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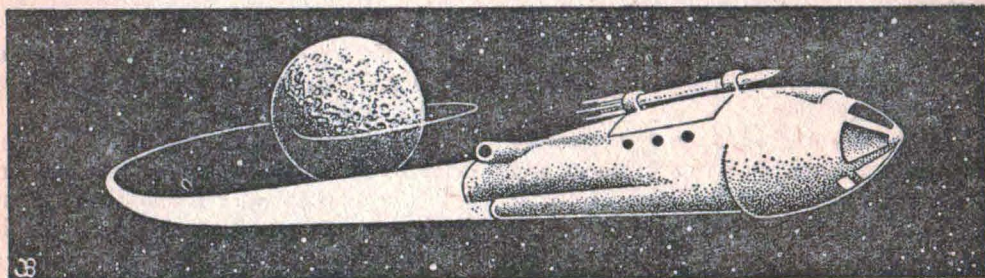
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By KILIAN HOUSTON BRUNNER

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I

IT WAS a wild night. The wind shouted in the bending trees like a giant's child, shrieking its glee at the black, cloud-racing sky, and the rain poured and spattered on the earth, churning even the tough thin Argus grass from its place, dancing like a cloud of devils across the hard bare roads, whipping the faces of travelers like a myriad of icy needles, soaking and re-soaking the imperial banners over the castle of the kings till they were too heavy to stand out from the staffs at the bidding of the wind, too heavy to reveal that they hung upside-down to signify the passing of a king.

Outside the black castle, people waited, watching. They were gray people, common people, men with the coarse hands of farmers and mechanics, women with lined, careworn faces and eyes like dying coals.

A bell was tolling.

The same storm whipped at the windows of a lone helicopter but a few miles distant in the night. It had not the look of something made with human hands, for it came from one of the mutant worlds beyond the bounds of the Empire, whither the un-human children of men had been harried by the lash of hatred, and where they had built themselves a culture that still retained knowledge lost to the Empire in the Long Night that had swamped the stars ten thousand years before.

The man at the controls handled them with delicacy, for she was bucking like a live thing, and half an impatient move might tear the blades from the screaming rotors and toss them a mile to the barren lands below. He had a high bald forehead and sensitive lips, but the nose and eyes of an eagle, and his hands were pale and

long, his voice, when he spoke, low and pleasant.

He glanced for a second over his shoulder and said conversationally, "Nice weather, eh, Sharla?"

There were two other people in the cockpit behind him, uncomfortable on seats built for not-men bigger than mere humans. The girl on the left shuddered, and drew her cloak tighter around her, and tried to force herself closer into the corner where she sat. She said, "Landor, is there much further to go?"

Landor risked a quick glance from the wildness outside to the position marker glowing like a firefly in the corner of the control panel. He said, "Not far. Perhaps another ten minutes' flying time will get us there."

The third passenger grunted expressively. He said, "This is the ride of the furies, Ser Landor, and no mistake!"

Landor laughed shortly, without taking his eyes from the storm or shifting hands or body an infinitesimal fraction. He said, "You have the makings of a poet, Ordovic."

"A poet? Not I!" Ordovic retorted, his eyes straying from the windows to the pale, set face of Sharla across the seat beside him. "I'm nothing but a common fighting man, more at home with a spear than a pen and happier with a sword than either."

He dropped his hand to the hilt of his own blade, and the steel rang very softly in its scabbard, and at the noise his dark eyes filled with something that belied his self-deprecation.

He added, putting his hand to the clasp at his neck, "You're cold, my lady. Will you take my cloak?"

Sharla stopped him with a gesture. "Not now, Ordovic. We have but ten minutes'



flying to do, and I have no wish to freeze you for that space of time. There will be warmth at the castle."

Landor said pointedly, "There may be a warm reception for us in more ways than one, Sharla. Ordovic, I'm no fighting man—my swordsmanship went with my youth—and I place our safety in your hands."

Ordovic squared his shoulders and under the coarse brown cloak there was a glint of metal. "But twenty-eight years, Ser Landor," he boasted, "and as strong as a Thanis bull."

Sharla glanced at him very swiftly, and away. Her lovely face was troubled.

THE crowd before the castle thinned slowly. Many of them had watched since sundown last evening, and had seen the banners dip and vanish and rise again inverted in the dim red glow of the winter sun, and had raised the Passing Cry for Andalvar of Argus, and watched in the wet chill of the storm in honor of their ruler.

On a bare slab of rock beside the road waited a boy of seven and a crone of sixty, bent and worn, for old age came quickly on this harsh bare world. The boy yawned and huddled against the old woman, trying to share the impact of the blast. Nearby, men stamped and shifted and blew on their hands, and their leather coats dripped wet.

Suddenly the old woman closed her eyes, folded her cold hands together, and whispered, "Ronail?"

"Here, granny," the boy said, putting his arm around her wasted shoulders.

"Ronail, I see bad days," the old woman whispered, her voice like the rustle of dry leaves in the wind. "Ronail, I see evil days ahead of Argus, and I pity you."

One of the men nearby turned suddenly, his beard spangled with drops of rain like tiny jewels. He bent low and said urgently to the boy, "What was that?"

The boy said casually, with the inconsequentiality of youth, "'Tis only granny. She's a seeress."

The man's eyes lit, and he bent closer to hear the faint words as they fell from her stiff, withered lips. Other men stepped near.

"Ronail—Ronail, where are you?"

"Here, granny," said the boy comfortingly. He pressed up against her.

"Ronail—I see bad times for Argus soon. I see the black witch scheming to oppress us and forget the Empire—the people groaning and the soldiers bought—the Empire become dust."

"Ay!" whispered the bearded man. "The black witch. Andra! This is an evil day for Argus."

"Ssh!" said a man behind him. "There may be more."

"The purging of the fire and the chastening of the whip," recited the old hag in her mumbling tones. "The sores and the wraths of the lords—"

The bearded man signed himself, and the boy, after gazing in wonder for an instant, followed suit.

"Ay, the dark of the Long Night is near to be seen, and ere the black witch be forgotten there are black days for Argus!"

There was another sound than the storm, faintly, in the distance, like the buzzing of a monstrous fly, and the crone opened her eyes and stared unseeing at the castle.

The noise grew. Even the deaf could feel it now, a great steady drone that made the ears ring and the heart falter. They stood, searching the bare black sky.

Then there was a light that shone more brightly than all the moons of Argus—called after the many-eyed god for its nine bright satellites—which flared out of nothing in the sky and grew steadily as the noise grew. Above it there became visible a shimmer like the wings of an insect.

"A devil!" shouted someone, and they threatened to break and run, but the bearded one said scornfully, "What devil would venture near the castle of the kings? No, 'tis a machine, a flying machine. I have seen such in my travels, but I never thought to see one in the air of Argus."

They passed the explanation from mouth to mouth, and they signed themselves and stood fast. Slowly, the light settled, tossed by the wind but driving gently down into the bare space that the first drawing-aside had left. The noise was like the drumming of a demon.

It touched the wet ground before the castle, and the light vanished and the noise ceased.

The door of the thing opened and three figures came out, the first two dropping

lightly to the ground and turning to aid the third.

Together the new-comers passed through the crowd, who drew back at the air of authority worn by the leader of the three. He was a tall man with a shining helmet and a cloak that stood out behind him like great wings, and he strode through the gale-strong gusts as if the storm had not existed.

Before the mighty iron doors of the castle he paused. Then with sword reversed he hammered on the door till it rang and rang again, and he threw back his head and roared in a bull voice that shook the castle and drowned the storm.

"Open! Open in the name of Andalvar's daughter, the Princess Sharla of Argus!"

SENCHAN VAR raised the drape from the narrow slit in the wall, and glanced through it at the black night outside. He said, "There are quite a few of them left, my lady."

"But naturally, Senchan," said Andra lazily, and there was half a laugh hidden in her voice. "Did you expect less from a people loyal to its kings?"

He dropped the curtain again and turned to lean against the wall beside it, his face thoughtful. "Things have happened, my lady—sooner than we expected. Perhaps too soon. I counted on a month more."

Andra reclined on the yellow silk pillows of her divan like a well-fed cat. She had cat's eyes too—yellow, with heavy lids—and her black hair hung around her shoulders as the night hung around the castle.

"What makes you say that, Senchan?" she said casually, picking grapes from a bowl before her and splitting them with her perfect teeth. "Why should our plans not go through as well now as later?" She tossed one of the fruit to the black Sirian ape chained to the opposite wall of the room, and laughed when he caught it and rejected it. His kind were no vegetarians.

Senchan Var followed the movement with his eyes and shuddered. He confessed frankly, "It is not that our plan is not working, my lady. It is working too well! All's going too smoothly. I cannot rid myself of the fear that there will be a flaw."

"Is it the thought of Sharla that makes

you afraid, Senchan? A child—forgotten, lost? She hasn't been seen or heard of for seven years, Senchan."

Senchan Var elbowed himself away from the wall and paced restlessly up and down, his bare feet brown and thin on the snow-white fleece of the carpet. He said, "No, my lady. Sharla's the least likely untoward factor to crop up. If she's not dead, she still will not hear of your father's death for long after you're established regent."

"Is it Penda, then, that worries you? Where is he, by the way?"

"Asleep, my lady. He displayed deep feeling earlier—wept, and fell asleep weeping."

"He would," said Andra. "'Tis natural at his age."

"Natural!" said Senchan Var scornfully, "Your pardon, my lady, but to weep like a girl at his age is shameful. If my son did that, being as he is much of an age with Prince Penda—*King* Penda, I should say, I suppose—I'd rise from my deathbed and strike him!"

Andra curved her full red lips into a smile, and picked a bloody bone from the floor beside her. At the movement the ape across the room bounded out to the full length of his silver chain and dropped to his knees, his thick lips drawn back from teeth like chisels. She laughed again, very softly.

"That's a loyal sentiment, Senchan," she said. "Which reminds me—he brought his hound into the dining hall again today, against his father's commands. Have Dolichek brought, will you? And the whip-master."

Senchan Var's grizzled face turned to meet her gaze in astonishment. He said, "My lady, if you ask me, Dolichek is half the reason Penda is so insolent. If you'll allow me the suggestion, Dolichek should be dismissed now, and this practice discontinued."

Andra's fingers folded like a steel trap closing on the bone she held, and the blood from the meat on it welled red between her fingers. She said in a sort of sibilant whisper, "No, Senchan! Think! Spoilt he may be—spoilt he is. But as such he is most suited to our purpose. Fetch Dolichek."

Senchan shrugged, mute rebellion smol-

dering in his eyes. He said, "Very well, my lady; but it makes my heart ache to see the fruit of a fine stock go rotten."

Andra relaxed, and the ape whined tentatively, extending black hairless paws towards the bone. Impatiently she flung it at him. He seized it out of the air and curled up contentedly to gnaw it on the floor.

Very faintly above the muted roar of the storm, dulled by six feet of stone, there was a buzzing sound like a gigantic fly. Senchan Var noted it and frowned, but since Andra did not comment on it he said nothing, but tugged at the gold-wove bell-rope beside the window. A small brassy bell rang somewhere outside.

A slave with the hot brown skin of a Marzon and the twitching eyes of a man born under a variable star entered silently and stood waiting for orders.

Andra picked more fruit from the silver bowl and said, around a soft Sirenian plum, "Bring Dolichek and the whipmaster, Sam-sar."

THE slave bowed and vanished again, and she said a little peevishly to Senchan Var, "Senchan, what's that row?"

"I don't know, my lady," Senchan Var reported. He was straining his eyes into the blackness beyond the window. "It's dark as a wolf's throat out there."

"Then drop the curtain," Andra commanded. "It's cold enough in here as it is, in all conscience. And 'twill be this way for days. You know these storms."

The slave stood again, silently, at the far end of the room, three paces from the black ape, grunting over his bone. He said, "My lady, Dolichek and the whipmaster wait."

"Bring them in," said Andra, inclining her head. Senchan Var snorted and strode over to the window again, stood with his back to the entrance as the slave ushered in Dolichek and the wielder of the whip.

Dolichek was a boy of perhaps fifteen, with a thin peaked face and a body more bone than flesh and little of that. He brushed back his straggling blond hair, matted with dirt, and essayed a bow to Andra, who smiled slowly and took another fruit.

She said, "Dolichek, Prince Penda—King Penda, now—brought his hound into the dining hall again today, against his father's

command." She took a tiny malicious delight in saying it.

Dolichek sighed so slightly that one had to look hard to notice it, and said, "Very well, my lady. That was three strokes last time."

"This time four, then," said Andra casually. "Slave, four lashes!"

The wielder of the whip was black, and seven feet tall. He hailed from Leontis, where under the first King of Argus his ancestors had sweated to mine platinum on a world scant millions of miles from its primary. When he nodded at Andra's bidding, the muscles of his neck rippled down his chest and shoulders like waves in oily water. He spat on his hands and wetted the thong of his silver-mounted whip, flexed it, raised his arm—

Andra stopped him with a gesture. "Listen!" she said. "Senchan, that noise has stopped. Look outside."

Senchan Var needed only take a pace to lift the yellow drape from the window. He peered out into the night, shook his head.

"Too dark after the light in here," he reported. "There seems to be some sort of cart or carriage outside on the road before the castle—"

From somewhere below came the crash-crash-crash of smitten iron, and Andra froze as if struck to stone by an enchanter's wand. In utter silence, save for the slobbering of the ape over his bone, they heard a man's voice from below shout, "Open!"

"Open in the name of Andalvar's daughter, the Princess Sharla of Argus!"

II

KELAB the conjurer looked both ways along the Street of the Morning, surveying the wet gray stones of the cracked paving and the pools of water in the blocked gutter.

A few yards down the road from him an aged crone, one of the many beggars who sat along the Street of the Morning, huddled on a doorstep. He looked her over, from her closed eyes to her stiff hands and bare feet, and noted the mouth, slackly open like that of an idiot. She was dead.

He signed himself, as any vagrant would, and tossed a few coins into the tin cup at

her feet. No sweeper would touch those coins, for they were burying money and as such, tainted. She would have her funeral.

He sniffed the air. It had a part-clean smell, made of the new-washed streets and the unwashed thousands of the Low City, and he inhaled it gratefully, his eyes running along the ill-matched roofs of the houses till they fell on the flagstaff over the fortress on the Hill of Kings a mile away.

The banner on it was upside down, the proud golden sun hanging sadly in the bottom quarter instead of the top, the black-lettered motto of the House of Argus inverted above it. Kelab's lips formed the words slowly.

"Be strong: be just: be faithful."

Without taking his eyes from the banner he fumbled in his pouch and pulled a watch from it—a watch that had never come from any forge within the Empire. He looked at it, and his eyes filled with satisfaction and his lips took on the shadow of a smile.

Under a swinging rain-worn sign that had once said, "The House of the Bubbling Spring," he paused and rubbed his clean-shaven chin. He seemed to come to a quick decision, descended the few steps below the sign and pushed open the ill-fitting door.

Beyond it, the air was thick, twice-breathed; it was laden with the stench of sweat, stale liquor and smoking drugs. At one table a party of thin, shifty-eyed spacemen sat around five empty bottles of tsinamo, playing the endless game called shen fu, and their soft-spoken bids and the click of chips were the only noises in the muggy-hot room.

There was a long bar on the left, littered with empty drink cartons and stained with spilt liquor, and behind it a fat man with thinning sandy hair sat, his back to the room, playing a color-sonata on a Mimosan chromograph.

He didn't turn as Kelab came up to the bar and hitched himself on to a reasonably clean seat, said only, "What's yours?"

Kelab said, "Water, Finzey. Water from the Bubbling Spring."

Finezey shut off the chromograph and whirled, his fat face splitting in a lavish grin. He said explosively, "Kelab! How long have you been on-world?"

"Since about midnight—and a rough coming I had of it, too. There wasn't so much as a mile of clear weather between here and the Silent Mountains."

"It was pretty bad," said Finzey sagely, reaching below the counter for a bottle and a mug. "But you know what they say—weather bad, trade good."

"Trade looks to have been good," agreed Kelab, glancing around the littered room. He took the mug Finzey filled with the heady potent fuming liquor he laughingly called the water of the Bubbling Spring, sniffed it, and drank a few mouthfuls.

Finezey eased his bulk on to a stool opposite and said eagerly, "Where've you been lately, Kelab—hey? You haven't touched Argus since—must be two years back."

"And two months," Kelab nodded. "I've been out of the Empire, around the fringe. Picking up new tricks among the mutant worlds till I was broke, and then working my way back towards the big money. But I see the banner's inverted over the fortress yonder."

He jerked his head eastwards.

Finezey plucked his lower lip with pudgy fingers. "Ay," he agreed. "We had a man in around midnight with the news that Andalvar had passed."

"You have the burying money?" Kelab asked, and Finzey pushed a white pottery bowl towards him. It was more than half full of coins, imperial and outland currencies. Kelab shook it reflectively, added another coin to it, pushed it away.

Finezey's eyes widened, and he touched the coin with his finger to make sure it was real. He said incredulously, "You said you were broke, Kelab!"

THE conjurer shrugged. "I was broke. Money given in a good cause, they say, is money gained, and I can earn that again in three days. The poor has need of the burying money of the kings.

"There is another outside who will need burying," he added, picking up his drink.

Finezey nodded. "I have been told so. She will stay till noon—the burying money is more, so. I will charge myself with her funeral. But Kelab, you haven't heard?"

"Heard what, fat one?"

"The sight of the banner was the first news you had of Andalvar's passing?"

Kelab nodded, and Finzey rushed on, bubbling like his own liquor with excitement. "Then no one has told you how, round three this morning, a flying machine such as none ever saw on Argus came to earth before the castle of the kings where Andalvar lies, bearing, they tell me, a soldier, a counsellor, and the Princess Sharla!"

Kelab's hand faltered only for the slightest fraction of a second as he took the mug away from his mouth, and his voice was quite steady when he said, "Sharla, fat one? You speak in riddles. Andalvar's daughter is called Andra."

"No, you do not understand," Finzey struggled to explain. "Princess Sharla is the lost princess, the one who was thought dead."

Thoughtful, Kelab drained his mug, set it down. He said, "I recall stories—but remember, Finzey, I am no Argian, and so much goes on in the Empire that I cannot know all the news. Tell me."

"Well, as you doubtless know, Andalvar was married late in life, some twenty-odd years ago, and his wife Lora first bore him a daughter, who was named Sharla. Since he was King, he hoped for a son to take his place on the throne in after years, but his wife bore him next another daughter. Andra—her whom they call the black witch, though she's a beauty and no mistake."

Kelab's smoky eyes stared fixedly at the blank screen of the chromograph. He said, "Go on."

"Then, five years later, she bore him a son at last—Penda, who's now officially king—and died in childbirth. And Andalvar, fearing lest his time be short, made certain of having a good regent for the time before his son came of age by sending Sharla—then some twelve years old, much Penda's age now, in fact—to study at a school far away from here, where some of the arts of the Golden Age lived on, I'm told."

"After two years she disappeared, and none could be found to trace her. They tore the Empire apart—I'm surprised you heard nothing of it."

Mechanically Kelab reached for the bottle and refilled his mug, said, "Seven years ago

I was out of the Empire. I heard only rumors."

"I'm amazed, even so. However, she was gone, and 'tis credibly reported that the loss drove Andalvar a little crazy. In his ruling he was just, as ever, and in his bargaining as shrewd; but he would not tolerate that the others of his children should come to the slightest harm. For instance he would not let Andra be trained for the Regency as Sharla was to be, nor would he suffer his son to be beaten or punished for his transgressions. He kept a slave's son—one Dolichek—as whipping-post for him, in accordance with a very ancient custom lapsed previously these four hundred years. And they tell me, shorn of the discipline which made Andalvar a firm ruler, Andra has grown spoilt and capricious and self-seeking, and there is no sign in Penda of the quality that will make a good king."

"I see," said Kelab reflectively. "Tell me more—who are considered to be the powers at court?"

Finezey was growing expansive. The spacemen behind Kelab went on making their whispered bets, and the curious blue chips changed hands with a soft click-clack. Finzey said, "Why, Andra herself, of course, and Senchan Var, a man they call the Lord Great Chamberlain. They say he has the Council of Six in his pocket—that's the council of the rulers of the vassal worlds, you know?"

Kelab nodded. There were six worlds in the Empire that had nominally equal rights with Argus in ruling the straggling remnants of a union which had once spanned half a galaxy, but they were powerless singly whereas Argus was not, and their wealth, in these days when wealth was measured in ships and fighting men, only balanced Argus's when they stood together. Apart, they were negligible.

"What kind of a man is this Senchan Var?"

"Noble," said Finzey. "Of good descent. And honest too—but if I'm any judge, in love with the black witch. He holds, they say, that Andalvar was more than just in his dealings with his subjects—generous, rather—and would sooner the iron-harsh rule our ancestors knew, saying openly that leniency courts revolution. But he is admired for his feats in war when young. His swords-

manship was all but legendary. The people would follow him, I think."

"Why add that, fat one?" Kelab demanded.

Finzey shrugged elephantine shoulders. "No reason, but that you asked me who were the powers at court. He is the greatest after Andra—except perhaps for Sabura Mona. No one knows much of her."

"And who is Sabura Mona?"

"That's one I can't answer. She is a woman, fat—fatter than I by far, which is no mean size. There are rumors—but rumors only. They say she has a spoon in every stew cooked in the Empire, that Andalvar trusted her implicitly, that she advised him. But she is very seldom seen in public, she does not appear at palace functions, and if she is served by the castle servants or indeed any servants at all, they do not speak of her."

"Enigmatic," commented Kelab.

"In very truth," agreed Finzey emphatically. "And I know no more about her than I've told you, so you don't need to sit there looking as if anquar wouldn't fizz in your mouth."

Kelab grinned like a boy, flashing white teeth in his dusky face, and swept a lean brown hand through his black sleek hair, knotted behind with a gaudy cloth. There was a tiny gold disk in his left ear-lobe that caught the light from the lamps beyond. He said, "All right, Finzey, but you're the first man I've spoken to on Argus since two years ago, and things change in two years. And the voice of the people—what's it saying now?"

Finzey said shrewdly, "Do you mean the big voice or the small voice?"

"The small voice," said Kelab. He swirled the liquor around the bottom of his mug. "The voice that matters."

FINZEY glanced past him at the group of spacemen. Nothing seemed to have changed at first glance, but there was suddenly an abstracted look in their eyes, and they made their bids in a whisper, and the chips shuffled from hand to hand instead of click-clacking as before. He got down from the stool noisily and began busily swabbing the bar.

Kelab smiled very faintly, and a blue

shimmer drifted like smoke between the bar and the spacemen at their game. It curled and writhed like a live thing, and remained, a curtain hanging on nothing, a web stirred by intangible winds—and a barrier that no sound would pass. He said, "Finzey, what does the small voice say?"

Cautiously the fat bartender leaned across the bar and nodded at the blue veil. "I'd forgotten that one," he said. "They don't call you The Conjuror for nothing. But you cannot tell these days who is not seeking money as an informer—"

"Speak," said Kelab impatiently.

"They say there have been prophecies. At times of doom there are always prophecies. When Sharla disappeared and again last night the voice of the seers was heard. Last night, they say, the word was spoken before the castle of the kings itself. Black days for Argus, my friend, and the Empire dust and forgotten—and the black witch is the cause. Princess Andra. There are those who say her regency could itself end the Empire."

Kelab nodded. His eyes glowed somber-bright, like a lantern behind a horn shade. "From what you say of her I can well believe it. And the small voice—does it say 'Ay'?"

"It roars like a caged lion," said Finzey flatly.

"Of the coming of Sharla it says—what?"

"As yet, nothing. But there are high hopes . . ."

"I see," said Kelab slowly. "And the burying of Andalvar will be—when and where?"

"On the third day after the passing, as the custom is, at the castle of the kings. The chieftains and the lords attending will be here tomorrow or the next day and will be received by the Princess Sharla, I assume—if she *is* in truth Sharla."

Kelab halted his mug halfway to his lips and said slowly, "Of course. I hadn't thought of that."

"Decision rests with the Council of Six as to the Regency, of course, but traditionally the eldest daughter of a dead king is chosen Regent if one is needful. But it could be otherwise, in theory."

Kelab tossed down the rest of his drink and said, "How much do I owe you?"

Caught by surprise, Finzey blinked. He said, "So soon? But why? I wanted to hear of your marvelous travels since last we met. Why must you go?"

Kelab grinned, jerked a thumb at the thousand-circle coin he had left in the burying money bowl, while with the other hand he rolled up the blue veil and squeezed it into nothing. "I have to earn my bread. How much?"

"A gift, Kelab," said Finzey, spreading his fat hands. "Call it my share in that coin. But pickings for entertainers will be small until the mourning days are over."

"I'll take that risk," said Kelab the Conjuror.

He went out of the bar, away from the drunken girls and the spacemen playing shen fu and the smell of stale liquor, and he walked for many hours in the Low City, his heels clicking on the paving and his head bent in thought.

SENCHAN VAR said furiously, "This is the sort of thing that should not happen!"

Andra seemed quite composed about it all. She sat blandly picking fruit from the silver bowl, as undisturbed as the black ape curled up and snoring very softly against the wall, one paw still clutching the stripped bone. The noon sun shone yellow through the slit windows. Inconsequentially she said, "This is the sort of thing that the common people will take as an omen, I feel—the storm clearing at her arrival, I mean. There is, I take it, small doubt that she is indeed my sister Sharla?"

Senchan Var said bitterly, "None, my lady. You would not know it, my lady, but she looks as did your mother at her age down to the finest detail. And if she is as tender as she looks outside we may say goodbye to the Empire."

Andra laughed. "My dear faithful Senchan, she may prove to be the very leader the Empire needs to hold it together. What does Sabura Mona think?"

Senchan Var whirled on her and said, "My lady, where is Sabura Mona? She came to the bedside of your father but she did not stay and watch with us."

"No more did I, Senchan. It is a woman's weakness."

Senchan Var snorted. "In *you* I am prepared to forgive it, for you are young, my lady, but that Sabura Mona is tougher than a thousand men I could name. She has the heart of a Thanis bull—"

"But the looks of a demon," supplied Andra quietly. "And does it matter *who* saves the Empire?"

"By the winds of Argus, *yes!*" said Senchan, driving fist into palm with an explosive slap. "One thing can save the Empire from the downhill path, and one only. A firm hand at the controls! What can this upstart Sharla do? She's been away from the Empire nine years, while you've been here at the heart of affairs. What is to be done must be done now! But the common people already know she is here, and their voice says *she* is the one to save Argus!"

Andra shrugged. "What care I for the common people? What do they know of statecraft? We have the support of the people who matter, Senchan—the rich men and the nobles. How do we stand on the Council of Six?"

"They may vote together or they may split three and three. Lorgis, Draco and Bunagar have little love for you, being from the poor pastoral worlds, and may be willing to stake all on a new deal, but Heena, Dolon and Mesa should stay true."

"They better had," said Andra ominously. "I made them all three, and what I made I can break. But Senchan, there is one thing you have forgotten."

Senchan Var frowned doubtfully. He said, "That the union with Mercator is enough to rescue the Empire? But you forget, my lady—a royal union is effective only when the woman is a ruler in her own right, else she must swear allegiance to her husband and deny her own people. As regent you would have secured a valid union—though really a back marriage would have been required to cement it when Penda came of age—"

Andra said lazily, "No, I didn't mean that. Think, Senchan. You and I know that is the best course for the Empire—new strength grafted on the old stock. There is an easy test of whether Sharla does too. Think over the wording of that contract we made."

Puzzled, Senchan began to recite it under

his breath, from memory. After awhile he understood.

Slowly, he began to smile.

III

"THAT'S the dangerous one," whispered Landor.

Sharla, Regent since twenty hours ago on a split vote of the Council of Six, tradition having the deciding say, nodded imperceptibly. She sat, black-robed and veiled, on a black-draped throne at the end of the Hall of State, waiting to receive the lords and chieftains who had come to honor her father at his burying, Landor beside her where Senchan Var had stood to her father in the office of Lord Great Chamberlain, Ordovic stiffly uncomfortable in formal uniform as Captain of the royal bodyguard. Andra was not present. Ostensibly, she wished to attend to the ordering of her father's affairs in the city, but in effect she had ceded her rooms in the castle to Sharla and snubbed her by walking out, and Sharla was much distressed at her attitude.

But it worried Landor not at all.

Immediately after the Council of Six had split their votes three and three, and the precedent of other occasions had decided the course to be followed, Senchan Var had tendered his resignation, and Sharla had promptly appointed Landor in his place, for Landor seemed to have the notables and the history of Argus at his fingers' ends. And certain people were muttering, displeased.

Far down the hall the black-robed trumpeter made the rafters ring behind a man framed in the vast open doorway of the hall, a tall, insolent-faced man with black hair and fiery eyes, polished helm under his left arm, its plume nodding as he turned casually from side to side surveying the rows of courtiers lining the hall, his right hand on his sword-hilt. He wore the brass and leather of a fighting man.

The trumpeter put down his silver horn, and the nomenclator announced, "Barkasch of Mercator, come to pay tribute to Andalvar of Argus!"

The tall man ceased his survey of the hall and began to walk up it with an easy, swinging stride, his sandals padding on the

carpeted floor and his accoutrements making the ghost of a jingling rhythm as he went.

In silence he paused before the throne and faced the black-veiled Regent.

Finally he bowed, and in a voice that the shouting of orders had made like a brazen gong said, "Greeting, my lady of Argus."

Ordovic signaled to the company of the bodyguard without taking his eyes from Barkasch, and they stood easy, their shields crashing in unison between their shoulder-blades. He was glad that there was still precision and efficiency here, among the soldiers.

"Greeting, my lord of Mercator," said Sharla, and her voice was firm and musical, but she shaped strangely the words of a tongue she had not spoken save with an outland accent for seven years.

Barkasch straightened from his bow slowly, and his eyes rested for a moment on the veil before her face. He said, "My lady, I know not that voice! Yet I know well the voice of my lady Andra. Ho! Trickery!" He flung back his head and his voice went rolling among the rafters, while Sharla looked up in dismay. Of course—to be here so soon he must have left Mercator before more than the first news of Andalvar's passing had gone out.

"Let me handle this," whispered Landor, and she nodded.

Stepping forward, he rapped the ground with his staff of office. The courtiers along the hall had shifted like waves breaking when Barkasch had shouted, and a small murmur of resentment had gone up. Now it rose again at Landor's movement, for there were those present who held that Senchan Var had been unjustly displaced, more who had coveted his post for themselves, and some even who held Sharla as all but an imposter.

Now Barkasch, hand on hilt of sword, drew his blade to half its length from the scabbard and let it drop back, ringing. He said with a hint of contempt, "And who may you be?"

"I am Landor, Lord Great Chamberlain of Argus, and this is no trickery."

"No trickery?" Barkasch's eyes searched Landor's unlined face suspiciously. "Yet I know that voice is not the voice of my lady Andra."

"Indeed it is not," said Lander composedly. "'Tis that of my lady Sharla."

"Sharla, Ser Lander?" said Barkasch incredulously. "The lost daughter of Andalvar? What tale is this?"

HIS hand shot out like a striking snake, and Sharla gave a tiny cry of fear as he ripped the black veil from her face. For a long instant he stood there, the shred of cloth held in his strong fingers as in a trap, while he stared at Sharla.

Eventually he relaxed the sternness of his face and began, very slowly, to smile.

"Your pardon, my lady of Argus, but I am a direct man. I trust no one's word who is not known to me of old, and that you should be here to stand in your father's place is too strange to take unchecked." His eyes ran over the delicate loveliness of her face, the hair like spun gold that shone beneath her black hood, the curves of her body beneath the mourning robe.

He said, "Indeed, my lady, it is as if your mother were alive again."

Sharla nodded slowly. "Ay, my lord. I have been told I do resemble her."

The courtiers rustled and craned to see past Barkasch, and there was a low murmur of surprise. Since custom decreed that the king's daughters should wear veils in public till the dead ruler was buried, this was the first opportunity many of them had had to see her face, and those who remembered the last Queen of Argus saw the similarity and marveled.

"And," said the lord of Mercator after an interval, "I beg to present the bond for honoring three days hence."

Someone of Andra's retinue among the watchers sniggered very briefly as Sharla looked up in amazement. "Bond, my lord?" he said questioningly. "What bond?"

"*This* bond," said Barkasch, sliding a roll of parchment from one of the pouches at his waist. He held it out. "A marriage bond!"

He stepped back with something that on a less regal face would have been a self-satisfied grin, and Lander whipped open the scroll and began to read. A rustle of amazement and wonder ran among the courtiers, and the member of Andra's retinue who had sniggered, laughed aloud. Ordovic

turned towards him and half drew his sword, his face like thunder. The laughter stopped short.

Sharla, without taking her eyes from Barkasch's face, laid one hand on the arm of the throne, and Lander covered it with his own, still scanning the rough, much abbreviated uncial script of the document in his hand. Hastily Sharla rapped out, in the outland finger-code of the bandits of Hin, "Isn't it in Andra's name?"

Lander rapped back, "Andra's not mentioned by name, though she must have made it."

"What does it say?"

"I'll read it," offered Lander. He nodded to Barkasch, said aloud, "With your permission, I'll read this out, my lord."

Barkasch showed assent, and Lander began to speak in a firm controlled voice, his accent flawless. Sharla had wondered often in the past days how he, who swore he had never been on Argus in his life, had gained that and his intimate knowledge of Argian affairs.

He read, "Bond of marriage between the lord of Mercator and the Regent of Argus, to be confirmed upon the death of Andalvar and the accession his daughter as Regent in the stead of Prince Penda, being under the age of ruling, which marriage to be royal union between the thrones and crowns of Argus and Mercator, Mercator to have its place on the Council of Six instead of Lorgis of Phaidona—"

A roar of rage went up from among the courtiers, and Lorgis himself, a bull of a man from one of the pastoral worlds, one of the three who had voted in favor of Sharla's election, bounded to his feet. He shouted, "Let them but *try* to take Phaidona's place and they shall pay dearly!"

Lander, who had raised his eyes and waited patiently when Lorgis leapt up, remained silent till he had subsided, muttering threats into his beard, while Barkasch of Mercator looked at him without interest. Then Lander resumed.

"—And the lordship of the Empire, in the event of Penda's decease before attaining the age of ruling, or of his death without children, to descend by the joint line of Argus and Mercator."

Amid dead silence, he rolled the parch-

ment up again, finished baldly, "It is sealed with the royal seals of Argus and Mercator."

Barkasch said, "And so, my lady, after your lamented father's burying, we shall talk again of this." He bowed ironically, turned to go.

A voice said, "Wait."

The single word was spoken no louder than one would speak across a table, yet everyone in the hall heard it and turned to see who had said it, and saw, in the arch of the door through which twenty fighting men might pass abreast, a small slender man with dark sleek hair and dusky skin, wearing a tattered suit of brown homespun, high boots, a gaudy silk cloth on his head.

Ordovic's sword leapt into his hand and in three steps — tramp-tramp-tramp—the men of the bodyguard had turned to face the doorway, their halberds at the ready. Barkasch of Mercator straightened up and raised his eyebrows quizzically as the slender man walked lightly down the hall.

HE MADE a strange contrast to Barkasch, who last had done that, for he was small and wiry where Barkasch was broad and muscular, and he wore worn civilian clothes while Barkasch had the outfit of a soldier, and while Barkasch had borne helmet, sword and knife, he had only a battered brown hat and no weapon at all.

