bent every force that you can master to your will. You have made things work for you. First impression is that, potentially, you are dangerous."

"I guess I asked for it," Mackenzie said.

"I do not follow you."

"Skip it," said Mackenzie.

"The only trouble," said the Encyclopedia, "is that you don't know where you're going."

"That's what makes it so much fun," Mackenzie told him. "Cripes, if we knew where we were going, there'd

be no adventure. We'd know what was coming next, As it is, every corner that we turn brings a new surprise."

"Knowing where you're going has its advantages," insisted the Encyclopedia.

Mackenzie knocked the pipe bowl out on his boot heel, tramped on the glowing ash.

"So you have us pegged," he said.

"No," said the Encyclopedia. "Just first impressions."

The music trees were twisted gray ghosts in the murky dawn. The conductors, except for the few who refused to let even a visit from the Earthmen rouse them from their daylight slumber, squatted like black imps on their podia.

Delbert rode on Smith's shoulder, one clawlike hand entwined in Smith's hair to keep from falling off. The Encyclopedia waddled along in the wake of the Earthman party. Wade led the way toward Alder's podium.

The Bowl buzzed with the hum of distorted thought, the thought of many little folk squatting on their mounds —an alien thing that made Mackenzie's neck hairs bristle just a little as it beat into his mind. There were no really separate thoughts, no one commanding thought, just the chitter-chatter of hundreds of little thoughts, as if the conductors might be gossiping.

The yellow cliffs stood like a sentinel wall and above the path that led to the escarpment, the tractor loomed like a straddled beetle against the early dawn.

Alder rose from the podium to greet them, a disreputable-looking gnome on gnarly legs.

The Earth delegation squatted on the ground. Delbert, from his perch on Smith's shoulder, made a face at Alder.

Silence held for a moment and then Mackenzie, dispensing with formalities, spoke to Alder. "We rescued Delbert for you," he told the gnome. "We brought him back."

Alder scowled and his thoughts were fuzzy with disgust. "We do not want him back," he said.

Mackenzie, taken aback, stammered. "Why, we thought . . . that is, he's one of you . . . we went to a lot of trouble to rescue him—"

"He's a nuisance," declared Alder. "He's a disgrace. He's an no-good. He's always trying things."

"You're not so hot yourself," piped Delbert's thought. "Just a bunch of fuddy-duddies. A crowd of corn peddlers. You're sore at me because I want to be different. Because I dust it off—"

"You see," said Alder to Mackenzie, "what he is like."

"Why, yes," agreed Mackenzie, "but there are times when new ideas have some values. Perhaps he may be—"

Alder leveled an accusing finger at Wade. "He was all right until you took to hanging around," he screamed. "Then he picked up some of your ideas. You contaminated him. Your silly notions about music—" Alder's thoughts gulped in sheer exasperation, then took up again. "Why did you come? No one asked you to? Why don't you mind your own business?"

Wade, red faced behind his beard, seemed close to apoplexy.

"I've never been so insulted in all my life," he howled. He thumped his chest with a doubled fist. "Back on Earth I wrote great symphonies myself. I never held with frivolous music. I never—"

"Crawl back into your hole," Delbert shrilled at Alder. "You guys don't know what music is. You saw out the same stuff day after day. You never lay it in the groove. You never get gated up. You all got long underwear."

Alder waved knotted fists above his head and hopped up and down in rage. "Such language!" he shrieked. "Never was the like heard here before."

The whole Bowl was yammering. Yammering with clashing thoughts of rage and insult.

"Now, wait," Mackenzie shouted. "All of you, quiet down!"

Wade puffed out his breath, turned a shade less purple. Alder squatted back on his haunches, unknotted his fists, tried his best to look composed. The clamor of thought subsided to a murmur.

"You're sure about this?" Mackenzie asked Alder. "Sure you don't want Delbert back."

"Mister," said Alder, "there never was a happier day in Melody Bowl than the day we found him gone."

A rising murmur of assent from the other conductors underscored his words.

"We have some others we'd like to get rid of, too," said Alder.

From far off across the Bowl came a yelping thought of derision.

"You see," said Alder, looking owlishly at Mackenzie, "what it is like. What we have to contend with. All because this . . . this . . . this—"

Glaring at Wade, thoughts failed him. Carefully he settled back upon his haunches, composed his face again.

"If the rest were gone," he said, 'we could settle down. But as it is, these few keep us in an uproar all the time. We can't concentrate, we can't really work. We can't do the things we want to do."

Mackenzie pushed back his hat and scratched his head.

"Alder," he declared, "you sure are in a mess."

"I was hoping," Alder said, "that you might be able to take them off our hands."

"Take them off your hands!" yelled Smith. "I'll say we'll take them! We'll take as many—"

Mackenzie nudged Smith in the ribs with his elbow, viciously. Smith gulped into silence. Mackenzie tried to keep his face straight.

"You can't take them trees," said Nellie icily. "It's against the law."

Mackenzie gasped. "The law?"

"Sure, the regulations. The company's got regulations. Or don't you know that? Never bothered to read them, probably. Just like you. Never pay no attention to the things you should."

"Nellie," said Smith savagely, "you keep out of this. I guess if we want to do a little favor for Alder here—"

"But it's against the law!" screeched Nellie.

"I know," said Mackenzie. "Section 34 of the chapter on Relations with Extraterrestial Life. *'No member of this*

company shall interfere in any phase of the internal affairs of another race.'"

"That's it," said Nellie, pleased with herself. "And if you take some of these trees, you'll be meddling in a quarrel that you have no business having anything to do with."

Mackenzie flipped his hands. "You see," he said to Alder.

"We'll give you a monopoly on our music," tempted Alder. "We'll let you know when we have anything. We won't let the Groomies have it and we'll keep our prices right."

Nellie shook her head. "No," she said.

Alder bargained. "Bushel and a half instead of two bushels."

"No," said Nellie.

"It's a deal," declared Mackenzie. Just point out your duds and we'll haul them away."

"But Nellie said no," Alder pointed out. "And you say yes. I don't understand."

"We'll take care of Nellie," Smith told him soberly.

"You won't take them trees," said Nellie. "I won't let you take them. I'll see to that."

"Don't pay any attention to her, Mackenzie said. "Just point out the ones you want to get rid of."

Alder said primly: "You've made us very happy."

Mackenzie got up and looked around. "Where's the Encyclopedia?" he asked.

"He cleared out a minute ago," said Smith. "Headed back for the car."

Mackenzie saw him, scuttling swiftly up the path toward the cliff top.

It was topsy-turvy and utterly crazy, like something out of that old book for children written by a man named Carroll. There was no sense to it. It was like taking candy from a baby.

Walking up the cliff path back to the tractor, Mackenzie knew it was, felt that he should pinch himself to know it was no dream.

He had hoped—just hoped—to avert relentless, merciless

war against Earthmen throughout the planet by bringing back the stolen music tree. And here he was, with other music trees for his own, and a bargain thrown in to boot.

There was something wrong, Mackenzie told himself, something utterly and nonsensically wrong. But he couldn't put his finger on it.

There was no need to worry, he told himself. The thing to do was to get those trees and get out of there before Alder and the others changed their minds.

"It's funny," Wade said behind him.

"It is," agreed Mackenzie. "Everything is funny here."

"I mean about those trees," said Wade. "I'd swear Delbert was all right. So were all the others. They played the same music the others played. If there had been any faulty orchestration, any digression from form, I am sure I would have noticed it."

Mackenzie spun around and grasped Wade by the arm. "You mean they weren't lousing up the concerts? That Delbert, here, played just like the rest?"

Wade nodded.

"That ain't so," shrilled Delbert from his perch on Smith's shoulder. "I wouldn't play like the rest of them. I want to kick the stuff around. I always dig it up and hang it out the window. I dream it up and send it away out wide."

"Where'd you pick up that lingo?" Mackenzie snapped. "I never heard anything like it before."

"I learned it all from him," declared Delbert, pointing at Wade.

Wade's face was purple and his eyes were glassy.

"It's practically prehistoric," he gulped. "They're terms that were used back in the twentieth century to describe a certain kind of popular rendition. I read about it in a history covering the origins of music. There was a glossary of the terms. They were so fantastic they stuck in my mind."

Smith puckered his lips, whistling soundlessly. "So that's how he picked it up. He caught it from your thoughts. Same principle the Encyclopedia uses, although not so advanced."

"He lacks the Encyclopedia's distinction," explained

Mackenzie. "He didn't know the stuff he was picking up was something that had happened long ago."

"I have a notion to wring his neck," Wade threatened.

"You'll keep your hands off him," grated Mackenzie. "This deal stinks to the high heavens, but seven music trees are seven music trees. Screwy deal or not, I'm going through with it."

"Look, fellows," said Nellie, "I wish you wouldn't do it."

Mackenzie puckered his brow. "What's the matter with you, Nellie? Why did you make that uproar about the law down there? There's a rule, sure, but in a thing like this it's different. The company can afford to have a rule or two broken for seven music trees. You know what will happen, don't you, when we get those trees back home. We can charge a thousand bucks a throw to hear them and have to use a club to keep the crowds away."

"And the best of it is," Smith pointed out, "that once they hear them, they'll have to come again. They'll never get tired of them. Instead of that, every time they hear them, they'll want to hear them all the more. It'll get to be an obsession, a part of the people's life. They'll steal, murder, do anything so they can hear the trees."

"That," said Mackenzie soberly, "is the one thing I'm afraid of."

"I only tried to stop you," Nellie said. "I know as well as you do that the law won't hold in a thing like this. But there was something else. The way the conductors sounded. Almost as if they were jeering at us. Like a gang of boys out in the street hooting at someone they just pulled a fast one on."

"You're batty," Smith declared.

"We have to go through with it," Mackenzie announced flatly. "If anyone ever found we'd let a chance like this slip through our fingers, they'd crucify us for it."

"You're going to get in touch with Harper?" Smith asked.

Mackenzie nodded. "He'll have to get hold of Earth, have them send out a ship right away to take back the trees."

"I still think," said Nellie, "there's a nigger in the woodpile."

Mackenzie flipped the toggle and the visiphone went dead.

Harper had been hard to convince. Mackenzie, thinking about it, couldn't blame him much. After all, it did sound incredible. But then, this whole planet was incredible.

Mackenzie reached into his pocket and hauled forth his pipe and pouch. Nellie probably would raise hell about helping to dig up those other six trees, but she'd have to get over it. They'd have to work as fast as they could. They couldn't spend more than one night up here on the rim. There wasn't enough serum for longer than that. One jug of the stuff wouldn't go too far.

Suddenly excited shouts came from outside the car, shouts of consternation.

With a single leap, Mackenzie left the chair and jumped for the door. Outside, he almost bumped into Smith, who came running around the corner of the tractor. Wade, who had been down at the cliff's edge, was racing toward them.

"It's Nellie," shouted Smith. "Look at that robot!"

Nellie was marching toward them, dragging in her wake a thing that bounced and struggled. A rifle tree grove fired a volley and one of the pellets caught Nellie in the shoulder, puffing into dust, staggering her a little.

The bouncing thing was the Encyclopedia. Nellie had hold of his taproot, was hauling him unceremoniously across the bumpy ground.

"Put him down!" Mackenzie yelled at her. "Let him go!"

"He stole the serum," howled Nellie. "He stole the serum and broke it on a rock!"

She swung the Encyclopedia toward them in a looping heave. The intelligent vegetable bounced a couple of times, struggled to get right side up, then scurred off a few feet, root coiled tightly against its underside.

Smith moved toward it threateningly. "I ought to kick the living innards out of you," he yelled. "We need that serum. You knew why we needed it."

"You threaten me with force," said the Encyclopedia. "The most primitive method of compulsion."

"It works," Smith told him shortly.

The Encyclopedia's thoughts were unruffled, almost serene, as clear and concise as ever. "You have a law that forbids your threatening or harming any alien thing."

"Chum," declared Smith, "you better get wised up on laws. There are times when certain laws don't hold. And this is one of them."

"Just a minute," said Mackenzie. He spoke to the Encyclopedia. "What is your understanding of a law?"

"It is a rule you live by," the Encyclopedia said. "It is something that is necessary. You cannot violate it."

"He got that from Nellie," said Smith.

"You think because there is a law against it, we won't take the trees?"

"There is a law against it," said the Encyclopedia. "You cannot take the trees."

"So as soon as you found that out, you lammed up here and stole the serum, eh?"

"He's figuring on indoctrinating us," Nellie explained. "Maybe that word ain't so good. Maybe conditioning is better. It's sort of mixed up. I don't know if I've got it straight. He took the serum so we would hear the trees without being able to defend ourselves against them. He figured when we heard the music, we'd go ahead and take the trees."

"Law or no law?"

"That's it," Nellie said. "Law or no law."

Smith whirled on the robot. "What kind of jabber is this? How do you know what he was planning?"

"I read his mind," said Nellie. "Hard to get at, the thing that he was planning, because he kept it deep. But some of it jarred up where I could reach it when you threatened him."

"You can't do that!" shrieked the Encyclopedia. "Not you! Not a machine!"

Mackenzie laughed shortly. "Too bad, big boy, but she can. She's been doing it."

Smith stared at Mackenzie.

"It's all right," Mackenzie said. "It isn't any bluff. She told me about it last night."

"You are unduly alarmed," the Encyclopedia said. "You are putting a wrong interpretation—"

A quiet voice spoke, almost as if it were a voice inside Mackenzie's mind.

"Don't believe a thing he tells you, pal. Don't fall for any of his lies."

"Nicodemus! You know something about this?"

"It's the trees," said Nicodemus. "The music does something to you. It changes you. Makes you different than you were before. Wade is different. He doesn't know it, but he is."

"If you mean the music chains one to it, that is true," said Wade. "I may as well admit it. I could not live without the music. I could not leave the Bowl. Perhaps you gentlemen have thought that I would go back with you. But I cannot go. I cannot leave. It will work the same with anyone. Alexander was here for a while when he ran short of serum. Doctors treated him and said he was all right, but he came back. He had to come back. He couldn't stay away."

"It isn't only that," declared Nicodemus. "It changes you, too, in other ways. It can change you any way it wants to. Change your way of thinking. Change your viewpoints."

Wade strode forward. "It isn't true," he yelled. "I'm the same as when I came here."

"You heard things," said Nicodemus, "felt things in the music you couldn't understand. Things you wanted to understand, but couldn't. Strange emotions that you yearned to share, but could never reach. Strange thoughts that tantalized you for days."

Wade sobered, stared at them with haunted eyes.

"That was the way it was," he whispered. "That was just the way it was."

He glanced around, like a trapped animal seeking escape.

"But I don't feel any different," he mumbled. "I still am human. I think like a man, act like a man."

"Of course you do," said Nicodemus. "Otherwise you

would have been scared away. If you had known what was happening to you, you wouldn't let it happen. And you have had less than a year of it. Less than a year of this conditioning. Five years and you would be less human. Ten years and you would be beginning to be the kind of thing the trees want you to be."

"And we were going to take some of those trees to Earth!" Smith shouted. "Seven of them! So the people of the Earth could hear them. Listen to them, night after night. The whole world listening to them on the radio. A whole world being conditioned, being changed by seven music trees."

"But why?" asked Wade, bewildered.