He came up between the leveled halberds of the bodyguard to before the throne and bowed to Sharla with a flourish before he turned to Barkasch and said, "My lord of Mercator!"

Casually Barkasch looked down his nose at the smaller man. He said, "What is it, impudent one?"

"My lord, did you not remark upon a mistake that Ser Lander made in the reading of the marriage bond?"

Sharla felt Lander's hand tighten over hers on the arm of the throne.

Barkasch said, his forehead creasing in puzzlement, "Mistake, impudent one? I heard him read it distinctly, as it is written."

"Who is this man?" tapped Sharla, and felt Lander reply, "I do not know."

"Yes, a mistake," the stranger insisted. "An omission. Ser Lander," turning, "if it please you, let my lord of Mercator read it out aloud."

Numbly, Lander passed the scroll. Barkasch snatched it angrily and spread it with a crackle. He began to read in a voice that burned with impatience.

"Bond of marriage between Barkasch, lord of Mercator, and Andra, Regent of Argus, to be confirmed upon—"

He broke off, his face showing most undignified astonishment. He began to scrutinize the writing, while Sharla, who had gasped in amazement when he had read out her sister's name, exchanged glances with Lander, who looked as completely taken aback as she was, and as relieved.

"Indeed, you see, my lord," said the small man, "there was a mistake, an omission. Ser Lander did not read the names of the parties. And since it is specified in the contract that the marriage is between yourself and the Princess Andra, and since the Princess Andra is *not* Regent of Argus, it is in effect void."

Barkasch struggled to speak for a long time, his hands quivering on the scroll. When he finally succeeded, his voice was almost choking with rage. He crumpled the offending parchment into a ball and threw it on the ground, and raised his hand as if to strike the small man, who stepped adroitly out of range.

Finally he turned to Sharla and forced out, "Your pardon, my lady. It seems I was indeed mistaken. But by the wind that blows over Mercator," his voice rose to a shout, "Argus has not heard the last of me!"

He turned on his heel and strode out, and everyone seemed to relax at his going. The herald shouted that there were no more chieftains in attendance, and with a wave of her hand Sharla dismissed the watchers and they filed out.

But when she looked for the slender man he was nowhere to be seen.

The bodyguard came to attention as she descended the steps from the throne, but before she hurried out with Lander she said, "Ordovic!"

"My lady?"

"Find that man and bring him to my rooms!"

"My lady," said Ordovic, clicking his heels.

He turned to the guards, shot out his arm. "Dismiss, and go find the man who was here just now. Report to me with him

outside my lady's quarters. At the double!"

They broke ranks, piled their halberds against the wall, and left the hall at a trot.

Most of the courtiers were already at the far end of the hall, and only a few slaves remained nearby, straightening disarrayed hangings after holding them aside for Sharla, but a movement at the corner of his eye caught Ordovic's attention. He remained perfectly still, as if watching the departing courtiers.

Someone bending over—picking up something, he could see by straining his eyes to one side. Now he was standing up—

Ordovic whirled. It was a slave with hot brown skin and twitching eyes, and he was trying to stuff something hastily into a pouch. Ordovic knocked him flying with a blow from a fist that had killed men twice the size of him, stepped up to him as he writhed on the carpet. With ungentle fingers he opened the fist that held whatever he had picked up.

Eyes narrowing, he scrutinized it. He spoke Argian badly and read it worse, but he knew this could be only one thing—the marriage contract between Andra and Barkasch. What would a slave want with it?

He said in atrocious Argian, "What's your name, slave?"

"Samsar," said the slave sullenly.

"Why did you pick this up for?" Ordovic continued, shaking the parchment before Samsar's face.

"It is my duty," said the slave, still rubbing his jaw. "It is my duty not to leave litter to make the castle untidy."

"That was not why you tried to *bide* this," insisted Ordovic. He picked up Samsar as if he had been a child, put him on his feet and held him there by one shoulder. "A document bearing seals is not litter." He shook Samsar till his teeth rattled, and lapsing thankfully into thieves' argot, which he spoke far better than Argian, and which, if he was any judge of slaves, this man would also understand, he added a phrase descriptive of a very elaborate and uncomfortable form of torture which few people who did not frequent the Low City and talk with thieves would know. Samsar, however, must have understood, for he blanched under his brownness, tore himself away and ran unsteadily from the hall.

IV

WHEN Ordovic reached Sharla's apartments the guard on duty outside saluted him casually, and his eyes flashed fire. "Do that again," he ordered crisply, his Argian accent even worse than usual.

The guard did it again, more smartly.

Ordovic looked him over. "That's better. Has any of my lady's bodyguard who was on duty in the Hall of State come here yet?"

"No, sir," said the guard.

"If one of them does, send him in."

"Yes, sir," said the guard. Ordovic nodded, rapped on the door with bunched knuckles.

After an instant, a slender girl-slave opened it, and at the same time he heard Sharla's voice from within inquire faintly, "Who is it?"

The slave spoke over her shoulder through a red velvet drape. "The captain of the bodyguard, my lady."

"Let him in," Sharla commanded, and the slave stepped aside, bowing.

Ordovic thrust the hangings apart, took one step through them, and stopped. He tilted his helmet back as he gazed around the room, and finally whistled in amazement as he took in the lavish fittings.

Landor, leaning against the wall opposite the door, laughed briefly. "My lady Andra has elaborate tastes, has she not?"

"Indeed yes," said Ordovic feelingly. His eyes took in the red and yellow velvet drapes, the yellow silk couches and cushions and the silver bowls—some of them containing fruit, some cakes—the candelabra in carved crystal, worth a king's ransom, the white fleeces on the floor, the tapestries and paintings on the wall.

Finally he stepped across to the couch where Andra had sat the previous evening, sat down and helped himself to some fruit. Landor elbowed himself away from the wall and jerked a thumb at a heavy iron staple across the room. "See that? I'm told Andra keeps a Sirian ape—as a pet!"

"Wildcat," grunted Ordovic. He reached into his pouch for the folded parchment he had put there. "Where's my lady, Ser Landor?"

"Her attendants are readying her for dinner," Landor answered "There is a cere-

monial meal, I believe." He came over and took a Sirenian plum from the bowl in front of the couch.

Ordovic held out the parchment between two fingers, said, "Here's the bond of marriage or whatever. I caught little of the drift of that scene, but I guessed most of it, so when I spotted a slave named Samsar trying to sneak it away, I knocked him flying and threatened him with—" again the phrase descriptive of a certain protracted torture. He grinned like a boy.

Landor chuckled without mirth, examined the scroll carefully. After a pause he said, "Ordovic, I don't understand. When I read this the first time it was as I read it and named no names—yet here they stood both, the names of Andra and Barkasch, clear as day."

Ordovic stopped another fruit on the way to his lips and said incredulously, "It's magic, Ser Landor."

"It looks like it," nodded Landor.

"Who was the man who came in?" demanded Ordovic, and Landor shrugged.

"Whoever he was, he worked a miracle and saved much trouble. Why? If we knew who he was, we might guess his motive for aiding us."

The slender girl-slave pushed aside the curtains, and Landor said, "What is it, Valley?"

Valley said, "There is a guard outside who would speak with Ser Captain Ordovic."

Ordovic rose to his feet, swallowing his fruit in haste. He said, "That'll be one of my men, Ser Landor. I sent the bodyguard after the stranger on my lady's orders, and I expect one of them is reporting."

He strode to the curtains and disappeared through them.

A moment later Sharla came from an inner room, her hair fluffy and shining, her face freshly made up, and wearing a blue robe which had certainly not been in her exiguous baggage when she arrived.

LANDOR looked her over, said finally, "Sharla, I never saw you look lovelier. Where did you get the robe?"

She sat down on one of the couches, frowning. "Thank you, Landor. I'm told it belonged to my mother. But there's a cer-

tain amount of business to see to. Did I not hear Ordovic?"

"One of the men he sent after the stranger is reporting. He'll be in in a moment. How did your interview with Penda go? What do you make of him?"

"Of course, he's completely changed since last I saw him. He's no child now, but a youth, and he'd have a tremendous physique if he were less soft. But soft he is, and he made little impression on me. He'll need schooling to be a king, Landor."

Landor nodded soberly. He said, "As I expected. Where is he?"

"In his own apartments. The death of our father has hit him hard, and he said he would not be out till the time of burying."

Landor nodded again, held out the scroll he held in his hand. "Here's the bond Barkasch threw down," he said. "Ordovic caught a slave by the name of Samsar trying to sneak it away—he doesn't know why. And the amazing part of it is—but read it for yourself, remembering how I read it at first."

Sharla ran her eyes down it, studying it for signs of an alteration. Finally she folded it and laid it on her lap, stared fixedly ahead, shivering.

"It's magic," she said finally. "How could that man have changed it?"

Before Landor could reply, Ordovic pushed through the drapes and halted on seeing Sharla. He bowed, came on.

Landor said, "Well? What did your man report? Who was it?"

"They call him Kelab the Conjuror," said Ordovic. "The sergeant of the guard came to me with a wild tale of him—'tis reported, they say, that there is a man whom no bars will hold, who comes and goes where he will, and who has strange powers that surpass the human."

"The last I believe," said Landor grimly. "No human agency changed these words on the parchment."

"I inquired what sort of man he is, and learned that he is an entertainer—a conjurer for display as well as for such strange purposes as the changing of the marriage bond, but the sergeant of the guard insisted with such vehemence that no ordinary hunt would find him that I resolved to let him wander."

SHARLA said suddenly, "By the winds of Argus, I recall him now. I have heard of a man named Kelab, and I saw him once perform, doing things that a human never could. He was held in repute as a mutant, and feared, even in the outlands, which was where I saw him."

At the mention of the outlands Ordovic's eyes lifted to her face for an instant and as quickly looked away. Landor said musingly, "But you know of no reason for this action?"

"Not any at all," said Sharla.

"And you never met face to face?"

"Never. But if half the stories current are true, no ordinary spies will trip him, and he will come only if it suits him."

Ordovic said, "By the winds of Argus, my lady—!"

Sharla motioned him silent. She said, "Let that wait. There are two matters that concern us more—Penda, my brother, and Sabura Mona."

"Sabura Mona! Sabura Mona!" said Ordovic fiercely. "Am I never to hear more of Sabura Mona than her name? Who is she or what is she? Does no one know?"

"Sit down, Ordovic," invited Sharla. She indicated a place beside her, and Ordovic, after a moment's hesitation, took it.

"Sabura Mona was my father's chief adviser and confidant," said Sharla softly. "He used to say of her, I'm told, that she knew everything, from the smallest whisper of the beggars on the Street of the Morning to the cry of the mutants beyond the Empire, and that she was never wrong save once—when she advised him to send me away to learn the craft of ruling, and it seems now that she was less wrong than he believed. 'Tis said she planned his dealings with the outlands and the mutants more than he did himself."

"But you have not met her?" Landor said.

"I recall her vaguely when I was a child," Sharla answered.

The heavy curtains over the door parted with a swish and Valley stood in the gap, her hands folded demurely, her delicate face expressionless save for her big brown eyes. She said, "My lady, there is word from Sabura Mona."

Landor and Sharla exchanged glances, and Landor said, "Speak, Valley."

"She desires that my lady shall come to

her apartment tonight at the hour of ten, preferably alone, her messenger says."

Ordovic half rose, said, "Is this Sabura Mona such that she may order the Regent?"

Valley remained in the doorway, not understanding him, for he had spoken in his own dialect and she in Argian, and Landor said to Ordovic, "She has ordered kings."

He subsided, and Sharla raised her voice. "Tell the messenger I will attend her."

Valley nodded and disappeared silently, while Ordovic said, "You are going, then, my lady?"

Sharla nodded. "Not quite alone. With Landor, I think. My excuse can be that my command of Argian is dimmed with seven years' disuse."

"Now, Landor. About my brother. Strength is his lack. There shall be no more of the whipping-post. He shall be taught statecraft. He will not like it, but you I trust to undertake the task."

A shadow of a smile of pride touched Landor's lips. "I am flattered, Sharla, that you have confidence in me."

"The name of his scapegoat is Dolichek, I believe. He is a slave's son. Find him. And find his father too, if he lives."

Landor nodded and went out, the curtains swaying behind him. Ordovic sat silently, staring at nothing. After awhile Sharla said gently, "Ordovic."

"My lady?"

"Call me not *my lady*. We are three strangers together here on Argus, even though I was born here. This coldness is unbecoming." She laid her hand gently on his knee and looked at his hard profile.

He said woodenly, "The fact remains, my lady, that you are Regent of Argus and daughter of a king, and I am but one of your subjects."

"You are an outlander, and no subject of mine!"

"Your subject by adoption," said Ordovic firmly.

"You called me Sharla before, Ordovic."

HIS face went rigid and he got abruptly to his feet, began to pace the room with long, light strides. He said, "Must you taunt me, my lady, with the memory that I took you for a woman of the streets? I can

never forgive myself."

"I *was* a woman of the streets, Ordovic! And would have remained so, for who would credit the tale I had to tell? Slavered from the peaceful world where I was schooled, sold into a brothel—who believed I was a princess, of royal birth?"

"Landor did," said Ordovic harshly. "He gave you back your heritage—all this." He gestured at the lavish fittings of the apartment. "He gave you back your honor and your rightful station!"

He whirled and stood before her, towering over her, and his eyes were like chips of granite. "There was only one thing I could give you—my service.

"If you have no further orders for me tonight, my lady, I shall withdraw."

Sharla looked up with parted lips, shaking her head slowly. At last she sighed and said composedly, "Very well, Ordovic, if that is the way you wish it. But I have one further task for you tonight."

"At your orders, my lady."

"Find Kelab the Conjuror, and bring him to me. If you can, buy him—if you must, drag him."

Ordovic saluted without expression and turned and walked out, not looking back.

For a long time Sharla sat gazing into vacancy, her face set and white.

Then the curtains stirred again and Valley stood there, hands folded as before, her eyes big and limpid. Sharla thought, not for the first time, that her younger sister had picked her slaves well for quick obedience and silent service.

She roused herself, said, "And what is it, Valley?"

"Dolichек attends my lady's pleasure," said Valley. "The Ser Landor sent him, so he affirms."

"Let him enter," Sharla commanded, and as Valley withdrew, arranged her robe and patted straight the cushions of the couch. Then she looked up and saw Dolichек.

He stood there pale and silent, his bony body white with cold, and bowed a little hesitantly towards her. She thought, there is a queer pride in him, somehow—though he is only whipping-post to a prince, there is pride there.

Behind him the whipmaster, who had come assuming the usual purpose for the summons, waited patiently like a basalt statue.

She said, "Come here, Dolichек," and there was no resemblance to the way Andra would have said it in the tender voice she used. He looked puzzled, but obeyed, walked forward with a trace of a limp. There were blue bruises and long weals on his bare legs. In front of her he paused, his eyes asking a mute question.

She looked past him to the whipmaster, "Slave!"

"My lady?" said the giant, his voice a deep rumble.

"Are you of my father's slaves, or a purchase of my sister's?"

"I was of the lady Andra's following, my lady."

"Break your whip and go to her," said Sharla casually. "I have no further use for you."

The giant looked at the whip in his hand, snapped its silver-mounted stock without effort, tossed it away and walked out.

In still amazement Dolichек watched him go, and then turned to Sharla, his lip trembling.

Suddenly he was on his knees, his head buried in her lap, sobbing, "My lady! My lady!" while she stroked his matted yellow hair mechanically and stared at nothing.

ORDOVIC left Sharla's rooms with his mind in a turmoil and his face set grimly. The passage was dimly lit by high windows, and torches flared at the inter-sections. Under one of these torches, in the shadow of its scone, a man stood waiting.

"Who stands yonder?" he challenged.

The man moved from the shadow into the light of the torch and said, "It is I, captain—Tampore, sergeant of the guard."

Ordovic laughed shortly. "Have you come with more fairy-tales of Kelab to tell?"

"No, captain. I have a word or two of advice," Tampore spoke in 'thieves' argot, a crisp, guttural form of Argian salted with slang which Ordovic comprehended better than the formal tongue.

"Speak on," he invited, his eyes searching Tampore's face.

"It is a good thing for Argus that you

and Ser Landor and my lady Sharla came, for you are a soldier, and we understand soldiers well on Argus, and Ser Landor is a statesman of power and the lady is well thought of by the common people from the sheer mention of her name, though few have seen her, and she is reputed tender. The lady Andra is not called the black witch for her kindness."

Ordovic, watching his face, nodded.

"*But* you are strangers. We admire soldiers, ay—but Ser Senchan Var too is a soldier, and famous within the Empire, which you are *not*. The lady Andra has filled the high places with her own men. It would seem to us of the guard, who hear the whispers from those same high places, that had she retained the Regency and had her marriage to Barkasch of Mercator gone through, she would have broken the last shackle holding her—the even splitting of the Council of Six for and against her. But she sprang that marriage bond upon your mistress unawares. Beware of other hidden pitfalls. And beware of a knife in the dark lest the lady grow impatient."

Ordovic did not move his steady gaze. He said, "What manner of man is Barkasch of Mercator? And what purpose is served by the proposed alliance?"

"Barkasch is a fighter and a brave man, and he rules an independent kingdom of three harsh worlds whose soldiers are the fiercest in the galaxy. A royal union that united the worlds of Mercator and the Empire *could* be the first step to a newly glorious Empire. It could also be a weapon of unbounded power to further the designs of a ruthless woman."

"The designs being—?"

Tampore shrugged. "They are not blown kisses, but who save a wizard can know the heart of a witch?"

Ordovic permitted himself the shadow of a smile. Landor had some inkling of those designs. He said, "While we speak of wizards, where may I find Kelab the Conjuror tonight?"

Tampore plucked his beard, said, "I said he was not to be found if he did not wish it. He could make you forget you found him—they say he can make a man blind to him a foot away, yet still see all but Kelab. But if he chooses to be found he may be found

in the Low City if he has no task of entertaining for some noble or rich merchant."

Ordovic said, "What is the Low City?"

"That part of Oppidum west of the fortress on the Hill of Kings where Lady Andra is resident. Oppidum is the greatest city on the planet, and city imperial for ten generations.

"East of the fortress lies the spaceport and the wealthy quarter and the markets. They have a saying at the port—passengers go east, spacemen go west."

Ordovic nodded. He said, "I thank you for your advice, Tampore. I'll follow it."

"Good luck, Captain Ordovic. And here is one last piece of advice worth all the rest." He pressed something hard and cold into Ordovic's hand, turned with a swish of leather sandals and was gone in the darkness. Ordovic fingered what he had been given and laughed with a strangely bitter sound when he found what it was.

The oldest remedy of all. Cold steel.

He tucked the knife in his belt and went on down the passage, thinking of the past few minutes. Landor—Sharla—

The memory of their first meeting was as angry as an old wound broken open.

V

ORDOVIC was feeling very pleased with himself. He pushed open the swinging gate by the hand-lettered sign that read PIRBRITE'S GARDENS, and walked in with the rolling gait of one just in from a long trip in free fall. He had two thousand circles to spend—good solid Empire currency—and all the time he wanted. And he intended to spend both to his own pleasure.

He paused with one hand on the gate, surveying the garden. There were little tables here and there among the bushes, and there was soft lighting, part artificial, part the glow from the two-foot globes of white and pink luminescence on the birbrak trees that made any night on Loudor glorious. There was a mixed scent of clean fragrant foliage and rich liquors from a dozen worlds, and many men and women sat under the outstretched branches, talking, drinking and making love. And of course the inevitable party of spacemen playing shen fu. They said there was not a drinking-place on any

world where you could not find one game in which to lose your money.

As he looked around, a small stout man in pink and green like one of his own birbrak trees came up to him and said, "The best of evenings to you, Ser soldier, and your request?"

Ordovic looked down and smiled slowly. "You are Ser Pirbrite?"

"I am."

"Excellent. I wish to get drunk, by degrees—loudly and noisily drunk."

Pirbrite looked anxious, and Ordovic laughed. "Not all here, my friend. I doubt if all the liquor in this place could make me drunk. I shall merely lay the foundations of it. Have me brought a measure of ancinar and a plate of strine, and if there is music I would like it."

Pirbrite nodded and moved away. Ordovic picked a nearby table in the bay of a birbrak tree, where he could see the stars in a great thick band across the moonless sky. A pleasant place, and of higher class than most that he frequented. And—his eye swept appreciatively along a line of girls standing close to the little covered hut that served for bar and kitchen—had a neater line in hostesses.

The girl at the end of the line took a laden tray from the serving hatch and came over to him. He studied her with interest, and began to consider revising his plans for the evening. Blonde hair, delicate face, a figure which was in no need of support.

She set down the tray and waited, looking him over with a brassily insolent stare while he took the brimming mug of fuming red liquor and drank, and after it sent one of the tough balls of strine meat that are so useful for prolonging the process of getting drunk.

He looked up and grinned, and spun a fifty-circle coin with a flip of his thumb. She caught it expertly and turned to go, but his hand closed on her wrist like a steel trap and he said, "Since when has a measure of ancinar and a plate of strine made fifty circles?"

She sat down beside him on the bench, smiling like a child caught stealing sweetmeats, and said, "I like you, soldier. What's your name?"

"Ordovic," he answered, "and yours—thief?"

"Sharla," she said smoothly. "Are you going to spend all your money on yourself, then?"

"Oh, take it, subtle one," said Ordovic in mock disgust. "Or take it in kind."

"A kiss for it," offered Sharla, half-rising, the coin clutched triumphantly in her hand, and she leaned forward to press her lips on his. But a right arm as strong as a steel bar went round her body, and she did not move away.

Ordovic was revising his plans for the evening.

AGAIN the swinging gates beside the hand-painted sign parted, and a thin man with a balding head and a nose like an eagle's beak stood on the threshold, keen eyes surveying the garden. The glow of the birbrak trees and the dark green of their foliage made the scene like a paradise, but there was no appreciation in his cold, unsmiling face. He wore a patrician gown like a well-to-do merchant, but there was a short sword belted to his waist.

As usual, Pirbrite himself came bustling over to him and wished him the best of evenings.

"Evening," said the man curtly. "You are the proprietor?"

"At your service," agreed Pirbrite, his eyes anxiously searching the other's face. "You wish, Ser—merchant?"

"I am no merchant," said the newcomer briefly. "You have here a girl by the name of Sharla—empire-born?"

Pirbrite's brow cleared. If that was all—He said doubtfully, "I fear she is engaged with a customer just now, but we have many others just as charming—"

The newcomer seemed on the edge of losing his patience. He said with an effort, "You misunderstand me. What is the history of this girl?"

"Really, I hardly know," admitted Pirbrite. "I purchased her at auction three quarter-years since, and she has proved accomplished and attractive in her task as hostess."

The stranger raised his eyes to the sky as if praying for self-control. He said, "And her previous owner?"

"Heneage, master of the Mooncave out of town to the east. He had her from the

slaver who picked her from some school on Annanworld, fringewards in the Empire yonder." He jerked a thumb indiscriminately at the galaxy overhead.

"That sounds like the one," muttered the stranger. "Where is she?"

"In shadow of that tree yonder," said Pirbrite, pointing. He cupped his hands around his mouth and gave forth the deep-throated boom of a Loudor moth. Instantly the nearer trees glowed brighter to attract the insect, and the dark bay he had indicated was flooded with a soft pink radiance.

"Ay," said the stranger after a pause. "Her price?"

"Her price?" echoed Pirbrite, taken aback. "Well, really—I had never thought of selling her—I mean . . ." He gasped.

"Come now, man!" rapped the other impatiently. "Delay not! Name it!"

Pirbrite took a deep breath and shut his eyes. "Three thousand circles," he said flatly. It was more than double her worth.

Then he felt something hard and cold pressed into his chubby hand, and he opened his eyes again to see the stranger striding down into the garden with his hand on his sword, and in his own hand—

His eyes grew as round as the coins with wonder, and he picked up one of them—there were three—and turned it over.

A thousand circles!

THE newcomer surveyed the soldier coolly. A fighting man, plainly. A mercenary, like all his breed, but an honest mercenary who would fulfill his contract or die.

He transferred his attention to Sharla and said, "You are the Princess Sharla Andalvarson of Argus?"

Ordovic said huskily, "Man, you are crazed!"

The stranger said, "I think not. Is it not truth, Sharla?"

She nodded, very slowly, with parted lips, but otherwise made no move.

Ordovic got slowly to his feet, his face bearing an expression of mingled doubt and amazement. He said, "Speak! What is this—a jest?"

"No jest, soldier, but the sober truth. This lady is indeed Sharla of Argus, and elder daughter of King Andalvar. As I read the story she was slavered from a school on

Annanworld seven years back and sold into a house of shame on Loudor here—Mooncave by name. In due course she was resold here—a princess of the imperial blood, but who would believe the tale?"

Sharla's eyes were dim and far away, but she said huskily, "Ay. They took it for the tale of a child half crazed when I tried to tell them first, and the slavers never realized they held the Empire's wealth at the sword-point.

"My father would have bought me, or laid waste the world on which my blood was spilled if I had been slain. And then I learned to shut my mouth, and have kept it shut these seven years, for most of the old courtesans spin such tales—I met one who claimed to have been my father's mistress scant ten years before, but she knew nothing of the court of Argus. She was a liar like all the rest—and what was I?"

She sat there hardly moving her lips, telling her tale of shame in a low but tearless voice.

"I had almost forgotten," she finished.

Ordovic looked bewilderedly from one to the other. He had thought he knew every trick of the trade when it came to parting money and its owner, but this was a new one. There were ways of testing its validity—

He said fiercely, "By the winds of Loudor, stranger, this is no common tale. Who are you that you spin so wild a story?"

"No one that you would know, soldier. And none that you would know either, Sharla. My name is Landor, and I am neither of Loudor nor of Argus, but of Penalpar, half the galaxy away."

"Well, Landor of Penalpar as you call yourself, what if this tale of yours be true? What is it?"

Landor ignored him and bent his brilliant eyes on Sharla. He said, "Sharla, your father is sick and approaching death. These two months I have sought you, beginning on Annanworld and tracing you hither to Loudor to bring you back."

Sharla seemed to come to life again slowly. "My father sick?" she echoed. Landor nodded.

She sat up, pulling her costume together, her eyes fixed on nothing. She said, "We must go to him then—at once, quickly."

Landor said, "Ay, Sharla. You must go

to him. It was to that end that I sought you out, for in you stands the future of the Empire. Your sister Andra—"

Sharla blanched and looked at him fiercely. "Andra! My sister! What of her? And what of my brother Penda—a child of three when last I saw him?"

"Well, both of them, but Penda spoilt and Andra known by the name of the black witch—and she it is who will be Regent in your father's place till Penda comes of age. This must not be!"

Ordovic looked from one to the other in puzzlement. He said, "Ser Landor, I do not understand."

Impatiently, without looking at him: "Soldier, no one cares whether you understand or not. Get you gone in peace and seek another trull—the Princess Sharla must come back to Argus with me. Here—take this purse." He held out a small leather bag which jingled and hung heavy from his fingers.

Ordovic's face went slowly white. He said, "My lady! Forgive me for what I would have done!"

Sharla's voice was metallic and emotionless. She said, "I forgive you, Ordovic. Take your money and go."

He said, "You wish me to take your money, Ser Landor?"

Landor shook it at him in annoyance. "Take it!"

Ordovic snatched it from him and tossed it in his hand. A strange set smile played on his lips. "Right, Ser Landor!" he said. "Whether you like it or not, you have bought you a fighting man. I take no pay without service."

Landor looked at him with astonishment and then chuckled reluctantly. He said, "Soldier, you are a man of mettle. You are right. The road is grim from here to Argus as I know to my cost—"

"How great a cost?" said Ordovic.

"Some seven thousand circles," said Landor, his eyebrows rising.

"My price is a fraction of that," said Ordovic. He set his helmet on his head and waited.

Sharla said, "Ser Landor, there is the matter of my price—"

"I bought you, Sharla. You are free—and when should you have been otherwise?"

Come, put my cloak around you and let us go."

She moved like one in a dream.

THREE months, it took. They came by way of Tellantrum, Forbit and Poowadya, and wasted three precious days at the frontier world of Delcadore because Sharla was without papers and needed an outland visa to enter the Empire. Ordovic rattled his sword under the nose of a frightened bureaucrat, and they obtained clearance in three days instead of three weeks. Then they came to Anfagan and Neranigh, and mercifully found a friend of Landor's whose private ship was heading for Penalpar by way of Mercator, and brought them within hailing distance of Argus. And then by one last of the big slow traders that were now the only ships on the star-routes save the fleet and wicked vessels of the pirates and the navies of the autochthonous worlds, to Oppidum on Argus, and by helicopter to the castle of the kings.

But they had come too late.

And then the knowledge that Sharla was indeed heiress to the Regency of the Empire—and a burning shame was in him at what he had done, not to be quenched till he had given her back what he and his breed had taken from her—honor, dignity, rank, and the right to hold up her head in the company of kings.

He slapped his hilt thoughtfully.

After a short while he went to his quarters and was met by three silent slaves who offered to take his harness off and bathe him. He dismissed them angrily.

"Am I a woman, then, that I should need aid in undressing? Out, slaves! Fetch me a meal, and get gone!"

They vanished in a flurry, and he stripped and slid luxuriously into the steaming tub before the log fire that spat and crackled on the hearth. He had learned long ago that sorrows are best forgotten as soon as recalled, and what Sharla had said had faded from his mind.

He was towelling himself lustily when the slaves reappeared with trays of food and drink, and he paused to look at it. He poked the food suspiciously and said, "What is this?"

"The brains of katalabs and the hearts

of nugasha fried in pebab oil," said the first slave proudly. "This is honey cake with Thanis garlic, and this frozen breast of quail."

"Faugh! You call that a meal? Fetch me the roast thigh of the katalabs whose brains you would have done better to lend to your own, and three measures of ancinar, and as much fruit as one of you puny children can carry. I wish to *eat*—not peck!"

A quarter hour later he obtained what he wanted, and he chased the slaves away and, with caution born of long experience, searched the room thoroughly from floor to ceiling for spy-holes. He found three, and after pushing his sword down each to discourage eavesdroppers, he plugged them with strips torn from a curtain until he could obtain mortar and fill them permanently.

Lastly he called for a swift horse and rode into Oppidum.

THE Street of the Morning had seemingly been so named because it was never so alive as at night. There were harsh yellow lights at the eaves of its buildings, and it was thronged with people of all colors and shapes. The beggars clustered in droves around the cheap infra-red lamps at the intersections, claiming a few ring from the passers-by. Occasionally a spaceman or a soldier on a spree was foolish enough to toss one of them a full circle or even more, and they flocked after him who was so lavish like bees after honey.

There were the women of easy virtue, too; but most of them were in the cafes and drinking-shops, for the night was far spent already when Kelab the Conjuror again came down the Street. There were stars thick in the sky, and six of Argus's nine moons hung over this hemisphere, but there were also yellow torches on the battlements of the fortress on the Hill of Kings, and he listened to the talking of the wind and not the noise of the crowds.

He descended the steps and pushed his way into the House of the Bubbling Spring. It was bright and hot and noisy; a good deal of extravagant love-making was going on; there was a three-piece orchestra playing curious outland instruments, one with strings to be bowed, one blown and one

struck with little yellow mallets; there was the same party of spacemen playing shen fu, and their low-voiced bids and the click of chips went on unnoticed.

The lid was over the Mimosan chromograph behind the bar, and four attendants moved among the tables. Finzey sat in front of his rows of bottles, grinning like a fat god. At the sight of Kelab he let go a joyous shout and reached for a bottle of the conjurer's choice.

Kelab nodded and leaned on the counter while it was being poured out, his head cocked to one side, the gold disk in his left ear gleaming in the garish light.

Finzey set the mug before him, said, "So you're back, Kelab! What have you done today? Earned your thousand circles yet?"

The conjurer smiled faintly and nodded. "I think I have earned them again. Your burying money rises well?"

"Seven thousand and ninety circles and a few odd ring at sundown last," said Finzey proudly. "There has not been such a bowlful before in Oppidum, even at the burying of a king."

Kelab nodded. He said, "The poor will feast well if all the cities on Argus give so freely."

Finzey's expression suddenly became drawn and worried. He said, "Kelab, while we speak of burying money, there was one who needed burying above on the street—remember?"

Kelab said, "I recall her. Well?"

"At noon there was but three ring in that cup."

The conjurer looked up. "I put a circle there myself, fat one."

"As I surmised. Will you divine the thief? Here is her cup." He pushed a little tin mug across the bar, and Kelab picked it up and handled it, his face going strained and his eyes unfocused in the effort to recall.

His hands, if any had watched them, would have seemed to flow like water on and in the mug, as if hands and mug were one, and there was a curious flicker of blue fire when at length he relinquished it. He said, "It is hard to see, for the theft was the act of a moment and the thief thought little of the cup. Where are the three ring he left?"

Finzey picked three tiny coins from a

shelf behind him, and passed them to Kelab, who felt them one by one. He said finally, "Two of them were placed there after the theft, but the third remembers. The thief thought very hard about the money."

"His name?" said Finzey eagerly.

"Arcta the Wolf," said Kelab casually. "You will see to it?"

Finzey nodded. The conjurer said, "It wearies me, that divination. I need rest." He picked up his mug of liquor and walked into the deep shadowed bay at the far end of the room among the loving couples, and chose an empty alcove and a bare table. He sat down, and became a shadow among shadows.

LATER, Ordovic too came into the Street of the Morning. He had walked the Low City since close on sundown, asking for a dusky man, a conjurer named Kelab, and since his Argian was scanty and his thieves' argot scarcely better, his temper had frayed thin.

But one of them had mentioned Finzey, at the sign of the Bubbling Spring, and he had come here, hoping.

Also he wanted a drink.

Finzey came to him, his face expressionless.

"Ancinard," said Ordovic. "A big measure, fat one. And some strine."

Without more expression than a statue Finzey slashed three strips from a side of strine under the bar and folded each into a ball and laid them on a plate. He filled a measure with fuming red ancinar, and pushed both across the counter.

"Seven circles," he said.

Ordovic dropped the coins tinkling on the bar, took the measure and the plate and turned away to seek a table. His eyes swept the room.

And suddenly, as he looked into the darkness at the far end, shadowed with consummate artistry for the lovers using it, the loud noise and the bright lights vanished and there were three birbrak trees, and a sky above powdered with rare stars except where the galaxy lay in a monstrous wheel. There was a shadowed pool of darkness facing him—a bay in one of the trees.

Someone, somewhere, gave forth the drone of a Loudor moth.

He took a few steps forward like a man in a dream as the trees brightened. Sharla? Sharla?

Then there was a puff of smoke and a great crashing wind—

And nothing before him except a slender man with a dusky face, staring into a mug of liquor cupped between his hands.

"You?" said Ordovic hoarsely. "You? How did you know?"

Kelab swirled the liquor in the mug and a stream of bubbles fled up from the bottom like a flock of birds rising into clear air. He said, "Be seated, Ordovic."

Ordovic lowered himself by touch on to the seat opposite him in the alcove, his eyes fixed on Kelab's face. He found the forgotten drink and the strine in his hands, and pushed them to one side of the table. There was some kind of blue curtain drawn across the mouth of the alcove, which pulsed as if it were alive and glowed with a quiet light.

Kelab said finally, "It was blazed like a beacon on the surface of your mind, Ordovic. You have met Sharla and you can never be the same again."

"That is truth," said Ordovic. His hand stole out and he took the ancinar and sipped it. The fumes did something to his head, and when he looked at Kelab again, it was with a new clarity.

He said, "I have been seeking you since sundown, here in the Low City."

Kelab nodded, still gazing into his mug as if it were a divining-bowl. He said, "I knew."

"You knew? And yet you let me tramp on, hunting for you?"

The conjurer nodded again, with the suspicion of a smile. "I am not found unless I choose to be found, Ordovic. There are few men so completely master of their fate as I."

"My lady Sharla sent me to bring you to her," Ordovic said slowly.

"Her words were, to be exact, 'If you can, buy him—if you must, drag him'," agreed Kelab.

Ordovic's mouth fell open and he said, "Can you know *everything* that passes in my mind, wizard?"

"Only that which is close to the surface. But, in answer, tell her I am not to be

bought and that the man is not born who could drag me. Besides, she already owes me a thousand circles."

"What for?" demanded Ordovic, aghast.

"For the regulation of the matter of the marriage bond," said Kelab casually. "If she chooses to pay me, I shall be at my ship on the spaceport tomorrow, about the hour of ten. If not, not; but I shall not choose to see you again."

Ordovic bounded to his feet. "Of all the insolence!" he shouted, his hand closing on the hilt of his sword.

Kelab's hand moved like a ripple on water and the sword stuck fast in its sheath. He said, "Sit, Ordovic."

"Coward!" accused Ordovic bitterly. "You dare not fight with a man's weapons!"

"For that," said Kelab evenly, "I am entitled by your standards to kill you. You would kill a man who called you a coward. I, whose powers are immeasurably greater than yours, dare not be so casual. I hold this world in the hollow of my hand, Ordovic. Remember that when you call me a coward.

"You will come tomorrow morning."

He stood up and crumpled the blue curtain over the mouth of the alcove and shook it into nothing. Ordovic said, "Suppose I do not choose to?"

"You will come," said Kelab, and walked away into the brightness beyond.

Ordovic followed him with his eyes, his hand automatically seeking the hilt of his sword. It moved easily in its scabbard again, but now that he had the chance of drawing it he left it, and sat slowly down again behind the table, his hand pulling his ancinarid towards him.

VI

TEN O'CLOCK. Six moons over the castle of the kings, a few flying clouds, a chill wind that rustled the crowns of the trees. In the castle—near silence, for there was no carousing tonight. Andalvar of Argus lay dead in the castle, and tomorrow was the day of burying.

Sharla had eaten at the table of her guests, and there was a blank space left for the Barkasch of Mercator. But rumor said Barkasch and his company of fighting men had

lifted at sundown from Oppidum and bent for Mercator again, Barkasch in a towering rage.

She had eaten in somber silence, bowing to the guests as they arrived and departed, and took the first opportunity of returning to her apartment with Landor. When she did so, Valley and the other quick, quiet maids bathed her in scented water and combed her hair.

Landor sat in the antechamber, thoughtfully sampling the fruit which packed the silver bowls and considering the impending visit to Sabura Mona. An enigma, that one: all-powerful over Andalvar, seeking perhaps to establish the same control over Sharla.

Suddenly a smile touched his lips. A worthy antagonist, perhaps: for Landor held that the man—or woman—who could match him in the game of statecraft was not yet born.

Sharla came through from the inner room, her hair golden and shining around her face, wearing a plain white kirtle without sleeves, that reached to her knees. She was barefoot.

Landor surveyed her appreciatively. He said, "Sharla, I don't despair of you. It seems that your childhood schooling in the arts of deception is not entirely lost to you."

Sharla nodded seriously. She said, "The innocent outland girl without much experience—is my disguise."

He nodded back. "If you will put on your least subtle expression, I think it is near the hour."

Sharla turned to the trio of waiting slaves, said, "Valley, Lena, Mershil, I shall not need you again tonight. Call me at the same hour tomorrow. You may go."

They curtsied silently and withdrew.

Then Sharla and Landor called the guard from the door and requested escort to the chambers of Sabura Mona.

The guard led them down echoing stone passages lit only by flickering torches. They passed slaves on errands, who failed to recognize Sharla in her unregal attire and went by with a scuffle of bare feet. The passages grew colder and the torches more and more infrequent.

Sharla said in a low voice to Landor, "she doesn't live in state, does she?"

That's an understatement," said Lander

softly. "This is a part of the castle reserved to the slaves, as I recall, apart solely from Sabura Mona's apartment. I do not understand. A woman of power and influence—"

The guard stopped before a plain wooden door set in the stone wall. There was no mat before it and no curtain, no guard stationed outside. Just the plain door.

"This is it," said the guard.

"Strike the door and say the Princess Sharla awaits," commanded Landor, and the guard pounded twice at it with his fist.

A soft voice from within questioned, "Who stands there?"

"The Princess Sharla awaits, Sabura Mona," answered the guard.

There was no sound of bars being withdrawn or bolts shooting into place, but the door began to open gently and the guard turned and strode wordlessly away.

Sharla looked questioningly at Landor, and he nodded. She went in.

The room beyond was bare—quite bare. The walls were unadorned stone and the floor was uncarpeted. There was no fire in the hearth, and two flaring torches were the only lights. There was a rough bed with a coarse cloth spread, a table with half a dozen pens and ink and sheets of paper, wooden chairs.

On one of the chairs sat Sabura Mona.

SHE wore a homespun robe of brown which did no more than cover her fat body, nothing to decorate it. She was the fattest woman Sharla had ever seen. Her arms were like tree-branches and her legs like tree-trunks, but soft. Yet she was not absurd.

No. She was not *fat*. She was big. She was imposing. There was no shadow of the ludicrous in her monstrous bulk. And Sharla wondered why.

It was her eyes, she thought. They were big and dark and there was the sorrow of a world in their depths, as if the wisdom of all the ages hid behind that mask of soft pendulous flesh.

Her voice too was as beautiful and as melancholy as her eyes.

She said, "Welcome, my lady. I fear I cannot offer you the hospitality to which you are accustomed, but I live, as you see, in humble circumstances."

Sharla said, a little uncertainly, "It is of no consequence, Sabura Mona."

The other extended a fat hand and indicated one of the wooden chairs. "Be seated, my lady. And—this is Ser Landor?"

Landor nodded, said smoothly, "My lady Sharla asked me to accompany her, since her Argian is worn with long disuse and I speak it to perfection."

"Really?" Sabura Mona's eyebrows rose on her forehead. "And in which of the outland dialects are you most at home?"

"It is of no consequence," stammered Sharla. "We cannot impose upon you—"

"I speak them all," said Sabura Mona, and there was a finality in her voice that defied further argument. She spoke next in the dialect of Loudor.

"So you see, Ser Landor, your presence as interpreter is really not required."

Landor could not avoid the pointed hint, but there was a curious flicker of unreality about the way he turned and withdrew, leaving Sharla very alone and helpless, as if he had been fighting very hard to control himself, doing consciously what he should have done naturally.

As soon as the door shut behind him, Sabura Mona turned her eyes from following him and looked at Sharla with a curious abstracted expression. Sharla noticed that her sole ornament was a tiny gold ear-clip, and strove to remember where she had last seen one like it.

Sabura Mona said, "I called you hither, my lady, in this way, for two reasons. The ostensible one is that here we cannot be overheard or spied upon. The more pressing is that I am growing old, and am anyway a fat and clumsy woman, and I cannot do much walking or attendance at ceremonies."

Sharla said, "But Sabura Mona, you should have more exalted quarters than this. If you do prefer to live here, at least let me order you better furnishings—"

"I do not choose to have them," said Sabura Mona.

"But have you no slaves, no attendants—?"

"I do not choose to have them," repeated Sabura Mona firmly. "And therefore let us talk no more about them. My comfort or discomfort is a small thing compared to that of the Empire."

"I called you hither to speak of two things—Barkasch of Mercator, and the people of Argus. First—of Barkasch. You would do well to beware of him. He cannot fight the Empire alone, though he would dearly like to, for he is a scheming and ambitious man whom fate has chosen to sit at the head of a trio of the wildest worlds in the galaxy—wild not in terrain but in people.

"His are the fiercest warriors of all. His are the ambitions of a merchant prince magnified a millionfold. It seemed that his alliance with Andra and his seat on the Council of Six would give him the power he sought, but far from that he was made to look a fool before many people, and when his temper cools he will ally himself with Andra's cause and will not rest until she is in your place. Beware of him. He is crafty. Have your adviser Landor see to it.

"And the second thing. The people of Mercator. They are fickle. They believe like all the peoples of the Empire in prophecy, and though they welcome you now, someone will one day soon realize that no prophecy is current proclaiming you beneficent and just ruler of the Empire, though many run the crowds with the word that the black witch shall bring about the Empire's ruin. It would be the work of a day, no more, for Andra, your sister, and Barkasch of Mercator to have the crowd howling for your blood on no stronger evidence than that it is not you but your sister who is to ride the Empire to oblivion."

Sharla said after a long silence, "That is all, Sabura Mona?"

"That is all. There will be more. I have spies, my lady, and I ordered them to warn me of such rumors as might cause your overthrow. I, who planned so much for your father, have no plan now—yet. What is to come remains inscrutable. But rest assured—I have small love for your sister or for Barkasch of Mercator, and shall guide you—with the assistance, doubtless, of your Lord Great Chamberlain, Landor—" (this with the air of an afterthought), "as I did your father.

"I shall see you at the burying tomorrow, my lady. Farewell."

Feeling a little foolish and disappointed, Sharla rose. She said, "Is there a guard

nearby that I may summon to escort me to my apartment?"

"No need, my lady. Walk and be assured."

Sharla gazed at the immense bulk of the woman before her for a while. Eventually she turned and went away.

Though the passages were dark and bare and cold, somehow she felt no apprehension at walking along them alone after Sabura Mona's words.

When she re-entered her own rooms, Landor was waiting. He greeted her and said, "First, with regard to what you said earlier—Dolichek's father is dead."

Sharla brushed it aside, and suddenly weary, sat down on the couch beside him. She said, "I have seen Sabura Mona."

Landor nodded. He said, "She is a strange woman, is she not? I am intrigued to have met her. She impressed me with an air of power." He shifted to face her. "Tell me, what did she say?"

Sharla told him, in outline. When she came to the part about the prophecies, he snorted. "Faugh! I have no faith in prophecies. The bad guesswork of a few old women, and they follow it because they think it a prophecy, and point to it when they have followed it as true foresight. Go on."

She finished her tale, and he said, "All? It seems little enough, in faith, to insist on conveying in private."

Sharla said, yawning, "Landor, yours is the statesman's brain, not mine. I weary and would sleep. In the morning, if Ordovic has found this conjurer, we will see him, and find out more from him. Till then, Landor."

Landor rose without speaking and withdrew.

SENCHAN VAR looked gloomily from the narrow slitted window without benefit of a drape, westward over the Low City. He could see the lights along the Street of the Morning and hear the clamor of the city playing.

He said, "Andalvar of Argus dead at the sundown before last, and they still drink and sing in the Low City. A rootless stock—craven and unworthy of Argus."

"While the burying money grows, Senchan," said Andra.

Senchan Var turned angrily on her. "Burying money or no, my lady, it is an insult to the memory of Andalvar, your father, and I am all but ashamed for you, my lady, that you do not take it seriously."

Andra's composure was fraying visibly. She sat on a couch covered with badly cured katalabs pelts, and the floor was hard and cold and the walls bare, for the fortress on the Hill of Kings was a fortress first and a palace after, and though it was the focus of imperial government and state-owned trading it was still a soldier's barracks rather than a home.

Across the room her ape whined and chattered fretfully.

She snapped, "Senchan, there is no need to lose your temper with me simply because my minx of a sister dismissed Dolichek from whipping-post and told the whipmaster to break his whip and come to me again, and you happen to agree with her. She did it out of sentiment and no anxiety for the strength of Penda's moral fiber. Further, she is a weakling and neither she nor the fool whom she put in your place is acquainted with the veriest elements of intrigue."

"No?" said Senchan Var. "It seems to me, my lady, that she is strong and self-possessed, as witness the way she disposed of Barkasch of Mercator and the marriage bond."

Andra spat. "According to Samsar's story? Not at all. Only this conjurer and his fantastic trick saved her. And there is one thing more—"

A soldier of the fortress company entered and saluted. He said in harshly accented Argian, "A slave below, my lady, demands entrance. Female slave called Valley."

Andra shot a triumphant glance at Senchan Var and said, "Fetch me her, and also the slave Samsar, the wizard Kteunophimi and the black Leontine slave who came hither from the castle of the kings this evening."

The soldier saluted again and went out. Andra said, "See, Senchan? Can anyone be skilled in intrigue who does not have wit enough to chase away spying slaves? She took them all from me, trustingly, and her idiot of an adviser, Landor knew too little to warn her. I tell you, Senchan, a week and we shall have torn this sister of

mine to shreds. Ay, and scattered the shreds to the eight winds of Argus."

The door opened again, and the same soldier ushered in Valley, swathed in a thick cloak from head to ankles, but her brown feet were bare, the great black slave who had been whipmaster to Dolichek, Samsar of the hot brown skin and twitching eyes, and a small, nervous man with a withered face like an old apple and a mirthless grin that displayed toothless gums. The soldier himself turned to go out again, but Andra stopped him with a gesture.

"Stay, soldier," she commanded. "There may be need of you."

He closed the door obediently and stood with his back to it.

"Now," said Andra, a gleam in her cat's eyes, leaning forward on the pile of skins that formed her resting-place. "You, Samsar!"

Samsar stepped forward sullenly.

"Your tale again, Samsar. Not that part about the entry of Kelab nor the departure of Barkasch, but that about the fate of the bond itself."

"Why—why, my lady, did I not make it clear?" stammered Samsar, his jaw working stiffly, for there was a vast black bruise all across his cheek where Ordovic had hit him.

"I would have recovered it for you and preserved it, but Ordovic, the captain of the royal bodyguard, picked it up while it would still have been but foolish to attempt to steal it under the eye of the courtiers."

"Enough!" said Andra, holding up her hand. "Step back. Kteunophimi!"

The withered man came forward, mumbling.

"Work the miracle of full memory on the slave Valley," she commanded. Mumbling from the aged wizard.

"Do not waste time in vain attempts to speak!" said Andra. "But a few simple movements are all you need, Kteunophimi."

THE wizard turned to face Valley, who stood very straight with her big eyes bright and limpid and the hood of her cloak thrown back on her shoulders, and began to move his hands in a complicated pattern. After a few seconds he stepped hastily aside, and Valley, her eyes wide open but unsee-

ing, walked unhurriedly forward to face Andra.

"Well, Valley? You have heard all that passed in the apartment my sister took from me?"

The slender slave nodded.

"Tell me of what was said concerning Barkasch and the marriage bond," Andra commanded, and sat back on her pile of skins.

Valley began to speak as a machine would speak. In flatly unimaginative terms she described the reactions of Sharla and Landor, and the entry of Ordovic. Senchan Var listened, a frown on his face, marveling at the way Valley copied the very accents of the speakers. Landor and Sharla had talked in Argian, but with the arrival of Ordovic switched to their outland tongue, and since Valley did not herself understand the meaning of what she had heard, but could only repeat it parrotwise, Andra called for an interpreter and heard the talk with interest. Samsar stood in the background, a faint beading of sweat on his brow.

When Valley repeated Ordovic's version of Samsar's clumsy attempt to steal the marriage bond, Andra raised an imperious hand. "Enough!" she said. "Samsar, step forward." Samsar did not budge.

"Soldier—" said Andra, and the soldier before the door caught Samsar's arms and frog-marched him in front of the couch.

There was a gleam in Andra's yellow eyes that was not all due to the torches. She said softly, caressingly, "Samsar, you lied to me."

"MY LADY—!" stammered the slave, his eyes twitching. "I did my utmost—"

"Utmost or not," cut in Senchan Var, "you lied to my lady, Andra! I should rip your false tongue from your throat!"

Andra was regaining her self-confidence and poise. She said, "Hold, Senchan. I have it how this may turn to our advantage even now. What was the meaning of the threat Ordovic used to this man, interpreter?"

Samsar's eyes filled with abject terror, and his mouth trembled, but he could not speak. The interpreter shook his head.

"I know not, my lady. 'Tis not of their dialect, nor of Argian."

With a casual glance at the wretched

Samsar, Andra turned. "Senchan, explain its meaning."

The old man blanched. He said, "It is—it is—" Then he turned his back sharply and said with an air of finality, "It is not seemly for you to know, my lady."

"Fool, Senchan! Will none of you tell me? Then I demand it of a common soldier! You before the door! Explain!"

Woodenly, his eyes focused on empty air, the soldier explained.

When he finished, Andra nodded, her lips drawn back from her teeth like a cat's. She said slowly, bright-eyed, "Slave!"

The Leontine giant stepped forward.

"Take this Samsar and do to him as you have heard—and stop him wailing!"

A broad hand clapped across Samsar's mouth and he fell to moaning faintly. "Then go into the Low City and spread it abroad that Ordovic threatened this. Let Samsar be found on the streets later—about dawn?"

The giant said, "I hear and obey," and picked up Samsar casually under one arm and went out. Senchan Var turned to Andra with an expression of despair on his face, and would have spoken, but Andra cut him short.

"Senchan, we cannot afford to be squeamish. We are playing for the glory of an Empire, and one man—or ten thousand—cannot be permitted to stand in the way of it. You're a soldier, Senchan—not a ninny! Kteunophimi, take that soldier and make him forget what he has seen, believing it to be Ordovic's work."

The aged hypnotist nodded and led the soldier into a far corner. After a while the latter departed like a walking doll, and Andra turned to Valley, still standing motionless before the couch.

"Continue," she commanded.

They listened in jubilant silence when she came to the scene between Ordovic and Sharla, and Andra said, "So my precious sister was a woman of the streets in her long absence. How much capital could we make of that, Senchan?"

All the old man's puritanically moral upbringing rose in revolt at that. He said, "That a woman without honor should come to stain the throne of Argus! 'Tis the most shameful thing I ever heard!"

"Agreed," said Andra. "It will be com-

mon knowledge three days from now. Continue, Valley."

When she finished her recital, he said, "She is visiting Sabura Mona; that is dangerous, my lady. Sabura Mona is unpredictable and very, very shrewd."

Andra frowned. "Indeed, I do not know whether she will stand to our side or to Sharla's."

"Is there a way to spy on *her*?"

"None. The walls of her room are stone as thick as you are tall, and she has no slaves to be bribed and never leaves the castle of the kings."

"Then she is too dangerous to be allowed to live."

"True. Kteunophimi!"

The wizard came forward.

"Take away your pupil Valley, send her again to attend my sister. You will then send up my black Leontine slave when he has dealt with Samsar, the liar."

The old man bowed and left the room unsteadily, leaning on Valley's arm. After a while Senchan Var said, "Word from Barkasch?"

"None. He went off-world in a huff at sundown. I expect his messenger some time. He will not accept being made a fool of lightly."

The door opened. Another soldier stood there, saluted.

He said, "There is a man craving audience who will give no name but is come in connection with the marriage bond of Barkasch of Mercator—my lady," he added hastily.

Andra and Senchan Var exchanged glances.

Andra raised her eye-brows as if to say, "What did I tell you?" and ordered the soldier, "Let him enter."

The soldier stepped aside and a man came from behind him, and both Andra and Senchan Var tensed and began to flush with rage.

Kelab the Conjurer.

VII

"SER LANDOR! SER LANDOR!" A patter of feet, panting, shouting in high feminine voices. Landor struggled from sleep and found a gray rain-washed sky shedding dull light through the windows.

His door burst open and Valley came in, her face tear-stained.

"Ser Landor! My lady Sharla has disappeared!"

Instantly Landor tossed the covers off and reached for his clothes. He said, "How? When?"

Valley said, "It must have been early today, Ser Landor. When she went to see Sabura Mona, as you know, she dismissed us and I for my part went into Oppidum. This morning, when we went to awaken her, she was gone from her bed, and there were signs of struggle."

Landor buckled his sword-belt and forced his feet into sandals. He said, "Call out the guard! Find Captain Ordovic! Let him see that none leaves the castle!"

Valley bowed and vanished, and Landor, his face like thunder, went striding down the passage to Sharla's rooms. Here he found Mershil and Lena, her other personal slaves, weeping and wringing their hands. The door to the bedroom was open, and the bed visible beyond was disarranged, as if by a struggle. He ordered harshly, "Peace, you! No one is blaming you—you were dismissed and all is in order. Let me pass!"

He pushed between them and went into the bedroom. They followed, howling, and he rounded on them. "Has anyone touched this bed since it was found so?"

"None," Lena assured him eagerly through her tears.

"Then keep silence. I have a little skill in divination." He turned to the bed, while the slaves ceased their sobbing and watched with interest. He laid his hands caressingly on the covers, his eyes blurring and his fingers seeming to melt and run into the fabric as Kelab's had on the beggar's cup.

At last he shook his head and turned away, as there came a clatter of feet and a jingle of metal, and Ordovic burst into the room, closely followed by Tampore.

He said, "The slave Valley came with a wild tale of Sharla vanishing."

"True enough," said Landor. "You have put guards at the entries of the castle?"

"Ay, though it's by way of locking the ship after the air has blown. When did she go? Did she return from her meeting with Sabura Mona?"

"Ay, for we spoke together after she came

back. But her slaves were dismissed, and there was none to see or hear—"

Ordovic cursed. "Tampore! Was there no guard before the door?"

"There was one. Where is he?"

"Bought?" suggested Landor, and Tampore flared, "The man who can be bought does not enter the bodyguard. He is dead for certain."

"Who was it?"

"One Elvir."

"By the winds of Argus!" said Ordovic, and stormed into the passage. There was a squad of guards there. His eyes switched over them, and he shot out a brawny arm and said, "Elvir!"

A big man in the second rank stepped out and came up to him. Behind, he heard a furious growl of astonishment from Tampore.

He said in clipped thieves' argot, "Elvir, were you not on guard at the royal apartment—here—last night?"

"I was. I came at midnight and changed places at dawn with my relief."

Landor came out behind Ordovic, bidding Tampore be quiet. He listened. Ordovic said, "Who was your relief?"

"Darbo, captain."

One of the other guards spoke up. "That's so, captain. I went in search of the sergeant when the slave came with news of the disappearance."

"Elvir, did you let anyone in—anyone at all—last night after you came on duty?"

"As is customary, I let pass Dolichek, the prince's whipping-post, and the whipmaster—the black giant."

Ordovic cursed. "And they came out again?" Landor demanded, striding forward.

"Of a truth, yes!"

"BUT did you not know that Dolichek is no longer the prince's whipping-post? That my lady told the giant to break his whip and go serve the Princess Andra?"

Elvir's face went ashen. He said, "No, Ser Landor. I swear it. I heard nothing of that. I did merely as usual in letting Dolichek pass to bear the burden of the prince's misdemeanors."

Landor said suddenly, "There is something wrong. I can sense it. Guards, into the inner rooms!"

They filed inside and fell in again in order. Landor said, "With your permission, sergeant?"

Tampore nodded, and he continued, "Search this apartment! Shift everything! Something is wrong. And Elvir, you are not to be blamed. With the others—to it."

They left no fraction of an inch of all the rooms in the suite unsearched, but found nothing to justify Landor's misgivings. At length the latter sat down on the bed with his head in his hands and said, "Still there is something wrong. It is as if there was unreality—Which of you searched beneath the bed?"

Three of the guards signified assent, Elvir among them, and Elvir said, "Ser Landor, I felt strange on doing so, for though there was nothing there I felt there should be. I felt that way too, now I recall, when Dolichek came last night with the whipmaster—worse when they went away again."

"Lift the bed," commanded Landor harshly, and six brawny guards bent to it and tugged and carried it half across the room. The space where it had stood was curiously shifting, as if it were seen through water, and he walked up to it and bent and searched the floor with his fingers, his face drawn and strained.

After a while it changed to a smile of triumph, and he heaved and lifted out of nothing a still, doll-like figure with matted yellow hair.

"Sharla!" Ordovic said, but Landor shook his head and stepped out of the shifting unreality.

"Dolichek," he said. "That is how it was done."

He laid the boy on the bed. It was amazing how closely in repose his young-old face resembled Sharla's.

"He lives?" questioned Ordovic.

"Assuredly. But he sleeps."

"How was he hidden?"

"Magic, Ordovic."

"This is the black witch's doing," said Tampore, stepping forward and glowering. "Did I not warn you, Captain Ordovic?"

But Landor shook his head. "I know few wizards and not one witch whose powers are capable of that. Kelab is one of them, of course—wait, Ordovic," holding up his hand as Ordovic was about to speak. "But

it were a strange thing to save us from the marriage bond and then to steal Sharla."

Ordovic said fiercely, "Would he take her for himself?"

"He would not dare," Landor said confidently.

Tampore said, "I do not see how it could be done—anyone could take my lady Sharla for Dolichek if her hair were dirtied, her face bruised and if she wore a similar garment; but one could not take Kelab for the Leontine giant."

"He is a magician, remember," Ordovic insisted.

"Landor, I think he is likely. When I met him in the Low City this morning, he demanded a thousand circles for his regulation of the marriage bond and said he would be at his ship today at ten."

"If he had just stolen Sharla from the castle of the kings, he would not have faced you in the Low City."

Ordovic said, "With his insolence he would dare anything!"

Tampore coughed, put in, "Ser Landor, the lady Andra is in the fortress on the Hill of Kings in Oppidum."

"What of it?"

"I have friends among the guards there. We could find out if Kelab has been to see the lady Andra."

Ordovic said hotly, "You deny that this is the black witch's work, yet can you name any other who would do it? Save Barkasch of Mercator, who is off-world?"

Landor wasn't listening. He said, "Tampore, what were your guards doing to let them leave the castle?"

"The black giant is well enough known to my men, but it is strange that they should have let out Dolichek."

"Then perhaps they did *not* leave the castle. Tampore, organize searches of every room and hole in and under the castle, and ask all the guards who were on watch last night whom they let pass—without exception."

Tampore nodded and signaled to his men, but Landor stopped Darbo, let the rest go. He said to Ordovic, "Does Sabura Mona know of this?"

"Not that I know of."

"Darbo," said Landor, turning to him, "go down and inform her, and beg her to

come to us if she will. In either case, return at once yourself."

The soldier saluted and withdrew.

They waited in silence, Ordovic pacing the room like a caged lion, his face grim and set, Landor struggling to preserve his outward calm. Almost a quarter of an hour passed.

EVENTUALLY Ordovic said, "Darbo is slow in returning. It irks me to wait and do nothing. I'll go seek him." He left the room and followed the passage, inquiring at stages where he could find Sabura Mona, and came eventually into the right corridor. He glanced down it. There indeed was the door to which he had been directed.

And something more.

His heart leaped and his hand closed on the hilt of his sword, and he padded silently up to the embrasure of the door. Darbo lay in it. There was fresh blood all over his face, and his heart had ceased to beat.

Ordovic rolled him over and his face showed his amazement, for the tough metal of the soldier's helmet had been crushed and driven into his skull with a blow like the butt of a Thanis bull—

He flung the body aside, ripped his sword from his scabbard and forced open the door.

The room was dim, but he could make out two figures, two monstrous figures, locked together in the center of the room, struggling: one vast and ebony—the Leontine giant, seven feet tall—the other also huge, but shorter and fatter. A woman. Sabura Mona.

He gaped in amazement at what he saw.

For Sabura Mona had the measure of the giant. He had one enormous hand sunk in the softness of her throat, but she did not appear to notice it. With the other, he was seeking vainly to force her arms from their grip on his waist, constricting the soft organs of his belly as surely as a steel band.

And she laughed. The incredible woman laughed, soundlessly, and instead of letting his arm drive back her head and snap her spine as the giant intended, she was forcing it forward—forward—

He snatched his arm away while he still had room to bend it, just an instant before joint and muscle and tendons would have torn apart, bent backwards at the elbow, and



her head snapped forward, came up under his chin.

Then in one huge astounding heave compounded of legs and arms and body and head, in that one instant when he had no grip on her, she flung him bodily at the ceiling.

He went up like a lifting ship and fell like a mountain, his skull split on the hard stone twelve feet above, and Sabura Mona, without a glance at the corpse, turned to dip her hands in a bowl of water, while Ordovic, sword limply in his hand, gaped.

The incredible woman wiped her hands and turned to him. "You are Ordovic?" she demanded, and he stared at her.

"YOU are—Sabura Mona?"

She nodded. "Your messenger told me you wished me to come. My lady Sharla, it seems, has disappeared."

Ordovic nodded. He gazed at the body of the giant. "With him, supposedly—if he was whipmaster to Dolichek."

"He was."

"But if he is still in the castle, Sharla—uh, my lady Sharla cannot be far either."

"Possibly," nodded Sabura Mona. "Let us go, then. But first, one small matter. Tell no one about my killing—him." She nodded at the dead man with a quivering of four chins. "Say you slew him, if you like, but tell no one I did. Understood?"

Her eyes were strangely luminous, and he nodded dumbly, followed her up the bare passages. As they approached Sharla's rooms, he noticed she began to wheeze as if she were exhausted.

Landor met them, nodded, said, "What kept Darbo?"

"Struck down by the Leontine giant, Ser Landor, and if Ser Ordovic had not saved me, that would have been my fate too," said Sabura Mona. She glanced commandingly at Ordovic, who nodded weakly.

"By the winds of Argus, then!" said Landor explosively. "If he was still here, perhaps Sharla—"

A soldier came stumbling down the passage, breathing in great sobbing gasps, as if he had run too far too fast. He said, "Ser Landor!" and saluted with difficulty. "Ser Landor, your flying machine—the one in

which you came to the castle of the kings—it's gone!"

"Gone!" said Landor, electrified.

"Yes, gone! And what is more, Sergeant Tampore sent a messenger on a fast horse to the fortress in Oppidum where the lady Andra is, and he has signaled by sun and mirror that Kelab the Conjurer visited her last night close on midnight, and stayed half an hour, and departed."

Landor said, "A fast horse—he could have done it in time to be here with the whipmaster by a quarter before one, and left, taking the helicopter and Sharla—by the winds of Argus, soldier! Have horses prepared for us! There is but one wizard on all Argus who could blanket the sound of a helicopter taking off, and that one is Kelab."

The soldier saluted and went back down the passage at a lope. Sabura Mona said, "Is this the doing of my lady Andra?"

Landor said, "Hers and the conjurer Kelab's, I fancy. The Leontine giant took her out under the eyes of the guard, in guise of Dolichek, and doubtless also with some charm against discovery provided by Kelab."

Sabura Mona shook her head sadly, with a vast trembling of chins and pendulous cheeks. Ordovic could not believe her the same woman who had tossed the giant like a Thanis bull. She said, "Ser Landor, I have cer ain spies—"

"Among my lady Andra's slaves?"

"Assuredly!" said Sabura Mona, her eyebrows rising in surprise. "All places."

"I shall need your counsel, then. At this moment the most important thing is to find Sharla, which means going in search of Kelab the Conjurer at once. If we still had the helicopter—"

Sabura Mona shrugged her elephantine shoulders.

"I can do no more than sit here in the castle of the kings and weave plots as a red liana weaves its beast-traps. But I shall do what little I can, Ser Landor. Be assured of my aid at all times."

Landor said with an attempt at graciousness, "I am grateful, Sabura Mona, and am sure you will serve Sharla as you served her father. If you will pardon us . . . Come, Ordovic. Our horses should be ready by now."

There was a gray sky over Oppidum. Toward dawn it had rained, but now it had ceased, though the streets were still deserted in the Low City. The night's gayety had passed.

Two bodies lay on the Street of the Morning. One was that of a hungry-looking man with a face like a wolf. His throat was slit in tribute to Kelab's skill in divination, and there was a cross carved on his face to show he was accursed and no burying money should be left for him. The other was Sam-sar's, but that one was barely recognizable as human.

There was a chill wind, too, but Kelab the Conjuror sat on the balcony of his ship, sixty feet above the brown concrete of the spaceport, and sipped a hot brew from Thanis.

Opposite him sat Sharla, her face strangely composed and quite relaxed, and she also was drinking the heart-warming beverage.

Every now and again the conjurer cocked his head on one side as if he was listening, and Sharla's eyes rested on him and saw the glint of gold in his left ear-lobe, and remembered that this was the one of which Sabura Mona's had reminded her. She thought for the first time not how small and slender he was, but that he was vaster than he seemed, like a volcano filled with smoldering fires, as if he was the strongest man in the world and also the most gentle.

He for his part sometimes looked across at her and smiled faintly, and thought how very beautiful she was in her white kirtle, with her pale lovely face and her golden hair.

But he did not need to look. He knew her, directly, as he knew everything near him; and certain things farther away, much farther away.

They had sat out on the balcony in silence for some time, no words being needed, when he glanced at the watch that had come from nowhere in the Empire, and said, "I think they are approaching, dear. Go to the place I showed you."

She rose with a quick smile and went in-ship, and he cleared away the tray from which they had eaten breakfast and checked that all was in readiness.

Then he sat down to wait.

VIII

AT THE entry to the spaceport hostlers came out from the stables, running, and Ordovic and Landor dropped from their mounts, sweating and panting.

Curtly, Landor tossed the men their pay and demanded, "Where is the ship of Kelab the Conjuror?"

One of the hostlers, a big fair man with a red scar from eyebrow to chin, shifted the stick he was chewing to the side of his mouth and said, "She stands most east'ards on the port, Ser Landor. 'Tis Ser Landor, en it?"

Landor nodded curtly and turned to Tampore and the squad of soldiers who had clattered into the yard with them.

He said, "Out of sight till called for, men! There's little you can do against this magician, but mayhap we'll need you to bring away his body."

Tampore saluted, and they reined in under the eaves of the gallery around the yard. Ordovic and Landor, swords swinging, stalked out of the yard on to the brown damp concrete of the port beyond.

There was only one ship that could have been Kelab's—a lean black vessel, her sides shiny with wet, that reminded Ordovic uncomfortably of certain fleet pirate craft he had tangled with in the outlands. He glanced at Landor, but Landor had suddenly withdrawn into himself, and there was a tiny bluing of the air around him. Ordovic looked away quickly. There was a new smell in the air—a smell of powers beyond the human.

They walked across to the lean ship and stopped twenty feet from the nearest fin. Above them, on a balcony built out from the side of the ship, they could see Kelab leaning back in a chair, drinking.

Landor shouted, "Conjuror!"

He put down his mug and glanced at them, and his dark face split in a smile of welcome. He raised a hand in salute.

"The best of mornings to you, Ordovic and Landor! You are early in bringing me those thousand circles."

"We bring no money, traitor," said Landor harshly. "What have you done with the Princess Sharla?"

Kelab raised his eyebrows. "I? I have

done nothing with any princesses to my knowledge."

"Liar!" accused Ordovic fiercely. "Who else but you could have stolen her from the castle of the kings?"

"Come down, conjurer!" called Landor. "Come down from that ship!"

Uneasily for the first time, Kelab said with a hint of peevishness, "I will not."

"Come down!" ordered Landor with a bellow, and the bluing of the air around him became stronger. Kelab puckered his brows and staggered; then he turned obediently and went inship. Ordovic looked at Landor with new respect, and fresh hope sprang up in him. It had seemed hopeless to walk out and face the conjurer like this, but maybe Landor had known what he was doing after all.

He was an enigma, Landor. From obscurity to Lord Great Chamberlain of the Empire at a step: guide to Sharla, yet unknown: a man who, as far as he and Sharla, and even the Empire, were concerned, walked out of nowhere on Loudor three months and a few days ago, after, as he claimed, a two-month search for Sharla.