"Why did men domesticate animals?" Mackenzie asked. "You wouldn't find out by asking the animals, for they don't know. There is just as much point asking a dog why he was domesticated as there is in asking us why the trees want to condition us. For some purpose of their own, undoubtedly, that is perfectly clear and logical to them. A purpose that undoubtedly never can be clear and logical to us."

"Nicodemus," said the Encyclopedia and his thought was deathly cold, "you have betrayed your own."

Mackenzie laughed harshly. "You're wrong there," he told the vegetable, "because Nicodemus isn't a plant any more. He's a human. The same thing has happened to him as you want to have happen to us. He has become a human in everything but physical make-up. He thinks as a man does. His viewpoints are ours, not yours."

"That is right," said Nicodemus. "I am a man."

A piece of cloth ripped savagely and for an instant the group was blinded by a surge of energy that leaped from a thicket a hundred yards away. Smith gurgled once in sudden agony and the energy was gone.

Frozen momentarily by surprise, Mackenzie watched Smith stagger, face tight with pain, hand clapped to his side. Slowly the man wilted, sagged in the middle and went down.

Silently, Nellie leaped forward, was sprinting for the thicket. With a hoarse cry, Mackenzie bent over Smith.

Smith grinned at him, a twisted grin. His mouth worked,

but no words came. His hand slid away from his side and he went limp, but his chest rose and fell with a slightly slower breath. His life blanket had shifted its position to cover the wounded side.

Mackenzie straightened up, hauling the pistol from his belt. A man had risen from the thicket, was leveling a gun at the charging Nellie. With a wild yell, Mackenzie shot from the hip. The lashing charge missed the man but half the thicket disappeared in a blinding sheet of flame.

The man with the gun ducked as the flame puffed out at him and in that instant Nellie closed. The man yelled once, a long-drawn howl of terror as Nellie swung him above her head and dashed him down. The smoking thicket hid the rest of it. Mackenzie, pistol hanging limply by his side, watched Nellie's right fist lift and fall with brutal precision, heard the thud of life being beaten from a human body.

Sickened, he turned back to Smith. Wade was kneeling beside the wounded man. He looked up.

"He seems to be unconscious."

Mackenzie nodded. "The blanket put him out. Gave him an anaesthesia. It'll take care of him."

Mackenzie glanced up sharply at a scurry in the grass. The Encyclopedia, taking advantage of the moment, was almost out of sight, scuttling toward a grove of rifle trees.

A step grated behind him.

"It was Alexander," Nellie said. "He won't bother us no more."

Nelson Harper, factor at the post, was lighting up his pipe when the visiphone signal buzzed and the light flashed on.

Startled, Harper reached out and snapped on the set. Mackenzie's face came in, a face streaked with dirt and perspiration, stark with fear. He waited for no greeting. His lips were already moving even as the plate flickered and cleared.

"It's all off, chief," he said. "The deal is off. I can't bring in those trees."

"You got to bring them in," yelled Harper. "I've already called Earth. I got them turning handsprings. They say it's the greatest thing that ever happened. They're sending out a ship within an hour."

"Call them back and tell them not to bother," Mackenzie snapped.

"But you told me everything was set," yelped Harper. "You told me nothing could happen. You said you'd bring them in if you had to crawl on hands and knees and pack them on your back."

"I told you every word of that," agreed Mackenzie. "Probably even more. But I didn't know what I know now."

Harper groaned. "Galactic is plastering every front page in the Solar System with the news. Earth radios right now are bellowing it out from Mercury to Pluto. Before another hour is gone every man, woman and child will know those trees are coming to Earth. And once they know that, there's nothing we can do. Do you understand that, Mackenzie? We have to get them there!"

"I can't do it, chief," Mackenzie insisted, stubbornly.

"Why can't you?" screamed Harper. "So help me Hannah, if you don't—"

"I can't bring them in because Nellie's burning them. She's down in the Bowl right now with a flamer. When she's through, there won't be any music trees."

"Go out and stop her!" shrieked Harper. "What are you sitting there for! Go out and stop here! Blast her if you have to. Do anything, but stop her! That crazy robot—"

"I told her to," snapped Mackenzie. "I ordered her to do it. When I get through here, I'm going down and help her."

"You're crazy, man!" yelled Harper. "Stark, staring crazy. They'll throw the book at you for this. You'll be lucky if you just get life—"

Two darting hands loomed in the plate, hands that snapped down and closed around Mackenzie's throat, hands that dragged him away and left the screen blank, but with a certain blurring motion, as if two men might be fighting for their lives just in front of it.

"Mackenzie!" screamed Harper. "Mackenzie!"

Something smashed into the screen and shattered it, leaving the broken glass gaping in jagged shards.

Harper clawed at the visiphone. "Mackenzie! Mackenzie, what's happening!"

In answer the screen exploded in a flash of violent flame, howled like a screeching banshee and then went dead.

Harper stood frozen in the room, listening to the faint purring of the radio. His pipe fell from his hand and bounced along the floor, spilling burned tobacco.

Cold, clammy fear closed down upon him, squeezing his heart. A fear that twisted him and mocked him. Galactic would break him for this, he knew. Send him out to some of the jungle planets as the rankest subordinate. He would be marked for life, a man not to be trusted, a man who had failed to uphold the prestige of the company.

Suddenly a faint spark of hope stirred deep within him. If he could get there soon enough! If he could get to Melody Bowl in time, he might stop this madness. Might at least save something, save a few of the precious trees.

The flier was in the compound, waiting. Within half an hour he could be above the Bowl.

He leaped for the door, shoved it open and even as he did a pellet whistled past his cheek and exploded into a puff of dust against the door frame. Instinctively, he ducked and another pellet brushed his hair. A third caught him in the leg with stinging force and brought him down. A fourth puffed dust into his face.

He fought his way to his knees, was staggered by another shot that slammed into his side. He raised his right arm to protect his face and a sledge-hammer blow slapped his wrist. Pain flowed along his arm and in sheer panic he turned and scrambled on hands and knees across the threshold, kicked the door shut with his foot.

Sitting flat on the floor, he held his right wrist in his left hand. He tried to make his fingers wiggle and they wouldn't. The wrist, he knew, was broken.

After weeks of being off the beam, the rifle tree outside the compound suddenly had regained its aim and gone on a rampage.

Mackenzie raised himself off the floor and braced himself with one elbow, while with the other hand he fumbled at his throbbing throat. The interior of the tractor danced with wavy motion and his head thumped and pounded with pain.

Slowly, carefully he inched himself back so he could lean against the wall. Gradually the room stopped rocking, but the pounding in his head went on.

Someone was standing in the doorway of the tractor and he fought to focus his eyes, trying to make out who it was.

A voice screeched across his nerves.

"I'm taking your blankets. You'll get them back when you decide to leave the trees alone."

Mackenzie tried to fashion words, but all he accomplished was a croak. He tried again.

"Wade?" he asked.

It was Wade, he saw.

The man stood within the doorway, one hand clutching a pair of blankets, the other holding a gun.

"You're crazy, Wade," he whispered. "We have to burn the trees. The human race never would be safe. Even if they fail this time, they'll try again. And again—and yet again. And some day they will get us. Even without going to Earth they can get us. They can twist us to their purpose with recordings alone. Long distance propaganda. Take a bit longer, but it will do the job as well."

"They are beautiful," said Wade. "The most beautiful things in all the universe. I can't let you destroy them. You must not destroy them."

"But can't you see,' croaked Mackenzie, "that's the thing that makes them so dangerous. Their beauty, the beauty of their music, is fatal. No one can resist it."

"It was the thing I lived by," Wade told him soberly. You say it made me something that was not quite human. But what difference does that make. Must racial purity, in thought and action, be a fetish that would chain us to a drab existence when something better, something greater is offered? And we never would have known. That is the best of it all. We never would have known. They would have

changed us, yes, but so slowly, so gradually, that we would not have suspected. Our decisions and our actions and our way of thought would still have seemed to be our own. The trees never would have been anything more than something cultural."

"They want our mechanization," said Mackenzie. "Plants can't develop machines. Given that they might have taken us along a road we, in our rightful heritage, never would have taken."

"How can we be sure," asked Wade, "that our heritage would have guided us aright?"

Mackenzie slid straighter against the wall. His head still throbbed and his throat still ached.

"You've been thinking about this?" he asked.

Wade nodded. "At first there was the natural reaction of horror. But, logically, that reaction is erroneous. Our schools teach our children a way of life. Our press strives to formulate our adult opinion and belief. The trees were doing no more to us than we do to ourselves. And perhaps, for a purpose no more selfish."

Mackenzie shook his head. "We must live our own life. We must follow the path the attributes of humanity decree that we should follow. And anyway, you're wasting your time."

"I don't understand," said Wade.

"Nellie already is burning the trees," Mackenzie told him. "I sent her out before I made the call to Harper."

"No, she's not," said Wade.

Mackenzie sat bolt upright. "What do you mean?"

Wade flipped the pistol as Mackenzie moved as if to regain his feet.

"It doesn't matter what I mean," he snapped. "Nellie isn't burning any trees. She isn't in a position to burn any trees. And neither are you, for I've taken both your flamers. And the tractor won't run, either. I've seen to that. So the only thing that you can do is stay right here."

Mackenzie motioned toward Smith, lying on the floor. "You're taking his blanket, too?"

Wade nodded.

"But you can't. Smith will die. Without that blanket he doesn't have a chance. The blanket could have healed the wound, kept him fed correctly, kept him warm—"

"That," said Wade, "is all the more reason that you come to terms directly."

"Your terms," said Mackenzie, "are that we leave the trees unharmed."

"Those are my terms."

Mackenzie shook his head. "I can't take the chance," he said.

"When you decide, just step out and shout," Wade told him. "I'll stay in calling distance."

He backed slowly from the door.

Smith needed warmth and food. In the hour since his blanket had been taken from him he had regained consciousness, had mumbled feverishly and tossed about, his hand clawing at his wounded side.

Squatting beside him, Mackenzie had tried to quiet him, had felt a wave of slow terror as he thought of the hours ahead.

There was no food in the tractor, no means for making heat. There was no need for such provision so long as they had had their life blankets—but now the blankets were gone. There was a first-aid cabinet and with the materials that he found there, Mackenzie did his fumbling best, but there was nothing to relieve Smith's pain, nothing to control his fever. For treatment such as that they had relied upon the blankets.

The atomic motor might have been rigged up to furnish heat, but Wade had taken the firing machanism control.

Night was falling and that meant the air would grow colder. Not too cold to live, of course, but cold enough to spell doom to a man in Smith's condition.

Mackenzie squatted on his heels and stared at Smith.

"If I could only find Nellie," he thought.

He had tried to find her—briefly. He had raced along the rim of the Bowl for a mile or so, but had seen no sign of her.

He had been afraid to go farther, afraid to stay too long from the man back in the tractor.

Smith mumbled and Mackenzie bent low to try to catch the words. But there were no words.

Slowly he rose and headed for the door. First of all, he needed heat. Then food. The heat came first. An open fire wasn't the best way to make heat, of course, but it was better than nothing.

The uprooted music tree, balled roots silhouetted against the sky, loomed before him in the dusk. He found a few dead branches and tore them off. They would do to start the fire. After that he would have to rely on green wood to keep it going. Tomorrow he could forage about for suitable fuel.

In the Bowl below, the music trees were tuning up for the evening concert.

Back in the tractor, he found a knife, carefully slivered several of the branches for easy lighting, piled them ready for his pocket lighter.

The lighter flared and a tiny figure hopped up on the threshold of the tractor, squatting there, blinking at the light.

Startled, Mackenzie held the lighter without touching it to the wood, stared at the thing that perched in the doorway.

Delbert's squeaky thought drilled into his brain.

"What you doing?"

"Building a fire," Mackenzie told him.

"What's a fire?"

"It's a . . . it's a . . . say, don't you know what a fire is?"

"Nope," said Delbert.

"It's a chemical action," Mackenzie said. "It breaks up matter and releases energy in form of heat."

"What you building a fire with?" asked Delbert, blinking in the flare of the lighter.

"With branches from a tree."

Delbert's eyes widened and his thought was jittery.

"A tree?"

"Sure, a tree. Wood. It burns. It gives off heat. I need heat."

"What tree?"

"Why—" And then Mackenzie stopped with sudden realization. His thumb relaxed and the flame went out.

Delbert shrieked at him in sudden terror and anger. "It's my tree! You're building a fire with my tree!"

Mackenzie sat in silence.

"When you burn my tree, it's gone," yelled Delbert. "Isn't that right? When you burn my tree, it's gone?"

Mackenzie nodded.

"But why do you do it?" shrilled Delbert.

"I need heat," said Mackenzie doggedly. "If I don't have heat, my friend will die. It's the only way I can get heat."

"But my tree!"

Mackenzie shrugged. "I need a fire, see? And I'm getting it any way I can."

He flipped his thumb again and the lighter flared.

"But I never did anything to you," Delbert howled, rocking on the metal door sill. "I'm your friend, I am. I never did a thing to hurt you."

"No?" asked Mackenzie.

"No," yelled Delbert.

"What about that scheme of yours?" asked Mackenzie. "Trying to trick me into taking trees to Earth?"

"That wasn't my idea," yipped Delbert. "It wasn't any of the trees' ideas. The Encyclopedia thought it up."

A bulky form loomed outside the door. "Someone talking about me?" it asked.

The Encyclopedia was back again.

Arrogantly, he shouldered Delbert aside, stepped into the tractor.

"I saw Wade," he said.

Mackenzie glared at him. "So you figured it would be safe to come."

"Certainly," said the Encyclopedia. "Your formula of force counts for nothing now. You have no means to enforce it."

Mackenzie's hand shot out and grasped the Encyclopedia

with a vicious grip, hurled him into the interior of the tractor.

"Just try to get out this door," he snarled. "You'll soon find out if the formula of force amounts to anything."

The Encyclopedia picked himself up, shook himself like a ruffled hen. But his thought was cool and calm.

"I can't see what this avails you."

"It gives us soup," Mackenzie snapped.

He sized the Encyclopedia up. "Good vegetable soup. Something like cabbage. Never cared much for cabbage soup, myself, but—"

"Soup?"

"Yeah, soup. Stuff to eat. Food."

"Food!" The Encyclopedia's thought held a tremor of anxiety. "You would use me as food?"

"Why not?" Mackenzie asked him. "You're nothing but a vegetable. An intelligent vegetable, granted, but still a vegetable."

He felt the Encyclopedia's groping thought fingers prying into his mind.

"Go ahead," he told him, "but you won't like what you find."

The Encyclopedia's thoughts almost gasped. "You withheld this from me!" he charged.

"We withheld nothing from you," Mackenzie declared. "We never had occasion to think of it . . . to remember to what use Men at one time put plants, to what use we still put plants in certain cases. The only reason we don't use them so extensively now is that we have advanced beyond the need of them. Let that need exist again and—"

"You ate us," strummed the Encyclopedia. "You used us to build your shelters! You destroyed us to create heat for your selfish purposes!"

"Pipe down," Mackenzie told him. "It's the way we did it that gets you. The idea that we thought we had a right to. That we went out and took, without even asking, never wondering what the plant might think about it. That hurts your racial dignity."

He stopped, then moved closer to the doorway. From

the Bowl below came the first strains of the music. The tuning up, the preliminary to the concert was over.