And now he was in a position to wield the powers of the Empire, via Sharla, as Sabura Mona had done with Andalvar. There should be a battle royal betwixt those two.

Save, of course, that it was now Kelab who held the whip.

The lower door of the ship before them opened, and a flight of steps grew from the side of the nearest fin. Kelab the Conjurer came out the door and began to descend the steps, and behind him—

"Sharla!" said Landor. "This liar said he had not seen you."

He stopped suddenly, because Sharla was gazing at him from the topmost step with something that was almost contempt and yet was mixed with pity. Kelab continued to come down undisturbed.

She said, "I am not Sharla of Argus."

Ordovic's mouth fell open and he gazed in blank astonishment, but Landor rounded on Kelab and said furiously, "This is of your doing, Kelab!"

Kelab nodded quite calmly. He said, "Indeed it is."

Ordovic's sword flew from its scabbard

and he made it whistle in the air an inch from the conjurer's chin. He said, "As you value your life, restore her her senses!"

Kelab made a tiny movement, and the sword blued, flared, and melted into nothing. He said, "I have already, Ordovic. This girl is *not* Sharla of Argus."

"Not—Conjurer, you lie!" Ordovic tossed aside the useless sword hilt and made as if to smash Kelab's face with his bunched fist.

"I tell truth," Kelab insisted, with a glance at Landor. His face was strained, and around him too, the air was beginning to glow blue. Landor was scowling anxiously, and his eyes burned with an inner light. "This girl is no princess, but a puppet, a dupe, a slave."

"Of whom?" demanded Ordovic.

Kelab's face went into a snarl like a tiger's, but he forced out with difficulty, "Why, who else but Landor, Ordovic?"

LANDOR said furiously, "Conjurer, you are mad!"

Kelab relaxed, shrugged easily. He said, "Answer me this question. When did Andalvar fall ill? Five months ago without warning?"

Landor nodded, puzzled.

"Yet," said Kelab devastatingly, "it is a three month journey from here to Loudor, longer by way of Annanworld, and when you found Sharla you claimed to have been engaged in searching for her two months already. *Three months* before Andalvar fell ill you went in search of Sharla. Why then?"

"There was a—a prophecy," began Landor, reddening, but Kelab cut him short.

"You do not believe in prophecies, Landor. You have said so often. Only last night you said so again. *Why then?*"

There was a sudden crash of thunder, and darkness came, blacker than the depths of space.

For an instant Ordovic feared he had been struck blind. He could feel nothing, hear nothing but the echoes of that tremendous thunderclap, and—

And there was nothing beneath his feet, no concrete, rain-wet, and no cold breeze on his face.

Death?

Then there was a great ripping of the blackness like frozen lightning, and solidity

returned to his body. He gulped air and stared around.

No ship. No concrete beneath his feet. No low buildings around the port. No city of Oppidum beyond them. But a lavender sky and a cruel red sun, and a hot blast that tore at his eyes, and bare hard rock beneath his feet. He was alone.

He cried out in terror. There was no fear in him of human weapons, of sword or spear or even the mutants' thing-that-kills-at-a-distance, but this was magic, and it was more than human.

The cry went echoing among the rocks around him, and echoed and echoed again, and seemed to grow with distance instead of fading. Twenty miles ahead he saw a mountain like a bleeding finger in the harsh red light split and fountain into the sky without sound save the echo of his cry.

The splitting of the mountain made the earth shudder like a pool of water. He saw the frontal wave of an earthquake flow across the flat bare plain towards the rocks where he hid, parting it into chasms a mile deep and folding it like waves breaking.

Then it reached him, and the ground shook with terrifying silence, and he fell, blinded and nauseated, into a vast crevasse.

Down—down—down—

Then the blackness split again and there was a cool green bower among drooping trees that were not birbrak trees but enough like them to awaken a stir of longing. There was green lush grass before it and a clear still pool with a few pebbles on the bottom. He looked, entranced, into the bower, and saw Sharla.

She sat there on a bank of the cool grass, naked, and stretched out her arms towards him with a glad cry. He made to run forward, embrace her—

And a voice—*her* voice—said in his memory, "I am not Sharla of Argus."

Sharla—not Sharla—real or imaginary—

He hesitated, and she called again. Her voice?

Or the voice of Landor, whose puppet she was?

He stopped, planting his feet firmly on the ground, and looked away. She began to weep. He steeled himself not to move.

Then there was a touch on his shoulder, and he half relented, turned to face her—

But it was not Sharla. The green and shading trees had put out their branches like tentacles, to constrict—

Again he screamed, and began to run. On the water's edge he tripped and fell into the pool. It parted before him, and he fell without breaking the surface.

Down—down—down—

THEN searing heat, blistering heat. He stood among rocks that glowed redly, before a pool of molten metal that bubbled like water, white-hot. Flames flickered and spat around him, and there was a high thin singing in the air, which stank of sulphur and had the hot unsatisfying flatness of a furnace room.

He looked up. There was no sky but a veil of hot, smoky vapors that whirled and scudded and sometimes tore to show, straight overhead, an unbearable white flame that was a sun. And not only straight overhead—eastwards another, dimmer, and southwards another, blue instead of white. Three blazing suns and rocks that were ready to flow down as lava.

The pool before him boiled furiously, bubbling and spitting. One of the red bubbles did not burst, but grew larger. He drew back, but the rock behind him was red-hot. He froze, staring with horrified eyes at the surface of the monstrous bubble. Higher it grew. Taller than himself, its base all but touching his feet. Higher—

He fell forward and it burst, leaving a hollow roundness into which he fell.

Down—down—down—

He crashed into the branches of a thick tree, its leaves blue-green and shiny. The heat here was wet, muggy; the air smelt of decayed vegetation and fetid swamps. There was a monstrous roaring noise in the distance.

All around was the tree, obscuring the sky except for the gap straight overhead caused by his fall—a real, physical fall, which had bruised him and torn his clothes and stunned his mind.

He shifted in the crotch where he lay, and something slender and black rustled away, hissing. A serpent!

He stared around wildly in the green-dark shade, and saw more of them, coiled on the branches or sliding without noise up or

down the trunk. One of them disturbed a creature which flapped away on many leathern wings, uttering a curious harsh scream.

Then the roaring was nearer, and he saw *things* coming towards him through the jungle. They were all mouth and great sagging belly, with many shifting eyes and long whiplike tentacles.

One of them came up to the tree where he was, and a thin long tentacle wrapped round his body and tore him from his perch, held him for an instant above that horrible black maw. The stench of rotten meat from it made him vomit.

Then he was falling again, down—

A bare expanse of snow and a bitter, cutting wind. He lay in the snow for a while, panting, weak in body and mind. Delicious coldness—he could lie here forever and sleep—

He forced himself to stagger to his feet and wrapped his torn garment around his cold body. At once snow drove into his face and a blizzard shut down around him like a wall.

What now? Was this the end? Was his fall from world to world to finish here? Was this even real? His frantic mind beat at the numbed confines of his comprehension, seeking an answer which he could not give.

Someone was coming towards him through the snow. A big figure, larger than life. The Leontine giant?

No, he was dead. He himself had done the killing—

And yet not. That was Sabura Mona's hypnotic conditioning. *She* had done the killing. And here she was. Walking out of the blizzard—

He turned and stumbled away, fell and lay still in the snow till she came and picked him up as if he had been a child, and walked with him into the whirling whiteness.

Sometimes, as he looked at her, she seemed not to be Sabura Mona, but Kelab, and she spoke with Kelab's voice, soothing him to sleep, and he drowsed, warm in her arms, as if she radiated warmth in this sub-zero world. It seemed to last a long time . . .

THE air blued for a moment, and he was suddenly fully awake again, blinking in bright yellow light. Sabura Mona set him

down upon a soft couch before a leaping fire, which Kelab was tending. Then she went aside to the wall and stood motionless.

Ordovic sat up and stared at Kelab. The little conjurer was cut and bleeding. His gaudy headscarf was muddy and his brown clothes were torn. But there was a kind of strange contentment on his face.

Ordovic thought, minutes—or years—ago, I hated this man more than I hated anyone in the galaxy. But I cannot hate him any longer because I know who did to me what has been done, and beside the hatred I feel for *that* man I can have no others.

Without looking up the conjurer said, "I owe you an explanation."

Ordovic looked around him. He saw a square room with this couch where he lay, a stool beside the fire for Kelab, the walls bare and featureless. He said grimly, "A small debt beside what Landor owes me."

"You got it pretty badly, no?" said Kelab sympathetically. "I did what I could for you, but Landor is powerful in his way, and it wasn't a lot." He shifted a log, and the flames spat and crackled.

"Explain then," said Ordovic, rising and coming over to spread his hands at the fire. "Where are we?"

"We are no place in any physical sense, Ordovic, since this and all the other places you have been swept through are countries of the mind—those, visions from the sick mind of Landor, but this is a creation of mine."

Ordovic shook his head to clear it. He said, "I owe you my life. Or Sabura Mona. Somehow I have a strange impression that you are the same person. Who *is* Sabura Mona?"

"You already have an inkling of the truth," said Kelab. "She is not human. She lives alone, without comforts and without one slave—yet she guides an empire. *The* Empire. She is a robot, a mechanical woman."

Ordovic nodded slowly. He had known, really, since he saw her kill the Leontine giant. He looked at her again, standing with inhuman stillness against the wall, and this time he did not shudder, for she was only a machine.

He said, "But how is she here? Is she too an illusion?"

Kelab shook his head. "Things of the mind are real here, and so she is real. She is as much a thinking being as you or I. She is here in her own right. Also she is my only advantage over Landor."

"And you? You are no mere man. Are you a robot?"

Kelab shook his head.

"A mutant, then? From one of the outland worlds?"

"I'm no outlander."

"Then you must be an emissary from the Golden Age."

"Not what you mean by the Golden Age—the time of the greatness of the Empire—but from a better age than this nonetheless. I'm from the future."

He accepted it without disbelief. The skepticism was washed out of him. "But Sharla?" he said. "The girl who is not a princess after all?"

Kelab glanced at his watch. He said, "We have a short time before Landor can strike again. I stunned him, with a lucky blow you might say, but it was no physical weapon I used. Next time or never, I'm afraid . . . But your explanation—"

"Landor too is from the future, and it is in the creation of that future that I am engaged now, and that's why I was so anxious to secure Andra in the Regency. I'm going to have a devil of a time putting things to rights even if I do beat Landor."

"The history of my time depends on Andra marrying Barkasch and bringing Mercator into the Council of Six—remember? The prophecies about the ruin of the Empire which Landor sealed his doom by affecting to despise, will come to pass, and revolt and rebellion will tear it apart. There will be another Long Night, in which most of the histories and most of the knowledge will be lost. Yet out of that will come the first human society to approach perfection."

"Somewhere in the Long Night a mutation will occur which will give—from my point of view, gave—to men for the first time unbounded power *and* a standard by which to control their using of it. The power—well, I said I held the planet of Argus in my hand. I did and do. I could crush it like a soft fruit with no other tool than my mind. And all—or nearly all—the men and women of my time have that power. The

standard by which they control it—is telepathy. That was the key. It gave men a sense of unity, of belonging to a union rather than fighting for themselves alone.

"THE result—peace between man and man. The end of your breed, Ordovic, and of all fighters, but the fine fruit of this tangled tree of humanity."

"But not quite the full fruit. The mutation had not yet bred to perfection in my time, and one or two individuals lacked the sense of common ground and still craved the feeling of power over their fellow men. Such atavisms must be shunned by us, for their insanity is in part contagious, so we segregate them and watch them."

"Once, one of them vanished. I do not mean died, or went away. Our sense of unity is not dulled by distance, and death is a slow fading after tens of thousands of years to one who controls his environment as completely as do I, for instance. He—whom you call Landor—had taken himself and his pretensions to power to a time and place where he could use them."

"What time? That was the question we had to answer."

"We guessed that the by then almost legendary Empire would have attracted him. We studied the few flimsy records we had for any spot at which he might try to interfere, and posted scouts to watch them, of whom I was one. I knew as soon as I was told of the coming of Sharla that something was wrong—and behold: Landor. Ambitious to wield real power over people—imperial power."

"He knew who I was, of course, since I changed the marriage bond. My motive in that was not what you thought, but to prevent Barkasch from being unable to marry Andra later. That was the first move—in the nature of a challenge."

"The girl you know as Sharla is not Sharla. She is much as the real Sharla might have been, but her name is Leueen and she is of middle-class birth and no princess. Landor slipped in between her sale by Heneage at Mooncave on Loudor and her purchase by Pirbrite, took her out of time long enough to give her some resemblance to the real Sharla and construct a complete and detailed hypnotic personality for her. Then

he shifted to the time of Andalvar's death, and planned to use her as a puppet, to-front for his ruling of the Empire.

"But there were holes—vast lacunae—in his story, if anyone had looked for them. Did you truly believe that anyone shrewd enough to be a slaver would not have investigated the claims of a child to be Sharla Andalvarson? He could have named his own price to her father—half the galaxy! No, the real Sharla died when one of the holds of the slaver blew into space during takeoff. I've met the slaver—he didn't know even then whom he'd kidnapped. And his pretensions to statecraft! You're no skilled hand at intrigue, but you knew enough to walk warily and plug the spyholes in your room. He? He did not even expel Andra's slaves from Sharla's quarters.

"He played badly, considering they were the highest stakes he could name."

"Or I," said Ordovic. "Imperial dominion—it could have made the Empire great again."

Kelab laughed shortly. He said, "You owe the Empire no allegiance. You're outland born. Besides, I can name a higher."

"Name it."

"Peace between men."

Ordovic considered it soberly for a while. Then he said, "I lack the sense of unity you say you have. And all my life I've lived by violence. But I can understand, I think. Maybe it is a higher stake."

"Landor has not yet lost," said Kelab. "Ordovic, our time's shortening. Listen to this.

"Remember that what happens to you is illusion as far as you're concerned. If you fall into the trap of believing, you're lost. I cannot protect you always, for Landor has the strength of the insane and I—I say it in all humility—I am more important to the safety of the human race than you. Landor has hidden Sharla as I hid Dolichek when the Leontine giant kidnapped Sharla for me, but his is no mere illusion of warped light as mine was, but a twisting of the mind, of space, even of time. If you want to find her, remember for all you are worth that all is illusion save the spaceport at Oppidum. When we return there, the battle's over."

Ordovic said, "Kelab, once I called you a coward, afraid to fight with a man's

weapons. I am ashamed. The weapons you fight with are not a man's. They are the weapons of gods."

"Hush!" said Kelab, his dark face suddenly alert. He put out one hand, and the robot that was called Sabura Mona came to life—

And there was blackness.

IX

HE WAS aware in a strange extra-sensory way of the presence of Kelab and Sabura Mona, casting their minds here and there, searching, and of an atmosphere of struggle beyond ordinary human striving. In the midst of the darkness he clung with all his powers of mind to one bubble of brightness. It framed Kelab's face, set and serious, saying, "If you fall into the trap of believing, you are lost."

This is illusion!

The pounding of his heart was like a trip-hammer, and the rush of blood in his ears like a mighty tide. He felt neither heat nor cold, only an overpowering sense of evil, wrongness, insanity.

That wasn't illusion.

Then the darkness began to drift away, like a curtain falling in low gravity, revealing a blank landscape with a ghastly sun setting behind black mountains ahead of him. Stars shone down with the unwinking glare of empty space. There was a bare orange plain before him and around him, and he felt sand soft and dusty between his toes.

This is illusion!

But things of the mind had reality here, even as he was real, and as conscious as if he were physically present. What twisted creation of Landor's warped brain might not also be real here? Sabura Mona was real though she was a robot—

In panic, he crouched, stared all around, hardly daring to look from one spot to another lest what he feared should slip his eye. Nothing. Upwards, nothing. Blackness.

It dropped from above like a wet pall, softly, coldly slimy, and folded over him from head to foot, a constricting nothingness. He screamed, kicked, fought—

And still it clung to him, like an engulfing kiss, a wet kiss from a demon, till

there was nothing but it.

And a bubble which showed Kelab's face, lean, cut and bruised, but oddly content, saying, "If you fall into the trap of believing, you're lost."

He had almost believed!

With a shout he stretched out his arms and tore the illusion apart. The blackness divided with a sigh and beyond he saw a familiar scene. A ship—a lean black ship, her sides shiny with wet. Brown concrete underfoot, a gray sky above. The spaceport at Oppidum!

This was reality, Kelab had said. Then they had won?

Kelab, his face tired but jubilant, nodded. His headscarf was gone and his clothes ripped, but he stood by the fin of his ship and smiled. And beside him, alive and well, Sharla! He cried out in joy and strode forward to take her in his arms. The greatest prize of all—

And then he heard Kelab's voice say again, "If you fall into the trap of believing—"

Landor was quick, but Ordovic was quicker. He whirled, and saw that there were no low buildings at the port edge, no city of Oppidum beyond. The concrete ended at his feet.

This is illusion!

He laughed, and at his laughter the illusion cracked and fell in a thousand shards and there was more blackness.

Even the blackness was not real blackness, for he could sense—more than see—the figure of the conjurer on his left, lean and serious, and behind him the soft cheeks and pendulous jowl of Sabura Mona. They overshadowed the galaxy, and the Nebula In Andromeda floated behind Kelab and was dwarfed by him. He himself was as a shadow beside him.

He knew the reason. This was the true Kelab, who held worlds in the hollow of his hand.

AND it was as if he could hear mighty footfalls in the distance, a vastly slow and measured and inevitable tread. Kelab and Sabura Mona looked up expectantly, waiting.

At last Landor was coming face to face with his antagonists, and for the scene of

the last battle he had chosen the deeps between the stars.

He came almost casually up to Sabura Mona and Kelab, looked at them, and made as if to pass them by.

Sabura Mona blocked his way.

He flickered like a blue flame, and there was no Sabura Mona, only a vague impression that was nothing more than a change in the outline of empty space. She was there still, Ordovic knew. But she was powerless.

Landor said, in a voice that was more than any mere speech could be, "Kelab, this is between us two."

Kelab nodded, his bright smoky eyes on Landor's face. He was watching, waiting—?

Then Ordovic understood. The fight was on already, a battle of wills, without physical reality. And as soon as he realized that, he saw the weapons they used.

He saw Landor facing a flame from which—impossibly—Kelab looked out. He saw the lightnings that flared and flamed and heard the soundless clash of mind on mind. They matched illusions—hot worlds, cold worlds, pseudo-realities scattered like rabbits through the circle of their minds. Sometimes Ordovic recognized one of the ingredients that made up the worlds he had been through. More often they were greater, more terrifying: some there were almost too big for the mind to hold, that distended the powers of imagination to unveil things from the darkest corners of the brain, that made him almost scream aloud in pain.

Kelab engulfed them in bright clean flame and whirled them to nothing.

Then came a formless universe of horror that made him rock and stagger, and Landor was after his advantage like lightning. Kelab recovered and came back, a splendid figure dripping flame at his fingertips, hurling bolts of silent lightning, but Landor seemed like a mountain, untouched by fire. He had made Kelab falter once. He was bent on doing it again.

He did. The flames on Kelab's body died for a moment and he staggered. Landor made one step forward and his right hand swept down like a sword, bearing horror and fear and shapeless insanity.

And Kelab poised for a moment and tumbled headlong into an endless black gulf.

Landor stood for a moment, vast and

inscrutable, and then his icy composure shattered and fell apart, and he passed his hand across his forehead wearily, while Ordovic stared in sheer horror. He had not for one second believed that Landor would win. What would become of him now?

Then, as Landor turned slowly, an expression of savage triumph on his face, he felt something in his mind that chilled him with awe. He heard Kelab's voice say quietly, "This is reality, Ordovic."

And suddenly he was not only Ordovic. He was part of a great shining organism among the stars that was the human race, and he towered over the galaxies and over Landor, who froze with his face set in a mask of terror.

Then he was striding after him, and Landor was a tiny black figure running desperately, more afraid than he had ever been, a deformity, a blot on the shining beauty of the human race.

And he was lost in a bottomless gulf, turning over and over, while the walls of the past fled by him and he fell beyond space and beyond time into the formless not-being before the universe was, where he would never do harm again.

THEN the horizons of the universe closed in around Ordovic, and he suddenly had weight again. There was a lean ship before him, her sides rain-wet and glistening, and brown concrete beneath his feet.

"This too is reality," said a quiet voice. He turned and saw Kelab standing where he had stood before, unmarked save for the content on his face. He found that he himself was also unhurt. But there was a monstrous tiredness in his mind, and a fading memory of a temporary glory that was beyond imagining.

And—his eyes lifted and met hers—Sharla, too, on the top step of the flight leading to the lock. But of Landor not one sign. He said, "So we won."

Kelab nodded, "He is gone now, and I must be about the setting to rights of the Empire. You, of course, must go, and Leueen whom you know as Sharla, and Andra be installed as Regent."

Ordovic said, "But the people had high hopes of Sharla. Will they stand for it?"

"A long time ago," said Kelab, "a poet you would not have heard of said something about making us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of. There you have the people of Argus. Besides, there are rumors that their hopes were unfounded—I and Andra, whom I visited last night, have seen to that. For instance, yesterday you made rather a brutal threat to a slave—one Samsar. Today at dawn that slave was found, mutilated according to your threats, on the Street of the Morning. Andra's doing—not mine. And it is now common knowledge that Leueen-Sharla was a woman of easy virtue, which is itself a bar to the Regency. They may regret your passing, but there are still the prophecies, so they will sigh and say it was foreordained."

"Is it not strange that a conjurer should regulate the destiny of worlds? Why a conjurer, Kelab?"

Kelab's face grew soft. He said, "To put aside my powers would be to me as cutting off your hands would be to you. As a conjurer I can use them, for show 'tis true, but you cannot hide a sun under a dishcover. Thus I use them without exciting comment. Even so," his smoky eyes showed somber regret, "I miss the sense of being part of the human race."

Ordovic was about to speak, recalling that brief moment of splendor when Kelab stepped into his mind, but the conjurer made a tiny gesture with one hand and he had a sensation as of something tremendous that instant forgotten. He shook his head to clear it.

Kelab continued, "I can buy you passage on a ship whose captain will ask no questions. You are an outlander, Ordovic—and so is she."

Ordovic's eyes went up to the blonde girl whom he had called Sharla.

"She is very beautiful even if she is not the regent of an empire," said Kelab. "And I think she is in love with you."

She came down the steps to Ordovic and put her arm around his waist, smiling. They looked at each other for a long time. Then she turned to Kelab.

"Which is this ship you spoke of?" she said.

"Yonder," said Kelab the Conjurer.



MISSION TO MARAKEE

By **BRYAN BERRY**

Remote Marakee, citadel of consuming evil, drew battle-weary Ray Carver to match wits with its mind-enshrouding master and his faceless ones.

THEY came into the little Oklahoma town in a long, straggling line.

They were weary, those men. They had been weary for many days, months, *years*. They were tired and hungry and dirty and if you looked into their



eyes you could see a great despair and a sadness.

"Company—ha-a-a-It!"

Raggedly they stopped, resting their blasters on the sandy road without waiting for the order.

"You men know why you've been brought here. I don't have to tell you. Anyway—you're going to hear it officially, now. Captain Markham's meeting us here in five minutes. Fall out."

They sat on the edge of the road, silently. Some lay down and looked up at the blue sky with its fringe of clouds, some drew figures in the sand.

The captain arrived on a bicycle, alone.

"Well, men, this is it," he said, addressing them. "I expect you've already heard all about it from the villagers. The war's over."

"Who won?" asked someone, sourly.

The captain blushed. "The war's over and owing to the disorganized state of the armed forces round here you won't be officially demobilized. Your record papers are no longer in existence and there's no available transport to take you back to your homes—if they still exist. You're on your own." He raised his voice a little, hysterically. "We're *all* on our own."

The men looked at him steadily, or looked at the sky or their feet. The man who had been clicking his blaster carried on doing it.

"**H**AVE you got that?" asked the officer, more quietly.

Nobody said anything; not a word.

"I'm in charge of you while you stay in this town, remember that. The last lot of men to come through here thought they'd paint the town red before they left. They didn't get far. If you want any help there's an information building at the far end of the street, over the post office. There are maps there that will tell you as much as we know of the Plague and radio-active areas. They'll also give you some idea of which roads are still in use and which towns aren't there any more." Little lines screwed up round his mouth. He looked round at the men with something like pity in his eyes. "Better take a look at that map, boys," he said, "before you go home. You may find there isn't a home to go to."

They knew all this already. It was in their eyes.

"Most of you men are from the west, aren't you? California? Idaho?"

One of the men looked up. "Belmont, Nevada," he said. "I never heard anything about that place being hit."

"Take a look at the map."

"How about Denver?"

"Denver, Colorado? I wouldn't try going back there, son. That's right in the center of the Plague Belt. You'd better all take a look at that map. I can't guarantee that it's perfect. Far from it. It's just the best we can do in the circumstances. As you know communication is pretty well non-existent now. We have to rely on people passing through here and the news from the few odd radio stations functioning. Anything more?"

Tick-tack, tick-tack, went the safety-lock on someone's blaster.

"Dismiss, *civilians*," said the officer.

And that, for these men, was the end of the war that had started twenty-one years before, in 1967.

Only a few of them had been fighting throughout the entire length of the war, of course. Most had been conscripted since, but they had all had their fill of war and death and tragedy.

When the Asian air-fleets bombed Los Angeles on August 3rd, 1967, everyone knew that they were in for a hell of a time, but nobody had any idea how long it would last. The armchair prophets had all said that with atom bombs and hydrogen bombs and all it would be over within the year. They had been very wrong. It had stopped now only through sheer exhaustion of men, weapons and the will to fight, on both sides. When the Asian air fleets dropped hydrogen bombs over Europe, the British replied with a particularly large and powerful bomb of their own, thinking to do to the Asian capital at Shanghai what the Americans had done to Hiroshima in the previous war. The bomb did its work well enough. But there wasn't any Britain left the following week, thanks to the Asian reprisals.

And so it went on. When there weren't any more atom bombs or hydrogen bombs or germ bombs or radio-active war dust there were still men to be killed, cities to be gutted with incendiaries, peaceful stretches

of countryside to be blistered and blackened with flame-throwers. The Asian ships reached Lower California and out swarmed the little yellow men with hatred in their eyes. And California and Texas and Mexico became battlegrounds.

So did France and Germany and the Scandinavian countries.

And the battle did not stop, ever. Somewhere men could always be found to kill and be killed. And there was nowhere, no, not a single country in the entire world that escaped the killing, the slaughter, the death. There was murder at the North Pole; there was plague and pestilence throughout Africa; there was destruction in Peru and India, Australia and the Canary Islands. Nowhere escaped.

It took two years for the fighting to die out after the official armistice. Texas and Madagascar and New Zealand were the last battlegrounds, and it was in Texas that this company of tired and despairing soldiers had been fighting.

Carver unlaced his boots, took off his socks and stirred the sand of the road with his toes, thinking.

"You're from Illinois, aren't you, Carver?" said the man next to him.

"Uh-huh. Merrill Town, near Springfield."

"Goin' back there?"

"Got to look at a map and see if it's still there. No use going back if there's no place there to go back to." He stirred the sand some more, making whorls and patterns in it.

"Any family?"

"My Ma was killed when they raided New York. She went up there visiting. First time she ever left Merrill Town. And the last. No other folks that I still talk to. Guess I'm lucky in a way. Some of these guys have got to think about reaching their wives and kids—if they're still alive."

"Guess there can't be much left anywhere now. I'm from Denver, Colorado. That captain said he wouldn't advise going back there."

Some of the men had already started up the street into the town, headed for the information center. Others were standing about talking. On the other side of the road from Carver the man who had been clicking

his blaster was now dismantling it, throwing each piece away in a different direction, solemnly.

"You might need it yet," called Carver.

"What do I fire in it—peanuts?" replied the man, throwing away one more piece.

Carver laughed. Then he turned and watched the men walking in their twos and threes down the street. "Coming?" he asked, getting into his boots again.

"Guess I'd better," said his companion.

Together the two men walked up towards the information building.

"You mean to say that *all* that is Plague Belt area?" asked one of the men, pointing at the map.

The man behind the desk nodded. "As far as we can make out it is. A broad band running north up from New Mexico—Colorado, Wyoming and a good bit of Montana. That's the main area of Plague. Over there—" he pointed, "you can see that there's another fairly large area not far from where we are now. Any of you men come from Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana?"

"I'm from Illinois," said Carver.

"Madison, me," said someone else.

The man at the desk got up and walked over to the map where the soldiers were crowding round. "Well, you'll have trouble getting back there. There's a Plague belt round that area, too; a big semi-circle looping southwards from Minnesota and going up into Ohio.

"How about a plane?" said Carver.

The man laughed. "You've been fighting too long, son. There aren't any planes left for food transportation, let alone taking old soldiers back to their home towns. You know—I haven't seen a plane over this town in the last two years. Not a single one."

"How about a car, then?"

"No cars hereabouts for that sort of trip, either. If you go north you might reach a town with some transport left. Can you pay for your journey?"

Carver shook his head.

"Humph. You won't get a car then. Them that's got cars charge around a hundred credits a mile."

"A hundred credits a *mile*?" from ump-teen shaken throats.

"That's right. You know—it costs around

that to buy a sack of flour in some places up north now?"

The soldiers did not answer.

"Well, how in heck can I get home?" asked Carver, frowning.

The man looked at him quickly. "Illinois, you say? You could walk round the south of the Plague Belt up to the Lakes and then go by water—if you can build yourself a boat, that is."

Carver didn't wait to listen to it. He had seen all that the map could tell him. There was no one else there that he particularly wanted to travel with; besides, he thought, one can travel faster than two. Not that there was any hurry, though. If there *was* any Merrill Town left it would still be there whenever he reached it, whether this month, next month, next year or whenever.

He walked down the steps and out into the street. The town had not suffered much. Most of the menfolk were old; the young ones having gone off to the war to do their duty and get shot to bits or blown up or gassed or given tetanus, typhoid, malaria or something equally unpleasant.

THERE was quiet in the streets. A silence and a waiting.

On some of the porches the old folk sat, dreaming and smoking pipes. Only the big shell of the steel factory at the far end of the town gave evidence that even this small and peaceful place had not entirely escaped the Asian bombs.

Carver walked away from the town, up the sandy road. What was there left, now, he thought? What was there for him; for Raymond Henry Butler Carver? What in the whole world? He stopped walking for a moment to look back at the town. There it lay, half asleep, drowsing in the evening sunlight.

"Why not stay?"

There was nothing wrong with the idea; nothing wrong with it at all. He could pick up some kind of a job. Probably that captain could use a man for locating the last of the soldiers and getting them back from Texas.

The sun made a red curtain on the sky, over in the west. The sound of a harmonica floated out on the evening, gently.

Curious, Carver turned to find where the sound came from. Sitting on the fence a

hundred yards down the long road was a child, blowing lustily.

The tune broke off. "Hey there, Soldier," shrilled the little girl.

Carver walked up to her. "Hey there to you, too."

"You one of those men just come in?"

"That's right." He sat down beside her on the fence.

"You goin' try and get home?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"Where you from?"

"North. Illinois."

She swung her bare legs, thinking. "Maybe I know someone who could help you," she said. Then she looked up at Carver with baby-blue eyes. "You wouldn't tell anyone if I did help you?"

"Not if you didn't want me to I wouldn't." He fished in his pocket. "Candy?"

She stretched out an eager hand. "Haven't had any candy for a long time now. Old Butch used to make it but he's dead now."

Carver laughed. "Keep the lot," he said. "What's your name?"

"Oh, everyone calls me Scamp."

"Well, Scamp. Suppose you tell me about this person who might help me get back home, huh?"

She looked at him sideways, her mouth moving hungrily round the candy. "Don't know that I ought to," she said.

"Don't talk with your mouth full."

"Glob?"

"I said wait till you've finished that candy. Didn't your ma ever teach you?"

She finished the candy and looked at him queerly. "I never knew Ma," she said.

Carver looked down. There was a small silence between them.

"Maybe I will tell you, though," she said at last, swinging her feet again. "This guy that may help you I mean."

"Yes?"

"Lives over there." She pointed to the west, vaguely, putting another piece of candy into her mouth.

He waited patiently until the candy was chewed, savoured, reduced to convenient size and eventually swallowed. "Over where?" he said.

She pointed again. "Behind those trees over that way."

"What makes you think he might help me?"

She looked around quickly, this way and that. "Don't you tell no one."

"I won't."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"Well then. He and me—we're in a sort of Secret Society together. He gave me this." She held up the harmonica. "And he's very tall and stringy—but awful nice. He told me to watch for men."

Carver laughed.

"No, stupid," said Scamp, showing surprising knowledge of what had sprung to Carver's mind. "I mean he wants me to get men for him. He told me that he had a way of getting them where they wanted to go that the other people round here don't know about. He said that if I saw any guys who were heading for the north-east then I was to try and send 'em over to him. But he told me that I wasn't to tell nobody 'bout it, ever. See?"

Carver did not see. "What means has he got of getting me home? All the folks round here say that there's no way of getting anywhere except on foot."

She swung her legs again. "O.K. Mister, if you don't believe me you just go away. But don't you tell nobody what I just been saying."

"That's a nice way to talk to a guy who gives you candy," said Carver.

"Aw—I didn't mean it, Mister," she said, putting her hand on his arm. "Tell you what—if you want to meet this fellow I'll take you over there now."

"O.K., Scamp," said Carver, jumping down from the fence. "Lead the way. Maybe your boy friend will give me a harmonica, too."

"Don't be a stupe," said Scamp, getting off the fence. "And he ain't my boy friend."

Hand in hand they walked over the fields towards the trees.

THE house was a big house, sitting well back among the trees. It was the biggest house Carver had seen in the town. Most of the windows were shuttered tightly and one of the side walls had crumbled into ruin, showing the inside of a large room cluttered with junk of all kinds.

"That house is empty," said Carver, firmly.

"You soldier guys think you know everything, don't you?" said Scamp, exasperated. "You just wait a minute and you'll see that it *has* got people in it."

"People? You didn't tell me about anyone except this one guy."

Scamp squeezed his hand. "I shouldn't 'a said that. You just forget that I told you anything about anyone besides just this one fellow, see? If he asks you what I told you, you just say I told you that he'd help you get home."

Carver nodded. "If that's what you want, then that's what I'll say."

They reached the shell of the old house, then. Standing in front of it with the trees behind and about him Carver felt the desolation—a tangible thing there in the evening air. He felt it pushing at his body and his mind, sending its quiet and exploring fingers into his thoughts and touching the back of his neck so that the short hairs there bristled and fidgeted.

"All you got to do is knock *this*," said Scamp, banging a stone against the foot scraper.

They waited, the man and the child.

The door opened a fraction.

"Hullo," said Scamp. "I've brought a man to see you."

The door opened wide and Carver looked up into the eyes of one of the tallest men he had ever seen. Well over six foot six and thin as a beanpole. "Well, well," said the man, "so you have, Scamp."

"He says he wants to get back home—to Illinois."

"Illinois, Scamp."

"Well, that's what I said, sort of."

"My name's Harding," said the tall man, looking at Carver. "If you want to get to Illinois there might be a chance I can help you."

Carver nodded. "I'd like to ask you about that chance," he said.

The man who called himself Harding held the door open. "If you'd like to step inside?" he said.

Carver walked forward, smiling down at Scamp. "Be seeing you, sweetheart," he said.

She turned away. The door closed.

Carver laughed in the gloomy hallway.

"She's a sweet kid," he said.

The tall man who called himself Harding laughed too. "Yes, she is, isn't she?" he said. Then he brought the butt of a blaster down on Carver's head.

II

WHEN he came to he was lying flat on his back and there was a light burning above his head. He did not open his eyes immediately. Instead he lay there and registered the fact that somewhere a light was burning; he could feel the light on his eyes.

Then he opened his eyes.

"Awake, eh?" someone said.

Carver tried to turn his head to see who had spoken, but he found that there was a band round his neck. He tried to move his arms and found that they, too, were fixed down.

"No good trying to move," said the voice.

Carver thought about the voice: it wasn't Harding's, of that he was certain. "Who are you, and what in heck do you think you're doing?" he grunted.

"Just going to find out a few things about you, that's all," said the voice. Then a hand came into Carver's range of vision, swinging a big, metal, jointed arm across his body.

On the end of the arm was a rubbery cup, equipped with what looked to Carver like a pin-cushion of terminals from which wires and small glass tubes ran to a main cable which extended outside his sight, behind his head.

The hand brought the cup down and fitted it over Carver's head. "This isn't going to hurt you," said the voice, quietly.

Carver struggled to free his hands; strained the muscles of his chest and neck. Nothing happened. Whatever held him down was too tough to break.

"I told you it wasn't any use struggling," said the voice.

Then the hand appeared again and placed a broad rubber attachment over Carver's eyes.

Carver heard the clicking of a switch, then the mounting hum of some kind of machine. A smell of ozone came out of the darkness and tickled his nostrils. He wanted to shout, to scream, to get free.

Then the cup over his head started to buzz. An enormous bumble bee had seemingly settled in his brain and was fluttering its wings there, frantically.

And after that came the questions.

They did not come from a voice, but from *within* his own mind. And his own mind answered them. They were not his own questions at all. Oh, no. They were someone else's questions, but whatever it was over his head made his own mind ask them. And the questions went on forever. Why this? What is that? Why the other? Who this? Who that? Where were you born? What was your father's Christian name? Where was he born? Where is the town of Des Moines? What State is it in? Who was Caligula? Who were the Borgias? Where is the river Arun? How do you know it's there? Who taught you it was there? On, on, on went the questions. There were questions on history, on science, on geography; questions on himself and his life; questions on the war. And his mind answered all of them.

How do you know that you're *homo sapiens*? his mind asked, suddenly. Because I can't be anything else, his mind answered. How do you know you can't be anything else? How do you know the Earth is round? How do you know you are still on the planet Earth? How? How?

Time lost all meaning for Carver; time shrugged its shoulders and was gone, but the questions did not go. They buffeted and rocketed through every small part of his mind like a thousand flying ants released within a jam jar.

The fact that he could see once more was the first intimation he had that the brain picking had stopped. The light was burning up there on the ceiling and there was only a quiet hiss from the thing over his head.

Hands appeared and removed the cup.

"Feeling all right?" said a voice.

"I'm not dead, if that's what you mean," said Carver.

Laughter, slow and throaty, floated in the still room. "You can get up now," said the voice.

Carver sat up and looked about him. He was on a table on which there were thick iron clasps, which had been used to keep his limbs in place. Behind him there was a massive bank of apparatus, filling almost

the entire wall. Carver recognized a few of the items—condensers, massive resistances, a large transceiver, carbon-anode tubes. The rest was beyond him. After taking a quick look round he focused his attention on the man. He was small and wiry, with a thin black moustache. The man smiled.

"Glad to see you're all right, Mr. Carver," he said. "Sometimes the—er—patient goes unconscious for a few minutes. You seem to have recovered entirely. That means you have a strong mind."

"I'm happy to hear it," said Carver, letting his legs down to the floor and standing up. "May I ask what that darned thing is, and what right you've got to subject people to it? Who are you, anyway?"

"All in good time, Mr. Carver, all in good time," said the man, with a smile. "No—I wouldn't advise you to try any violence on me. I know it's the natural thing to want to do, but I wouldn't advise it. No." A blaster was in his hand, steady.

"You can't scare a rabbit with a blaster these days," sneered Carver. "No one's seen any charges in years."

The man waved a hand at the machine against the wall. "What do you imagine we power that with, then? Not everyone is devoid of electronic power, regardless of what you have heard to the contrary."

"Yeah?" Carver made a hard, pink ball of his fist.

"I don't want to have to fire this, Carver," said the man. "It will make you useless to me or anyone if I do. But if you want violence then I shall have to; and that would be a pity."

"A pity, would it?"

"It would. You see—we need help. We want *your* help."

"We? Who's 'we'?"

"If you agree to be peaceful I shall show you."

Something in the hardness of the man's voice made Carver pause. The man held the blaster as if it was charged, all right. There didn't seem any fear in his voice, either. Either he was bluffing with an empty weapon or else—or else he, and presumably the others, whoever they were, had plenty of power. Such people would be able to help him get home, providing they wanted to.

"If I help you, will you help me?" asked Carver.

"I think we could come to some working agreement that would suit both of us," said the man, running his fingers along the smear of moustache.

"O.K.," said Carver.

The man opened a door and held it for Carver. "This way," he said.

They walked down a long corridor lit by fluorescent tubes. Carver noticed the lights and noted that here was yet another indication that all was not so primitive on Earth as the people in the town had thought.

CARVER went into a room that was long and narrow and well lit. There were half a dozen men in the room, sitting round a mahogany table. There was a large map on the wall and something that looked like an elaborate 'visor set up against the far wall. There were no windows, and it dawned on Carver, then, that they must be underground.

"Gentlemen—Mr. Carver," said the man with the moustache. "At the head of the table, Professor Willis, then Dr. Bacon, Dr. Lane, Mr. Harding—whom you've already met, Dr. Langtree and Mr. Herron."

Carver missed the names with the exception of Willis, Harding and Bacon. Harding he had met, as the man had said; Willis and Bacon he knew by name. Willis had at one time been writing reports to scientific journals on the evolution of mutants resulting from the radio-active emanations of atomic bombs. Bacon had been the driving factor behind the first attempts at colonization of Venus. If the other men came into the same category, then there was certainly some brain-power round that table.

"Sit down, won't you, Carver?" said Willis, waving a hand at a vacant chair. "We have a lot to talk about. I expect Mansfield has told you that we want your co-operation?"

Carver sat down. "Why *my* co-operation?"

"Well, we need the co-operation of able-bodied men who want to help us. We are not in a position to go out asking for help. As you have probably gathered, nobody in the town even knows we exist here. I will explain the reasons for this secrecy later on. Just now I want you to listen to what I have to say and try to view it objectively. I

realize we have been rough with you. I think when you hear our story you will agree that we had reasons for what we did."

"You mean that gadget in the other room?"

Someone snorted. It was the thin doctor who had been introduced second to last.

"The — er — gadget, yes," said Willis. "Now, then. You know the war is over. You know, too, that there isn't much left of Earth. Not much food, not much money—not that that means anything now, and not much brain or reasoning power left. That much is obvious from a simple look around you. What you may not know is that the damage to the major cities is far greater than most people realize. We have come off best of all the continents, and America is not in a very happy state. India, Europe, Africa, Australia—they're all far worse."

"How do you know?" queried Carver. "I thought all the lines of communication were down. There aren't any radio stations functioning now, are there? Or if there are any surely they are very limited. I haven't heard any radio news from anywhere except this country for over two years now."

"That is because you have been stranded down in Texas. But you are quite right in a way; there is no general communication now, no. But there are certain groups existing who are able to get through to each other."

"Groups of scientists?"

Willis nodded. "Exactly. Scientists. Not only here in America, but in other parts as well. And the scientists are not letting anyone else know that they have managed to contact other parts of the world. If they did their receivers and transmitters would be commandeered by what is left of the governing bodies."

"Well, what's wrong with that? Why should the scientists have the monopoly of communications? They got us into the war with their bigger and better bombs. What right have they to keep any knowledge from the public now that the war's finished?" Carver felt his face growing red.

"Science did not start the war, Carver," said Willis, quietly. "Science is the quest for knowledge. It was the politicians that got us into the war—politicians and land-grabbers. But that is not the reason for our hold-

ing out on the rest of the world over the communications. No. There is a far more important reason than that."

"And that is?"

"Mutants."

"Mutants?"

"Mutants. For a long time I worked on the effects of radio-activity and cosmic rays on evolution and heredity. Dr. Lane over there worked on the theory of mutations also. We came to certain conclusions. One: radio-activity can result in mutants. Two: a mutant need not necessarily be a physical freak, but can be a *mental* freak. We have every reason to believe that there is such a freak in existence somewhere on this continent at the present moment. It seems that whatever it is—this freak—lives near the Great Lakes, probably near Chicago, somewhere. There is another group of scientists up there who are in contact with us and who are trying to find out more. From ample evidence we believe that the mutant is working *against* what is left of mankind, and is possessed of mental powers far in advance of our own. For that reason we are keeping as quiet as we can about our activities."

Dr. Lane leaned across the table towards Carver. "And we plan to scuttle him if we can," he said.

Carver shrugged. "I don't pretend to get much of a grip on all this. I've been fighting down in Texas too long to be able to think straight. What do you want me to do, anyway?"

"You're from Illinois, aren't you? Presumably, then, you know that part of the world."

Carver barked a short laugh at him. "How d'you think you're going to reach Illinois? The whole of the Lakes country is hemmed in by a Plague Belt, so they tell me."

Willis nodded. "We can't get there by road, certainly. Has it occurred to you that we might go *over* the Plague Belt?"

"Have you a magic carpet hidden up your sleeve?"

The professor showed shining teeth in a smile. "No, but I have a gyro in the parlor," he said.

"Nuts. There's no plane for miles around."

"We don't advertise our property, Mr. Carver. After our talk you can feel, touch,

smell the gyro. It is quite tangible and real, I assure you."

"Well, then, why haven't you gone to Illinois before now?"

"For the simple reason that we wanted someone who knew that part of the country. The scientists already up there could have guided us through to wherever they have their headquarters, certainly, but . . ."

"Could have?"

"Exactly. Three days ago we failed to contact them. They have not answered our calls since. We imagine that the mutant or the Preachers have got them."

Carver looked bewildered. This was all getting too much for him. "And who might the Preachers be?"

"Religious fanatics out to destroy the scientists and make what's left of the world revert to the simple life. Illinois is a hot-bed of them. There is the possibility that they are connected with the mutant in some way, too."

"Sounds as if my home town'll be pretty rough. Is there *anything* pleasant in Illinois?"

Willis laughed. "If you agree to join us, you'll find out."

"I'll think about it," said Carver. Then a thought struck him. "What was that gadget supposed to do to me?"

Dr. Langtree, lean and brown as a long strip of leather, frowned. "That gadget, as you call it, represents my life's work, Mr. Carver. It's the mentatron."

"The mentatron finds out whether you're sane, healthy, fit, intelligent *and* whether or not you are *homo sapiens*," Willis put in. "We are happy to tell you that you are all of those things." He smiled.

"Supposing I hadn't been *homo sapiens*? Supposing I had been one of your mutations—what then?"

Willis made a small nest of his fingers and looked down at the table. "Ah," he said, "that would have been unfortunate for you."

"I see. But why all this secrecy? Why are you hidden away here like moles?"

"I SHOULD have thought that was obvious," said Langtree, still annoyed at having had his mentatron called a gadget. "We stay out of sight because this mutant

has powers much greater than those of a normal man. *Great* powers, you understand. If we were functioning in the open it would take him little time to sort us out and destroy us. It happened before. There aren't half so many scientists left as there were four or five years ago. They were dying off like flies—from odd physicists to the best brains in modern research. When we tumbled to the fact that they were being systematically destroyed we went underground."

The six men round the table looked at Carver steadily. He could see that they were genuine from their faces; he was in no doubt of *that*. But did he want to help them? What about the other men that Scamp had sent round to them? What happened to them? And what part did Scamp play in all this? He asked them about the others.

There was a shuffling of feet, a coughing.

"They met with an accident," said Willis. "We had another gyro not far from here. We sent them off in it, together with two scientists who were then with us. They were going to try to reach the party at Illinois. They never did so. We kept in touch with them right up to their landing. Then, after a few minutes, while they were getting out of the gyro, the contact broke. The party at Illinois were still in touch at that time. The men never turned up there. Now we don't know what's happened to the party of scientists, either."

"And Scamp? Where does she fit in?"

Willis laughed. "Imagine yourself to be a mutation with colossal mental powers. You would naturally have a poor view of the human race as a whole, and you would probably ignore any young creatures of the species, thinking them harmless and beneath your notice. So we use Scamp. You see—a child can take part in a game in all seriousness. She knows we're here all right, but she never lets on to the villagers. She's a great help to us."

Carver nodded. He needed time to think about it all. He couldn't make a decision there and then—or could he?

Supposing he refused to go with them to Illinois. What then? Always supposing that they let him go free again, what would he do? Where would he go? Get a job in the town with all this going on around him? He thought about this while the six men

looked at their fingernails, stared at the ceiling, knowing full well what he was thinking about.

A fly buzzed in the room. Dr. Lane swatted at it with the flat of his hand. The tall man called Harding started to whistle *My Darling Clementine* through his teeth.

"O.K.," said Carver. "I'll join your party."

There was a rustling sigh from the six men. Then they all started to talk at once, thanking him. It was the first time anyone had thanked him for anything in years, he thought, absently.

III

THE gyro sat in the middle of the room, bright and shining. A thing out of the past; out of the days when all the cities were sparkling and clean and had movement within their long concrete arteries. It was egg-shaped, the gyro was, and it had small wings that stuck out on either side. Carver judged that it would hold four people in comfort; five with a squeeze.

"How did you get it here?" he asked.

Willis smiled. "We brought it in parts from about seven different states. It took us three years to assemble this and the other one and another five months to collect enough fuel to get us anywhere."

"Have you used this one at all?"

"Several times. We set off at night, naturally, so that the villagers don't see us. We haven't yet attempted a hop as long as this next one, though."

Carver bonged the gyro with his fist. "Who's going with me—and who's piloting?"

"There'll be yourself, Bacon, Lane, and Mansfield as pilot."

"The man who worked the gadget?"

"The mentatron, yes."

Bacon and Lane entered the small room. "We're going with you," said Bacon, big and ruddy, in the doorway.

"Uh-huh. I just heard. How do we get the gyro out of here?"

"Simple," said Willis. "We turn a handle and the ceiling slides away; we turn another handle and the roof opens up. It's taken us a long time to build this place up the way we wanted it, Carver, but we *have* done a

thorough job on it."

"Fuel for the gyro?"

"Plenty, now."

"Food?"

"Capsules. We raided an armed services store several years back and laid a stock in."

Carver frowned. "So that's why we never got enough, is it?"

Bacon shrugged his shoulders. "There'll come a time when humanity will thank us for stealing their vitamins so as to keep going in order to rub out *homo sapiens'* successor."

"Huh?" said Carver.

Willis turned to him. "We have a theory that this mutant is the next step up on the human ladder. The logical successor to *homo sapiens*—superman, if you like."

"I don't like. I don't like at all," said Carver, staring at the gyro. "Still, I said I'd help and I will."

Willis became business-like. "I suggest you start off early tomorrow night," he said. "That will give you time to get to know each other and for you, Carver, to ask all the questions you want to. You'll find that Bacon, Lane or myself will be only too willing to tell you anything that may help you get a grip on what you're likely to find when you get to Illinois."

"Not that we know much ourselves," said Bacon, grinning.

"Well, you probably know more about the present state of the country than I do," replied Carver. "For instance, do you know whether Merrill Town, Illinois, still exists?"

"Never heard of it," said Bacon. "Why do you ask?"

"My home town."

"Oh, well, we can go back and take a look at the map. All the places we know have been destroyed are marked on it. The name doesn't seem to be familiar to me, though. I think I should have remembered if we'd heard anything about it."

Carver laughed. "It's a little, one-horse dump. Probably too small to get on the map, anyway."

They went and looked.

It wasn't marked on the map, but where Carver judged it should have been there was an angry red smear. "What does the red coloring mean?" he asked.

"Radio-activity. The areas that we're cer-

tain are radio-active are marked in red, while the Plague Belt areas are blue. Whereabouts is this town of yours?"

Carver tapped his finger on the map. "Right in the middle of all that red, I guess. Is the map to scale?"

"It is."

"Then it looks as though I haven't got a home town any more." Strangely the thought did not worry him. He felt relieved, if anything. Now he was free to do whatever he wanted. He did not even feel a sense of loss; just the lifting of a weight from his mind.

"That doesn't alter your decision to come with us?" asked Bacon.

Carver shook his head. "Not at all," he said. "When we get there I might try to get near to the place just to have a look-see, but I'm pretty sure it must be within the radio-active area."

And then they talked on; Bacon explaining what he knew of the state of America and the world in general. Apparently there were many groups of scientists living just as this one, undercover, working to try to rebuild something for mankind.

"But these mutants, now," said Carver. "How do you know about them? I mean—here you are in Oklahoma and these other guys are miles away. I know you have been in close contact with them—but how can you be *sure* about the mutant?"

"Willis tumbled to what it was when we got news that three of the scientists up in Illinois had run off to join the Preachers—turned traitors as you might say. There was no reason on Earth why they should have done so, unless they had been influenced from outside. I knew two of them. Dr. Hustig and Dr. Schultz. Two of the best brains in the country—and scientists right down to the core. We got the reports that the three men had gone off on some expedition and hadn't come back. Next time they were seen was with a crowd of Preachers; all dressed up in long black robes and all, shouting 'Death to the Scientists!' and so on. They wouldn't do things like that under their own steam."

"But you still can't be certain that a mutant was behind it," replied Carver.

"That was just one of the first things. There were plenty more. The boys up in Illinois kept us informed of what went on

and told us to keep undercover. They went underground themselves, then. So did we. Up until that time we had been in a town about twenty miles from here. We moved in here piece by piece—a long job it was, too."

"And nobody found out?"

"Sure. Harding lived in the village—he found out. We told him what we were doing and he agreed to help. He moved in here officially. All the villagers know he lives here and they shun him like fury. Ergo—they shun the house, and us, too."

Harding appeared in the doorway, long, brown, lean. "Somebody mention me?" he asked, smiling.

"Tell Mr. Carver about yourself, Harding. Why don't the villagers like you?"

"They think I'm a ghost or something," said Harding.

Carver looked at him, steadily. "What *are* you, then?" he said.

Harding opened his jacket, opened his shirt, opened his *chest*. A dancing mass of wires and cogs and small plastic tubes glittered where a heart should have pumped. "A robot," said Harding.

Carver stared. "I thought Bacon said you had lived in the village," he said.

"So I did. So I did. The man who made me died; he had kept up the pretence for three years—that I was his friend, come to stay for a while. He even bought two lots of food every day. Then when he died and I had no money I was silly enough to go on living in his house, naturally without food. People began to notice. Soon they avoided me. Then Professor Willis arrived and I saw him one night in this place and questioned him. And that's how I came to be here."

Carver walked across to him, staring at the jumping wheels and the liquids pumping and settling in the tiny tubes. "A robot," he breathed. "But I couldn't tell you from a man."

Harding laughed, closing his chest and buttoning his shirt.

"Nor can I, sometimes," he said, walking away.

"Turning to Bacon, Carver said: 'I don't see how you can keep everything undercover the way you seem to, despite our metal pal. Surely the villagers notice something?'"

Bacon shrugged his shoulders. "You real-

ize that we only occupy the cellars of the place. Harding has two rooms furnished up above, at the back of the house. If anyone passes that way they break a circuit and Harding hears the alarm; then, if he's down here, he goes up above in case he's got a caller. It's worked very well up to now, but, of course, it may fall round our ears one day."

Carver was still looking at the door through which Harding had entered. "He looks so darned *like a man*," he said, softly, to himself.

THE next night they packed the food capsules, emergency fuel, four blasters and other equipment into the gyro.

Carver's hands were wet with perspiration as he waited for Harding to come back from outside the house with a report on whether there were any people about to see the take off.

Bacon was bulky inside his flying suit, like a sack of pumpkins, leaning against the metal egg of the gyro. "Nervous?" he grinned.

Carver nodded. "You don't notice fear when you're fighting all the time. It's the waiting about that gets you. I remember one time when . . ."

Harding stood in the doorway of the room with the other scientists behind him.

"Nobody about that I could see," said Harding.

Willis and the others came in and grouped round the gyro.

"Then we're ready?" queried Bacon. "We're ready to go?"

"Yes, we're ready," said Mansfield. Lane buckled into his flying suit, stubbed out his cigarette, and said: "Yes, we're ready."

Handles were turned. The ceiling and the roof slipped away into silent darkness and the men, looking up, could see the stars.

"Course plotted, Mansfield?" asked Willis.

"Sure."

"Supplies all in?"

"That's right."

There was handshaking and the wishing of good luck.

Carver and Bacon and Lane and Mansfield entered the gyro. There was a humming and a buzz of motors, a slight shaking of the

metal ship and then they ascended like a strange metal balloon up into the night.

Carver looked at his companions. Bacon and Mansfield he knew; Lane he did not. Lane was small and elderly and had hair like white grass. "You worked on mutations with Willis, didn't you?" Carver asked.

"I did." Gray eyes turned, unblinking.

"And you think there's something in this theory about the mutant being the first of a new race?"

Lane spread out gloved hands. "What can one think? We are now certain that there *is* a very powerful mental mutant in Illinois; we know a few of his powers. Only a few, mind. Logically we must fear him and either avoid him or destroy him."

"But that doesn't answer my question. What makes you think he's the successor to *homo sapiens*?"

"Logic once again. Man as we know him is merely a step in the evolutionary ladder. There are other steps which we must expect. The theory of evolution by mutation was put forward many years ago by people like de Vries and Bateson. Now surely it's natural to expect that we shall have some mutations in our own race? If the theory of evolution by mutation is correct, then the various types of ancient man were evolved by mutation—the Piltdown Man, the Neanderthal Man and so on; right up to *homo sap.* The *next* step up is probably this thing in Illinois."

Carver frowned. "How much do you know about him, whoever he is?"

"Not a great deal. We are pretty sure that he can influence minds at some distance, but also that that distance is limited. None of us has been worried or influenced, for instance. We also think that he cannot be very old. The first inkling that something was amiss up in Illinois came when one of the scientists reported finding a pile of child's slates in an old run-down shack. The slates had the most amazing collection of mathematical formulæ on them, but the formulæ were set out as part of an elaborate game, something like 'Happy Families.'

"Some of the formulæ were miles ahead of contemporary maths—whole steps in reasoning were left out. It might have been a hoax or just some kid who'd stumbled on a maths book and used the symbols for a

game. But it didn't look that way. Rinehard, one of the mathematicians up at Illinois, he said that the steps that had been left out were steps that would only have been omitted by someone or something that knew them *intuitively*."

"Another thing—the number of people who have suddenly become Preachers is significant. Those scientists that Bacon was telling you about as well as others—all suddenly getting religious and wanting to destroy what's left of the cities."

Carver listened to the humming motors of the gyro as the vessel rose higher and higher and then started to sweep north-eastwards. He looked down and saw the few lights dwindle into nothing beneath them. "Where are we now?" he asked.

In front, Mansfield consulted a screen. "Over Muskogee—or what's left of it."

They sat in silence, then, listening to the motors and each thinking his own secret thoughts.

Carver found himself remembering the days when he had first been up in a gyro. That first trip with Uncle Joe, way back in 1970, just after the war had started, at Thanksgiving, with Uncle Joe as excited as he was. It had been the first time for both of them. He remembered Uncle Joe's face all shining and wet with sweat. And the crowds of people below at the airfield—taking this one last chance to get into the airfield before it was closed to all but fighting planes; this one last chance to stand and stare at the planes roaring, and eat candy and listen to the barkers at the fair crying out in the hot summer air. What a day that had been! What magic had been there with them in the gyro as they lifted off the ground with a buzzing and a humming and a clapping of hands from below. I was too young to know what war was, then, thought Carver, remembering how he had sat next to Uncle Joe, eating candy and looking down at the airfield closing in upon itself as they went higher and higher and higher . . .

CARVER dozed, dreaming; dreaming of days lost in time, gone by faster than the speediest rocket. What wonderful days they had been. The silver cars racing through the streets of all the big towns; and the small towns and the villages with their

metal and glass candy stores and drug stores, where you could go and press buttons and have twinkling plates of ice cream jumping at you from the counter when you put in your ten cents, all colors, all flavors. Great mounds of frozen joy, of icy magnificence.

Someone tugged his arm. He opened his eyes.

Bacon held something under his nose. "Better put this on. We're over the Plague Belt. If we should crash . . ."

It was a mask. Carver slipped it on while Bacon did likewise. The others already had theirs in place.

It was an hour before Mansfield signalled that they were out of the Plague Belt area. Off came the masks.

"Phew, I felt like I was underwater with that thing on. Where did you get them, anyway?" said Carver, holding his mask in his hand and peering at it intently.

"Made 'em up ourselves," said Bacon.

"And kept them for yourselves?"

"What do you think? Imagine making a dozen or twenty and then telling someone that we had them. Every man jack who wanted to get back home through one of the Plague Belts would be at our throats. And every man who took one of the masks would have half a hundred after it. That wouldn't work. We've got a job to do, Carver, same as you had fighting down in Texas. The important thing is that we finish that job."

Mansfield looked round. "This is where you two change over. If you'll come up in front here, Carver, I shall need your help to guide me down. You're supposed to know this part of the world."

They changed places, Carver and Brown, Carver sitting down beside the pilot. He was shown on the chart whereabouts they were and from then onwards he told Mansfield the directions to take.

"We want to reach a hamlet called Harville."

"Been there many a time as a kid," said Carver. "My ma used to know a lot of folks out there."

"Well, that's where we're headed. The Illinois party had their hideaway under a pickle factory there. Know any pickle factories in that area?"

"I don't think so. Anyway, I know Har-

ville and it isn't a big place. If there's a factory there we shall find it sooner or later."

Ten minutes afterwards they brought the gyro down through the velvet of night to bump into a broad field on the outskirts of Harville.

They opened the door and sat inside for a little while, their blasters ready on their knees. But nothing stirred in the darkness to give any hint that Harville had life left in it. Somewhere an owl hooted; that was the only sound save the rustling of the summer wind.

"Do we go out?" asked Carver, quietly.

"One of us does. The others had better stay here with the gyro since it's such a precious possession. Whoever goes out had better look about and try to find somewhere we can park this thing where it won't be noticed."

Carver gazed briefly outside. "I know roughly whereabouts we are. I'd probably stand a better chance of finding somewhere than any of you others."

"And supposing something happens to you?" asked Bacon. "That means we're stuck here without the first idea where to look for this factory."

Carver grunted. "I told you that I didn't know where the factory was. I can't help you there. I might just as well go outside and look for a place to hide the gyro." He picked up his blaster and stepped towards the open doorway. "O.K.?"

Bacon shrugged. "O.K., I suppose you're right."

"Be seeing you," said Carver, dropping to the ground. "Don't go away."

Bacon leaned down. "Here, take this."

"What is it—a watch?"

"A wrist radio. It'll keep you in contact with us."

Carver strapped it on. "Right," he said.

"Good luck."

"Goodbye."

The light blur of the gyro was lost in darkness behind him as Carver loped over the long grass towards the buildings on the far side of the field. If he remembered correctly a road ran on the other side of those buildings, a road that led into the main street of Harville. Or was that on the other side of the field? He could not be sure, it was so long since he had been in the town

and his memory of it was blurred and distorted by time.

He arrived at the edge of the field. There was no road, however, only another field. The buildings were emergency prefabricated houses and, by the look of them, tenantless. At the far side of this second field he saw a faint glimmer of light like a firefly dancing in the night. It looked like a campfire. There was no sense in running straight into danger, he thought, so he turned and made his way through the prefabricated buildings. In the distance he saw more looming buildings. That would be Harville, he decided, and set off towards them.

Harville was a skeleton of tangled iron and steel girders. The bodies of its buildings stuck their steel bones up at the night, and the concrete and plastic flesh that once had clothed them lay in crumbled piles all around. Harville had been in ruins long enough for the weeds and the creeping greeneries to emerge and crawl and swallow. He was beginning to get his bearings; the street he was in led straight down to the main street. If there was a factory anywhere it would be in that direction.

He clicked a switch on the wrist radio.

"Hullo, Bacon?"

"Hullo, Carver. Any luck?"

"I've found a bombed building that might do. Three and a half walls standing and no roof."

"Sounds O.K. Any sign of life out there?"

"I saw what I think was a campfire. Apart from that nothing. Harville might be a ghost town."

"Will you come back here to guide us or shall we risk having you light a fire or use the blaster to guide us in?"

"I should think we could risk it. It looks as though Harville's gone to sleep for good."

"Right, then. Use the blaster at low pressure. That should give enough light. What general direction are you?"

"Er—south-east I guess. I'm in the main street of the town, and the road is concrete so you should be able to spot it."

"Right. We'll be seeing you."

Carver went outside the building and adjusted his blaster to low pressure. It'll take 'em four or five minutes to get here, he thought, looking idly about him. The town was certainly dead. Very dead. He

wondered what had happened to the people of Harville. Had they all been killed in the war, or evacuated?

There was a buzzing in the sky.

Carver turned his blaster upwards and sent a fan of white fire up to guide them in; then he directed the weapon towards the building, so that they should see the gap through which they would have to lower the gyro.

The buzzing came overhead. The gyro lowered itself gently down, sighing.

Bacon was first out. "A ghost town, you said? It surely is. Not a sign of life—just that campfire burning, like you said. We didn't want to go too near it in case they spotted us." He stretched his arms, yawning. "Ah! It's good to be out of that crate." The other men tumbled out after him, dusting themselves down, unzipping the necks of their flying suits.

Then Lane said: "Well, now we're here we'd better get some boards or something and block up this hole in the wall. We don't want to advertise the fact that we've got a gyro in here."

So they collected boards and concrete slabs and piled them up to block out the view of the gyro within the splintered shell of the building.

"Now for the factory," said Bacon, breathing heavily after they had finished. "Any idea where it *might* be, Carver?"

Carver pointed down the long white blur of the road. "That way, I should think. Most of the main buildings are down there. How much is left of this factory, anyway? Did they tell you that when you were in contact with them?"

Lane nodded, chipping in. "Yes, apparently it's still got all its walls and a roof over it. But what may have happened since we last spoke to the boys up here I wouldn't like to guess. We may find the place burned down."

They set off towards the centre of the town, then, passing among the silent shells and the steel skeletons of the buildings like ghosts in a mighty graveyard, walking softly, not speaking.

Then Bacon said: "Look!" pointing.

The men looked.

"Lord," breathed Mansfield. "Nine of 'em! There were nine scientists left, weren't

there, after those two went haywire?"

The letters were painted on the long wall of a building in white paint. DEATH TO ALL SCIENTISTS, they said. Below this legend were nine piles of bone and ash and blackened ruin that might, at one time, have been men.

IV

DAWN came in the east like red mist poured on the sky.

And in the light the four men stood looking at the burned bodies that lay at the foot of the wall.

"No wonder we got no replies from them," said Bacon, breathing heavily. His big hands clenched and unclenched.

"The Preachers?" queried Carver.

"Yeah, the Preachers," said Mansfield, his eyes fixed on the nine black heaps, the nine ash piles. "'Death to All Scientists', hey? Well, they sure made a good job of this lot. Maybe it'll be our turn next." He looked round, his blaster in his hands, as though expecting to see the Preachers converging on him from the buildings nearby.

There were no Preachers; only the gray dawn and the empty shells of buildings and the birds sending their voices to the sky.

They buried the bodies in a patch of waste ground and set up nine small crosses while the sun struggled up into the sky and the earth warmed beneath their feet.

"Well," said Bacon, brushing earth from his flying suit. "There's no sense in us hanging about here any longer. Our best plan would be to try to locate this factory."

Lane nodded. "What shall we do—split up?"

"We can keep in touch through the wrist radios. We shall have a better chance of finding the building quickly if we do," said Carver.

Bacon nodded. "Right," he said. Splitting up, the men went their separate ways, each with his blaster ready for sudden attack, each wary of the shadows and of the sad, shell-like houses.

Carver chose a side street that led out towards a sort of adjunct of the village proper. He had noticed some fairly large buildings in that direction and thought that probably the factory would be among them

—if anything remained of it.

Silence hung over the streets, and Carver felt it as he walked.

At the far end of the street there was a building with a tall tower at one side. Carver made for this, thinking that if he could get up inside the tower it would give him an opportunity to get a bird's-eye view of Harville and spot any buildings that might conceivably be the factory.

He reached the building and started to go in through the gaping mouth where once a door had been.

"That building isn't safe," said a voice.

Carver looked at his radio. It was off. Couldn't be that, then. And that meant that . . .

Carver wheeled round, swinging his blaster up and levelling it.

She stood with her head on one side, looking at him. "Scared?" she said.

Carver blinked twice and lowered the blaster, staring. She was about seventeen or eighteen, he judged, dressed in a sweater and torn blue jeans. Her feet were bare.

"I said, 'Are you scared?'"

"I've been fighting too long to trust the sound of a voice behind me," he said. "Who are you, anyway? And what in heck are you doing in this ghost town?"

She walked nearer and he looked at her more closely. Her features were too coarse for her to be called beautiful, but she had fine eyes and a pleasantly slim and boyish figure. "I could ask you the same questions," she said, giving him the same critical looks that he had been giving her.

"I suppose you could."

Silence, then, for a few seconds.

She stirred the soil with a bare foot, still looking at him. "You a soldier?"

"Was."

"Uh-huh. Is it true the war's over?"

"Sure. Didn't anyone tell you?"

She laughed. "Who'd bother telling me? All the people that were still alive left Harville last year. Don't see many strangers round here nowadays."

"What are you doing here, then? You live here?"

She pointed vaguely behind her. "No. I live over there with the rest of 'em."

"The rest? Who are they?" asked Carver, thinking of the campfire.

"Young people like myself. After the old ones died or moved off to join the Preachers we got away on our own. Moved up into Wisconsin for awhile; then came back here. Got a little camp over back of the town. By the time we got back, there wasn't anybody here at all, 'cept a gang of old codgers living under a factory. The Preachers got them. Recent, too."

Carver nodded. "We saw their bodies."

"We? You're not alone?"

"Got a pal with me," said Carver, quickly. "He's over on the other side of town right now." Wouldn't do to say too much at the start. Don't let on your numbers even to your best pal—he may be acting for the enemy."

"How did you get here?"

"Walked."

She sat down on a lump of concrete, studying him. "Yeah? Where from?"

"From the east."

"Sure you didn't come in a gyro?"

"Gyro? What gave you that idea?"

"Heard one last night. First one I heard for—oh, *years* I guess. Seemed funny—hearing a gyro and seeing a stranger, all at the same time, as you might say."

Carver laughed. "Well, O.K., then. We *did* come in a gyro. Now tell me about yourself and Harville—and who are these Preachers you talked about?"

She stretched herself and started to chew a piece of grass. "You come from the east and you've never heard of the Preachers? Mister, either you're ribbing me or else you must think I'm awful dumb. Everyone round here *and* in the east knows about the Preachers. Most of the people *are* Preachers now, anyways."

CARVER sighed. "All right, so we didn't come from the east. Tell me about the Preachers. Where do they hang out? What do they do, and why do they do it?"

Satisfied, she smiled. "I thought you didn't, somehow. I thought you didn't come from the east. And I bet there are more than two of you, aren't there? And I bet you know something about that other party of guys who came here."

"What other party?"

"Oh—some guys that came in a gyro. They told me they were looking for the

others who lived under the factory. Then they all joined the Preachers."