"O.K.," Mackenzie said, "I'll hurt it some more. Even you are nothing but a plant to me. Just because you've learned some civilized tricks doesn't make you my equal. It never did. We humans can't slur off the experiences of the past so easily. It would take thousands of years of association with things like you before we even began to regard you as anything other than a plant, a thing that we used in the past and might use again."

"Still cabbage soup," said the Encyclopedia.

"Still cabbage soup," Mackenzie told him.

The music stopped. Stopped dead still, in the middle of a note.

"See," said Mackenzie, "even the music fails you."

Silence rolled at them in engulfing waves and through the stillness came another sound, the *clop, clop* of heavy, plodding feet.

"Nellie!" yelled Mackenzie.

A bulky shadow loomed in the darkness.

"Yeah, chief, it's me," said Nellie. "I brung you something."

She dumped Wade across the doorway.

Wade rolled over and groaned. There were skittering, flapping sounds as two fluttering shapes detached themselves from Wade's shoulders.

"Nellie," said Mackenzie harshly, "there was no need to beat him up. You should have brought him back just as he was and let me take care of him.

"Gee, boss," protested Nellie. "I didn't beat him up. He was like that when I found him."

Nicodemus was clawing his way to Mackenzie's shoulder, while Smith's life blanket scuttled for the corner where his master lay.

"It was us, boss," piped Nicodemus. "We laid him out."

"You laid him out?"

"Sure, there was two of us and only one of him. We fed him poison."

Nicodemus settled into place on Mackenzie's shoulders.

"I didn't like him," he declared. "He wasn't nothing like you, boss. I didn't want to change like him. I wanted to stay like you."

"This poison?" asked Mackenzie. "Nothing fatal, I hope."

"Sure not, pal," Nicodemus told him. "We only made him sick. He didn't know what was happening until it was too late to do anything about it. We bargained with him, we did. We told him we'd quit feeding it to him if he took us back. He was on his way here, too, but he'd never have made it if it hadn't been for Nellie."

"Chief," pleaded Nellie, "when he gets so he knows what it's all about, won't you let me have him for about five minutes?"

"No," said Mackenzie.

"He strung me up," wailed Nellie. "He hid in the cliff and lassoed me and left me hanging there. It took me hours to get loose. Honest, I wouldn't hurt him much. I'd just kick him around a litle, gentle-like."

From the cliff top came the rustling of grass as if hundreds of little feet were advancing upon them.

"We got visitors," said Nicodemus.

The visitors, Mackenzie saw, were the conductors, dozens of little gnomelike figures that moved up and squatted on their haunches, faintly luminous eyes blinking at them.

One of them shambled forward. As he came closer, Mackenzie saw that it was Alder.

"Well?" Mackenzie demanded.

"We came to tell you the deal is off," Alder squeaked. "Delbert came and told us."

"Told you what?"

"About what you do to trees."

"Oh, that."

"Yes, that."

"But you made the deal," Mackenzie told him. "You can't back out now. Why, Earth is waiting breathless—"

"Don't try to kid me," snapped Alder. "You don't want us any more than we want you. It was a dirty trick to start with, but it wasn't any of our doing. The Encyclopedia talked us into it. He told us we had a duty. A duty to our

race. To act as missionaries to the inferior races of the Galaxy.

"We didn't take to it at first. Music, you see, is our life. We have been creating music for so long that our origin is lost in the dim antiquity of a planet that long ago has passed its zenith of existence. We will be creating music in that far day when the planet falls apart beneath our feet. You live by a code of accomplishment by action. We live by a code of accomplishment by music. Kadmar's Red Sun symphony was a greater triumph for us than the discovery of a new planetary system is for you. It pleased us when you liked our music. It will please us if you still like our music, even after what has happened. But we will not allow you to take any of us to Earth."

"The monopoly on the music still stands?" asked Mackenzie.

"It still stands. Come whenever you want to and record my symphony. When there are others we will let you know.

"And the propaganda in the music?"

"From now on," Alder promised, "the propaganda is out. If, from now on, our music changes you, it will change you through its own power. It may do that, but we will not try to shape your lives."

"How can we depend on that?"

"Certainly," said Alder, "there are certain tests you could devise. Not that they will be necessary."

"We'll devise the tests," declared Mackenzie. "Sorry, but we can't trust you."

"I'm sorry that you can't," said Alder, and he sounded as if he were.

"I was going to burn you," Mackenzie said, snapping his words off brutally. "Destroy you. Wipe you out. There was nothing you could have done about it. Nothing you could have done to stop me."

"You're still barbarians," Alder told him. "You have conquered the distances between the stars, you have built a great civilization, but your methods are still ruthless and degenerate."

"The Encyclopedia calls it a formula of force," Macken-

zie said. "No matter what you call it, it still works. It's the thing that took us up. I warn you. If you ever again try to trick the human race, there will be hell to pay. A human being will destroy anything to save himself. Remember that—we destroy anything that threatens us."

Something swished out of the tractor door and Mackenzie whirled about.

"It's the Encyclopedia!" he yelled. "He's trying to get away! Nellie!"

There was a thrashing rustle. "Got him, boss," said Nellie.

The robot came out of the darkness, dragging the Encyclopedia along by his leafy topknot.

Mackenzie turned back to the composers, but the composers were gone. The grass rustled eerily toward the cliff edge as dozens of tiny feet scurried through it.

"What now?" asked Nellie. "Do we burn the trees?"

Mackenzie shook his head. "No, Nellie. We won't burn them."

"We got them scared," said Nellie. "Scared pink with purple spots."

"Perhaps we have," said Mackenzie. "Let's hope so, at least. But it isn't only that they're scared. They probably loathe us and that is better yet. Like we'd loathe some form of life that bred and reared men for food—that thought of Man as nothing else than food. All the time they've thought of themselves as the greatest intellectual force in the universe. We've given them a jolt. We've scared them and hurt their pride and shook their confidence. They've run up against something that is more than a match for them. Maybe they'll think twice again before they try any more shenanigans."

Down in the Bowl the music began again.

Mackenzie went in to look at Smith. The man was sleeping peacefully, his blanket wrapped around him. Wade sat in a corner, head held in his hands.

Outside a rocket murmured and Nellie yelled. Mackenzie spun on his heel and dashed through the door. A ship was swinging over the Bowl, lighting up the area with floods.

Swiftly it swooped down, came to ground a hundred yards away.

Harper, right arm in a sling tumbled out and raced toward them.

"You didn't burn them!" he was yelling. "You didn't burn them!"

Mackenzie shook his head.

Harper pounded him on the back with his good hand. "Knew you wouldn't. Knew you wouldn't all the time. Just kidding the chief, eh? Having a little fun."

"Not exactly fun."

"About them trees," said Harper. "We can't take them back to Earth, after all."

"I told you that," Mackenzie said.

"Earth just called me, half an hour ago," said Harper. "Seems there's a law, passed centuries ago. Against bringing alien plants to Earth. Some lunkhead once brought a bunch of stuff from Mars that just about ruined Earth, so they passed the law. Been there all the time, forgotten."

Mackenzie nodded. "Someone dug it up?"

"That's right," said Harper. "And slapped an injunction on Galactic. We can't touch those trees."

"You wouldn't have anyhow," said Mackenzie. "They wouldn't go."

"But you made the deal! They were anxious to go—"

"That," Mackenzie told him, "was before they found out we used plants for food—and other things."

"But . . . but—"

"To them," said Mackenzie, "we're just a gang of ogres. Something they'll scare the little plants with. Tell them if they don't be quiet the humans will get 'em."

Nellie came around the corner of the tractor, still hauling the Encyclopedia by his topknot.

"Hey," yelled Harper, "what goes on here?"

"We'll have to build a concentration camp," said Mackenzie. "Big high fence." He motioned with his thumb toward the Encyclopedia.

Harper stared. "But he hasn't done anything!"

"Nothing but try to take over the human race," Mackenzie said.

Harper sighed. "That makes two fences we got to build. That rifle tree back at the post is shooting up the place."

Mackenzie grinned. "Maybe the one fence will do for the both of them."

THE END

ASSIGNMENT ON PASIK

by
MURRAY LEINSTER

THE SNARK hit atmosphere, screaming, and Stannard grimly set himself to fight it out with the fins. A half-hour since he'd used what jets remained in action, and the gyros too, past all sane risk. He had a good approach-course now, though—it was a shallow, almost infinitesimal slant toward the planet's surface—but normal landing-procedures were definitely out. He saw seas and land and peninsulas below, so random-landing would be unwise. He had to depend on the fins and the *Snark's* streamlining to gain some sort of control from the resistance of the air. He succeeded only in part.

The *Snark* bounced, and the straps that held him in his chair dug into his flesh, and then the small space-car seemed to throw a fit. It went spinning through some fleecy cirrus clouds a good four miles up, and then straightened out and skidded backwards. The tail went up and Stannard saw jungle below him, straight in front of the control-room ports, and the *Snark* seemed to decide that this was a good place to smash, and dived down with the evident purpose of splashing itself and Stannard over as much landscape as possible. At least, though, this was land. There was a sea not many miles away.

He caught a fleeting glimpse of foliage rising past the side-ports. Then jets sputtered erratically, he heard the begin-

ning shriek of dry gyro-shafts, there was a crashing, then a violent bump, then a heaving, wrenching explosion, and the control-room split down the middle on either side of him, the whole scrap-heap which was the *Snark* partly folded on itself like an accordion and partly billowed out like an expanding latex-bubble, —and there was a vast silence.

Stannard hung in the control-seat with an expression of vast amazement on his face. The amazement was because he was alive. He didn't even seem to have any broken bones. But the *Snark* was not quite through. He heard a crackling, booming noise. The fuel-store had caught. And it might burn merely brightly, or it might burn with the ravening ferocity of thermit, or it might let go at any instant in a monstrous detonation which would blast everything up to half a mile away.

It was time to get away from there. Stannard broke loose the straps, pitched headlong and without dignity, scrambled through a gap in the plating, and ran like the devil.

He dodged tree-trunks, panting, and came out on a patch of savannah just as the fuel blew. There was a sound like the end of all creation, a blast of air lifted him off his feet and hurtled him forward through the air with his legs still making ridiculous running motions.

Then there was stillness once more. He looked about, and listened. In ancient days there had been tales of castaways. They were very glamorous, exciting stories. But this was something else. Even aside from the absolute failure of the job he'd been on, he was in a bad fix. This was one of the planets of the Bornik star-cluster, and he thought it was Pasik but he was not sure. The whole group had been surveyed, a couple of centuries before, and all the stars were yellow dwarfs, the planets were approximately solar-family types, and the vegetation on this one had been green as seen from space. Green vegetation plus seas meant breathable atmosphere and not too impossible a climate. This could be Pasik, if he'd identified the local sun correctly. But he wasn't sure even of that. This part of the galaxy wasn't much visited. Sometimes a hunting party came through to land here and there and gather more or less improbable speci-

mens. There were races of low development on some of the planets, and there was a vague commerce of sorts kept up by occasional traders. But the known facts about the planets were few. Men could live on them, but few did. A castaway could survive, but the odds against being picked up were so enormous that they were best expressed by zero.

He moved back toward the site of the recent explosion. He came to trees bent outward from the blast. He went through them to stumps of trees snapped off by the explosion and piled in untidy windrows. He wormed through a passable place and saw the crater where the *Snark* had been. There was literally nothing left but a hole in the ground. On one pile of shattered trees he saw a bit of torn plating. Caught among tree-stumps he saw a crumpled mass of metal. And that was all.

He managed to shrug. No stores, no tools, no food. Hopelessly isolated for all time.

Then he saw a movement across the clearing the explosion had made. Something glistened blackly among tree-branches. A thing came out of the tumbled, shattered trees. It carried a spear, and it was about five feet high. It had a cylindrical body and glistening, jointed legs which looked mechanical. It had two arms of nearly human size, and two smaller, apparently specialized mandible-like upper arms, and a head which was curiously humanoid without being in the least human. Another similar creature followed it, and another and another. There were thirty of them, altogether. Some carried spears, and others carried other weapons, and several had bags containing mysterious objects slung over their shoulders.

They regarded the crater and made noises among themselves. Stannard froze. A man who stands motionless does not attract attention. This is true on all planets, everywhere. Stannard stood still.

The sticklike men moved forward. They peered into the crater where the fuel had blown a hole all of forty feet across. One of them pointed to the crumpled metal plating. More noises. One of them doubled up suddenly, and then was erect again. Others did the same. They clustered around

the crater and gesticulated to one another. Then, suddenly, they began to dance. It was an hilarious, unorganized, utterly gleeful dance. Stannard realized, blinking, that they knew exactly what the plating was, and they knew that a ship had crashed and blown itself to atoms, and that the doublings-up were laughter and the hopping and cavorting was the expression of exuberence that a creation of men had destroyed itself and—of course—apparently killed all the humans in it.

Then one of the stick-men saw Stannard. The dancing stopped instantly. All the stick-men—those with spears included—stared at him. They began to move toward him.

It was preposterous. It was absurd. Stannard felt his flesh crawl as the litter carried him swiftly through a narrow lane in the jungle which seemed to be unending. The litter which carried him had been hastily improvised, but it was comfortable. Stick-men carried him swiftly, some running with the flexible litter-poles on their shoulders, some running behind, and at least one or two had gone racing on before to carry the news. From time to time the unburdened ones pelted up level with Stannard's bearers and deftly took their places, while the relieved ones fell back. And the one who spoke English trotted alongside Stannard and babbled as if ecstatic whenever Stannard glanced in his direction.

"Pasiki have master," he seemed to chortle. "Pasiki have man-master to serve! All Pasiki love man-master! All Pasiki glad to have master! Oh, master, we are happy to have master to serve!"

Stannard kept his face impassive. It did not make sense. That crazy, zestful, rejoicing dance about the scene of the *Snark's* explosion, and now this babbling abasement. When the dancers had first seen him they had stopped short in their dance. They had seen a man, alive, and a murmuring arose among them. Spears had shifted. Then a shrill voice had called among the rest as they moved toward him. One had come ahead. Twenty yards away he had gone down on hands and knees. The others stopped. The leader crawled to Stannard's feet, and then abjectly lifted Stannard's foot and

put it on his head. And he spoke—in English! It was not speech from a throat, somehow. It was actually the vibration of a diaphragm somewhere near where a man's throat would have been. But it formed English words. Now that same native babbled more English words, trotting swiftly beside the litter the others had made and brought for Stannard to ride in.

"Oh, master, such gladness! Pasiki do not know what to do without man-master! Hundreds, thousands Pasiki serve with such gladness!"

Stannard said drily, "How much farther do we go?"

"Not far, master," chortled the English-speaking one. "We have sent for man-style servants, for man-style food, for man-things man master will want. Oh, such gladness!"

Stannard again had a crawling sensation in the back of his neck. If he'd ever seen triumphant hate in his life, it had been the dancing about the crater where the *Snark* had struck. And surely, if these stick-like, these ant-like men—Pasiki, they called themselves, which would mean that this was the planet Pasik, barely mentioned in the Space Directory as an earth-type planet, friendly inhabitants of grade 2B, type exoskeletal tympannate—surely if these creatures had wanted to kill him, they could have done so with their spears. Stannard reflected vaguely on tales of local dieties to whom sacrifice was made. They did not fit, either.

"Where'd you learn man-talk?" he asked abruptly.

"Man-master, master," babbled the Pasiki, skipping in seeming glee as he kept pace with the litter. "Man-master had many Pasiki to serve him. All Pasiki love man-master! Our man-master died, master. Some Pasiki went to serve woman-master, but they come more gladness to serve man-master."