"What?"

"They joined the Preachers. Told me first off that they were going to wipe the Preachers out or some such thing, then they went off and became Preachers themselves, just like that." She looked at him steadily and then said: "All except Perry, that is."

"Perry—who's he?"

"One of the guys who came in the gyro. He's crazy." She got up from her seat and walked over to the side of the building, leaning against it and watching Carver.

"Crazy, you say?" said Carver.

"Sure, crazy as a loon. Leastways—that's the way he acts."

"Has he always acted that way? Who is the guy, anyway?"

"Of course, he's always acted that way. He's stupid. Crazy. Any objections to a guy being crazy if he wants to be?" She scowled at him.

Carver laughed. "Of course not," he said. But he was thinking of what Professor Willis had told him about the scientists' use of Scamp. Supposing the same thing applied to mental people as well as to children? A moron would be less use to the mutant than a child. That was probably how the crazy man and this girl and her friends had escaped. "What's your name?" asked Carver.

"The man is interested," she said, addressing the building with raised eyebrows. "Claire is my name."

Carver laughed. "My name's Ray. Ray Carver. Late of the United States Army."

"Pleased to meet you," she said with mock solemnity. "Now the official introductions are over, will you tell me what you're doing in this part of the world?"

Putting caution aside Carver told her, as briefly as he could, why they had come to Harville and what they had found. She leaned against the building, listening to him, every now and then digging her bare toes into the earth.

"What's 'mutant' mean?" she asked, when he had finished speaking.

"A—a freak, I guess. But this guy we're after isn't a physical freak. He hasn't got two heads, or a long blue tail or anything like that, so far as we know. He's a mental freak. He's got powers that we haven't. I

reckon he influenced those other boys to join the Preachers. As soon as he finds out that we're here he'll start on us."

Claire looked up at him. "Why hasn't he tried his tricks on me or the boys, then?"

Carver looked at her, grinning. "You're too young, that's why. It seems he leaves the stupid and the young alone."

She was silent awhile, thinking, stirring the earth again.

Carver watched her with interest. He looked her up and down, thinking, too, but about other things. She was pretty; *very* pretty, he decided. "You want to help us?" he said at last.

"Why should I? I'm happy the way I am. Nobody interferes with me none. I can manage. Why should I stick my neck out?"

CARVER shrugged. "No reason except the one that's kept everyone fighting the last twenty-one years. Me—I like freedom."

"So do I, and I've got it, haven't I?"

"For how long, though? As soon as you're old enough you'll be off to join the Preachers. He won't let you get away that easy. Ever think about that?"

She was silent again. Then she said: "Suppose I do help. What's it going to get me?"

"Only the satisfaction of having helped the world."

"What's the world done for me that I should want to help it? Killed my folks; burnt up the place I lived in; smashed up whatever life I might have planned before I even had a chance to plan it; that's what the world's done for me." She scowled, a gray cloud settling over her face.

Carver nodded. "I can see all that," he said. "But supposing you don't help. Eventually you'll be bagged by this mutant and made into a Preacher. The others didn't want to be Preachers when they started out—you told me that yourself—and then suddenly they up and joined them. The same'll happen to you."

"Then I'll move away from here."

Carver laughed shortly. "How long do you think the mutant is going to be content to remain in Illinois? If we don't get rid of him before long he'll grow powerful enough to be boss of the entire continent—maybe even the world. I know it sounds fantastic now.

"In ten years' time, unless we or others like us can do something, it won't be fantastic at all."

Claire still did not look impressed. "What do you want me to do, then?" she asked.

"Take me to see this loony guy, Perry."

"Don't know where he is."

"Doesn't he live with your lot?"

She shook her head, blonde hair shifting and swaying like a gold cloud. "No. He lives on his own in the woods some place. We see him now and again. Not often, though."

"You could take me to where he *might* be."

She nodded. "Uh-huh. There's a stream I've seen him at once or twice. Catches fish there. Guess we might find him."

"You *will* help?"

"O.K. If you want." She pushed herself away from the wall and stretched. "When do we go—now?" she asked.

Carver nodded. "I'll just contact my buddies and tell 'em where I'm going." He clicked the switch on his radio.

"You mean that dingus *works*?" There was awe in her voice as she leaned over, staring.

"Sure it works. Hullo—Bacon? Look, I've met a girl who knows something about the Preachers and about the party that came up here before us. There's one of them still alive. Eh? Yes, only one. She says she'll take me up to see him. What? O.K., then. Straight along the main street, turn south and on. Be seeing you."

"So the others are coming?"

"That's right."

THE others arrived within ten minutes, Bacon, Lane and Mansfield, all puffing, all out of breath. "So here we all are," said Bacon, wiping his face.

Carver told them all that Claire had told him.

"Just for the book—where is this factory?" asked Bacon.

Claire pointed down the street. "At the end there."

"Supposing we take a look there before we go hunting for Perry. There's more likelihood of us finding something worthwhile in the factory than in talking to a loony."

The men nodded, agreeing. "I'll show

you where the place is," said Claire, leading them.

The factory was still intact. They found the trapdoor that led to the cellar and went down. There had been some equipment in one of the rooms on the ground floor and this had all been smashed, but the cellar, apparently, had been untouched.

"They must have caught them up top," said Bacon, looking round. "If the Preachers had seen this box of tricks they'd have played hell with it. Lucky for us it's all still intact." He turned to Claire. "What are these Preachers like?"

"Oh, they wear long black robes and they've all got a funny look in their eyes."

"Yeah—I mean, what do they *act* like?"

"Funny—like they only got one idea—that we should all go back to living in the fields and such."

Bacon nodded, thinking. "It looks to me as though the mutant can put another mind in place of the old one—but the new mind retains nothing of the knowledge of the old."

"Huh?" said Carver, puzzled.

"Well—look at it this way. Those men that came up from Oklahoma in the first gyro. They went off and joined the Preachers, didn't they? They *became* Preachers themselves, in fact, right?"

"Right."

"Well, since they were originally from Oklahoma, they would have known about the scientists up here working underground. They would have told the other Preachers about the underground laboratory here and we wouldn't be seeing it now. No, I guess the mutant can substitute a sort of zombie mind that responds to his own directions, but can't remember anything of what happened before, can't know a thing about its own past."

Lane was in ecstasies over some of the apparatus. "They've done wonders here, Bacon. How they succeeded in keeping it up for as long as they did is a miracle to me."

Bacon nodded. "At a guess I should say that the mutant can't affect anyone he doesn't know about. The Preachers bring him news of newcomers in the district and then he contacts them mentally. If the Preachers don't know about a person then that person

is safe so long as he stays out of sight. That was Willie's guess as well, if you remember?"

Carver looked at him. "So *we're* safe only so long as nobody sees us?"

"That's what I should think."

"Then I hope to God no one saw us bring the gyro down last night. What do you think of that idea of Bacon's, Claire? You were about here when the Preachers raided this place, weren't you?"

"Sure I was. There'd been a Preacher round here for a couple of days or so, snooping. Then a whole gang of them arrived here one morning. I was over on the hill raiding a deep-freeze food store up there. I saw them come in here and then, 'bout an hour after, out they all came again with these scientist friends of yours."

"Then?"

"Then they lit bonfires under them, up against that wall down the road. I didn't stay to see what happened after."

Bacon nodded again. "That just about bears out my theory."

Carver scratched the back of his head. "You feel certain that the mutant and the Preachers are together, then?"

"That's the way it looks, doesn't it?"

"Yes in a way it does, but you can't tell me that the mutant himself is anti-science."

"Of course not. He's merely using that as an excuse to destroy any intelligent, thinking humans that are left."

Lane called to them, his voice booming in the cellar. "Just look at all this, will you?" He was standing in front of a maze of wires and small golden globes.

"What is it?"

"Not too sure. We ought to have Langtree with us; I think it's some sort of psycho-conditioner, but I can't be certain. Langtree would know all right, he's well up in this sort of thing."

Carver, puzzled, asked: "How come you boys know so little of what the scientists up here were doing?"

Bacon laughed. "We don't know simply because they didn't tell us. We were very much afraid that the mutant would be able to seek out and destroy anyone who was working against him. It now looks as though he has to have definite knowledge of a person's whereabouts before he can do any-

thing against them." He looked across at Lane. "This may have been the thing they were working on towards the end, then?" The thing they told us might be a great help in combating the mutant?"

Lane nodded quickly. "I think this is it, all right. If I sit down to it I may get some idea of what it's supposed to do."

"You think it was meant to protect them against the mutant's mental forces?"

"I should say it was, yes. It looks to me as though it's some sort of electronic brain, but to what purpose it could be put I've no idea—yet." Lane sat down on a stool in front of the machine and began tinkering with it.

Carver watched him for a moment, and then pointed to a curved, cup-shaped apparatus that rested on a small ledge behind the main maze of wires. "That looks as though it might have come off the gadget you put on me, Mansfield?" he said.

Mansfield leaned over, peering. "From the mentatron—? Yes, it does look like the helmet slightly, I admit." He picked it up, turning it over. "Look there," he said.

They looked. On the convex side of the cup was a beautifully made wig of brown hair, parting, scurf and all.

"Incredible," said Bacon, looking at it.

"Beautifully made," said Lane, "but for what purpose? As a head protector in case one of the Preachers tried to club you? Or what?" He took the cup from Mansfield and examined it. "Here are terminal plugs—see, these seven minute screws? And *these*," he picked wires up from the workbench, "are seven in number also. And they connect to *this*." He held up a small box of gray metal.

"What does all that add up to?" asked Carver, impatiently.

"Don't know. Don't know," said Lane, half to himself. "But give me time and I'll find out. Just give me time." He sat down on the stool again, forgetting them.

The others looked round the rest of the cellar, leaving Lane working. Claire stuck by Carver, not at all impressed with the scientific apparatus that abounded and which gave Bacon, Lane and Mansfield such obvious pleasure. "You know?" she said to Carver. "I reckon the best thing you could all do is to take that gyro up over Marakee one night and drop an atom bomb on the

Preachers' place. Then you wouldn't have to worry none about all these gadgets."

Carver laughed. "Atom bombs—ha! Listen, honey—the last atom bomb was used up years and years ago. Nobody had any factories or research plants left to make 'em after that. Where do you think I could get one, for Pete's sake?"

She shrugged carelessly. "Just an idea," she said.

"I think I've got it," shouted Lane. Remember Claire telling us that the loony guy wasn't affected by the Preachers? Well—these boys up here must have tumbled to that and set to work."

Bacon leaned his great bulk against the bench, peering closer. "What *is* that thing, then?"

Lane beamed. "It's a secondary brain, electronically worked and controlled from this machine here. Least—that's what I think it is."

Bacon took the hair-covered skull-cap in his hand. "This goes on the guy's head, I take it?"

"That's right. One chap sets out with that thing on his head. He's in constant contact with this gadget *here*," Lane pointed to a small panel of valves which snuggled below a large screen. "It's a development on the old telesceiver; a telepathic thought-wave beam. There won't be any power in here at the moment, but if there was I could show you."

"What does it do?" asked Carver.

"Well. The man that goes out with the skull-cap on his head shows up on the screen as a black dot, moving. The screen lights up as a map of the immediate area, so the guy working the controls here can see where his pal's going. Now if the guy outside scents trouble it is automatically transmitted to the controller—who switches the electronic brain into action immediately. It's my belief that the electronic brain is in direct contact with the brain proper and takes over from it entirely for as long a time as the controller here wishes."

Bacon scowled. "So what?" he said.

"So that if the guy outside is in danger from the mutant—if he's seen by a Preacher, for instance, who runs off to tell his boss—then the electronic brain takes over."

"And the mutant can't influence this sec-

ond brain, is that it?"

Lane nodded. "That's my guess," he said. "I only wish Langtree was here to see this."

Carver thought of something. "What was that chap Perry like when he left Oklahoma, Bacon?"

"Perry—oh, he was a bright boy. Something must've happened to turn his head when he got here, I should imagine."

"Claire," Carver went on, "did you see Perry when he first arrived in the gyro?"

Her face screwed up, frowning, concentrating. "Why, no, I guess not. I met the others, but I don't remember seeing Perry when they landed in the gyro. And they told me that they'd dropped one of their boys on the way."

"Where was ~~all~~ this—here in Harville?"

"No. South of Harville. They were after a deep-freeze food store: they'd dropped this other guy off near here, so they said."

Carver's eyes were bright. "Lane—are you *sure* that thing isn't working?" he said, pointing at the maze of wires.

Lane looked astonished. "Well," he said, "I didn't think to try it—there doesn't appear to be any power here, does there?"

Bacon reached up to a switch from which a cable ran to a desk lamp over the bench. "We'll soon see," he said.

Click went the switch.

The light came on.

Lane opened his mouth and his eyes together. "If there's power, then . . ."

Carver smiled. "That's what I think, yes. That electronic brain is still running at this moment. It's been running ever since the boys here met up with Perry and sent him out with another one of those skull-cap things on his head as an experiment. The brain avoids the mutant's influence because it's equivalent to the brain of an idiot—and Perry's got that thing on his head still, since the scientists never switched it off before they got killed. The screen may be switched off or run out of juice if you like, but I'll lay any money the brain's still functioning."

Lane shook his head. "It may have *been* functioning, I grant you. But it can't be any more."

"Why not?"

"Because I've disconnected parts of it to examine it. The fact that I was so *certain* that it couldn't be functioning made me

careless of the fact that it was. If you're right and Perry *has* got that electronic brain clapped to his head he must have come out of it by now. My tinkering with the works here would have been certain to have put it out of action.

"Then what will he do?" asked Bacon.

"That depends on what he was supposed to have been doing when he started off. I don't know enough about these brain things to be able to say whether you retain memory of what you did when the other brain took over. Could be Perry will come back here if he wasn't far away when I disconnected the works."

"Could be, indeed," said Perry, peering down through the trapdoor.

V

"PERRY!" cried Bacon, overjoyed.

"Perry," said Claire, puzzled.

Perry came down the ladder into the cellar and they could see a second skull-cap brain in his hand. "I waited a while upstairs, listening, before I came down," he said.

Bacon strode over, shaking his hand. "Good to see you again, Perry. Lucky Lane here turned this gadget off or you'd still be a loony!"

Perry shook his head, bewildered. "Tell me about it all," he said. "I was sent out by Martenson with this thing on my head as an experiment. The other boys had gone straight over to a deep-freeze store to get food and dropped me down here. I knew Martenson personally and he got me to try this gadget. That's all I know. When you've got it on I guess you don't know what you were like before, and when it's off you don't know what you did when it was on. I don't even know how long I've had it on. Where is Martenson, anyway?"

There was silence in the cellar. The men looked at each other, none wanting to tell what had happened to the scientists and to the other men who had come over in the first gyro. Then Bacon said: "Got some bad news for you, Perry. Martenson's dead."

Then they told him all they knew. He sat down on the stool in front of the workbench. "All of them," he said, slowly, and with sadness and weariness in his voice.

"Every darned one of them gone."

"They'd have got you, too, if it hadn't been for that skull-cap you were wearing," Bacon reminded him.

Perry nodded, wearily.

"The thing to do now is to think how we can prevent such a thing happening again by destroying the man—or creature—behind it all. Anyone got any ideas?"

Perry clasped his head in his hands. "There's something I've got to remember, first, something they told me . . ." He stared at the floor, trying to remember. "It's all so muddled in my head—I can't seem to focus any thoughts, can't remember what I was supposed to be doing."

"Something Martenson told you before you went off?" queried Bacon, putting his hand on Perry's shoulder.

"I guess that's what it must be all right. But I can't remember it. It's all so blurred and fuzzy up here." He tapped his head.

Lane looked up. "Maybe if we put you under the brain again you'd remember?"

Bacon laughed. "When he's under the brain he's loony, isn't he? Besides, he wouldn't know us."

Carver pointed at Claire. He'd know her. We could all go upstairs and she could ask him and then switch the set off when we came down again."

Lane nodded. "That might work. Let's try."

They tried. Lane showed Claire which buttons to press, which switches to switch. Then he fitted the skull-cap over Perry's head once more and they all went upstairs, leaving Claire and Perry together.

On the ground floor of the factory they sat about on boxes and chairs, gloomily regarding the apparatus that had been smashed by the Preachers. They did not speak. The silence of the place was a tangible, oppressive thing about them. Carver found himself wondering how much deeper he would get in the battle with the mutant. He did not doubt that before long the creature would in some way find out about them; it was a wonder they had managed to survive as long as they had. Or were they, even now, being watched. Were there Preachers outside the pickle factory at this moment, *now*? If he stood up and looked out of the window behind him would he see black robes flip

behind buildings and leering faces mask themselves with camouflage twigs?

He stood up and looked out of the window.

The street was white and silent and deserted. On a mound of rubble a cat licked itself.

And in the room time passed at tortoise pace.

"Cigarette?" said Bacon, fishing in his pocket. The men lit up, puffing smoke up into the still room.

"Anything out there, Carver?" asked Lane.

"Not a thing," said Carver, sitting down again. The men loosened their flying suits, drew on their precious cigarettes, looked at their watches; impatient, all of them.

Then Bacon said: "They've been down there fifteen minutes. You think everything's all right?"

"Sure," said Carver. "Claire'll take care of him. If she'd finished she'd have come up to tell us."

Bacon sat looking at his fingers. "It's this waiting about that gets you, like you said before. It's O.K. when you're doing something, but when you've got to hang about waiting for things to happen . . ."

Carver grinned. "Don't I know it," he said. "I had a large number of years of just this sort of thing. Were you in the fighting?"

Bacon shook his head. "No. They would not let me get in it. Said I was too valuable to them. They set me working on rocket bombs since I'd been on rocket research before the war."

The trapdoor opened finally and Claire put her head up. "Come on down, it's all over," she said, smiling up at them.

"What's happened? What did he say?" asked Bacon, as they went down.

Claire turned on the bottom rung of the ladder. "What did you expect—miracles? You can't get much sense out of a loony at the best of times. All I could get out of him was something about a place in the north west."

"This true, Perry?"

Perry shrugged his shoulders. "How should I know what I say when there's another brain in charge of me?"

Claire hitched up her jeans at the knees and sat on the bench. "He was telling me

something about Dak—Dakota, I think it was. Yes. *Dakota*."

Snap went Perry's fingers. "Got it."

"Got what?" said Bacon.

"Got what I had to remember. They sent me out because they knew the Preachers had tumbled to them. I was to go up to a place in Dakota where they're building a rocket."

Bacon held a big hand in the air. "Wait a minute, boy. Where *who* are building a rocket? And why? For what reason?"

"The other scientists. The ones nobody ever knew about."

"Eh? What? Explain!" A chorus of excited voices.

"I'm telling you, aren't I? Martenson told me about it when he sent me out with that thing on my head. That morning he'd picked up another wavelength on his visor. A party of scientists and engineers had gathered together up in the Dakota country—some Canadians and British, as well as Americans—and were building a spaceship to take as many sane and healthy people as possible off to start up the colony on Venus again."

Bacon was red in the face. "*What?*" he shouted. "The colony's been dead for years up there—must have been. They had to stop sending supply ships up there when the war started getting tough. There can't be much left now."

"**B**UT there'd be enough to last a new colony for a time if they took more supplies up with them. And this spaceship they're building is to be the first of many, providing they can get the materials. Naturally, Martenson wanted to warn them about the mutant down here—tell them to speed up their work as much as possible, but the connection broke and he couldn't get through to them. He was sending me up there to warn them; that was where I was supposed to be going when I left here."

Lane nodded quickly. "At a guess I should say the secondary brain is only reliable for short spells. If it's left on too long the wearer forgets everything about his proper personality and loses track of what he's supposed to be doing. That's why you never got far away from here—why you never went up to Dakota."

"So they're building a spaceship,"

breathed Bacon, his eyes glowing in his red face. "That changes things. Our first job will be to get up to Dakota and warn them about the mutant. I can't think that he'll be long in shoving a finger in *that* pie when he finds out about it—and you can depend on it that he *will* find out."

"You think we should go up to this place in Dakota and warn them, all of us?" said Carver.

"They'll have to be warned. If they don't know already, that is. Maybe we could get through to them somehow," said Bacon. Then he turned to Lane. "Have you checked up to see whether their 'visor still works?"

LANE made a face. "The 'visor was upstairs. You saw what the Preachers left of all that stuff."

"No chance of mending it?"

Lane shook his head. "Not unless they've got a whole heap of spares somewhere here—and I doubt that very much. Remember how long it took us to collect the parts for our own apparatus down at the last place? I don't imagine they found things any easier up here. However, we can look."

They looked, all of them. They opened cupboards, explored drawers, removed floorboards and tapped the walls for secret compartments. Then they went upstairs and looked there. Not a coil of wire, not a single valve did they find. Nothing.

Lane stood over the wrecked 'visor, shaking his head. "Impossible," he said. "Could not be done unless we can find a store of parts somewhere."

Carver turned to Claire. "Know anywhere we might get some radio or 'visor parts?"

"No. When the old folk left here on their own they took their stuff with them. Those that joined the Preachers smashed all the rest up."

"Where's the nearest non-Preacher village or town, then?" asked Bacon, rubbing his chin.

Claire lifted her shoulders, dropped them. "Don't know. The Preachers have got their headquarters in Marakee, that I *do* know. As for places where the Preachers haven't been—I just couldn't tell."

Bacon turned to Lane, frowning. "What do you think we'd best do? Try to get spares

for the 'visor or get up to Dakota as fast as we can?"

Lane gave a last look at the 'visor. "It'd take us a heck of a time to collect sufficient parts to repair that," he said. "I vote we go up to Dakota."

Mansfield, who had been leaning by the window, straightened up. "I suppose nobody's thought of a little thing called fuel. So far as we knew we were coming from Oklahoma to Illinois, not a second jump to Dakota as well."

"You mean we haven't sufficient gas to take us there?" said Bacon, exasperated.

"That's what I mean."

The men were silent, then, thinking. Their thoughts showed on their faces. At last Claire broke in with: "What about the first gyro, the one *you* came in, Perry?"

Perry looked up, brightening. "Yeah—we had stacks of gas when we came here. Remember loading it in, Bacon?"

Bacon nodded. "Sure. What happened to that gyro?"

"The Preachers smashed it up," said Claire. "But they might have missed the fuel."

"We can go and look," said Bacon. "Where is the gyro, Claire?"

"Over on the other side of town."

"Right. Perry and I'll go over there with you. The others can stay here and guard the fort while we're away." He moved towards the door, opened it, then stopped. "Carver—Lane, here."

The men moved up to him. "What is it?" said Carver, feeling a small fear growing in him.

"A movement of some kind," said Bacon softly. "Keep back from the door."

They peered round the gaping window. Nothing stirred at all in the deserted street. The skeletal houses roasted under the hot sun. From a long way away came the raucous voices of rooks wheeling among tall pines. The white concrete of the road baked quietly, by itself.

"Where did you see it?" asked Carver, watching the houses, the road.

"Beyond that 'visor kiosk to your right. Looked as though someone stepped back behind a building."

Something moved outside like a black wraith, like black smoke.

"There! See?"

"A Preacher," said Claire, watching.

Bacon turned to the others. "We've got to get him."

Carver nodded. "I'm a past master at this sort of thing. Give me a hand, Mansfield, while the others stay here?"

Mansfield nodded, gripping his blaster, his knuckles white.

"The rest of you get down in the cellar and stay out of sight until we get back," Carver went on.

Bacon shepherded them to the trapdoor. Claire turned as she started down. "Be careful," she said.

Carver grinned. "The lady's worried about me!" he said, his heart bumping unreasonably.

"Go on, Claire, go on," said Bacon, fussing. The trapdoor closed.

"How are we going to do it?" asked Mansfield.

"First thing is to find out how many there are. We may have just seen an advance scout, but there could be others behind those buildings. How's your blaster?"

"Charged."

Carver peered round the window, carefully. "If these Preachers are as reactionary as we're told, then they won't have anything much to fight with. Which direction is Marakee—their hideaway place?"

"Over to the left, I think."

Carver shifted his blaster in his hands. "In that case one of us had better get over there to stop them getting home, while the other drives them that way from the right. You get out the back and make for that tall building over at the end of the street. Get up inside it, then you can get a good view of the town—but be careful, Claire told me it wasn't safe."

"What are you going to do?"

"Drive this Preacher guy towards you."

"Supposing there's more than just the one?"

"Then I drive *them* towards you."

Mansfield turned and padded for the door on the other side of the factory, opened it gently and slipped out of sight.

Carver broke a splinter of wood from a bench nearby and put it into his mouth, chewing. It's times like this that it gets you, he thought, remembering Texas and the

fighting there, waiting for the Asians to advance into the town, or waiting to go out after them with a great spike fixed on the end of your uncharged blaster. He had another look round the window. Outside a thin, tired dog moved among the rubble like a jumble of dry, brown sticks, sniffing and snuffling for scraps that it would never find.

Over the silent street rested a shroud of heat wavering in the blue distances, shimmering on white concrete. Behind a building swirled a black robe.

Carver waited five more minutes, periodically looking out to make sure that the Preacher was still there. Then, judging that Mansfield would have reached the tower, he turned and left the building by the back door.

Running softly between houses, blaster held ready, he gained the other side of the street and planted himself in what had once been a rock garden, but was now a wilderness. Then, straining his ears, he heard them.

Voices.

THAT meant that there were several Preachers out there. He listened again. Three voices for sure—perhaps more. What weapons would they have, he wondered? If they were strictly anti-science they could hardly use firearms or blasters, even if they possessed any. He edged round the building and crept forward.

The dog he had seen minutes before was sitting licking itself in the middle of the concrete road. Seeing Carver, it stood up, snarling quietly, showing yellow teeth.

Unused to man, thought Carver, pausing in his stride. If the creature barks now . . .

The creature barked.

Carver darted behind the nearest building, swinging off the safety lock on his blaster, pressing himself up against the wall.

Voices came nearer, almost drowned by the dog's barking.

I'll wait until they're near enough to hit, thought Carver.

Footsteps, coming nearer. *Heavy* footsteps; and voices, too.

"Only a dog barking."

"You don't think one of them could have got out here after us?"

"No. They're still in there all right. Come on."

A scuffling of feet, then. "Why don't we rush 'em now?"

"Because we're not sure how many are in there, that's why. We wait for nightfall, like we did before. By that time Pike will've reached Marakee and told the others."

Carver held his breath. So they had sent a man back to fetch reinforcements. He wondered whether Mansfield had seen him. A blaster's sound would not carry all that way. There was no way of telling.

The dog, having turned his attention from Carver to the Preachers on the other side of the building, continued to snarl.

"I reckon it wouldn't be a bad idea to look around, just in case one of them guys got out and started to prowling round."

"Oh, why don't you two guys quit arguing? All day you do nothing but argue," a third voice said.

"Well, I'm going to look around, anyway."

Behind the building, Carver tightened his grip on his blaster, running his tongue round a mouth that was hot and dry as a desert hollow. He heard the man's footfalls nearing him round the building. The dog, backing away from the advancing Preacher, came into view, snarling. Out of the corner of its eye it saw Carver and the fur lifted on its back. Round the corner, cautiously, came a shining barb.

An arrowhead, thought Carver. It's an arrowhead. He pressed the trigger on his blaster. The arrowhead glowed, cooked, melted. Then it *plugged* down onto the sand with a fizzle and a steaming.

"What th'—" said the Preacher, incautiously moving into sight, eyes wide in his head.

Carver fired again and the Preacher's head rolled in the sand like a melon, eyes still astonished.

The other two Preachers came round the corner of the building then, their strong steel bows in their hands, arrows notched. Carver burned a hole in the first one's chest, then flung himself down as an arrow from the second Preacher's bow flashed like a snake's tongue, speeding past. On the ground Carver rolled over and over, swinging the blaster up again and firing even as the Preacher got a second arrow into place.

The Preacher blistered where he stood,

incinerated like a paper doll, burned to black flakes and gray ash.

Carver stood up, sand running in small streams in the creases of his flying suit. Now to see whether the other one had got past Mansfield or not. Apparently there had been four altogether; three very dead and the other possibly living. There was no sense in returning to the factory until he had made sure about that fourth man.

He started off down the road. In the distance a figure was walking towards him. He brought his blaster up and then lowered it. It was Mansfield.

"Hullo, there. What happened?"

"Did anyone try to get past you?"

"Uh-huh," said Mansfield.

"You get him?"

"I did. How did you get on? I waited for you to drive them my way and then I caught sight of you from the tower. Are they all done for?"

"Yes. We'd better get back to the others. That guy you fixed was heading back to Marakee to get more men. I heard these three talking about it. They mentioned sending only one man back, but I suppose another might have gone before, though I doubt it."

VI

THEY took the bodies of the Preachers to a caved-in cellar and covered them with rubble. Mansfield was trembling. "When I *think* of what they did to those others," he said, hoarsely.

"I know. At least the blaster's swift. Too good for them."

"Is that the lot?"

"Yes, that's the lot."

They climbed out of the cellar and made their way back towards the factory without speaking, each thinking his own thoughts.

They were about a hundred yards from the front of the factory when Carver started to say something and then stopped.

"Well?" said Mansfield.

"Nothing."

Their pace was quicker now. Carver walking slightly in front.

"You were going to say something," said Mansfield, insistent.

"Only that I've got a feeling . . ."

"... That something's wrong? So have I."

Then the door of the factory burst open and, with a tumbling and a scurrying, with a scuffing of dust and a patter of bare feet on the hot white concrete road, Claire was running towards them. And words poured in a shrieking torrent from her mouth. "They're mad, *mad*," she screamed, throwing herself into Carver's arms.

He held her close, kissing her hair, her brow, before he realized exactly what he was doing. "What is it? What's wrong?"

She sobbed onto his flying jacket, her body jerking. "They're-crazy. They've gone like the rest; that man you call Bacon and the other one with gray hair. They've gone like the Preachers!"

So it's happened, thought Carver. The mutant's found us at last. That meant that there must have been more Preachers on the other side of the building who had managed to report back to their base; or else, and this was more likely, they had all been spotted before and the mutant had been biding his time.

"There, there," said Carver, stroking Claire's hair. "You're O.K. now. Stop crying."

Her sobbing shook itself to a halt. "What are you going to do?" she asked, tears making rivulets on her face.

"What happened? Tell me quickly. And come behind this building—and you, Mansfield. If Bacon and Lane have gone daffy, they may do anything and we don't want to be in sight."

Behind the building they crouched, Carver with his blaster steady and pointing round towards the entrance to the factory. "Now tell me about it," he said, softly.

"It all happened so quickly. We were all down in that cellar when the gray-haired man started complaining of a sort of headache. And Bacon did, too, afterwards. Then this gray-haired man went up to the machine down there and shouted 'Destroy it—it's the work of the Devil' or something like that.

"Perry must've seen what was happening, 'cos he socked him straight out. Then Bacon got crazy, too. Perry started to tackle him and told me to go up top and see if you two were around. I looked through the window and saw you. We'd better get back to see

how Perry got on. That Bacon is strong—and Perry, he's only a little guy."

"Look!" said Mansfield, suddenly, peering round Carver's shoulder.

Bacon stood beef-faced and foaming in the doorway of the factory. "Death to the scientists!" he shouted, seeing Mansfield jerk back out of sight.

"Will he use the blaster, do you think?" Mansfield said.

"I doubt it," replied Carver. "This religious mania seems pretty complete. The others were only armed with bows and arrows, remember."

"Do you think he recognizes us?"

"Not a chance—he's more like a zombie now, than a man," said Carver, steadying the blaster. Claire clutched at him. "What about Perry—do you think he's all right?"

"No, I don't," said Carver. "But we can't be certain until we get inside that factory. Mansfield—try to get round the back and see what happened to Perry. But watch out for Lane."

Mansfield shook his head. "You two get round the back—I'll try to reason with Bacon."

"You'll be wasting your time," said Carver, but Mansfield had already started out from the cover of the building, walking steadily across to where Bacon was standing.

"Hey, there—it's me, your pal."

"Death to the scientists. Death to all who tried to destroy God's good earth!"

"Sure. But look—it's *me*, Harry Mansfield. Remember?"

They were about five yards apart. Carver saw Bacon move and he shouted: "Get out of the way, Mansfield—run!" But it was too late. Bacon scooped up a heavy stone and moved swiftly, striking.

Mansfield fell as Carver's blaster burned Bacon to a pillar of ash.

They approached cautiously, not knowing whether Lane was watching them. When they reached Mansfield, Claire bent down, lifting his head. "Still alive. I'll look after him while you go see what happened inside."

Carver hovered for a moment, undecided. "Take him under cover somewhere if you can—and if you see Lane anywhere shout out." Then he walked towards the factory, thinking not so much of what had happened

as what might now happen, since the mutant apparently knew of their whereabouts. First Bacon and Lane—and who would be next? Mansfield or he himself? It would not be Claire or Perry; the mutant had already passed them over as harmless. The important thing was to get word through to the party up in Dakota.

HIS heart jumped and beat about within his ribs as he entered the factory. The vast room was empty; the trapdoor open. He walked sideways round the room, crab-like, pressed to the wall, his blaster nosing at the open hole. But no one came out.

He went nearer and peered down the steps. There was a hand gripping one of the steps and below the hand a body. Carver raised his foot quickly to bring it down on the hand; then he saw that it was Perry, and Perry had a pair of metal-cutting shears buried in his neck.

Carver heard the faintest pad of a foot-fall behind him. Hearing it he did not stop to think, but gave a standing jump, clearing the trapdoor and swerving round on reaching the other side in time to see Lane, eyes like blue fireballs, blazing, plunged down the trapdoor into the cellar with a shrill and bubbling scream.

Carver teetered on the brink a moment. Then regained his equilibrium and peered down. The scientist had curled himself over Perry's dead body and was lying very still. When Carver descended into the cellar he found that Lane, too, was dead, his neck broken by the fall.

So that's that, thought Carver, breathing heavily. Now there's just Mansfield, Claire and myself. And we don't know when the mutant will come for us; then there'll just be Claire to get through to Dakota. And Claire can't drive a gyro and anything might happen to her if she started to try to get there by land.

Momentarily Carver felt a great despair, a great sadness. He was beginning now to realize just how strong the forces were against him. The mutant, it seemed, was invincible. He could see how easily man would succumb to this greater mental strength. Soon he himself would be bound to be attacked.

He went back to where Claire was band-

aging Mansfield's injured head with a strip torn from his shirt.

"What happened?" she asked, looking up.

"They're both dead."

"Perry? You're sure?"

"Quite sure. He had a pair of shears in his neck. How's this boy here?" He knelt down.

Mansfield opened his eyes, blinking. "Where—what—?"

"It's O.K. now. Bacon bashed you with a rock. Does your head hurt?"

"Feels like he bashed me with a mountain. Where is he?"

"Dead."

"And Lane and Perry—what about them?"

"Dead, too. Can you get up?"

"Sure. Never felt fitter in my life," groaned Mansfield, levering himself up, helped by Claire. He stood swaying, holding his head. "What do we do now?"

Carver shrugged. "You saw what happened to Bacon. Well, we've got to get out of this place up to Dakota before the same thing happens to us. And it will, you know. That mutant isn't going to let us get away if he can help it. But we *must* get through and warn the others. First thing is to get over to the old gyro and see if there's any fuel left in her. You two stay here—you've got a blaster in case anything happens. Claire can tell me whereabouts the old gyro landed and I'll go see about this fuel."

Claire told him where the first gyro was to be found and he set off down the street, feeling the sun warming him, bathing the tight muscles of his cheeks with heat as he walked in the fine brightness of the sunlight.

At the end of the street he paused in the stillness, looking round. Now which way? Claire had told him to turn right, but there were two forks turning right. She had mentioned a water tank, hadn't she? Well, then, get up on top of some high building and have a look. He climbed up a heap of rubble onto a flat rock of a porch, thence scrambling onto the roof. *There* was the water tower.

He climbed down and set off once more, weaving in and out of the sepulchral streets, his rubber shod feet making but the faintest of whisperings on the concrete roads. And

he thought of the town and towns like it as they must have been before the war had come with its bombs and its raining deaths. It wasn't unlike his own home town. Like a Sunday afternoon, coming home late at lunchtime one day in summer vacation, that's what it's like. Walking along thinking about what Ma would say when you got in half-way through the meal, but not thinking about it too much, your mind too full of all the morning's adventures. Yes, that's what it's like, almost, thought Carver. But there aren't any cars parked and there isn't any smoke rising up in warm blue spirals from chimneys; no smells of Sunday roasts floating out on the air and now you don't hold a tin can full of minnows in your hand! no—you hold a blaster and you walk in a dead town and you're an interloper amongst ghosts of old years sunning themselves on crumbled porches, in weed-wreathed gardens.

He found the gyro smashed and gray and starting to rust. It looked like a gray and brown mottled egg. And it was nestling in a wilderness that had once been a large rose garden. He unfastened the storage compartment with difficulty and gazed inside. The fuel was there.

Now to get it back to the first gyro. To carry each heavy drum separately would mean several journeys and he did not want to spend any more time in Harville than was necessary. Better to try to get it all away in one go.

He made a rough sledge out of a wooden door and a length of rope; loaded the drums onto it and started to haul it out of the garden back towards the ruined building where the second gyro was hidden. Sweat ran down his face and neck, damp and sticky, for the drums were heavy. And then, after hauling away for some five minutes or more, he discovered that once more he was unsure of his way.

The ruined, tenantless houses smiled at him, secretly.

To the left stretched a row of 'visor kiosks and to the right a block of offices. He gazed about bewildered. He had not *come* this way; he must have taken a wrong turning somewhere. Then he saw the tall, tower-like building where he had first met Claire. If he climbed up inside that he would be able to get a good view of the town and should

be able to find out just whereabouts he was. He left the sledge up against the wall of a building and made his way towards the tower, walking swiftly.

At the turn of the road he paused. Why should he go on, he thought? What good would it do to try to reach Dakota? The mutant would reach his mind before he got the gyro started, probably; or, worse, would reach him when they were in the air and then the gyro would probably crash and Claire would be killed. There was no sense to it. No sense to it at all.

Far better to give up here and now and join the Preachers.

He felt an ache at the back of his head as though an iron hand had entered his skull and was stirring his brains round and around, furiously. Join the Preachers; that was what he had been thinking. Join the *Preachers*.

It was as though he had split into two halves, each separate, each thinking its own thoughts. One half he understood to be his own self; the other . . .

The mutant.

This is it. It's come at last, thought Ray Carver, walking in the streets of Harville in the state of Illinois. The mutant has reached me. He tightened his grip on the blaster. Death to all scientists and their followers. Death. *Death*.

He started to run, his feet heavy under him. Reach the tower. Find out where they are. Destroy them. Death to all scientists and their followers!

The tower was a monolith, a gravestone in a city of gravestones. He stumbled inside, his breath rushing and pumping through him in short sharp bursts. And there was a great spinning and a whirring within his mind; a searing pain and a jumbling of images; a fire and a frost and a scattering of pains pounding within him like a million fingers beating the taut skin of a mighty drum.

Up the old stairs, three—four at a time, legs moving like pistons. Throw the blaster away. Destroy all science and its evil products.

The blaster clattered and banged its way down the stairs.

The top floor. The window. *There* they were—over beyond those houses. The girl and the man who must be killed to protect

the Master, the Lord, the Messiah. Death to them. Death.

Foam frothed on Carver's lips, trickled on his chin, and ran down his neck. His eyes were gray fires and his hands were the claws of an insane fury, closing and unclosing like the leaves of some vast carnivorous plant.

"Death to all scientists!" he shouted, hoarsely.

Then came the shuddering.

A THOUSAND small bolts, loosened through bombs and time and now by the tread of feet, snapped themselves in pieces. Metal girders, rusted and corroded, and cracked and bent with bomb-blast, shifted and groaned softly. Concrete slabs that had been cracked for many a year felt a widening in their cracks, in their crevices; felt a strain and a pull, a force pushing them this way, pulling them *that*.

The shuddering; then the crumbling.

With a small pattering of falling masonry at first, then with a thunderous roaring the building wavered, parts of the outer walls pushing outwards and falling, other parts cracking out and in and downwards and upwards, cracking and breaking apart.

The floor shifted below Carver. It shifted and slithered upon itself, tilting. Boards ripped open as the concrete below them fell down, down.

And Carver screamed three times, waved his arms wildly and uselessly, and then slithered with the floor down to the floor below, crashing and crumbling, bumping and sliding, born on a great area of concrete and board that had somehow remained intact, like a man on a raft, who finds, quite suddenly, that the water of the sea beneath him has been removed, taken away elsewhere.

Three walls of the tower-like building remained, starkly. The other wall was a pile of bricks and concrete and woodwork and tangled girders, all piled up on itself below.

From the ruins dust arose in a mighty cloud that hung for a while in the still summer air like a yellow and ghostly jelly-fish, airborne and hideous, like yellow fog. Then, slowly, infinitely slowly, this dust settled down over rubble, over concrete road, over everything.

And then the great and eternal silence

came again among the houses, among the streets.

VII

"LIE still. Don't try to move."

He heard the voice faintly, under the blackness, under the weight and the pressure. There seemed to be nothing left of him besides his head and that throbbed with a merciless and unendurable rhythm. Vaguely he felt a hand touch his brow.

"Don't try to open your eyes if you don't want. Just lie still."

Water soothed his forehead, coolly, refreshing. He opened his eyes to twilight. "Where—?" he started, and then stopped. Claire put her finger on his lips. "Don't you try talking just now. You rest. And don't try to move."

He raised his head very slightly to look down at the rest of his body. Two long strips of wood were bound round his right leg. His left arm, too, had splints on it. Then he felt the pain, coming up out of his limbs and rising through him; the terrible aching agony that throbbed and pulsed through every nerve, every fibre, every tendon. He lay back again, beads of sweat on his forehead like dew freshly formed.

"I *told* you to lie still. You'll have to rest here for a long time yet while that leg mends up."

"Fractured?" he asked.

"Guess so. Don't talk now."

"How did you find me?" Talking was hard work. Every time he brought a muscle into play somewhere else seemed to ache. When he opened his mouth it was as though a thousand steel needles drove themselves into his neck.

"Can't you stop trying to talk? Here—take this." She gave him a food capsule, which he swallowed with difficulty. Then she put a beaker of water to his lips and he drank. "Now go back to sleep again," she said. Carver's eyes closed. He slept.

When he awoke the second time his head and neck ached less. It was daylight, the sun showing red. Evening, he decided. He turned his head and saw Claire snuggled beside him, sleeping. As he moved she awoke. "How do you feel now?" she asked, propping herself up on one arm.

"Better. How long have I been here?"

"Don't know. I never thought to count the days."

Then it came back to him, all of it. The journey back from the crashed gyro, the tower and the terrible probing into his mind as the mutant gained control. Vaguely, too, he recalled the crashing building. And now—now he was Ray Carver once more. The mutant had gone from his mind, no doubt thinking him dead. So he had won the first round. Ray Carver smiled.

"What's funny?"

"Nothing, honey. Just thinking. Have you seen anyone else since I—hey! What happened to Mansfield?"

She looked away, plucking a blade of grass up from beside her and twisting it in her fingers, twisting it, twisting . . . "He's dead," she said, softly.

"Dead? But how? What happened?"

"He went crazy like the others. Started shouting about 'Death to all scientists' and that, not long after you'd left for the gyro."

"So?"

"I got hold of his blaster."

"You mean you killed him?"

Her eyes showed that that was what had happened. "I did right, didn't I?" she asked. "That's what you did to Bacon, wasn't it? If I hadn't done it he'd have killed me and then come out after you."

He reached out with his good arm and caught hold of her, drawing her head down to him despite the pain that knifed through him. He kissed her for a long time. "Sure you did right," he said, "but I shouldn't have dragged into all this."

She squirmed in his grasp. "I came because I wanted, didn't I? You didn't make me come. I'm here with you and that's all that matters to me right now."

He rested back in her arms sighing, thinking how crazy it was to try to tell whether someone was young or old by her looks and appearance alone. Before he had been afraid to think about Claire because of her youth. Now he knew that that did not matter at all. Not at all. She had proved herself in more ways than one; by looking after him, by sticking to him, and, perhaps, most of all, by protecting him.

"We've got to get away from here," he told her.

"I knew that's what you'd say. I've brought a stock of food capsules from that cellar, and some water, too. If you tell me where the other gyro is I'll start packing them in."

"Did you find the fuel?"

"What fuel? I didn't find any fuel, no."

"Well, it isn't far from the building that came down. By the way—was that how you found me?"

"Sure. I thought someone must have been up inside it for it to fall like that. I searched round a bit and found you. We're only a few yards from it now, only it's behind you and you can't see it."

Carver nodded. "Well, the fuel I left on the other side, up against a wall. It's in drums and they're pretty heavy. If you can roll them over to the gyro it'd be a help. I don't think I can . . ."

"You bet you can't do anything. You just stay there. We're going to have trouble enough getting you across to the gyro without you trying to get up now on your own. Where is the gyro anyway?"

CARVER thought back, trying to focus his thoughts on the position of the ruined building inside which they had landed the gyro. "From here you go south about three or four hundred yards, then take a turning to your left—no, *right*, and go on down that street about fifty yards. The gyro's in a ruined building just about large enough to hold it. A building without a roof and with only three proper walls. Fairly tall, gray brick and concrete. Distinctive; you won't miss it."

Claire stood up. "I'll see if I can locate it while you rest up some more."

"When you're gone, see if you can find me a crutch," said Carver.

"You're not well enough to start thinking about moving yet," said Claire, standing beside him, looking down.

"Come here," he said. "Down beside me a moment."

She squatted down beside him, her fair hair falling loosely over her eyes so that she had to brush it back again. Carver reached up and drew her down to him, kissing her, gently at first and then more fervently.

"I must go see about that fuel," she said,

after a moment.

"Sure you must," said Carver. It was ten minutes or so before she stood up again, brushing her hair out of her eyes. "For a man with fractured limbs you've sure got a lot of kick left in you," she said, smiling down.

"Are you sorry?" asked Carver.

"You know darn well I'm not," she said, walking away.

It took her well over an hour to move the drums of fuel out to the gyro. After that she collected the blasters and food capsules and took them all along, too.

"Anything else?"

"My crutch."

"There you are." She handed him a makeshift wooden crutch. "Now I suppose you're going to try to walk?"

He grasped the crutch with his good hand and heaved himself upright like a slowly uncoiling serpent. Claire rushed forward to help him.

"No—leave me alone a moment. I just want to see how bad this leg is." Sweat made an ice mist on his forehead. Muscles jumped and made pains knife within him.

"Guess you're not as strong as you thought, eh?" said Claire, putting her hand on his arm, steadying him.

"I can get by. If you give me a hand now we'll try for the gyro."

It took them a long time to make it, but eventually they succeeded. Claire helped Carver up into the front seat.

"Now let's see—fuel, blasters, capsules, water, *right*. Now then, let's take a look at this map and see where we've got to get to. H'mm."

"Well," said Claire. "we're in Illinois now and we've got to get to Dakota. Northwest. Right?"

"Right. What I meant was *whereabouts* in Dakota. It's not like a garden plot, you know. Big place—lots of land."

Claire lapsed into silence.

Carver ran his fingers over the map. "He said about sixty miles north of Bismarck. That brings us to somewhere *here*." He stabbed the map. "Now—you come up here close to me and operate some of these controls since I can't use this arm. Pull what I point to, or push it as the case may be. O.K.?"

"O.K.," said Claire, grinning. "This sure is a crazy way to fly a gyro."

"Pull *that*," said Carver, working other controls.

Purrrrrrrrr went the gyro, rising.

And Harville became a gray blur and a white webbing of streets below them as they went up. Then Carver turned the gyro northwest and accelerated.

The jets roared within their silencers and the sound emerged as purrings and buzzings. Over Illinois the gyro sped, following the silver lane of the Mississippi into Minnesota and thence into North Dakota.

Bismarck was a pile of children's bricks below them and they passed over it, flying north still.

"Look down there," said Carver, after a while, bringing the gyro low down.

"Fields, buildings and people," said Claire.

"Right. Nothing odd about it except that from here it looks as though there's *purpose* behind it all. Look at those tent towns, for instance. And *there*—see? Those houses being built up again? This place has got somebody with ideas, and I guess it's the place we're after."

"Hadn't we better fly around a bit more and make sure that there aren't any Preachers up here? And what about this spaceship the scientists are supposed to be building? If they're building it anywhere here surely we should see it? You haven't got much hope of hiding a fully grown spaceship, have you?"

Carver smiled. "Well, what's that over there, then?"

Claire looked. The spaceship was a silvery pencil resting beside a row of wooden huts on a wide area of sand to the west.

"Pull that, press *this*," said Carver, working the controls furiously with his one good hand.

The gyro went down like an egg falling from a great height in slow motion.

Carver opened the door and Claire got out. An old man was walking across the field towards them, a corn cob pipe puffing in his mouth. He stopped about twenty yards away from the gyro and looked at Claire and then up at Carver. "When you've finished y'activities I'd be 'bliged if you'd get off'n my field," he said, swinging his pipe

from one side of his mouth to the other. "Where'd you get that danged thing, anyways?"

"Brought it all the way from Oklahoma," said Carver, laughing. "We're sure sorry if we've spoiled your crops. It's a strange sight for us—seeing crops and proper fields and that."

The old man nodded his head, a lock of his white hair tumbling into his eyes. "I heerd things was pretty bad down there. What you aimin' at doin' here?"

"They say there's a spaceship up this way somewhere," said Carver, carefully.

"Do they now?" The old man looked amazed, his blue eyes like steely marbles. "Now who might a told you that?"

"O.K. then, so we've just *seen* the spaceship."

"Thought you might've done," nodded the old man. "'Tain't finished yet, though. Them scientists are still a-workin' on her. She won't be long though, I bin told."

Carver looked past the man at the houses in the distance. "You think you could get anyone out here—a doctor maybe? I got pretty smashed up." His face was white. Claire, turning, looked at him quickly. "Ray," she said, stepping up into the gyro. "Sure looks all-in," said the old man, puffing his pipe. "Guess I'll go get someone to take a look at him." With that he turned about and padded away from the gyro.

"Ray, Ray," cried Claire. Carver stirred. "It's O.K., honey. Guess I should have taken things a bit easier—but there wasn't time. We've got to get word through to these boys about the mutant no matter what happens. If anything goes wrong you tell them, explain what happened at Illinois and what'll happen here if they don't do something about it."

"Ray, nothing's going to go wrong," said Claire, panicking.

Carver's face grew whiter. He closed his eyes.

When he opened them again he was in a white heaven, in a snowy luxuriance. The blinds were drawn, but light filtered through to him. He looked about. Wooden walls, flowers on the table. Beside his bed a small lamp. Folded carefully on the chair his flying suit and other clothes.

He tried to move under the sheets. His

leg was in a cast, but his arm was free and he found he could move it.

The door opened and a nurse came in; behind her walked Claire, with her hair tied in a red ribbon, new jeans and, for once, a clean face. She looked even prettier than before, he thought.

"Hullo, darling," she said, kissing him.

"Don't excite the patient," said the nurse, with a leer. "Mr. Carver must rest for some time yet." Then she went out with yet another leer.

"What happened?" asked Carver. "What day is it? How long have I been laid up here? Have any . . ."

"Shhhhh. Take things quietly like the kind nurse said." Claire kissed him on the forehead, the nose, the mouth. "What were you saying?" she asked after a while.

He grinned. "No. I *haven't* forgotten," he said, "though you're pretty good at driving everything out of my mind. I want to know what happened."

She sat on the edge of the bed, holding his hand. "Well, when the old man came back with a doctor I went along and saw you installed here and then I spoke to the doctor about seeing someone who was working on the spaceship. I told him a bit about what had happened and then he took me along to see a guy called Warner, Nelson Warner, who seems to be a sort of mayor of this place. I told him all about what had happened down in Illinois and all that you told me about Oklahoma. Then I went with him up to this spaceship, and he got talking to a lot of other guys up there. Scientists, I guess they were."

"When did all this happen?"

"OH—'BOUT seven or eight days ago, I guess. They put you out while they saw to that leg and arm of yours."

"Seven or eight days! And nothing's been done? Don't they realize that every moment counts? If the mutant gets wind of what's happening up here the place will be razed to the ground by Preachers, and those that don't get killed will turn Preachers themselves. Don't they realize that?" His face was like red beef with the effort of so much speaking, so much emotion.

"Sure they realize it, but there's nothing they can do, is there? If one of these boys

takes the gyro down there the mutant'll turn him into a Preacher before he's able to drop a bomb."

"They've got bombs here?"

"If they can build a spaceship, then surely they can make a bomb."

Excitedly, Carver said: "But the brain, Claire, the electronic brain. If someone goes down there and takes another guy with him to work the brain in Harville he could get near the mutant without anything happening."

"Nobody ever thought of that. I told them about the brain all right, but they never tumbled how we could use it."

Carver struggled upright in bed, wincing. "Get that nurse. Tell her I'm getting up. Hand me those clothes. If none of these guys can realize just how urgent this thing is I'll get up and tell 'em myself."

She put a hand on his shoulder. "Ray—you're not well," she said.

Then the nurse came in, followed by the doctor. There was a great fussing and a great soothing. Hands smoothed bedclothes back as Carver threw them off and raved.

Eventually Carver won. They brought a stretcher and loaded him on and two male nurses took him out through the hospital corridors with the doctor and Claire hurrying beside.

Nelson Warner was a busy man. He had the by no means small task of looking after the one part of the United States that was trying to get back on its feet.

"Every man on my staff is doing the job of three, Mr. Carver. I don't know how much of what you say is true and I can't afford to risk sending men down to Illinois on a wild-goose chase. However, I'm not a scientist and I can't pretend to understand whether these mutants you talk about are fact or fancy. I'll call Dr. Milton and Dr. Clavering. They'll know more about it and I'll act on their advice."

The doctors were sympathetic. They had indeed been briefly in contact with Dr. Martenson, but the 'visor connection had broken and they had lost the beam altogether. Yes they knew of Dr. Willis and Bacon and all the rest. Yes, mutants resulting from radioactivity were possible and probable. No, they didn't know anything about the Preachers. What would they advise Mr. Warner to do?

Well, now that was a problem. With so many men needed to look after the settlement and all the others occupied on important work on the spaceship, gathering supplies, repairing equipment and so on, well, they didn't see how Mr. Warner *could* send anyone off on what *might* be a wild-goose chase into Illinois. Of course, if Mr. Warner thought it advisable, then . . .

A bell rang.

Warner picked up a telephone. "Well?" He looked across at Carver. "Did you bring your gyro over Bismarck?"—the voice on the telephone interrupted him and he looked away again, listening. "Yes, yes. Where? Good God! Only just now heard something about them. Dangerous? Yes, I should say they are. Right. No, we'll try to spare a man from here. Uh-huh. Right. Goodbye." He banged the phone down, glaring.

"Trouble?" asked Carver, raising his eyebrows.

"Preachers," said Nelson Warner. "Near Bismarck. I had some men down there taking a census, starting reconstruction and so on. Just heard that a party of Preachers came into the town from the south and incited the townspeople. Two of my men killed."

"Now will you believe?"

"Doesn't look as if I've got much choice, does it?" He turned to the scientists. "Dr. Clavering—who's our expert on electronic brains?"

The old doctor turned his eyes upwards, thinking. "Well, now, there's young Dr. Carpenter, and Dr. Ross."

"We'll send Ross. He can work this brain gadget. Have we anyone here who knows that part of the world? I mean besides Ross—someone to have this brain slapped on him and who can go out to the Preachers' place and bomb it?"

Carver nodded, "Me," he said.

"You're an invalid, don't be an idiot."

"I can more or less stand and my arm's O.K. now. I've a personal reason for getting a shot at that mutant; besides—you just told us that you couldn't really spare anybody else."

"You wouldn't last, man. You may feel O.K., but you're still supposed to be in bed."

"Well, haven't you got any bethydyne in this place?"

"Limited supplies of it, yes."

"Then dose me up with that. Come on, for Pete's sake; the more time we waste talking about this the nearer we get to extinction. If you want that rocket of yours to leave for Venus you'd better make certain that this mutant is put out of the way. I've already had a brush with him; I know the ropes. You said you couldn't spare anyone else, so you'd better take advantage of my offer."

Nelson Warner pressed a buzzer. "Go, get some bethydryne," he said to the man who appeared at the door.

VIII

THEY dosed Carver up and gave him injections in his bad leg to kill the pain. They refuelled the gyro, and guards from the spaceship huts brought over two lethal-looking canisters.

Nelson Warner nodded towards them. "Bombs," he said.

Carver stopped his pacing up and down. "Howdidiyoumakethemupinsuchashorttime?" he asked.

"Take it slower. You're forgetting what that bethydryne does to you."

"HahahahahaIguessIam. How did you get them made up so quickly?" said Carver, carefully.

Warner shrugged his shoulders. "We already had them made up. When we get to Venus we may need bombs."

Carver stood watching the gyro being loaded. His mind was a great catherine wheel, showering sparks and red and yellow fires within his head; it was an electric fan whirring in a pile of feathers.

Carver knew it would wear off shortly. It was the immediate effect of the drug; he had had doses before, down in Texas before the supplies were cut off. After these first effects wore off he would notice only that his mind worked quicker and that he would be generally more alert. Also he would not need sleep for some considerable time.

"This is Dr. Harry Ross," said Warner, introducing a short, tubby man, with a shock of chestnut hair and thick glasses.

The two men shook hands. "We shall be seeing a lot of each other, I hear," said Ross.

"That's right."

"Perhaps it would be a good thing if you

were to tell me all you know about this mutant. I've only received garbled messages about it, so far."

Carver told him. By the time he had finished the gyro was ready to leave. Carver excused himself and limped over to the shadow of one of the huts where Claire was waiting.

"Ready?"

"Uh-huh. Just got a few minutes."

"How long do you think you'll be away?"

"I've no idea. If everything goes the way we plan I shan't be away more than two or three days at the most."

She sniffed and dabbed at her eyes. "Why couldn't you have let somebody else go instead? That mayor must have plenty of guys he could send."

"Well, you heard what he said; the same as I did. Couldn't spare anyone." He caught her in his arms and held her close. "Now don't you go running off with any of these guys up here while I'm away. And *stop crying*."

At the gyro, Nelson Warner held out his hand. "Good luck to you both."

The gyro door slammed. Then, with Ross piloting, the machine lifted itself and whispered off into the blue sky.

The sky wasn't blue any more, but inky black when they reached Harville. There was thunder in the air, too. The men smelt the thunder when they stepped out of the ruined building where they had landed the gyro.

"What's to do?" said Ross.

"First off we get round to that factory where the brain is kept. Since you're supposed to be an expert on that sort of thing I'm presuming that you'll know how to work it."

"And then?" Ross handed a blaster over to Carver, slinging his own over his shoulder.

"Then I go out with the thing on and hunt for a Preacher over towards Marakee, get him to take me to the Big White Chief. Once I'm sure where the mutant lives I get away, come back here and take the gyro over and drop the bombs. All that time you're in the cellar working the other end of the brain and seeing that it gets into action at the right moment to keep me out of trouble."

Ross looked skeptical. "Supposing you can't get away from the Preachers' place? Supposing the mutant tumbles to the fact that you're not as dumb as you seem to be?"

"If I'm not back here within three days you'll have to risk taking the gyro up over Marakee yourself, and then bombing the most likely buildings, if you can't find out where the Preachers live beforehand."

"And I have to go up without the brain, eh? Since I can't be wearing it on the gyro and working it in the cellar both at the same time."

Carver shrugged. "If you can think of a better plan let's have it. You'll just have to trust that I come through O.K."

In the cellar of the factory the brain was a joy, a wonder, a magnificent present for Ross. He fiddled with the wires and tubes with a great glow spreading out on his face. "Whoever built this was a genius. Martenson, you said his name was, didn't you? I've heard of him. Never met him. What a man. What a *brain*."

"Can you work it, that's the important thing."

"Naturally I can."

"Then let's give it a trial."

Ross fixed the skull-cap onto Carver's head, switched on the telepathic wave beam and sat back with headphones over his ears, listening. On the screen a map of the immediate area showed up with a single black dot showing the factory.

Ross took the headphones off. "Boy, you sure love that girl, don't you?"

Carver blinked. "Claire?"

"Who else? I've been getting nothing but Claire all through. Anyone would think there were no such things as mutants or Preachers from the way your thoughts are running."

Carver went red. "Looks like I shall have to mind what I think about. That thing's dangerous."

"A beautiful blackmail weapon—if you had any money I might try it at that," laughed Ross. "Now let's try the secondary brain." He clicked switches on.

"Well?" asked Carver. "I thought you said you were going to switch the thing on?"

"I did. And you responded. Didn't know where you were and didn't know me from Adam, but that's to be expected and is what

we need. The thing now is to instill purpose into your conscious mind, so that it carries over into the secondary brain when I switch it on again."

"The purpose is there now, Ross. Try again."

Ross switched on the brain. After a moment he said: "Where are you going?"

"To Marakee to find the Preachers' stronghold."

"What are you going to do there?"

"Find out where the mutant is and then come back here."

"Where is 'here'?"

"I—I don't know. I mustn't tell anyone in case they're really Preachers. That's right—I mustn't tell, mustn't tell, mustn't tell, tell, tell . . ."

Click went the switch. "That seems O.K.," said Ross. "You're as crazy as a loon, but that's all to the good. No mutant in his right mind would ever want *you* to work for him."

"Then we'll start right away. Get yourself settled in and take a dose of that bethydryne we brought. It'll keep you from falling asleep. Click on the secondary brain as soon as you hear that I've seen a Preacher or any other sort of trouble. O.K.?"

Ross nodded. "Good luck. Taking a blaster?"

"Can't. The Preachers'd be suspicious. Warner gave me a small needler, though. I've got it down in my boot where it won't show. Even that's risky."

"They won't think of searching you. What story are you going to tell to get in to see the mutant?"

"Don't know yet. I'll think about it as I go. So long."

And then Carver went out into the darkness.

The long road out of Harville was a white blur wending away into blackness. Carver walked slowly, his foot dragging and scuffling in the dust and rubble that was scattered here and there. About him the houses were like enormous sleeping toads bulking against the lighter rim of sky. The bethydryne seemed to make them more distinct than they would otherwise have been. So quiet it was. So quiet. Only the voice of an owl, crying to itself and the night, somewhere out among the trees beyond the buildings

of Harville to disturb the silence. And the silence was just the silence of night—any night. It could be a night of this year 1988 or it could be, if you did not look *too* closely at the crumbled houses, a night back in the '60s. One of those nights after the teleshow, coming home late after talking to Bud or Sam outside their gates, hurrying back homewards in the darkness. Yes—night was always the same, always.

He let his mind dwell on the night, turning the thoughts over in his mind. Night. So black and dark and *thick*, somehow. "Yes, thick was the word. There could be a million things happening all about and you would not see them because of the thickness of the night. It was so thick now that you could almost touch it and feel the blackness of it in your hand, like trying to close your fingers quickly underwater.

CARVER left the little town of Harville behind him and walked along the white road towards Marakee. And as he walked he planned the story that he would tell the Preachers and which he hoped would ensure that he met the mutant.

Up until that moment he had thought of the mutant simply as an enemy. But now, there in the darkness, it was different. The mutant was more than simply that, more than an Asian had ever been. For the mutant was not *homo sapiens*. That was the thing he had to remember. *Had* to. It would not do to become over-confident. This thing that he was doing—a lot depended upon it. Nelson Warner had not experienced a clash with the mutant, but *he* had; and that spaceship must get away to Venus.

Time flowed. The stars wheeled in the sky. Carver walked on, thinking.

Supposing the mutant *knew* him; what then? But no, that was not possible. He had tried to invade his mind, true, but it would be the mind that he knew, not the body or appearance.

And when he met the mutant this time he would have a different mind. But would the mutant know despite that? Just how powerful was it? And what was it like? Was it a freak physically or just like other men—or could it be a woman, even? Nobody knew. Nobody could tell because the only people who had ever seen it, ap-

parently, were Preachers; and to them it was the Great One, the Master, the Messiah, the Lord of All Things.

There was a glowing in the sky.

Marakee, thought Carver, but surely they don't have *that* many lights over there? Can it be a fire? He walked nearer, the sky a glowing red in front of him.

It was not a fire, but several. They were burning in the main square of Marakee. Bonfires.

Carver saw them and saw, too, that there were Preachers there. His thoughts flashed alarm. He knew that in the cellar of a factory in Harville Dr. Harry Ross was reaching for a switch.

Click went his mind.

A moron wandered towards Marakee square.

In the square the bonfires burned brightly, sending their sparks scuttering upwards in the coiling blue smoke towards the sky. On a wooden platform at the far end of the square a group of Preachers stood like midnight-haunting ghosts, their black robes billowing in the breaths of wind that raced through the streets in hurrying bursts, stirring the flames, scattering sparks, like gold sequins flung in handfuls into the darkness.

About the platform were gathered the townsfolk of Marakee: the men and women who were unsuitable for the mutant's purposes, but not sufficiently dangerous to be killed. One of the Preachers lifted his arms for silence and began to speak.

"It is a great occasion, my friends. A *great* occasion. Our Lord has decided that other townships and other lands shall be blessed with our wisdom. The Preachers shall go forth from this place and preach the word of salvation throughout this continent. Then shall they go over the seas and preach in other countries. And where the word is accepted shall there be peace, but where men have reverted to their old ways, their bad ways, the ways of science and destruction, there shall the Preachers strike them down, and there shall they die in *great* agony."

"Great is the vengeance of His Son, whose minions we are," chanted the other Preachers, rising from their seats and staring out at the assembly, their eyes like red pebbles, blazing.

Then someone started beating a gong. One of the Preachers threw a book onto the fire.

"*Thus* do we denounce science and all it stood for."

The other Preachers came to the front of the platform and, as the gong's notes died away, they started a hymn. A chant swelled and bubbled and frothed up with the rising smoke.

An old man, watching the fires, turned to Carver. "Nice old blaze, eh. Ha—stranger, ain't you?"

Carver's mouth was open. He drooled.

The word "stranger" ran round the group speedily. It reached the Preachers.

"A stranger with us?" The chief Preacher's voice was a boom, a thunder. "Let him come forth, not hide there in gloom and darkness."

Carver shuffled over towards the platform, the ranks of townsfolk parting like waves at the word of God. "Got something to tell yuh," said Carver, haltingly.

"You have, have you? Well?"

Carver looked anxiously about. "Guess it's pretty private."

"You guess it's private, do you?"

"Yes, sir, I guess I do. Uh-huh."

The Preacher looked at the other Preachers, grinning. "He guesses that he guesses it's pretty private." He looked back at Carver and frowned. "What's it about?"

"It's got to do with—with *scientists*," said Carver, softly.

There was a stiffening among the Preachers. Their eyes searched Carver's face. They moved their feet uneasily. "We'll see you afterwards," said the chief Preacher. "Right now we're having a service." He tapped his feet impatiently. The gong sounded again. "What hymn were we singing?" whispered one of the Preachers.

The hymn started again and Carver stood beside the platform, nodding his head in time to the music and smiling up at the Preachers standing above him. There was awe in his eyes.

And after the hymn came another speech by the Chief Preacher. And after that there was another hymn and then a passage from the Bible was read out. The fires were dying down by the time it was all over. They were

dying to a spluttering and a crackle of last sparks and final smoke wreaths.

Then, with a shuffling, the people went away.

"You there," said the chief Preacher. "What was it you were going to tell us about scientists?"

"I gotta see your chief. The Lord, I gotta see him."

The chief Preacher laughed. "*No one* sees the Lord."

"But I *gotta* see him. This is important. Special. It's about scientists who want to kill you all off. If you don't let me see him you'll all be killed. You just wait, is all. If I don't see him you'll all get killed. I'm telling you."

"Where are these scientists? How do you know about them?" The other Preachers had gathered round now and were staring down at Carver.

"**T**HEY sent me up here. Told me to spy out for 'em and report back. They said I'd get through O.K. because I ain't so bright like them scientists. But I heard what you guys are doin' and I guess I'm all for you. Them scientists—they don't believe in the Good Book no more. All they think about is making blasters and weapons and such. I don't want to go back to 'em. Me—I'd rather stay here and get to be a Preacher like you guys."

The Preachers looked at each other, their eyebrows lifting. Is he telling the truth? Are the scientists really planning an attack? Or is he a clever spy? Their eyes asked all these questions.

"Well," said the chief Preacher, "you just tell us what these scientists are planning, huh?"

Carver shook his head stubbornly. "Nope. I gotta see this Son of God. I gotta see him first. F'r all I know you might not be Preachers at all. You might be scientists acting like Preachers just so as to fool the people hereabouts. I ain't tellin' nothing to you guys."

They looked at each other again, the Preachers did. Then the chief Preacher said: "All right, you. Come with us." They stepped down off the platform and made their way across the square towards a large building set well back behind trees and shrubberies. Two Preachers walked on either

side of Carver.

"I can't walk so good as you guys," said Carver, wheezing. "I gotta bad leg. Gee, but you sure got it nice here. Think maybe that after I've told your Lord what I got to tell him he'll let me live here? Think he will, hey?" He shuffled along beside them. "Say—before I go in this place—what does he *look* like? Guess I'm a bit scared, sort of. You know how it is—first time seeing something new. My knees feel all wobbly and—and I can't think straight. Not that I ever could think straight much, but it's worse now. I got the jitters, I guess."

The Preacher on his right regarded him coldly. "What do you mean 'seeing something new'? *That* is no way to speak of the Master."

"Sorry, sorry. Guess I worded it wrong. But you know what I mean. No offence meant."

The Preacher's face was glowing as he spoke. "He is like gold burning in the sky, like a silver bird, like the power and the wisdom of God."

"He *is*? Gee!"

They all went into the building.

Within, all forms of comfort had been long removed. Some wooden, straight-backed chairs stood about and in the main hall there was a log fire blazing in an open grate. The entire place was lit by ancient oil lamps.

The Preacher who had taken charge of Carver pointed to a chair. "Sit there until I call you," he said. "What's your name?"

"Peters," said Carver. "Ray Peters."

Five minutes passed. Then the Preacher returned. "Come this way," he said.

"By Golly—he's goin' to see me. Wait'll I get this old jacket buttoned up a bit. *There.*"

They paused at the end of a corridor. "Go in with suitable reverence," said the Preacher, opening the door.

Shuffling, Carver went in. He found himself in a small, white-walled room. The door through which he had come closed behind him gently. There didn't seem to be any other door. "Hey," started Carver, "ain't there nobody here?"

A rosy-cheeked, gold-robed boy of about twelve stepped through the wall, saying: "Yes, there is."

IX

"WHO—who're you?"

"I'm the Messiah, the Chosen One. I'm the Great Light Burning in Darkness, the Son of God. I'm a Ten Year Old Infant of the Genus Homo, but I'm not Sapiens." The boy scowled at Carver. "Forget that last bit," he said.