"Woman?" said Stannard. "There are men and women masters here?"

"One woman-master," said the Pasiki in seeming bliss. "Eight—nine—ten man-master, master. You make leven man-master for Pasiki!"

The trail widened ahead. There was a sort of glade with thick, leafy stuff for a carpet in the place of grass. There was

a tent set up there. Stannard wanted to rub his eyes. It was not a tent, but a pavillion—a shelter erected on poles, shimmering like silk. There was a carpet on the ground. There was a table. There was a couch. There was a chair. The table was loaded with fruits and great platters heaped with foodstuffs. There were even bottles with colored contents. There was a stream of black, glistening figures running out of the farther side of the glade where the trail re-entered the jungle. Each carried some object, and every object was human. Stannard saw cushions, books, binoculars, pots and pans, silverware. He saw a sporting-rifle being hustled out of the forest toward the pavillion. He saw clothing—all of a man's wardrobe carried piece by piece to be dumped at the back of the pavillion.

"Pasiki bring things for man-master," chirped the English-speaking creature. "Everything our man-master left. Not one thing lost! All for new man-master."

Then Stannard stiffened. The things being brought out of the forest, now, were unbelievable. They looked like human bodies, except that they were carried with such lightness and such ease that they could not possibly be bodies. More, bodies would not be limp and boneless like that.

"Man-style servant-suits, master," the skipping creature gloated. "Pasiki make master happy, master make Pasiki glad. You look! You see!"

At sight of the litter, the creatures carrying the limp objects stopped short. And then Stannard's eyes popped wide. The things that looked like human bodies were actually suits, of a sort. Like diving-suits. But their look was utterly different. The creatures who carried them put them hastily down. Then they struggled with them. They put them on. And suddenly, instead of glistening black articulated things that looked like ants or stick-insects, there were half a dozen startlingly human-like figures moving toward the pavillion.

When the litter stopped, these oddities stood in amazing similitude of human servants to greet him. There was a figure which looked exactly like a butler out of an old book, complete with striped pants and vest. There was a valet.

There were two footmen. There were two maids, similarly contrived. They were incredibly convincing. Their flesh was lifelike. Their faces wore the reserved, detached expressions of perfect servants. Even their eyes moved and they had hands with fingers on them. The only thing that was not wholly lifelike was the fact that the garments on the figures had been moulded on them. The disguises—uniforms—servant-suits—were made of some extraordinarily flexible plastic, on the order of foam-flex, and each contained a hollow interior into which one of the insectile Pasiki fitted. With a stick-creature inside, the flexible creation stood erect and moved and looked human. Then the movements of the creature inside moved the outer shell as a man in a diving-suit moves his casing.

"Master," said the butler-shape, "we have gladness. Welcome, master. You rest and eat, master?"

Stannard surreptitiously pinched himself. He got out of the litter. The food looked good and smelled good. The butler-thing pulled back the chair. Stannard, his eyes a bit narrow, halted.

"Hm . . ." he said suspiciously. "Did I see a rifle just now?"

An unintelligible sound. Then a glistening black creature darted from the back of the pavillion. It placed a rifle in the lifelike hands of a footman-figure. The footman presented it to Stannard with an infinitely deferential bow. Stannard examined it closely. It seemed to be in perfect condition. He raised it and aimed at a tree-limb across the open space. He pulled the trigger. There was the normal, violent surge of energy and the regulation flare of deep-purple flame. The branch flew apart with a burst of steam. Stannard lowered the rifle. It was a weapon, all right, and in good working order. If these creatures had intended to kill him after some extraordinary hokus-pokus, they wouldn't have given him a rifle with which he could kill scores of them!

"All right," he said grimly. "I guess this is straight. I'll have lunch. Then what?"

"Master's house waits," said the butler-thing, obsequiously.

"If master wishes, he goes there. Or Pasiki make him new house here. Or anywhere. Anything master desires, Pasiki will do with gladness."

Stannard sat down. He had something to think about. He began to have a queer, so-far-unjustified hunch that this distinctly novel experience had something to do with the job he'd had on hand when he was ship-wrecked.

"You wish music, master?" asked the butler, deferentially.

"Eh? Oh, surely," said Stannard, abstractedly.

His seat did not give him a view of the trail from which a file of black creatures still trotted, bringing burdens. Now he saw an orchestra file before him. It looked real. It had uniforms. He suddenly recognized it—a name-band which had made visiphone records which ten years before had caught the fancy of half the galaxy. Servant-suits—plastic shapes into which the Pasiki slid themselves—reproduced the build and faces of the original musicians. There were instruments. Music began. It was an excellent imitation of a visiphone record, but after a moment Stannard noted that the movements of the instrumentalists did not match the music. The sound did not come from the instruments, then, but from that diaphragm each of the Pasiki possessed, and which vibrated to make speech or sound. It was somehow shocking to realize it.

Then dancers appeared, and Stannard almost started up. They were slim and graceful and shapely, and they had plainly studied visiphone records and learned the dances of human beings. But they were Pasiki, clothed in plastic suit-masks. Still, they were astonishingly like lissome human girls in the minimum of costume, dancing to sultry, impassioned music.

Somehow, Stannard felt a little sick.

On the third morning, as he waked, the butler-form hovered about his bed. The bed, like the palace to which he had been conducted, was shoddy and elaborate and falsely elegant. The building had plainly been constructed by the Pasiki under orders from a human being who con-

sidered that visiphone records portrayed the everyday life of aristocrats.

"Master," said the butler-thing obsequiously, "man-master comes to see you. In two hours."

Stannard rolled out of bed. The butler-masked Pasiki helped him to dress. Stannard wore the garments in which he had been wrecked, including his belt. As he fastened it, the butler handed him another belt. It contained two hand-blasters in holsters.

"Why weapons?" asked Stannard. "If I'm to have a visitor—"

"Man-masters, master," said the butler-thing blandly, "always wear weapons to see each other."

He bowed, to withdraw.

"But why?" demanded Stannard. "Custom or what?"

"Sometimes they kill," said the butler, as if piously regretful. "It is not for Pasiki to understand, master. The master who was here before was killed by another master."

Stannard said: "How'd the killing come about?"

"Who knows, master? They drank together, and the other master killed our master. You can ask, master, when he comes."

"The same killer's to be my visitor, eh?" said Stannard. "And what happened after the killing?"

"He went away, master. He did not want our master's possessions."

"How about the law?"

The butler-thing said blankly:

"Law, master?"

"I see," said Stannard grimly. "Humans are above the law to Pasiki. And there are too few to make laws for themselves. But didn't you Pasiki do anything at all when your master was killed?"

"We asked what the other master wished us to do, master," said the butler-shape. "We wished to serve him. But he told us to go to the devil. Then he would not tell us how to do that thing and laughed as he went away."

"I see," said Stannard.

He buckled on the extra belt with the two blasters. The

Pasiki served men, apparently. Any man would do. There was no feeling of loyalty to an individual. One man killed another man, and the Pasiki who had been joyous slaves to the murdered man promptly offered themselves as joyous slaves to the murderer. It was somehow convincing. It looked quite a lot as if this fitted into Stannard's hunch about a connection between Pasik and his job. But there was no mention of a woman-master, yet. He'd almost forgotten the one mention of her that he'd heard.

He was at breakfast when, utterly without warning, she came into the room. Her entrance was partly hidden by the butler-mask with its shiny-skinned occupant, who was serving Stannard his breakfast with elaborate ceremony. Stannard saw the feminine form, but he had seen enough foamflex servants. This one he had not seen before, but he was not interested. He spooned out a morsel of a curious pink-fleshed fruit and put it to his lips. Then the butler-thing move obsequiously aside and bowed.

"Welcome!" said the butler-thing profoundly. "Welcome to woman-master! Pasiki have gladness!"

Stannard looked up blankly. The girl faced him across the table, and she had a blaster in her hand. It pointed straight at Stannard.

"Good-morning," said the girl in a taut voice. "I'd like to know something about you, please. Of course I'd better kill you out of hand, but I'd like to be fair."

Stannard blinked. His eyes went to the blaster, and to her face. He suddenly noted that her costume was not a part of her body. It was not moulded on. It had been donned.

"You—you're human!" he said blankly.

"Quite," said the girl. She was very pale. "And my Pasiki have let slip you were planning to pay me a visit, so I thought I'd visit first. Don't move, please! I'm going to take your blasters."

She moved around the table, keeping him covered. The human-seeming servants skipped agilely out of her way. She ignored them. Stannard sat still, his hands on the table.

"Don't move!" she repeated fiercely, "I've no reason not to shoot!"

She was behind him. The blaster-muzzle touched the back of his neck. It pressed. Hard. She bent forward and reached around him to loosen the belt which held his weapons. He felt the warmth of her breath.

"Be still!" she commanded. But he caught the note of strain which was almost hysteria in her voice. "Keep still!"

The pressure of the blaster-muzzle was almost savage against his neck. Then he turned his head. Because of the pressure, the blaster-muzzle slid off and past his cheek. It flared as she desperately pulled the trigger. A part of the opposite wall spurted intolerable flame. And then the girl was in his arms, fighting desperately, and he was twisting the blaster from her fingers. Flames roared from the ceiling as the blaster flashed again. The room filled with stinking smoke.

Then he had the weapon away from her. He stepped back, breathing fast. He released her.

"I'd rather not be killed this morning," he told her. "More especially, not for a Pasiki holiday!"

He gestured angrily about him. The foam-figures—so incredibly convincing at any one glance—stared avidly at the picture of conflict between human beings. Other Pasiki—hordes of black, shining, inhuman shapes—pressed to look zestfully in through doors and windows.

"I've more than a hunch that they hate humans," he said wrathfully. "It would be only to be expected that they'd lie to you if it would make you try to kill me, and perhaps to me to get me killed. But is everybody here fooled by it? If my presence here's annoying, I'll be delighted to leave! I didn't come here on purpose! These creatures aren't my idea of congenial society!"

He glowered at her. Then he turned and snarled at the Pasiki in servant-suits and otherwise, who watched hopefully for a killing.

"Get the devil away from here!" he rasped.

Obsequiously, the servants retired. The staring, inhuman

faces outside vanished. Stannard tossed the girl's blaster contemptuously on the table.

"Sit down!" he said sourly. "I'll be glad to tell you anything you want to know, especially if you'll tell me a few things!"

The girl panted, staring at him as if she did not believe what she had seen and heard.

"You—let me go!" she said, as if stunned. "You—really let me—go!"

Stannard went back to the pink-fleshed fruit.

"Why not? I've been here for . . ." he counted up, "this is my third day. I was in a space-car headed from Billem to Sooris. I was alone. I'd had some repairs made in Billem, and they were badly done. Whether on purpose or not, some fool soldered the firing control junctions instead of flash-welding them, and the vibration broke them loose. I landed here with four jets firing out of eighteen, and all of them on one side. My gyros burned out too, trying to hold me on course. And I hit out of control, jumped, and ran away before the fuel blew. I came back to find Pasiki dancing joyously about the hole the crater had made, and then they fawned on me and said they loved me to death. They've been repeating that song ever since but I doubt their sincerity. I would like to get away from this planet. It isn't my idea of a sane or a wholesome atmosphere. Now, what else do you want to know?"

Her face worked suddenly.

"If—if that's true," she said unsteadily, "that's enough. If you were—really shipwrecked, and didn't—come here like the others—"

He raised his eyebrows, but his unreasonable hunch grew stronger. She was trembling. There was enormous relief in her voice.

"Sit down and have breakfast," he commanded. "By the way. I wasn't told you were coming. I guess that that was to give you an extra chance to kill me. I have been told that I'm to have a man visitor. Is he likely to have—ah—murderous intentions too?"

She looked scared.

"That would be—Mr. Brent. He's the nearest. Y-yes. He'll probably kill you. And—" Then she said desperately. "May I have my blaster back, please? Please! If he's coming I'll need it! But—but together we should be able to kill him instead. . . ."

Her name, she said, was Jan Casin, and she had been on Pasik for ten years—since she was a small child. The Hill Foundation had sent her father to the planet as a one-man scientific expedition. The Space Directory said that the local intelligent race was friendly to humans and there seemed to be no danger.

But a long while later—and this was not reported to the Space Patrol, and hence never got into the Directory—the situation changed. A trader of a new sort landed. He was a typical trader of the later time, one-half merchant and two-thirds pirate when he dared. The Pasiki, he discovered, had gemstones highly valued for technical uses. The trader bargained for them. But he and his crew were contemptuous of the stick-like, insectiform natives. The men were overbearing and rapacious. When the Pasiki grew resentful, the traders siezed a number of them and threatened to kill them unless they were ransomed for a full cargo of gem-stones. The Pasiki, in turn, managed to sieze some members of the trader's crew for hostages. The trader's crew, enraged, blasted a Pasiki town. The Pasiki promptly killed the hostages. The trader departed, swearing vengeance.

Later the trader returned with five other trading-ships. The Pasiki were furiously warned of wrath to come unless they made complete submission. They defied the six ships. And the ships set about a methodical, murderous slaughter. Every town and every village was blasted. Pasiki by millions must have been killed. The gem-stones wanted by the traders could be recovered from the ashes of blasted towns, and doubtless were. And then the six ships set up fan-beams—already illegal for any but Space Patrol ships to possess—and made gigantic roundups of the survivors, driving them ahead of the curtains of agony until more thousands died of exhaus-

tion, and until the sobbing, beaten remnant had lost all spirit and all hope.

When the six ships left, the few survivors of the last enormity had been subdued as no race was ever subdued before. They had sworn terrible oaths for themselves and their descendants until the end of time. They were the slaves of men. They were vermin under the feet of men. They would dig up the gem-stones men craved and give them as tribute forever and ever and ever. And they were passionately resigned to it.

For thirty full years, mine-slavery was their function. Then the gem-stones lost their value because it became possible to crystallize carbon in any size and quantity anywhere. There had never been many humans on Pasik, at any time, and the Space Patrol had carefully been kept in ignorance of events there. But when the gem-stones lost value, most humans left. Those who left, however, kept the secret of a planet to which any man could retire when troubles were close upon him, and those who remained stayed on because they were wanted too badly by the Patrol to find safety anywhere else. They turned the submissive Pasiki into domestic slaves. They built palaces and lived as kings over the scuttling little people. Before they died off they were joined by others,—some their late comrades of the mining days, and some badly wanted men who could pay lavishly for sanctuary. Pasik became an exclusive haven for the very cream of the aristocracy of crime. There was no law. There was no check upon anything any man chose to do. The Pasiki had lost the spirit to revolt. They abased themselves before any human, and obeyed any order in blindly terrified haste.

Sometimes there were as many as forty or fifty retired criminals on the planet, living in infinite self-indulgence. But the death-rate was high. No man who was never crossed by any slave would submit to being crossed by his fellows. And the men were ruthless to begin with. They killed each other in quarrels. They assassinated each other for fancied slights. They carried on insane, lethal, personal feuds. But none ever left the planet on the one seedy space-vessel which sometimes stopped by either to bring another fugi-

tive or to bring second-grade merchandise to exchange for the *dhassa*-nuts and other produce still worth shipping, which the Pasiki gathered for their masters.

The girl Jan Casin told this to Stannard, keeping her hand close to the blaster he had returned to her after she'd failed to kill him. She listened intently as she talked, but she was not so much afraid of Stannard, now. Among the retired criminals on Pasik there was one named Brent. He'd heard of her presence as a child. Of course. The Pasiki had an uncanny intelligence-system akin to telepathy, and everything that went on anywhere was known everywhere, at once. They told Brent of Jan, then merely a child. He went to see her, playing with dolls, and told her father amusedly that he would claim her when she grew old enough.

"And he had Pasiki watching," said Jan, uneasily. "When the Foundation ship came with supplies for us, he knew it first. He lured us away from home with a message, and he met the ship and told them that he was a planter and that I'd died six months after landing and Father a little later. So the ship went away and never came back again."

She stopped and listened.

"I think someone's coming, judging by the way the Pasiki sound talking to each other. Mr. Brent killed my father when I was sixteen. He meant to take me, but I managed to get away. I made the Pasiki help me, of course, but they wouldn't keep a secret from any human who ordered them to talk."

"That made things difficult," commented Stannard.

He listened, too.

"It did," said Jan briefly. She looked at Stannard with level eyes. "But I managed. Pasiki are the slaves of any human being who gives them commands. So I used them. I had bearers. I had food. I even had watchmen to warn me. And they'll never harm a human, so I was safe from them. They wouldn't try to catch me for their masters, because I could always order them to let me go. I could only be caught by a human being in person, and they—well, they get soft with slaves to wait on them all the time."

"I see," said Stannard.

"But I got tired of running away!" said the girl fiercely. "And I had no more books to read. I came back to my father's house to get books. Then my Pasiki warned me that you had come. They said a man-master was coming after me. I decided to come to you first. I rather expected to kill you. I was tired of running away!"

"Natural enough," said Stannard. He cocked his ear, and thoughtfully drew one of his two blasters. He made a fine adjustment at its muzzle. He put it on the table before him. The girl watched, and he went on in a natural voice: "I think I know something about a criminal named Brent. Quite a spectacular case, nine or ten years ago. Piracy."

The picture of their progress was quite incredible. All about was darkness—the darkness of pure jungle. On either side were the slender tree-trunks which were typical of the taller growths on Pasik. From time to time a thread of sky was visible overhead, thickly thronged with stars. Ahead there were torches. Little, glistening-bodied Pasiki ran on ahead, creating a shrill uproar to warn the carnivores of the jungle to draw aside. Behind them ran spear-bearing Pasiki, hating humans with all the passion a living creature can feel, yet prepared to battle to the death—against beasts only—in their defense. Then came the litter. Pairs of thirty-foot, limber poles reached out before and behind, and fifty of the unhuman creatures trotted swiftly with their burden. Among so many, the weight was not great, and a minor horde of yet other Pasiki followed with various objects carried for the service of the humans, and there were extra bearers to relieve the litter-carriers from time to time.

The litter itself was like a rather wide easy chair, in which the two people—Stannard and Jan—fitted not uncomfortably, though a definite physical contact could not be avoided. Because of the springiness of the carrying-poles, the feeling of motion was rather soothing than otherwise. Stannard smoked reflectively.

"Somehow," he said, "I feel rather silly being carried like this. I don't like the idea of slaves or servants anyhow. And intelligent creatures shouldn't be beasts of burden."

The girl, Jan, said restlessly, "I'm used to it. I certainly wouldn't have kept away from Brent and the others on my own feet!"

The litter went on and on. Presently Jan spoke again, and restlessly: "I want . . . ," she said, "I—I want to know what you plan for—for always!"

He did not answer for a moment, and suddenly she put her hands before her face in the darkness. Then Stannard said gently, "You've been here ten years, since you were a child. You've never really talked to another woman. You've never seen a man you weren't afraid of—and with reason. Now you aren't afraid of me. So naturally you want to be sure you won't be left alone to be afraid again. That's it, isn't it?"

There was a long pause, while the insect-like runners trotted swiftly through the darkness with a shrill and torch-lit clamor going on before. The flame-light glittered on the chitinous forms of the Pasiki.

Jan gulped, and said in a muffled, unsteady voice, "Partly, that's it. . . . But I guess I don't know how to act like a girl." She sobbed suddenly. "I just don't know how! I've read books about men and girls, and they were so different from here but I never could imagine myself acting that way!"

"I assure you," said Stannard, amusedly, "you're acting as feminine as any woman in the Galaxy could do! Anyhow, here's part of what you want to know. First, I'm going to stay right with you. Yes. Second, I'm going to contrive a way for us to be reasonably safe without having to kill off all the other men on Pasik. I've a reason for that. And third, I'm going to try to get the two of us away from Pasik."

"Leave Pasik?" she asked unbelievingly. "How could we? Only one ship ever comes here, and it certainly wouldn't take us away! Why, if we got away and told about the men who hide here from the Space Patrol . . ."

"Maybe," said Stannard," instead of having the ship take us, we'll take the ship. If—if you can draw a map for me of a few hundred miles round about—the sea-coast especially—and if it looks all right, and the Pasiki don't know much about boats, and if we have a little luck, I think we can get away."

"I've traveled more than anybody," said Jan quickly. "I can draw you a map! Surely! And the Pasiki don't make anything but rafts. They used to, but since they've been slaves they don't bother. I doubt they remember how."

"Then I can almost promise you to get you away from Pasik," he told her. "I'll be pretty inefficient, with the training I've had, if I can't. And meanwhile don't you worry! I'll be right with you for just as long as you want me to be."

"That's—that will be for always," she said with a little, quick indrawing of breath. "For always! You promise?"

He nodded, but his thoughts were sardonic. He was the first man since her father had been murdered whom she hadn't feared. She had never talked to another woman. In the book-sense she was educated, but by ordinary standards she was utterly unsophisticated, and yet she had full awareness of the bestiality of which men are capable. But her feeling of security was so new and so overwhelming that there could be no limit to her confidence in him.

It wouldn't be easy to justify that confidence, though. For a beginning, he'd have to rouse the men to whom Pasik was paradise, and make them desperate to destroy him. For another he'd have to take action the Pasiki could not know about nor understand, and he would need to create a complete surprise despite the Pasiki telepathy which spread news incredible distances in no time at all. And at the end he'd have to risk his life and Jan's on a throw of pitch and toss. It would be much easier to compromise and make a secure haven for Jan and himself, and live out the rest of his life with multitudes of abject slaves to serve them. Jan would think that only natural.

But there was the job he had to do, which the wrecking of the *Snark* had interrupted.

The litter went swiftly along the trail. Something roared in the jungle to the right. Stannard hadn't the faintest idea what it could be, but the Pasiki trotted on. Then Jan stirred, beside him.

"In—in books," she said rather breathlessly, "I've—read about people who were going to—be with each other always and—were very glad. M-may I ask you something?"

"Why not?" asked Stannard.

"W-would you say that we are—engaged?" asked Jan shakily.

He marveled at the ways of woman, but he said gravely, "Why—we seem to be. If you wish. Yes."

"And—it's for always?"

"Unless you want to break the engagement," he said, amused.

"I wouldn't do that!" she said quickly. "Oh, I wouldn't do that! But—in the b-books I've read . . ." She stammered a little. "S-sometimes they called each other—darling, and they kissed each other. I—wondered—"

He felt a little wrench at his heart. But he put his arm about her shoulders and bent over her upturned face. A moment later he said rather huskily, "Darling!"

The odd thing was that he meant it.

A long time later Jan sighed a little, looking wide-eyed at the stars.

"I like being engaged. It's nice!"

"And how many hours ago was it that you had a blaster at the back of my neck?" asked Stannard drily. "In fact, if you remember, you pulled the trigger."

Jan said ruefully, "Wasn't I silly, darling! I was too stupid for words!"

But Stannard reflected that he wasn't at all sure.

They followed almost a ritual in their flight. The trails of the Pasiki were numerous and well-traveled, with many branchings. But in three days and nights of journeying not one dwelling and certainly no village or city of the stick-men became visible. Before nightfall, each night, Stannard summoned the special Pasiki who invariably trotted beside the litter, and as invariably was capable of human speech.

"We will want bearers to carry us through the night," he commanded. "Send messengers that they meet us."

"Yes, master!" chirped the stick-man as if in ecstasy. "Much gladness for Pasiki to serve man-master!"

Then glistening-skinned figures darted on ahead and were lost to sight in the winding jungle trail. And presently there

was a restless, glittering small horde of Pasiki waiting, and the bearers who had brought the litter so far surrendered it, and the new bearers went on.

Jan pointed out sagely that it was not only merciful but wise, because no bearers grew exhausted, and greater speed was possible. Three times, in the past, close pursuit by Brent or his fellows had failed because she commanded fresh bearers to carry her on, while the men had ceased to think of their slaves as requiring even the consideration of lower animals. Brent, once, had driven a party of worn-out Pasiki until half of them died of exhaustion. But they did not revolt.

"On the other hand," said Stannard grimly, "I doubt that they feel grateful to us for acting differently."

He did not like the Pasiki. Their abasement, their servility, their shrill cries of adulation—when he knew that they hated him and all his kind—alone would have made him dislike them. But he could not help despising them for the fact that they had kept their race alive, as slaves, rather than die as free creatures. It was that personal dislike which made him able to make use of them as he needed to.

Riding in the litter was wearing. For the first twenty-four hours they went on without a pause. Their route was roughly due north. The second twenty-four they alighted, from time time, to stretch their legs and to eat. They began to veer to eastward. In between they talked—and Stannard absorbed from Jan every item of information she possessed about the planet and its products and its people and its geography —and in the night-time Jan dozed in the half-reclining seat with her head on Stannard's shoulder, while he watched. And then he dozed as well as he could while she stayed awake. He made sure that they traveled close to the shore of a great bay she had sketched on a map she drew for him. Once he waked to find her holding his head tenderly in her arms while she smiled down at him. He flushed, and she said defensively, "We're engaged, aren't we?"

She had acquired an absolute, unquestioning confidence in him. When, his plans mature, he began to demand metal objects from the Pasiki, she phrased the commands for him so they would be best understood. Once he took a copper

pan and cut an elaborate form from it with the heat-unit. in his belt. He commanded that fifty duplicates of the arbitrary form be made and sent after them. Then he made other and smaller items—bits of some cryptic devise that no Pasiki could understand, but which they could make the separate parts for. He demanded samples of Pasiki iron pots, and chose a special shape and size and commanded fifty specimens to be sent after him. And Pasiki in the hidden cities and workshops which they prayed no human would ever enter, labored to produce the parts he required.

On the fifth day, Stannard called a halt to journeying. Their flight had been around the head of a great bay and down its eastern shore until they were almost opposite their starting-point. But they were nearly a thousand miles by land-travel from anyone who could wish to injure them, and the Pasiki would warn them of any planned expedition against them. Stannard chose a home-site overlooking the waters of the bay whose farther shore was below the horizon. He commanded a cottage to be built. No palace, but a tiny place of two rooms, barely thirty feet from end to end. All this, he knew, the Pasiki would duly tell to the other men a thousand miles away by land. But Stannard was very particular about the roof of his house. It was round and flat and pointed at both ends, and very strongely built. The house had an awning before it, under which he and Jan dined in state, and there was a flagstaff on which a flag would doubtless be flown at some future date.

When the house was finished—and he had had the roof made completely strong and water-tight—he began the assembly of the devices whose component parts he had commanded to be made. He assembled them in secret, with none of the Pasiki able to examine any one. As he finished them, he welded their covers tight with the heat-unit from his belt. And Jan, now, gravely kept herself informed of all the telepathic information their Pasiki could give them of the doings of the men they had left behind.

Stannard had not expected action so soon, but it was only twelve days after Jan's first encounter with Stannard, and only fifteen after his arrival on Pasik that important information

arrived. Jan went wide-eyed to Stannard. A space-ship was expected. The sheds in which *dhassa*-nuts—a source of organic oils used in perfume synthesis—were stored against the coming of the trading-ship were nearly full. The landing-field which served as space-port had been ordered cleared of new growth. The one ship trading to Pasik was expected to land within days.

At that moment, obviously. Stannard and Jan were as helpless against the contented inhabitants of Pasik as those men were against them. They were separated by nearly a thousand miles by land, for security, round a great bay. They could not return without full warning of their coming by the Pasiki's telepathic intelligence system. They could do nothing if they returned. Ten men against Stannard—all warned and eager to burn him down for the seizure of Jan—would be only part of the odds. There would also be the crew of the trader, as definitely Stannard's enemies and Jan's pursuers as anybody else. There was absolutely nothing that they could do without the Pasiki knowing all about it, and everything the Pasiki knew, their enemies knew. They were plainly helpless.

But, on the very day that the trading-ship landed, Stannard lined up fifty of the Pasiki in a row. He had them come one by one to the house with the curiously-shaped roof. He gave each one a single metal pot and specific instructions. Each was to take the pot to a certain especial place, dig a hole, and bury it, leaving an attached cord out. When he had concealed the burial-place so that even he would have trouble finding it again, he was to pull out the cord and bring it piously back to Stannard.

Each of the Pasiki had the same orders, but each had a separate place to go to. They departed, running. They might hate Stannard utterly, and surely their tasks were meaningless, but they would obey.

Stannard waited. One day. Two days. Three and four and five. The trading-ship should be grounded for not less than ten days. Stannard waited out five of them. Then he smiled grimly at Jan. His task from before his shipwreck fitted in nicely with his immediate plans. He summoned all the Pasiki

within miles. He had them remove the roof of his house in one piece—it was coated inside and out with foam-flex—and turn it upside down. Jan, like the Pasiki, did not understand at all. They obeyed because Stannard commanded it. Jan watched absorbedly, blindly confident in Stannard's wisdom. Hundreds of the black, shiny, articulated creatures struggled to carry the upturned roof down to the water. At Stannard's further command they brought the flagstaff and fitted it upright in holes which surprisingly seemed to have been made for it. They brought the awning, and ropes which Stannard had ordered them to make, and provisions and water. He shipped a rudder and they gazed in absolute uncomprehension at a moderately seaworthy sailboat which was an artifact lost from their traditions. They did not even begin to grasp the idea until the boat was launched and Jan and Stannard were in it. Then they stared, by hundreds.

"I give commands," said Stannard sternly, regarding the horde of glistening black creatures on the shore. "We go to meet other man-masters we shall summon from the sky. I have made machines, fifty of them, which send messages to other worlds. I made so many lest any one of them fail to reach its destined world with its message. I sent them away to be buried and to begin their message-sending. Even now, the fifty machines send word through the skies to tell other man-masters to come and be served by the Pasiki, who wish no greater gladness than to serve the man-masters. I command that the machines be left untouched by all the Pasiki until the other man-masters come. And now this woman-master and myself go to meet the other man-masters when they come down from the sky."

He hoisted the sail. It had been an awning, but it filled. The boat pulled out from the shore. It heeled a little in the breeze, but it made surprisingly little leeway. It was, in fact, a reasonably able small boat. The land fell rapidly behind. Jan looked at Stannard in marveling admiration.

"The Pasiki have telepathy," he told her drily," but can they tell where we are when they do not know themselves? Or what we do?"

"No-no," said Jan. "But did you really send messages for

other space-ships to come to Pasik? That is wonderful!"

"It's a lie," Stannard told her. "A space-radio is a pretty delicate and complicated device. I couldn't make them out of stray parts manufactured by the Pasiki! But the Pasiki think I did! And it won't be long before they send word by telepathy, and our friends back there think all space is filling up with a howl for the cops?"

"Not long," said Jan. "It will be very quick! But why?"

"How will they take that?" asked Stannard drily. "Brent, for one, is wanted for piracy, murder, and assorted crimes. The others who came to Pasik by choice did it for similar reasons. They do not want the Space-Patrol here. And there's nowhere else where they can be safe. The Pasiki don't want other men here, either, but they daren't touch those buried pots. How long before the men get busy finding those pots and digging them up to blast them before a message can be picked up from them? If they open one and find it a hoax, that won't prove the others are! They have to find every one and smash it for safety's sake!"

Jan blinked at him.

"But still," she said plaintively, "I don't see why . . ."

He told her, and she gasped in amazement. Then, with a curious grimness all her own, she looked over the blasters at her waist. Stannard grinned at her. She flushed.

"You can't tell," she said firmly. "Just because I didn't kill Mr. Brent when I had the chance don't mean I won't kill anybody who tries to kill you!"

"I was grinning," said Stannard, "because you once said you didn't know how to act like a woman."

But she did. She sat close beside him and shivered as the boat sailed toward the sunset.

The sky was barely paling to the east when the boat ran full-tilt aground. It had crossed the bay during the dark hours, and now Stannard was a litle worried because he might be many miles out in his calculations. The map Jan had drawn him couldn't be expected to be accurate. But they forced their way through jungle, and found a Pasiki trail, and within a mile they came upon a little knot of

three stick-men trotting along the path on their own private business. Stannard hailed them savagely, and they knelt to him. Their regular master demanded extreme respect.

They led the way to the space-port. Stannard walked boldly across the freshly jet-seared open space. The airlock door of the trader was open. He walked in with Jan crowding closely behind him. He closed the lock, by manual control for silence.

"They've no discipline," he whispered in Jan's ear. "Trader!" There was scorn in the word. "Stay here. Blast anybody you see who isn't me. I'm going to see how many of the crew's on board."

But it was an anticlimax. Jan stood fiercely on guard until she heard his voice, very stern and very savage. Then there were scuffling footsteps and seared protestations. Two men only appeared, clad in the shapeless underwear of a space-trader's forecastle.

"Sh-shall I shoot?" quavered Jan.

"No," said Stannard, behind them. "Only two men on board and they were fast asleep. All the others are out with parties of Pasiki, digging up the iron pots by telepathic instructions—which takes time—and blasting 'em, to get them all destroyed as soon as possible. Stand aside, Jan."

He opened the air-lock and drove the pair out.

He saw them running frantically for the edge of the field as the airlock closed again. He took Jan to the engine-room, and set the drive for control-room handling. Gazing—she barely remembered the space-ship which had brought her to Pasik—she followed him to the pilot's cabin. He strapped her in the co-pilot's seat and started the gyros, flashed the jets all around, and then slowly and gently lifted the ancient trading-ship off the ground. In fifteen minutes it was beyond atmosphere. In half an hour it was straightened out on a course for Sooris, which had been Stannard's destination in the *Snark*. In an hour he locked the automatic controls and turned to Jan.

She looked queer. Somehow upset and disappointed.

"What's the matter? Hate to leave Pasik?"

"Oh, no," she said uncomfortably. "Only it seems like

something's missing. . . . We got all ready for a fight. I thought you'd have to kill people, and I was ready to kill anybody who tried to harm you and nothing happened."

"Except that we got away," said Stannard.

He watched her for a moment. Then he said amusedly:

"Anticlimax, eh? But I'd have done a rather poor job of it if I'd let it end in smoking blasters and corpses all over the place. The Space Patrol doesn't work that way when it can be helped."

THE END

THE RULL

by
A. E. VAN VOGT

PROFESSOR JAMIESON saw the other space boat out of the corner of one eye. He was sitting in a hollow about a dozen yards from the edge of the precipice, and some score of feet from the doorway of his own lifeboat. He had been intent on his survey book, annotating a comment beside the voice graph, to the effect that Laertes III was so close to the invisible dividing line between Earth-controlled and Rull-controlled space that its prior discovery by man was in itself a major victory in the Rull-human war.

It was at that point that he saw the other boat, above and somewhat to his left, approaching the tableland. He glanced up at it—and froze where he was, torn between two opposing purposes.

His first impulse, to run for the lifeboat, yielded to the realization that the movement would be seen instantly by the electronic reflexes of the other ship. For a moment, then, he had the dim hope that, if he remained quiet enough, neither he nor his ship would be observed.

Even as he sat there, perspiring with indecision, his tensed eyes noted the Rull markings and the rakish design

of the other vessel. His vast knowledge of things Rull enabled him to catalogue it instantly as a survey craft.

A *survey* craft. The Rulls had discovered the Laertes sun.

The terrible potentiality was that, behind this small craft, might be fleets of battleships, whereas he was alone. His own lifeboat had been dropped by the *Orion* nearly a parsec away, while the big ship was proceeding at anti-gravity speeds. That was to insure that Rull energy tracers did not record its passage through this area of space.

The *Orion* was to head for the nearest base, load up with planetary defense equipment, and return. She was due in ten days.

Ten days. Jamieson groaned inwardly, and drew his legs under him and clenched his survey book in the fingers of one hand. But still the possibility his ship, partially hidden under a clump of trees, might escape notice if he remained quiet, held him there in the open. His head tilted up, his eyes glared at the alien, and his brain willed it to turn aside.

Once more, flashingly, while he waited, the implications of the disaster that could be here, struck deep. In all the universe there had never been so dangerous an intelligence as the Rull. At once remorseless and immune to all attempts at establishing communication, Rulls killed human beings on sight. A human-manned warship that ventured into Rull-patrolled space was attacked until it withdrew or was destroyed. Rull ships that entered Earth-controlled space *never* withdrew once they were attacked. In the beginning, man had been reluctant to engage in a death struggle for the galaxy. But the inexorable enemy had forced him finally to match in every respect the tenacious and murderous policies of the Rull.

The thought ended. The Rull ship was a hundred yards away, and showed no signs of changing its course. In seconds, it would cross the clump of trees, which half-hid the lifeboat.

In a spasm of a movement, Jamieson launched himself from his chair. Like a shot from a gun, with utter abandon, he dived for the open doorway of his machine. As the door clanged behind him, the boat shook as if it had been struck

by a giant. Part of the ceiling sagged; the floor staggered toward him, and the air grew hot and suffocating.

Gasping, Jamieson slid into the control chair, and struck at the main emergency switch. The rapid fire blasters huzzaed into automatic firing positions, and let go with a hum and deep-throated *ping*. The refrigerators whined with power; a cold blast of air blew at his body. The relief was so quick that a second passed before Jamieson realized that the atomic engines had failed to respond, and that the lifeboat, which should already have been sliding into the air, was still lying inert in an exposed position.

Tense, he stared into the visiplates. It took a moment to locate the Rull ship. It was at the lower edge of one plate, tumbling slowly out of sight beyond a clump of trees a quarter of a mile away. As he watched, it disappeared; and then the crash of the landing came clear and unmistakable from the sound board in front of him.

The relief that came was weighted with an awful reaction. Jamieson sank back into the cushions of the control chair, weak from the narrowness of his escape. The weakness ended abruptly as a thought struck him. There had been a sedateness about the way the enemy ship fell. *The crash hadn't killed the Rulls aboard.*

He was alone in a damaged lifeboat on an impassable mountain with one or more of the most remorseless creatures ever spawned. For ten days, he must fight in the hope that man would still be able to seize the most valuable planet discovered in a century.

He saw in his visiplate that it was growing darker outside.

Jamieson took another antisleep pill and made a more definitive examination of the atomic motors. It didn't take long to verify his earlier diagnosis. The basic graviton pile had been thoroughly frustrated. Until it could be reactivated on the *Orion,* the motors were useless.

The conclusive examination braced Jamieson. He was commited irrevocably to the battle of the tableland, with all its intricate possibilities. The idea that had been turning over in his mind during the prolonged night took on new

meaning. This was the first time in his knowledge that a Rull and a human being had faced each other on a limited field of action, where neither was a prisoner. The great battles in space were ship against ship and fleet against fleet. Survivors either escaped or were picked up by overwhelming forces. Actually, both humans and Rulls, captured or facing capture, were conditioned to kill themselves. Rulls did it by a mental *willing* that had never been circumvented. Men had to use mechanical methods, and in some cases that had proved impossible. The result was that Rulls had had occasional opportunities to experiment on living, conscious men.

Unless he was bested, before he could get organized here was a priceless opportunity to try some tests on Rulls—and without delay. Every moment of daylight must be utilized to the uttermost limit.

By the time the Laertes sun peered palely over the horizon that was the northeast cliff's edge, the assault was under way. The automatic defensors, which he had set up the night before, moved slowly from point to point ahead of the mobile blaster.

Jamieson cautiously saw to it that one of the three defensors also brought up his rear. He augmented that basic protection by crawling from one projecting rock after another. The machines he manipulated from a tiny hand control, which was connected to the visiplates that poked out from his headgear just above his eyes. With tensed eyes, he watched the wavering needles that would indicate movement or that the defensor screens were being subjected to energy opposition.

Nothing happened.

As he came within sight of the Rull craft, Jamieson stalled his attack, while he seriously pondered the problem of no resistance. He didn't like it. It was possible that all the Rulls aboard had been killed, but he doubted it mightily. Rulls were almost boneless. Except for half a dozen strategically linked cartilages, they were all muscles.

With bleak eyes, Jamieson studied the wreck through

the telescopic eyes of one of the defensors. It lay in a shallow indentation, its nose buried in a wall of gravel. Its lower plates were collapsed versions of the orginal. His single energy blast the evening before, completely automatic though it had been, had really dealt a smashing blow to the Rull ship.

The over-all effect was of utter lifelessness. If it were a trick, then it was a very skillful one. Fortunately, there were tests he could make, not absolutely final but evidential and indicative.

He made them.

The echoless height of the most unique mountain ever discovered hummed with the fire-sound of the mobile blaster. The noise grew to a roar as the unit's pile warmed to its task, and developed its maximum kilo curie activity.

Under that barrage, the hull of the enemy craft trembled a little and changed color slightly, but that was all. After ten minutes, Jamieson cut the power, and sat baffled and indecisive.

The defensive screens of the Rull ship were full on. Had they gone on automatically after his first shot of the evening before? Or had they been put up deliberately to nullify just such an attack as this?

He couldn't be sure. That was the trouble; he had no positive knowledge. The Rull could be lying inside dead. It could be wounded and incapable of doing anything against him. It could have spent the night marking up the tableland with *elled* nerve control lines—he'd have to make sure he never looked directly at the ground—or it could simply be waiting for the arrival of the greater ship that had dropped it onto the planet.

Jamieson refused to consider the last possibility. That way was death, without qualification or hope.

Frowningly, he studied the visible damage he had done the ship. All the hard metals had held together, so far as he could see, but the whole bottom of the ship was dented to a depth that varied from one to four feet. Some radiation must have got in, and the question was, what would it have damaged?

He had examined dozens of captured Rull survey craft, and if this one ran to the pattern, then in the front would be the control center, with a sealed off blaster chamber. In the rear the engine room, two storerooms, one for fuel and equipment, the other for food and—

For food. Jamieson jumped, and then with wide eyes noted how the food section had suffered greater damage than any other part of the ship.

Surely, surely, some radiation must have got into it, poisoning, it ruining it, and instantly putting the Rull, with his swift digestive system, into a deadly position.

Jamieson sighed with the intensity of his hope, and prepared to retreat. As he turned away, quite accidentally, he glanced at the rock behind which he had shielded himself from possible direct fire.

Glanced at it, and saw the *elled* lines in it. Intricate lines, based on a profound and inhuman study of the human nervous system. Jamieson recognized them, and stiffened in horror. He thought in anguish: *Where, where am I supposed to fall? Which cliff?*

With a desperate will, with all his strength, he fought to retain his senses a moment longer. He strove to see the lines again. He saw, briefly, flashingly, five vertical and above them three lines that pointed east with their wavering ends.

The pressure built up, up, up inside him, but still he fought to keep his thoughts moving. Fought to remember if there were any wide ledges near the top of the east cliff.

There were. He recalled them in a final agony of hope. *There,* he thought. *That one,* that *one. Let me fall on that one.* He strained to hold the ledge image he wanted. and to repeat, repeat the command that might save his life. His last, dreary thought was that here was the answer to his doubts. The Rull *was* alive.

Blackness came like a curtain of pure essence of night.

Somberly, the Rull glided toward the man's lifeboat. From a safe distance, he examined it. The defense screens were up, but he couldn't be sure they had been put up

before the attack of the morning, or had been raised since then, or had come on automatically at his approach.

He couldn't be sure. That was the trouble. Everywhere, on the tableland around him, was a barrenness, a desolation unlike anything else he had ever known. The man could be dead, his smashed body lying at the remote bottom of the mountain. He could be inside the ship badly injured; he had, unfortunately, *had* time to get back to the safety of his craft. Or he could be waiting inside, alert, aggressive, and conscious of his enemy's uncertainty, determined to take full advantage of that uncertainty.

The Rull set up a watching device that would appraise him when the door opened. Then he returned to the tunnel that led into his ship, laboriously crawled through it, and settled himself to wait out the emergency.

The hunger in him was an expanding force, hourly taking on a greater urgency. It was time to stop moving around. He would need all his energy for the crisis.

The days passed.

Jamieson stirred in an effluvium of pain. At first it seemed all-enveloping, a mist of anguish that bathed him in sweat from head to toe. Gradually, then, it localized in the region of his lower left leg.

The pulse of the pain made a rhythm in his nerves. The minutes lengthened into an hour, and then he finally thought: *Why, I've got a sprained ankle!* He had more than that, of course. The pressure that had driven him here clung like a gravitonic plate. How long he lay there, partly conscious, was not clear, but when he finally opened his eyes, the sun was still shining on him, thought it was almost directly overhead.

He watched it with the mindlessness of a dreamer as it withdrew slowly past the edge of the overhanging precipice. It was not until the shadow of the cliff suddenly plopped across his face that he started to full consciousness with a sudden memory of deadly danger.

It took a while to shake the remnants of the *elled* "take" from his brain. And, even as it was fading, he sized up, to

some extent, the difficulties of his position. He saw that he had tumbled over the edge of a cliff to a steep slope. The angle of descent of the slope was a sharp fifty-five degrees, and what had saved him was that his body had been caught in the tangled growth near the edge of the greater precipice beyond.

His foot must have twisted in those roots, and sprained.

As he finally realized the nature of his injuries, Jamieson braced up. He was safe. In spite of having suffered an accidental defeat of major proportions, his intense concentration on this slope, his desperate will to make *this* the place where he must fall, had worked out.

He began to climb. It was easy enough on the slope, steep as it was; the ground was rough, rocky and scraggly with brush. It was when he came to the ten-foot overhanging cliff that his ankle proved what an obstacle it could be.

Four times he slid back, reluctantly; and then, on the fifth try, his fingers, groping desperately over the top of the cliff, caught an unbreakable root. Triumphantly, he dragged himself to the safety of the tableland.

Now that the sound of his scraping and struggling was gone, only his heavy breathing broke the silence of the emptiness. His anxious eyes studied the uneven terrain. The tableland spread before him with not a sign of a moving figure anywhere.

To one side, he could see his lifeboat. Jamieson began to crawl toward it, taking care to stay on rock as much as possible. What had happened to the Rull he did not know. And since, for several days, his ankle would keep him inside his ship, he might as well keep his enemy guessing during that time.

Professor Jamieson lay in his bunk, thinking. He could hear the beating of his heart. There were the occasional sounds when he dragged himself out of bed. But that was almost all. The radio, when he turned it on, was dead. No static, not even the fading in and out of a wave. At this colossal distance, even subspace radio was impossible.

He listened on all the more active Rull wave lengths. But

the silence was there, too. Not that they would be broadcasting if they were in the vicinity.

He was cut off here in this tiny ship on an uninhabited planet, with useless motors.

He tried not to think of it like that. "Here," he told himself, "is the opportunity of a lifetime for an experiment."

He warmed to the idea as a moth to flame. Live Rulls were hard to get hold of. About one a year was captured in the unconscious state, and these were regarded as priceless treasures. But here was an even more ideal situation.

We're prisoners, both of us. That was the way he tried to picture it. Prisoners of an environment, and, therefore, in a curious fashion, prisoners of each other. Only each was free of the conditioned need to kill himself.

There were things a man might discover. The great mysteries—as far as men were concerned—that motivated Rull actions. Why did they want to destroy other races totally? Why did they needlessly sacrifice valuable ships in attacking Earth machines that ventured into their sectors of space—when they knew that the intruders would leave in a few weeks anyway? And why did prisoners who could kill themselves at will commit suicide without waiting to find out what fate was intended for them? Some times they were merely wanted as messengers.

Was it possible the Rulls were trying to conceal a terrible weakness in their make-up of which man had not yet found an inkling?

The potentialities of this fight of man against Rull on a lonely mountain exhilarated Jamieson as he lay on his bunk, scheming, turning the problem over in his mind.

There were times during those dog days when he crawled over to the control chair, and peered for an hour at a stretch into the visiplates. He saw the tableland and the vista of distance beyond it. He saw the sky of Laertes III, bluish pink sky, silent and lifeless.

He saw the prison. Caught here, he thought bleakly. Professor Jamieson, whose appearance on an inhabited planet would bring out unwieldly crowds, whose quiet voice in the council chambers of Earth's galactic empire spoke with final

authority—that Jamieson was here, alone, lying in a bunk, waiting for a leg to heal, so that he might conduct an experiment with a Rull.

It seemed incredible. But he grew to believe it as the days passed.

On the third day, he was able to move around sufficiently to handle a few heavy objects. He began work immediately on the mental screen. On the fifth day it was finished. Then the story had to be recorded. That was easy. Each sequence had been so carefully worked out in bed that it flowed from his mind onto the visiwire.

He set it up about two hundred yards from the lifeboat, behind a screening of trees. He tossed a can of food a dozen feet to one side of the screen.

The rest of the day dragged. It was the sixth day since the arrival of the Rull, the fifth since he had sprained his ankle.

Came the night.

A gliding shadow, undulating under the starlight of Laertes III, the Rull approached the screen the man had set up. How bright it was, shining in the darkness of the tableland, a blob of light in a black universe of uneven ground and dwarf shrubbery.

When he was a hundred feet from the light, he sensed the food—and realized that here was a trap.

For the Rull, six days without food had meant a stupendous loss of energy, visual blackouts on a dozen color levels, a dimness of life-force that fitted with the shadows, not the sun. That inner world of disjointed nervous system was like a run-down battery, with a score of organic "instruments" disconnecting one by one as the energy level fell. The *yeli* recognized dimly, but with a savage anxiety, that only a part of that nervous system would ever be restored to complete usage. And, even for that, speed was essential. A few more steps downward, and then the old. old conditioning of mandatory self-inflicted death would apply even to the high Aaish of the Yeell.

The worm body grew quiet. The visual center behind each

eye accepted light on a narrow band from the screen. From beginning to end, he watched the story as it unfolded, and then watched it again, craving repetition with all the ardor of a primitive.

The picture began in deep space with the man's lifeboat being dropped from a launching lock of a battleship. It showed the battleship going on to a military base, and there taking on supplies and acquiring a vast fleet of reinforcements, and then starting on the return journey. The scene switched to the lifeboat dropping down on Laertes III, showed everything that had subsequently happened, suggested the situation was dangerous to them both— and pointed out the only safe solution.

The final sequence of each showing of the story was of the Rull approaching the can, to the left of the screen, and opening it. The method was shown in detail, as was the visualization of the Rull busily eating the food inside.

Each time that sequence drew near, a tension came over the Rull, a will to make the story real. But it was not until the seventh showing had run its course that he glided forward, closing the last gap between himself and the can. It was a trap, he knew, perhaps even death—it didn't matter. To live, he had to take the chance. Only by this means, by risking what was in the can, could he hope to remain alive for the necessary time.

How long it would take for the commanders cruising up there in the black of space in their myriad ships—how long it would be before they would decide to supersede his command, he didn't know. But they would come. Even if they waited until the enemy ships arrived before they dared to act against his strict orders, they would come.

At that point they could come down without fear of suffering from his ire.

Until then he would need all the food he could get.

Gingerly, he extended a sucker, and activated the automatic opener of the can.

It was shortly after four in the morning when Professor Jamieson awakened to the sound of an alarm ringing softly.

It was still pitch dark outside—the Laertes day was twenty-six sidereal hours long; he had set his clocks the first day to coordinate—and at this season dawn was still three hours away.

Jamieson did not get up at once. The alarm had been activated by the opening of the can of food. It continued to ring for a full fifteen minutes, which was just about perfect. The alarm was tuned to the electronic pattern emitted by the can, once it was opened, and so long as any food remained in it. The lapse of time involved fitted with the capacity of one of the Rull's suckers in absorbing three pounds of pork.

For fifteen minutes, accordingly, a member of the Rull race, man's mortal enemy, had been subjected to a pattern of mental vibrations corresponding to its own thoughts. It was a pattern to which the nervous systems of other Rulls had responded in laboratory experiments. Unfortunately, those others had killed themselves on awakening, and so no definite results had been proved. But it had been established by the ecphoriometer that the "unconscious" and not the "conscious" mind was affected.

Jamieson lay in bed, smiling quietly to himself. He turned over finally to go back to sleep, and then he realized how excited he was.

The greatest moment in the history of Rull-human warfare. Surely, he wasn't going to let it pass unremarked. He climbed out of bed, and poured himself a drink.

The attempt of the Rull to attack him through his unconscious mind had emphasized his own possible actions in that direction. Each race had discovered some of the weaknesses of the other.

Rulls used their knowledge to exterminate. Man tried for communication, and hoped for association. Both were ruthless, murderous, pitliess, in their methods. Outsiders sometimes had difficulty distinguishing one from the other.

But the difference in purpose was as great as the difference between black and white, the absence as compared to the presence of light.

There was only one trouble with the immediate situation.

Now, that the Rull had food, he might develop a few plans of his own.

Jamieson returned to bed, and lay staring into the darkness. He did not underrate the resources of the Rull, but since he had decided to conduct an experiment, no chance must be considered too great.

He turned over finally, and slept the sleep of a man determined that things were working in his favor.

Morning. Jamieson put on his cold-proof clothes, and went out into the chilly dawn. Again, he savored the silence and the atmosphere of isolated grandeur. A strong wind was blowing from the east, and there was an iciness in it that stung his face. Snow? He wondered.

He forgot that. He had things to do on this morning of mornings. He would do them with his usual caution.

Paced by defensors and the mobile blaster, he headed for the mental screen. It stood in open high ground, where it would be visible from a dozen different hiding places, and so far as he could see it was undamaged. He tested the automatic mechanism, and for good measure ran the picture through one showing.

He had already tossed another can of food in the grass near the screen, and he was turning away when he thought: *That's odd. The metal framework looks as if it's been polished.*

He studied the phenomena in a de-energizing mirror, and saw that the metal had been varnished with a clear, varnishlike substance. He felt sick as he recognized it.

He decided in agony, *If the cue is not to fire at all, I won't do it. I'll fire even if the blaster turns on me.*

He scraped some of the "varnish" into a receptacle, and began his retreat to the lifeboat. He was thinking violently:

Where does he get all this stuff? That isn't part of the equipment of a survey craft.

The first deadly suspicion was on him, that what was happening was not just an accident. He was pondering the vast implications of that, narrow-eyed, when, off to one side, he saw the Rull.

For the first time, in his many days on the tableland, he saw the Rull.

What's the cue!

Memory of purpose came to the Rull shortly after he had eaten. It was dim at first, but it grew stronger.

It was not the only sensation of his returning energy.

His visual centers interpreted more light. The starlit tableland grew brighter, not as bright as it could be for him, by a very large percentage, but the direction was up instead of down. It would never again be normal. Vision was in the mind, and that part of his mind no longer had the power of interpretation.

He felt unutterably fortunate that it was no worse.

He had been gliding along the edge of the precipice. Now, he paused to peer down. Even with his partial night vision, the view was breathtaking. There was distance below and distance afar. From a spaceship, the height was almost minimum. But gazing down that wall of gravel into those depths was a different experience. It emphasized how completely he had been caught by an accident. And it reminded him of what he had been doing before the hunger.

He turned instantly away from the cliff, and hurried to where the wreckage of his ship had gathered dust for days. Bent and twisted wreckage, half-buried in the hard ground of Laertes III. He glided over the dented plates inside to one in which he had the day before sensed a quiver of anti-gravity oscillation. Tiny, potent, tremendous minutiae of oscillation, capable of being influenced.

The Rull worked with intensity and purposefulness. The plate was still firmly attached to the frame of the ship. And the first job, the heartbreakingly difficult job was to tear it completely free. The hours passed.

R-r-i-i-i-ppl The hard plate yielded to the slight rearrangement of its nucleonic structure. The shift was infinitesimal, partly because the directing nervous energy of his body was not at norm, and partly because it had better be infinitesimal. There was such a thing as releasing energy enough to blow up a mountain.

Not, he discovered finally, that there was danger in this plate. He found that out the moment he crawled onto it. The sensation of power that aura-ed out of it was so dim that, briefly, he doubted if it would lift from the ground.

But it did. The test run lasted seven feet, and gave him his measurement of the limited force he had available. Enough for an attack only.

He had no doubts in his mind. The experiment was over. His only purpose must be to kill the man, and the question was, how could he insure that the man did not kill him while he was doing it? The varnish!

He applied it painstakingly, dried it with a drier, and then, picking up the plate again, he carried it on his back to the hiding place he wanted.

When he had buried it and himself under the dead leaves of a clump of brush, he grew calmer. He recognized that the veneer of his civilization was off. It shocked him, but he did not regret it.

In giving him the food, the two-legged being was obviously doing something to him. Something dangerous. The only answer to the entire problem of the experiment of the tableland was to deal death without delay.

He lay tense, ferocious, beyond the power of any vagrant thoughts, waiting for the man to come.

It looked as desperate a venture as Jamieson had seen in Service. Normally, he would have handled it effortlessly. But he was watching intently—*intently*—for the paralysis to strike him, the negation that was of the varnish.

And so, it was the unexpected normal quality that nearly ruined him. The Rull flew out of a clump of trees mounted on an antigravity plate. The surprise of that was so great that it almost succeeded. The plates had been drained of all such energies, according to his tests the first morning. Yet here was one alive again and light again with the special antigravity lightness which Rull scientists had brought to the peak of perfection.

The action of movement through space toward him was, of course, based on the motion of the planet as it turned on

its axis. The speed of the attack, starting as it did from zero, did not come near the eight hundred mile an hour velocity of the spinning planet, but it was swift enough.

The apparition of metal and six-foot worm charged at him through the air. And even as he drew his weapon and fired at it, he had a choice to make, a restraint to exercise: *Do not kill!*

That was hard, oh, hard. The necessity exercised his capacity for integration and imposed so stern a limitation that during the second it took him to adjust the Rull came to within ten feet of him.

What saved him was the pressure of the air on the metal plate. The air tilted it like a wing of a plane becoming airborne. At the bottom of that metal he fired his irresistible weapon, seared it, burned it, deflected it to a crash landing in a clump of bushes twenty feet to his right.

Jamieson was deliberately slow in following up his success. When he reached the bushes, the Rull was fifty feet beyond it gliding on its multiple suckers over the top of a hillock. It disappeared into a clump of trees.

He did not pursue it or fire a second time. Instead, he gingerly pulled the Rull antigravity plate out of the brush and examined it. The question was, how had the Rull degravitized it without the elaborate machinery necessary? And if it was capable of creating such a "parachute" for itself why hadn't it floated down to the forest land far below where food would be available and where it would be safe from its human enemy?

One question was answered the moment he lifted the plate. It was "normal" weight, its energy apparently exhausted after traveling less than a hundred feet. It had obviously never been capable of making the mile and a half trip to the forest and plain below.

Jamieson took no chances. He dropped the plate over the nearest precipice, and watched it fall into distance. He was back in the lifeboat, when he remembered the "varnish."

Why, there had been no cue, not yet.

He tested the scraping he had brought with him. Chemically, it turned out to be a simple resin, used to make

varnishes. Atomically, it was stabilized. Electronically, it transformed light into energy on the vibration level of human thought.

It was alive all right. But what was the recording?

Jamieson made a graph of every material and energy level, for comparison purposes. As soon as he had established that it had been altered on the electronic level—which had been obvious, but which, still, had to be proved—he recorded the images on a visiwire. The result was a hodgepodge of dreamlike fantasies.

Symbols. He took down his book. "Symbol Interpretations of the Unconscious," and found the cross reference: "Inhibitions, Mental."

On the referred page and line, he read: "Do not kill!"

"Well, I'll be—" Jamieson said aloud into the silence of the lifeboat interior. "That's what happened."

He was relieved, and then not so relieved. It had been his personal intention not to kill at this stage. But the Rull hadn't known that. By working such a subtle inhibition, it had dominated the attack even in defeat.

That was the trouble. So far he had got *out* of situations, but had created no successful ones in retaliation. He had a hope, but that wasn't enough.

He must take no more risks. Even his final experiment must wait until the day the *Orion* was due to arrive.

Humans beings were just a little too weak in certain directions. Their very life cells had impulses which could be stirred by the cunning and the remorseless.

He did not doubt that, in the final issue, the Rull would try to stir.

On the ninth night, the day before the *Orion* was due, Jamieson refrained from putting out a can of food. The following morning he spent half an hour at the radio, trying to contact the battleship. He made a point of broadcasting a detailed account of what had happened so far, and he described what his plans were, including his intention of testing the Rull to see if it had suffered any injury from its period of hunger.

Subspace was as silent as death. Not a single pulse of vibration answered his call.

He finally abandoned the attempt to establish contact, and went outside. Swiftly, he set up the instruments he would need for his experiment. The tableland had the air of a deserted wilderness. He tested his equipment, then looked at his watch. It showed eleven minutes of noon. Suddenly jittery, he decided not to wait the extra minutes.

He walked over, hesitated, and then pressed a button. From a source near the screen, a rhythm on a very high energy level was being broadcast. It was a variation of the rhythm pattern to which the Rull had been subjected for four nights.

Slowly, Jamieson retreated toward the lifeboat. He wanted to try again to contact the *Orion*. Looking back, he saw the Rull glide into the clearing, and head straight for the source of the vibration.

As Jamieson paused involuntarily, fascinated, the main alarm system of the lifeboat went off with a roar. The sound echoed with an alien eeriness on the wings of the icy wind that was blowing, and it acted like a cue. His wrist radio snapped on, synchronizing automatically with the powerful radio in the lifeboat. A voice said urgently:

"Professor Jamieson, this is the battleship *Orion*. We heard your earlier calls but refrained from answering. An entire Rull fleet is cruising in the vicinity of the Laertes sun.

"In approximately five minutes, an attempt will be made to pick you up. Meanwhile—*drop everything.*"

Jamieson dropped. It was a physical movement, not a mental one. Out of the corner of one eye, even as he heard his own radio, he saw a movement in the sky. Two dark blobs, that resolved into vast shapes. There was a roar as the Rull super-battleships flashed by overhead. A cyclone followed their passage, that nearly tore him from the ground, where he clung desperately to the roots of intertwining brush.

At top speed, obviously traveling under gravitonic power, the enemy warships turned a sharp somersault, and came back toward the tableland. Expecting death, and beginning

to realize some of the truth of the situation on the tableland, Jamieson quailed. But the fire flashed past him, not at him. The thunder of the shot rolled toward Jamieson, a colossal sound, that yet did not blot out his sense awareness of what had happened. His lifeboat. They had fired at his lifeboat.

He groaned as he pictured it destroyed in one burst of intolerable flame. And then, for a moment, there was no time for thought or anguish.

A third warship came into view, but, as Jamieson strained to make out its contours, it turned and fled. His wrist radio clicked on:

"Cannot help you now. Save yourself. Our four accompanying battleships and attendant squadrons will engage the Rull fleet, and try to draw them toward our great battle group cruising near the star, Bianca, and then re—"

A flash of vivid fire in the distant sky ended the message. It was a full minute before the cold air of Laertes III echoed to the remote thunder of the broadside. The sound died slowly, reluctantly, as if endless little overtones of it were clinging to each molecule of air.

The silence that settled finally was, strangely, not peaceful. But like the calm before a storm, a fateful, quiescent stillness, alive with unmeasurable threat.

Shakily, Jamieson climbed to his feet. It was time to assess the immediate danger that had befallen him. The greater danger he dared not even think about.

Jamieson headed first for his lifeboat. He didn't have to go all the way. The entire section of the cliff had been sheared away. Of the ship there was no sign.

It pulled him up short. He had expected it, but the shock of the reality was terrific.

He crouched like an animal, and stared up into the sky, into the menacing limits of the sky. It was empty of machines. Not a movement was there, not a sound came out of it, except the sound of the east wind. He was alone in a universe between heaven and earth, a mind poised at the edge of an abyss.

Into his mind, tensely waiting, pierced a sharp understanding. The Rull ships had flown once over the mountain

to size up the situation on the tableland, and then had tried to destroy him.

Who was the Rull here with him, that super-battleships should roar down to insure that no danger remained for it on the tableland?

Well, they hadn't quite succeeded. Jamieson showed his teeth into the wind. Not quite. But he'd have to hurry. At any moment, they might risk one of their destroyers in a rescue landing.

As he ran, he felt himself one with the wind. He knew that feeling, that sense of returning primitiveness during moments of excitement. It was like that in battles, and the important thing was to yield one's whole body and soul to it. There was no such things as fighting efficiently with half your mind or half your body. All, all, was demanded.

He expected falls, and he had them. Each time he got up, almost unconscious of the pain, and ran on again. He arrived bleeding—but he arrived.

The sky was silent.

From the shelter of a line of brush, he peered at the Rull.

The captive Rull, *his* Rull to do with as he pleased. To watch, to force, to educate—the fastest education in the history of the world. There wasn't any time for a leisurely exchange of information.

From where he lay, he manipulated the controls of the screen.

The Rull had been moving back and forth in front of the screen. Now, it speeded up, then slowed, then speeded up again, according to his will.

Some thousands of years before, in the Twentieth Century, the classic and timeless investigation had been made of which this was one end result. A man called Pavlov fed a laboratory dog at regular intervals, to the accompaniment of the ringing of a bell. Soon, the dog's digestive system responded as readily to the ringing of the bell without the food as to the food and the bell together.

Pavlov himself never did realize the most important real-

ity behind his conditioning process. But what began on that remote day ended with a science that could control animals and aliens—and men—almost at will. Only the Rulls baffled the master experimenters in the later centuries when it was an exact science. Defeated by the will to death of all Rull captives, the scientists foresaw the doom of Earth's galactic empire unless some beginning could be made in penetrating the minds of Rulls.

It was his deperate bad luck that he had no time for real penetrations.

There was death here for those who lingered.

But even what he had to do, the bare minimum of what he had to do, would take precious time. Back and forth, back and forth; the rhythm of obedience had to be established.

The image of the Rull on the screen was as lifelike as the original. It was three dimensional, and its movements were like an automaton. The challenger was actually irresistible. Basic nerve centers were affected. The Rull could no more help falling into step than it could resist the call of the food impulse.

After it had followed that mindless pattern for 15 minutes, changing pace at his direction, Jamieson started the Rull and its image climbing trees. Up, then down again, half a dozen times. At that point, Jamieson introduced an image of himself.

Tensely, with one eye on the sky and one on the scene before him, he watched the reactions of the Rull—watched them with narrowed eyes and a sharp understanding of Rull responses to the presence of human beings. Rulls were digestively stimulated by the odor of man. It showed in the way their suckers opened and closed. When a few minutes later, he substituted himself for his image, he was satisfied that this Rull had temporarily lost its normal automatic hunger when it saw a human being.

And now that he had reached the stage of final control, he hesitated. It was time to make his tests. Could he afford the time?

He realized that he had to. This opportunity might not occur again in a hundred years.

When he finished the tests 25 minutes later, he was pale with excitement. He thought: *This is it. We've got it.*

He spent ten precious minutes broadcasting his discovery by means of his wrist radio—hoping that the transmitter on his lifeboat had survived its fall down the mountain, and was picking up the thready message of the smaller instrument, and sending it out through sub-space.

During the entire ten minutes, there was not a single answer to his call.

Aware that he had done what he could, Jamieson headed for the cliff's edge he had selected as a starting point. He looked down and shuddered, then remembered what the Orion had said: "An entire Rull fleet cruising. . . . . "

Hurry!

He lowered the Rull to the first ledge. A moment later he fastened the harness around his own body, and stepped into space. Sedately, with easy strength, the Rull gripped the other end of the rope, and lowered him down to the ledge beside it.

They continued on down and down. It was hard work although they used a very simple system.

A long plastic "rope" spanned the spaces for them. A metal "climbing" rod, used to scale the smooth vastness of a spaceship's side, held position after position while the rope did its work.

On each ledge, Jamieson burned the rod at a downward slant into solid rock. The rope slid through an arrangement of pulleys in the metal as the Rull and he, in turn, lowered each other to ledges farther down.

The moment they were both safely in the clear of one ledge, Jamieson would explode the rod out of the rock, and it would drop down ready for use again.

The day sank towards darkness like a restless man into sleep, slowly, wearily. Jamieson grew hot and tired, and filled with the melancholy of the fatigue that dragged at his muscles.

He could see that the Rull was growing more aware of

him. It still co-operated, but it watched him with intent eyes each time it swung him down.

The conditioned state was ending. The Rull was emerging from its trance. The process should complete before night.

There was a time, then, when Jamieson despaired of ever getting down before the shadows fell. He had chosen the western, sunny side for that fantastic descent down a black-brown cliff the like of which did not exist elsewhere in the known worlds of space. He found himself watching the Rull with quick, nervous glances. When it swung him down onto a ledge beside it, he watched its blue eyes, its staring blue eyes, come closer and closer to him, and then as his legs swung below the level of those strange eyes, they twisted to follow him.

The intent eyes of the other reminded Jamieson of his discovery. He felt a fury at himself that he had never reasoned it out before. For centuries man had known that his own effort to see clearly required a good twenty-five per cent of the energy of his whole body. Human scientists should have guessed that the vast wave compass of Rull eyes was the product of a balancing of glandular activity on a fantastically high energy level. A balancing which, if disturbed, would surely affect the mind itself either temporarily or permanently.

He had discovered that the impairment was permanent.

What would a prolonged period of starvation diet do to such a nervous system?

The possibilities altered the nature of the war. It explained why Rull ships had never attacked human food sources or supply lines; they didn't want to risk retaliation. It explained why Rull ships fought so remorselessly against Earth ships that intruded into their sectors of the galaxy. It explained their ruthless destruction of other races. They lived in terror that their terrible weakness would be found out.

Jamieson smiled with a savage anticipation. If his message had got through, or if he escaped, Rulls would soon feel the pinch of hunger. Earth ships would concentrate on that basic form of attack in the future. The food supplies of entire planetary groups would be poisoned, convoys would

be raided without regard for casualties. Everywhere at once the attack would be pressed without letup and without mercy.

It shouldn't be long before the Rull began his retreat to his own galaxy. That was the only solution that would be acceptable. The invader must be driven back and back, forced to give up his conquests of a thousand years.

4:00 P.M. Jamieson had to pause again for a rest. He walked to the side of the ledge away from the Rull, and sank down on the rock. The sky was a brassy blue, silent and windless now, a curtain drawn across the black space above, concealing what must already be the greatest Rull-human battle in ten years.

It was a tribute to the five Earth battleships and their escort that no Rull ship had yet attempted to rescue the Rull on the tableland.

Possibly, of course, they didn't want to give away the presence of one of their own kind.

Jamieson gave up the futile speculation. Wearily, he compared the height of the cliff above with the depth that remained below. He estimated they had come two-thirds of the distance. He saw that the Rull was staring out over the valley. Jamieson turned and gazed with it.

The scene which they took in with their different eyes and different brains was fairly drab and very familiar, yet withal strange and wonderful. The forest began a quarter of a mile from the bottom of the cliff, and it almost literally had no end. It rolled up over the hills and down into the shallow valleys. It faltered at the edge of a broad river, then billowed out again, and climbed the slopes of mountains that sprawled mistily in distance.

His watch showed 4:15. Time to get going again.

At twenty-five minutes after six, they reached a ledge a hundred and fifty feet above the uneven plain. The distance strained the capacity of the rope, but the initial operation of lowering the Rull to freedom and safety was achieved without incident. Jamieson gazed down curiously at the worm. What would it do now that it was in the clear?

It looked up at him and waited.

That made him grim. Because this was a chance he was not taking. Jamieson waved imperatively at the Rull, and took out his blaster. The Rull backed away, but only into the safety of a gigantic rock. Blood-red, the sun was sinking behind the mountains. Darkness moved over the land. Jamieson ate his dinner. It was as he was finishing it that he saw a movement below.

He watched, as the Rull glided along close to the edge of the precipice.

It disappeared beyond an outjut of the cliff.

Jamieson waited briefly, then swung out on the rope. The descent drained his strengh, but there was solid ground at the bottom. Three quarters of the way down, he cut his finger on a section of the rope that was unexpectedly rough.

When he reached the ground, he noticed that his finger was turning an odd gray. In the dimness, it looked strange and unhealthy.

As Jamieson stared at it, the color drained from his face. He thought in a bitter anger. *The Rull must have smeared it on the rope on his way down.*

A pang went through his body. It was knife sharp, and it was followed instantly by a stiffness. With a gasp, he grabbed at his blaster, to kill himself. His hand froze in midair. He fell to the ground. The stiffness held him there, froze him there motionless.

The will to death is in all life. Every organic cell ecphorizes the inherited engrams of its inorganic origin. The pulse of life is a squamous film superimposed on an underlying matter so intricate in its delicate balancing of different energies that life itself is but a brief, vain straining against that balance.

For an instant of eternity, a pattern is attempted. It takes many forms, but these are apparent. The real shape is always a time and not a space shape. And that shape is a curve. Up and then down. Up from the darkness into the light, then down again into the blackness.

The male salmon sprays his mist of milt onto the eggs of the female. And instantly he is seized with a mortal melan-

choly. The male bee collapses from the embrace of the queen he has won, back into that inorganic mold from which he climbed for one single moment of ecstasy. In man, the fateful pattern is repressed into quadrillions of individual cells.

But the pattern is there. Waiting.

Long before, the sharp-minded Rull scientists, probing for chemical substances that would shock man's system into its primitive forms, found the special secret of man's will to death.

The *yeli*, Meeesh, gliding back toward Jamieson did not think of the process. He had been waiting for the opportunity. It had occurred. He was intent on his own purposes.

Briskly, he removed the man's blaster, then he searched for the key to the lifeboat. And then he carried Jamieson a quarter of a mile around the base of the cliff to where the man's ship had been catapulted by the blast from the Rull warship.

Five minutes later, the powerful radio inside was broadcasting on Rull wave lengths, an imperative command to the Rull fleet.

Dimness. Inside and outside his skin. He felt himself at the bottom of a well, peering out of night into twilight. As he lay, a pressure of something swelled around him, lifted him higher and higher, and nearer to the mouth of the well.

He struggled the last few feet, a distinct mental effort, and looked over the edge. Consciousness.

He was lying on a raised table inside a room which had several large mouselike openings at the floor level, openings that led to other chambers. Doors, he identified, odd-shaped, alien, unhuman. Jamieson cringed with the stunning shock of recognition.

He was inside a Rull warship.

There was a slithering of movement behind him. He turned his head, and rolled his eyes in their sockets.

In the shadows, three Rulls were gliding across the floor toward a bank of instruments that reared up behind and to one side of him. They pirouetted up an inclined plane and

poised above him. Their pale eyes, shiny in the dusk of that unnatural chamber, peered down at him.

Jamieson tried to move. His body writhed in the confines of the bonds that held him. That brought a sharp remembrance of the death-will chemical that the Rull had used. Relief came surging. He was not dead. *Not dead.* NOT DEAD. The Rull must have helped him, forced him to move, and so had broken the downward curve of his descent to dust.

He was alive—for what?

The thought slowed his joy. His hope snuffed out like a flame. His brain froze into a tensed, terrible mask of anticipation.

As he watched with staring eyes, expecting pain, one of the Rulls pressed a button. Part of the table on which Jamieson was lying, lifted. He was raised to a sitting position.

What now?

He couldn't see the Rulls. He tried to turn, but two head shields clamped into the side of his head, and held him firmly.

He saw that there was a square of silvery sheen on the wall which he faced. A light sprang onto it, and then a picture. It was a curiously familiar picture, but at first because there was a reversal of position Jamieson couldn't place the familiarity.

Abruptly, he realized.

It was a twisted version of the picture that he had shown the Rull, first when he was feeding it, and then with more weighty arguments after he discovered the vulnerability of man's mortal enemy.

He had shown how the Rull race would be destroyed unless it agreed to peace.

In the picture he was being shown it was the Rull that urged co-operation between the two races. They seemed unaware that he had not yet definitely transmitted his knowledge to other human beings. Or perhaps that fact was blurred by the conditioning he had given to the Rull when he fed it and controlled it.

As he glared at the screen, the picture ended—and then started again. By the time it had finished a second time, there was no doubt. Jamieson collapsed back against the table. They would not show him such a picture unless he was to be used as a messenger.

He would be returned home to carry the message that man had wanted to hear for a thousand years. He would also carry the information that would give meaning to the offer.

The Rull-human war was over.

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