Automatically, swiftly, Carver forgot. "The Chosen One!" he breathed, and then he bowed, and, after, got down on his knees.

The boy smiled down at Carver and reached out his hand. Carver found himself getting lighter. His legs no longer touched the floor. Like a great balloon he rose up off the floor and bumped against the ceiling of the small room like some vast moth trying to escape. "What you done to me?" he called down, making swimming motions with his hands.

The boy laughed sourly and made another motion with his hand. Carver descended slowly. "Just a joke," said the boy. "Levitation, hypnotically induced. You wouldn't understand. What were you going to tell me?"

"About the scientists," said Carver, looking at his feet, amazed. "They sent me up here to find out what sort of a place Marakee was. They're goin' to attack you. I fell in with 'em and worked for 'em, but I guess you guys here got the right angle on things, and I want t' follow you, yes, sir. Don't care where you lead; just want to follow."

The boy rustled his robes. "Where are these scientists? How many of them?"

Carver gulped, testing the floor with his foot. "There's twenty or more of 'em and they're over in Albany, Georgia. Some come over from Britain, too. Somehow they got to know about your Preachers and all, and they sure hate you."

"Why? Did you ever find out why they hate me?"

Carver scratched his head. "Well, sir, I guess I never did get straight on that. Seems they think you ain't human. Yeah, that's it; they think you ain't human. Something about a moo—moo—moo—"

"Mutation?"

"By Golly, yes, that's the word all right. That's the word. Anyway—that's what they

said you were." Carver paused, blinking. "Are you?"

The boy laughed and his eyes sparkled like frozen drops of dew. "Of course I am," he said. "Listen—I'll tell you about it. You'll forget it afterwards so it won't matter, but I *feel* like talking." He walked back and forth in the small room, his robes swishing like golden frosted lace.

Carver squatted on his heels and there was awe on his face as he watched and listened.

"I WAS born ten years ago in Bloomington. My parents had lived long enough in radioactive areas to become sterile; but they weren't. I was born with a working, active brain. I could see and hear and feel and, above all, *understand*."

"When I was four I killed my father. At six I killed my mother. Then I left Bloomington. Why did I kill them? They were trying to make me play with toys. They wouldn't believe that I already knew, by intuition, more of the world than they could ever learn. Then, slowly, oh very slowly, they started to wonder about me. They must have heard some talk of mutations and so on."

"My father was the first to suspect. He had an 'accident'. After that I managed to get out by myself for fairly long periods when my mother thought I was 'playing'. It was then that I found out just how powerful I was in relation to other people."

"Oh, there was nothing in my face or my body to distinguish me. Nothing like that. But I learned how to make people worship me and how to turn their thoughts and make them respond to my wishes. I discovered that I could get *inside* their minds whenever I wanted to. After I killed my mother I left Bloomington and wandered about for a while, not letting too many people know the things I could do. And then at last I decided on this place and started influencing the more intelligent people and killing off the scientists who might discover me. I instilled the idea of returning to the primitive and started the Preachers off."

"Why did I do it? Do I want to govern the Earth? I don't really know. I've still got a lot to learn about things. Maybe I shall

stop one day, but I don't think so now. It's pleasant being the Son of God. One thing I have in common with *homo sapiens*—we both love adoration. And something else, I want companionship—there must be others like me *somewhere*. I am trying to find them now. If there are enough of us it would be worth our while to govern this world. If there are not it would naturally be no fun. Nobody wants to govern a world full of animals."

Carver's mouth had fallen open. "Full of what?" he said.

"Animals. For that's what you all are to me. I'm speaking to you now as I would speak to an animal. If I was talking to another of my own kind I would have been able to explain to him all that I have just told you in about two sentences. His mind would have been capable of automatically filling in the steps I have had to *tell* you."

"Then—then you ain't the Son of God?"

The boy stared at Carver. "Forget what I told you," he said, "I am the Son of God, the Messiah, the Chosen One."

Carver forgot, but Ross, miles away, recording Carver's thoughts, did not.

"So the scientists are going to attack, are they? And they sent you out to find out where I was, I imagine."

"That's right, yeah. That's what they did right enough."

"It's a pity that I can't get into *your* mind to find out how much truth there is in what you've told me, but a moron's thought vibrations differ too much from the normal. A pity."

"Huh?" said Carver, staring.

The boy looked at him and again he forgot what had been said, as though a giant hand had wiped away the words from his memory.

The room was still; a silence creeping down round the two figures. Then the boy said: "I shall keep you here for a short time while I investigate whether you've been telling the truth or not. If you have then I suggest you join us here in our work. If you haven't . . ."

"Oh, by Golly," said Carver, stammering. "I been tellin' the truth O.K. No reason not to. I don't like them scientists any more than you do. I want to stay here with you an'—an' work with you like the Preachers

do. You think I could do that, hey? You think I could?"

The gold-robed boy stepped through the wall, and the small room was empty again. Carver stared this way and that. "He sure is the Son of God O.K. He's a miracle man sure enough. Steppin' through walls and all."

Escape said a small voice deep within him. Yes, it was there right enough, the voice. Telling him that now he had to return to Harville and that man—what was his name? Ross, yes, *that* was it. Ross. He'd done what he had set out to do and now he had to get back again. And for some reason he had to work fast. What was the reason now? He couldn't remember it at all. But he knew there *was* a reason.

The walls were bare and blank. High up in the ceiling there was a small grating, but there was no hope of his ever being able to get up there to it. There were no objects in the room that he could stand on and it was too high up for him to jump and catch the bars. He tried to open the door, but it was fastened on the other side.

He squatted down on his heels, thinking. There was something he should have remembered about this escaping business. Something he knew before he set out, something he should do . . .

The needler. He remembered it, then, and reached down into his boot. Which wall should he try? The wall with the door in it opened onto the main hallway—no, onto a corridor. If he tried that one he might manage to get out, but he would probably be seen by the Preachers and he simply *had* to get away.

Why did he *have* to get away?

He shook his head, bewildered. He did not know. Everything was so confused, so jumbled.

He held the needler in his hand, deciding which wall to attack. Well, one wall he knew about; the others he didn't. Better to try to get out the way he came in than risk landing in the Preachers' main rest room or something.

He pressed the stud on the side of the needler and a hole glowed on the hinge of the door, widening outwards as he changed the beam. The hinge dissolved. So, afterwards, did the bottom hinge.

Easing the door to one side carefully, Carver peered out. The corridor was lit by a single oil lamp hanging from a bracket on the wall. Nothing moved in the gloom. Remembering the way he had been brought, Carver started off down the corridor, hearing voices from one of the rooms leading off. He recognized one as being that of the boy.

At the main hall he paused, staring about him with his needler ready in his hand. But there was no movement, no sign of life. The Preachers had apparently gone to bed, with the exception of those whom he had heard talking.

It was at this moment that Ross judged it safe to switch off the secondary brain, for Carver had already seen and spoken with the mutant who would now believe him to be a moron and therefore unapproachable mentally.

There was a swift and searing pain in Carver's mind as though a coil of magnesium ribbon had burned there, suddenly, almost too swift to be noticed. And then Carver was really Carver once again.

Escape.

The thought was in *this* mind, too. He had no recollection of what had just happened but he knew that he *had* to get away from the building and out of Marakee back to Harville. And from the room behind him the voices rose, louder.

X

HE WAS a figure carved out of wood, he was an image. There was no movement in him as he stood there listening, judging whether the Preachers were going to come out of the room or whether their voices had merely *seemed* louder than before.

Then he moved.

The shadows of the cornice gathered themselves about him and held him close. His heart was beating like some gigantic clock deep within him, and he felt sure that the sound must be echoing throughout the building, so loud did it seem to him.

But the voices from the room died away again and continued as a distant hum. The Preachers were not going to come out. He had been wrong.

Then, with a swiftness and a great stealth he crossed the hallway, past the fire that had now reduced itself to a small sputtering of sparks and a dull red glowing, past the wooden benches along the walls. At the entrance to the building a Preacher, bow and arrow at his side, snored peacefully.

Carver smiled, thinking how sure, how certain the Preachers must be of their own security to be so lax with their guards. Carefully, quietly, he slipped by the sleeper and opened the door.

The square was silent beyond the shrubbery and trees. Only a thin wind made its small sound in the darkness, sighing.

Carver paused, getting his bearings, searching his memory for some sign of the way he had come. But there was no sign there, for he had come as Ray Peters, and all but the vaguest memory of that brief and artificial life had disappeared.

Cursing silently he gazed upwards at the stars and then, finding familiar constellations and judging the general direction of Harville from them, he started out into the long grass that grew before the building.

The bethydryne he had taken was helping to keep him on his feet and was also serving to deaden the pain from his bad leg, which was far from healed.

Once he reached the other side of the square he was able to see the main white concrete road that he felt sure would lead him through to Harville. Not a sound came from behind him, though by this time he had expected the Preachers to be in hot pursuit. Apparently they were still talking, but that could not be expected to last for very much longer. Sooner or later they would give chase and it was essential that he reach Harville before they were sufficiently close to him to see him going into the factory or to notice the hidden gyro.

He stood panting on the far side of the road. And then from a barn-like building nearby came the neigh of a horse.

"A horse," said Carver. "A horse."

If he could get it out of the barn, saddle it and get away he would reach Harville well ahead of the others—but would there be a saddle in the barn? Would the horse be too old for

There was only one way to find out. Carver lifted the bar and swung the door

open, praying that it would not squeak. It did not squeak, it moaned. A long and hideous moan like a man in pain.

"Who's that out there?" roared a voice from the next building.

"Whe-e-e-e-e-e!" said the horse, stamping within.

"I'll get you, you durned horse-thief!" shouted the voice. Then a window went up with a bang and a man in a nightshirt appeared, shaking an angry fist. "I'll get you."

Carver brought his needler up and fired. There was nothing else he could do. The man disappeared from the window with a small and final cough. Carver went into the barn.

The needler, turned to low power, made a brightness within. On the wall was an ancient saddle, together with bridle and bit. Carver took them down and approached the horse, who eyed him suspiciously.

"Come on, boy, come on," said Carver softly. The horse neighed once more, but allowed itself to be saddled.

Panting, Carver led the horse outside and then he heard it.

The shouting.

It came in the still air like a death wail, like the war-cries of ancient Indians, like distant thunder. Like all of these things. And Carver knew only too well what it meant. The Preachers had discovered his absence and had started out after him, waking the villagers to help in the search. It didn't matter now what shape the horse was in, thought Carver. Anything was better than nothing and besides, by the look of it, this particular horse should be able to travel at some speed.

There was a glowing of light in the town as Carver mounted the horse. And there was another glowing in the direction of Harville, too. It was the dawn, and the first birds had already started their songs. In the windows of the buildings lights were appearing, oil lamps and tallow candles, bundles of rushes and flaming brands.

"What's all the noise, the shouting? What is it? Is it a fire? Is it the Lord's wrath? Is it Judgment Day? Has somebody made some whiskey and got drunk? Is anyone ill?" The voices came from the houses, puzzled, frightened.

And the only answer the voices got was

the dull shouting and stamping of feet from the square and the clatter of a horse's hoofs pounding the road towards Harville.

Carver clung to the horse as a baby monkey clings to its mother. He was not a good horseman and he knew that if he did not cling tightly he would be thrown, and he prayed very hard that this might not happen, for besides the mutant, besides the job he had to do, there was Claire. The shouting had died away behind him, became a distant had to do, there was Claire.

The shouting had died away behind him, became a distant hum and vanished. It would take the Preachers quite a while to organize a proper search, he thought, and by that time he would be well on the way towards Harville. But supposing they gave chase by horse? Some of them were bound to come down this main road, and the road led only into Harville, so far as he could see. They might search Harville, and even if he himself had got away in the gyro with the bombs by that time there was still Ross to consider. There was the possibility that they would find the scientist, kill him, and smash the machinery that controlled the brain, for he would have to use the secondary brain when he set off with the bombs.

And if he took the gyro over Marakee to bomb the Preachers' building the mutant would be certain to reach out with his mind to find out who was in it. And if the brain machinery had been smashed, then the mutant would be able to reach him.

The horse's hoofs made a pounding, a clattering, on the hard road, striking up small showers of sparks behind.

Ahead, dark against the breaking dawn, the buildings of Harville raised their stone heads, and Carver could just make out the tall tower in which he had had his first brush with the mutant. He drove the horse down a side road towards it, knowing that with the tower as a landmark he would be able to find the factory fairly easily.

The factory was silent and bleak. Carver drew the horse to a stop and tethered it to a metal girder. Then he went into the factory as fast as his bad leg would allow him. "Hullo, there, Ross, I'm back," he called.

Raising the trapdoor, Ross appeared. "I know you're back, your progress registers on the screen, remember?"

Carver walked over. "We've got to hurry. They're out after me. I'm going over to the gyro now. Keep on the alert down here, because they'll reach Harville shortly and you've got to keep that secondary brain running, otherwise the mutant will get me. The trouble is that I can't remember what happened when it was switched on before. I don't even remember what the mutant looked like."

Ross grinned. "I do," he said. "Your thoughts came through to me here. That mutant told you plenty about himself and then made you forget it all. But he couldn't make *me* forget."

Carver turned, gazing out of the window. "I haven't got much time left. I'd best be moving. I shall take a blaster with me and fly above the main road into Marakee. I'll try to get as many of the Preachers as I can *en route* before I reach their main building."

"When do you want me to switch on the brain?" asked Ross.

"As soon as I've got the gyro up. Good-bye now." Carver moved away towards the door of the factory, hearing the trapdoor bang shut behind him.

In the sky, clouds lay like gold bars, glittering. Carver untethered the horse and led it across the road swiftly and then, reaching a side street, he gave it a bang on the flank that sent it racing off eastwards, the thunder of its hoofs momentarily drowning the birds' songs that filled the air.

Then Carver made his way towards the building where the gyro was hidden. And the sound of the horse retreating was echoed, faintly, from the west, and Carver knew that the Preachers were nearer than he had thought.

The gyro lifted into the still morning, a gray shape travelling on an invisible wire upwards, upwards. And with a click and a wrench, with a sharp stab and a sudden whirling, Carver became Peters once more.

BY GOLLY, here I am up in a gyro! How do I work the thing? I don't know *how* I know, but somehow I do. I press this and pull that and steer with *this* handle here, and lock the steering with *this*. I do it O.K., just like I've been flying a gyro f'r years and years. Now then. Gotta find them Preacher men down there on the road. See if I can't

kill 'em off afore they reach that place I come from. What's that town called, now? Can't recall the name. Doesn't matter. Get the blaster out, look over the side, open the floor window *there*. Turn the blaster to wide angle just like I been used to doing it, too. Well, what does it matter. If I c'n do things without knowing *how* I do them why should I worry about it? There are them Preacher men now. Get the blaster pointing down at 'em like so.

Fire!

See 'em fall? See 'em fall down all over like black bits of wood jumping and falling in a fire. Yeah—that's just what they're like O.K. By Golly, watch 'em fall! The horses, too. Pity about the horses. Nobody wants to kill horses, but them Preacher men have got to be killed off. Every one of 'em. Every one. That's the stuff, blaster. You show 'em, blaster. You show 'em how to die! By Golly, look at 'em *fall!*

The gyro hummed on its way and the blaster hummed, too. Destroying, incinerating, burning, blackening. Men fell with a great screaming and a great crying out to the Lord to save them. But no golden hand came out of the sky to lift them to safety; no holy voice gave them courage and strength. Nothing came to them at all, except the burning heat and sudden, terrible death.

Just like I was pouring burning petrol over an ants' nest, Carver thought, chuckling. Yeah—just like that. But have I *ever* poured burning petrol over an ants' nest? I don't know. What *have* I ever done, then? Nothing. *What?* But I must have done *something*, surely! Yeah—I've talked to the Son of God. That's right. Yes. I've talked to him. But when was it? Was it last month, last year? Or was it yesterday, or five minutes ago? I don't recall the time. Why don't I? Why can't I remember? Never mind. You're over the town now, and *that's* the building you've got to hit.

His hands sought the controls once again, unlocking the steering. He pressed three knobs and pulled two levers, slowly. The anti-gravity web crept down about the lower half of the gyro, moving stealthily, like green mist crawling on the bright grayness of the vessel's hull.

And the gyro hung in the bright morning

sun above Marakee like a dull pearl, motionless.

Then it went up, ascending the sky in a straight line until Carver was satisfied that he was at a safe distance. Next he checked the controls on the two bombs, his fingers fluttering like pale moths over the small jets that studded each of the canisters and that would compensate for the wind's sideways push when they fell.

At last everything was ready.

Carver squinted down through the floor window. I sure am a long way above 'em, he thought. Guess they're all standing about an' looking up at me right now.

"Yoo-hoo!" he called, chuckling. "Here comes number one!"

The bomb fell like a drop of water dripping from a tap. The small registers on its upper end received the wind pressure, checked it, and then started the small jets firing to compensate for it. Steadily the bomb fell, humming and clicking to itself as it went.

One moment the Preachers' building was a red brick and concrete structure sitting quietly on one side of the town square. The next moment it was an angry roaring, a great tumbling of bricks and slabs of rock, of earth and trees and leaves and sand all flung upwards and outwards as though a hand had come up out of the ground, gripped the building, squeezed and thrown it towards the blue heavens.

Mountains of soil detached themselves and wrapped their snaking brown arms about the surrounding houses with a noise like a handful of peas thrown against a cardboard box. Trees, ripped into green and brown fibres, settled back on the ground with cracklings and small, tired sighings.

And all about was confusion. Men who had escaped the explosion rushed here and there, shouting, calling names of friends.

Then the second bomb fell.

The town was a dead thing after that.

And there was a wrench, as before, in Carver's brain. He looked down and his throat tightened within him, after he had brought the gyro down lower, when he saw the destruction. But there was no other way, he thought. It had to be done. The mutant had had to be killed. But *was* it dead? Had it managed to avoid the bombs

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in some way? Or could bombs harm it, anyway? The fact that he was no longer protected by the secondary brain and that he was still living and sane did not prove anything, for the mutant might not be aware of his being in the gyro.

He turned the machine eastwards and set a course for Harville once more. It would not be safe to land in Marakee to investigate, he thought. There might still be some Preachers able to fight, and, having completed the major part of his mission, he wanted only to get back to Dakota and see Claire again.

On the white stretch of road behind him two Preachers were running for shelter. They must be returning from near Harville, thought Carver as he slid the floor window open once more and pushed the nose of his blaster through.

The Preachers sizzled in the burst of heat and then lay still. Two small piles of black ash, drifting in the wind.

Carver came in to Harville and set the gyro down in an open space beside the factory.

"Ross, Ross," he called, going in. "It's all over. They're finished." His words throbbed back at him in the empty room.

"Ross?"

Silence.

"Ross!"

Then came the slow grating of the trap-door opening.

XI

IT WASN'T Ross who opened the trap-door.

"Harding!" said Carver, amazed.

"Correct. Harding, as you say."

"But—but why are you here? What's happened to Ross? How did you get here?"

"The answer to the last question is very simple, Carver. I *ran*. Distance means nothing to me and I cannot catch the Plague, not being human. Oh, it's quite all right. I'm not infectious; I have no germs on me. I sterilized and disinfected myself thoroughly, I assure you."

"But Ross, where is he?"

"I'm afraid he's dead. I presume you meant the man who was down in the cellar of this building?"

"Yes, Harry Ross. He was a scientist from up north, Dakota. He was helping me destroy this mutant. What happened to him? Did the Preachers get him?"

Harding sat lightly on the edge of a dust-covered table. His long, gangling body spread there like a puppet. His eyes, gray steel sparklings, licked over Carver. Lips that looked so human moved. "No, Carver. The Preachers did not get him."

"Then what did?"

Harding tapped his chest. "I did," he said, smiling.

"You? But why? What possible reason could you have? Who sent you up here, anyway? Willis? Was he responsible?"

"Willis? Oh, dear no. No, Willis is not with us any more."

"You mean he's dead, too?"

The robot who called himself Harding nodded quickly, brightly. "That's right," he said.

Carver tightened his grip on the blaster he still carried. "Well, don't just talk in riddles. Who *was* Ross, if he wasn't a friend? What reason did you have for killing him?"

"Reason? The best of all. He's a scientist; he's a man like Willis and the rest that I served for so long, without knowing why I was doing it. He's one of the men who are trying to build up a 'better world'—he *was* one, I should say. It's all right. I'm not mad. I couldn't go mad. I haven't the power to do so. But I've lived among men, Carver, and seen their many, many faults."

"And—?"

"And I don't think they're suitable rulers of Earth. I imagine you've destroyed the mutant. I saw the explosions. But the mutant wasn't a fit ruler, either. If you hadn't killed him I should have done so myself." Harding picked a splinter of wood from the table and began to clean his nails.

The silence was unbearable.

"Well," Carver almost screamed, "who *is* suitable?"

Harding tapped a human-looking chest. "Me," he said, simply. "And, of course, others like me. Watch this." He stood up and walked over to the wall. "This wall is made of stone, is it not? Right. You will observe," he said, smiling, "that I have nothing in my hand." He showed a flesh-

colored hand to Carver. Then he pressed the hand against the wall and pushed.

There was a thunder, a rumbling. A great crack appeared in the ceiling and chunks of plaster fell down, bearing white dust in clouds. The dust floated like flour in the stillness of the room.

"Accomplished with very little effort. What does it prove? That robots are strong physically. No human could have done that. Now watch again." Harding went to the trapdoor and descended, calling: "I shall be back in a minute."

Carver took the safety lock off the blaster and turned it to full power. He was not yet sure whether he would have to use it, but he wanted to be prepared. Then it struck him that he was not certain that it would be effective on the robot.

Harding reappeared bearing a complicated machine. "Not a disintegrator ray or any such thing, I assure you," smiled Harding, putting the machine down on the table.

"I can see that," said Carver, dryly. "It's the inside of the 'visor, isn't it?"

"Precisely. Now supposing a man was to take a hammer and flatten it and was then presented with a box of spares. How long would it take him to rebuild the set? I don't mean a 'visor engineer, but an ordinary man with a layman's knowledge of 'visors."

Carver shrugged. "An hour—maybe two hours. I don't know."

Harding fetched a hammer, still smiling. "Watch again," he said, beating at the set twice with the hammer.

To Carver's amazement, for he remembered his own previous search, Harding fetched a box of spares and a welding unit from the cellar. Then he set to work. Fingers like pink sticks flashed at the speed of rockets over the set. Not a false move was made; not a thing picked up that was not used immediately and swiftly.

Carver was silent, watching.

The fingers flashed and weaved in and out. The sunlight streaming in through the windows sparkled on wires, on valves, on small metal bars as they were fitted back into place. The welder flared here, flared there, flared everywhere.

The set sat on the table, complete, mended.

Harding brought a power extension cable

up from the cellar and plugged in. Valves glowed, the set ticked over.

"See?" said Harding, standing back.

"Impossible."

"For you, yes. For me, no. That is the difference. A robot is quicker than a man. You and your race, Carver, have too many drawbacks; too many disadvantages to go on ruling here. Yes, I know the planet is in ruins, and I know the reason, too. Man is what he is; that is the reason. And if you and your people try to build it up again I have no doubt you will succeed. But then, after perhaps a dozen centuries, perhaps after only one, you will be back in the ruins again. It is inevitable. Inevitable because you are—*men*. I have just proved to you in two small ways how much better equipped are robots to govern this world. I did a job in precisely four minutes and seven point three seconds that would have taken one of your most brilliant 'visor experts at least a quarter of an hour. I also showed that a robot is physically much stronger than a man, and our strength is a tireless strength, remember. We do not have to sit down and rest, or have a cigarette or drink a cup of coffee. You may say that our existence would be purposeless, that we have no souls, no emotions. That is quite wrong. We are, admittedly, artificially created beings, but it is quite wrong to say we have no emotions."

Carver snorted. "What do you keep saying 'we' for? There's only one of you, isn't there?"

"How should I know? In the same way that there may have been a number of mutants born who resulted from radio-activity, so may there be a number of robots created, resulting from robot-specializing scientists. There has been so little communication over such a great period of years that nobody knows what is going on on the other side of the globe. I think the chances are that there are many more robots functioning at this very moment than you men would ever think. It will be my job to find them."

Carver's hand rested lightly on the blaster. "And what do you hope to gain from all this? Earth? The subjection of men?"

Harding smiled a smug smile. "Earth certainly, but not the subjection of men. No—the *elimination* of men."

"So you killed Ross and Willis?"

"And the other scientists down in Oklahoma." He smiled, as though in apology. "One must begin in a small way."

Carver picked up the blaster, swearing.

"That will do you no good," said the robot. "It will burn the clothes off me, certainly, but"—a metal and plastic, rubber and artificial-flesh finger wagged in admonishment—"it will only *heat* my body, not destroy it. It would take all of five minutes for a blaster to damage me. During that time I would not be sitting here watching you, believe me."

Carver laid the blaster on the table, sweat making a cold mist on his forehead. Could this creature be killed in any way accessible to him? He doubted it.

Harding strolled casually across the room to the window. "Look out there," he said, pointing to the shells of buildings, to the ruins and the creeping forests and shrubs and grasses. "What do you see? Ruins, quite. It would take humanity all of fifty years to clear the vegetation from the towns on this continent alone, but we could do it very much more quickly. Why? Because we would not squabble among ourselves."

"JUST a minute," said Carver, quickly. "You said just now that robots had emotions. Yet now you are saying that they would not respond in the same way as humans."

"Of course they have emotions. They have *identical* emotions. All robots are created the same. They *are* the same. They are not prejudiced in any way—except perhaps against man for the mess he has made of things and the fact that he has so stupidly abused the planet on which he lives. I tell you, Carver, the robots are the creatures most suited to bring a planet up from the depths to the heights—and keep it there."

"Nuts," said Carver sourly. "So far as you *know* there's only one of you. It will take you a long time both to find any others, if they exist, and also to rub out mankind. Do you imagine that the scientists won't get wise to what you're trying to do? They found out about the mutant, didn't they? They ran down the Preachers as well, didn't they? Didn't I? You're doomed before you start, Harding."

Harding scratched a face that might have been human, but which, of course, was not. "Just supposing," he said, "just supposing you're right about there being only one of me. How long do you think it would take me to collect sufficient data about myself to build a second 'me' and a third and so on? Not long."

"You haven't a laboratory or any metals to work with."

"There *are* laboratories. You've seen one in Oklahoma, another here. There's probably a third up in that place you mentioned—Dakota. There are in all probability others, too. As for metals—the continent is thick with metal. Just take a look at all the ruined buildings. Certainly it isn't in very good shape, but then, as the old human proverb goes: 'Beggars can't be choosers'."

"But you'll never be able to build another robot like yourself, Harding. The man who made you was a genius. You won't be able to examine yourself in sufficient detail to make replicas of every organ. It'd be insane to try it, anyway."

"Insane you say? Surely not insane. A difficult task, perhaps. For man an *impossible* task, but I do not think it will be too hard for me.

"I have more time than man has, you see. I need no sleep, I need no food. My body is self-lubricating. No, Carver, it will not be an impossible task for me."

A plan was forming in Carver's mind, slowly. He knew that this creature beside him was as deadly and as dangerous to mankind as the mutant had been, and he knew, too, that he would have to destroy it swiftly before it destroyed him. But the plan was still too vague. He would have to keep Harding talking while he worked it out. "You say you're better fitted to govern Earth than man," he said. "True you've shown me that you are physically superior and mentally and physically swifter, but these things don't prove anything, really. An elephant is stronger than a man, but he hasn't ruled Earth for a long, long time. And a hawk is swifter than a man."

"Those are animals with little or no intelligence. We have intelligence."

"Intelligence isn't everything. You said that you had emotions. How do I know that? You have only the emotions that your maker

instilled into you when he made you. No others."

Harding shook his head. "You're wrong, Carver."

"Prove it."

"Don't be a fool, how can I? Are you going to suggest that I make a practical demonstration of the emotion of pity and let you go free?"

Carver laughed. "It's an idea, but that wasn't what I was getting at. No, I wondered whether you would feel anything at all if you were to see those bodies over in Marakee where I dropped the bombs."

Harding considered. "I don't know," he said. "It would be interesting to find out."

"But if we went over there you could easily simulate emotion that would be visible to me, no doubt. That wouldn't be hard for you and I should have no way of knowing whether you *really* felt anything or not."

Harding nodded. "True," he said.

Here goes, thought Carver. If he spots that I'm trying to trick him he'll probably kill me now. But that's a chance I've got to take. If I don't manage to destroy him he'll kill me, anyway.

"But wait a minute," said Carver. "Got an idea. Have you looked down in this cellar below here?"

"Certainly."

"Did you notice that contraption of wires and globes?"

"I did."

"Well, that's a thought wave receiver. A telepathic gadget that reads your thoughts. All you do is put a cap on your head and the guy sitting at the desk down there can hear your thoughts. Now if I was to sit there and you went out over Marakee in my gyro with the cap on your head I should be able to tell whether you experienced any emotion or not. Frankly, I don't think you will."

Harding laughed. "I see. You imagine I'm sufficient fool to go off and leave you here so that you can make your escape, I suppose?"

"You could tie me to the chair down there."

"And risk your getting free? You must think I'm an idiot."

"Then let me read your thoughts down in the cellar. I might get something from them to prove that you *do* have emotions.

I would have no chance of escaping down there, less than here, even."

Harding put his head on one side. "H'mmm," he said.

Carver smiled. "Or are you afraid I won't find anything at all when I try to read your thoughts? Is that it, eh? You're scared I'm right about your not having emotions save for those that your maker put into you at the start."

"Not at all, not at all," said Harding, annoyed. "If you wish we'll try this thought-reading business."

Carver indicated the cellar. They went down through the trapdoor, stepping over the bodies of Lane, Perry and the recently killed Ross that were lying at the foot of the stairs.

"Put this on your head," said Carver, handing Harding the skull-cap.

"Well?" said Harding, waiting.

"Wait a minute, now. I sit *here* and switch *this*. Now then."

Harding scowled. "That doesn't look like a telepathic thought wave receiver to me, Carver," he said, peering.

Don't let him find out until I've got it working, thought Carver. Oh don't let him.

"It's a trick," shouted Harding, raising his hands to remove the cap.

Click went the switch under Carver's fingers. Harding's mouth fell open.

"How do you feel, Harding?" queried Carver, staring at him.

"I beg your pardon, I beg your pardon, I beg your pardon," said Harding, his face breaking into a stretching grin. "And pardon rhymes with garden, and pardon rhymes with garden."

CARVER smiled. So it worked the same on a robot as on a man, only better. Here was an idiot robot. A metal and rubberoid imbecile. "I want you to do something for me," said Carver, getting up. "I want you to come upstairs with me."

"Certainly, certainly, certainly," said Harding, nodding his head. They went up the steps into the main room.

"Now just stand there and I'll show you something very interesting and very beautiful," said Carver, taking up the blaster from the table once more. "Stand quite still, won't you?"

"Yes, yes, yes. What are you going to show me? What's going to happen? I'm so interested."

"I'm going to make you feel something you've never felt before. I'm going to warm you with this blaster and you'll be able to look down and watch yourself burning and melting before your own two eyes."

"I *will*?"

"Of course. Watch now." Carver pressed the trigger on the blaster. Harding's clothes smouldered into blackness and flared for a second before falling away from his body. Then there came a stench of burning rubber, of fusing metal and ozone. Carver was careful to avoid destroying the skull-cap before the blaster had caused sufficient damage.

"This is very interesting," said Harding, looking down. "Something *inside* me is getting hot, too. It feels like liquid, like liquid, like liquid, like . . ."

The burning continued and the heat became so intense that Carver moved back a little, keeping the blaster steady.

The wood of the floorboards near Harding's feet smouldered, blackened with the heat. Harding became a bright red, a glowing fire-man, a pillar of incandescence and of ruby shimmerings. He glowed and he flared. The plastics in him burned with harsh cracklings and the liquids boiled and turned themselves to steam within their tubes. And pressures mounted until a great hissing came from the bright and glowing figure.

Carver saw the danger and turned and ran from the room. Outside he hurtled for a nearby wall, flinging himself flat.

"How very interesting," came a voice from the factory, the words faint to Carver's ears, "How very . . ."

Then the explosion.

It was a short and harsh sound and it blew all the remaining window frames and doors out and brought plaster and brickwork tumbling and clattering down with a sound like rain on taut drumskins.

Smoke came from the factory, blackly.

Carver went back inside. There was a fire burning in the middle of the room and parts of the robot called Harding lay scattered all over; here a mess of nerve wires, there a jumble of silver cogs.

Swiftly Carver went down into the cellar

again and examined Ross's body. Harding had killed him by hitting him on the head with a spanner.

Carver carried the body upstairs and out to the gyro and then went back to the cellar to see what he could take back to Dakota with him. The visor set might be useful. Certainly the thought wave receiver. He went to unscrew the latter from the wall and then noticed what looked like a recording apparatus set back to one side of it and evidently coupled onto the main body of the receiver.

"Don't tell me this thing *records* the thoughts as well as *receiving* them," said Carver, using a screwdriver feverishly.

The thing did record the thoughts. Within the compartment that Carver opened up were several spools of tape. The first one would be Perry, thought Carver. The second one should be me.

He worked the recorder, fitting the end of the spool into the necessary slots. Enthralled he stood with the earphones over his head, hearing his thoughts played back to him, learning about the mutant for the first time.

The smoke had crept down into the cellar by this time and at last Carver switched off the recorder, pocketed the spools, took the recorder off the wall and went up again.

He was able to make two more journeys to collect items that the scientists in Dakota might need. Then the floor of the main room started to crumble and he had to retire to the gyro, watching, too late to bring out the other two bodies.

Smoke pushed its black fingers upwards out of the holes that had been windows, scrabbling at the walls of the building. In the open space in front of the factory Carver loaded his findings in the gyro and then lifted Ross's body into the back. Flames were making sputtering sounds and raising their yellow and red heads above the level of the windows on the ground floor.

Carver climbed into the gyro and shut the door. He sat there for a moment, thinking of Harding. How human he had looked, how very human. And then he started to think about Claire, many, many miles away in Dakota. Suddenly he wanted so very much to see her again, to feel her soft lips on his.

He started the gyro.

XII

AT DUSK, just beyond Bismarck, the gyro gave a cough and a choke. Carver examined the gauges on the control board. Fuel O.K., oil O.K. What was it, then? Something in the jets? Propellor engines faulty?

The gyro started to fall. Must be the engine. Hasn't been checked since I left Dakota, thought Carver. He pressed a knob, then two more. His hands sought levers. Beneath the gyro the anti-gravity curtains crawled and the vessel rested, its fall broken.

For twenty minutes Carver examined the engines without finding anything wrong. Then, scrambling about inside the gyro, he looked at the jets. Nothing wrong there, either; nothing that he could see, anyway. But *something* was wrong somewhere, that was obvious. The only thing to do was lower the crate down by releasing the anti-gravity webs a little at a time. That would land him somewhere just north of Bismarck and he would have to hoof it up to where the spaceship was being built—or perhaps had already been finished. It would also mean leaving the equipment he had brought from Harville, *and* the gyro. Still, he couldn't stay up here all the time, and he had to get to his destination as quickly as possible because the effects of the bethydryne were wearing off. Soon, without very much warning, he would roll up into a ball and sleep for a day or so unless he had another dose and another and another, each one smaller than the last. He knew how bethydryne worked, he'd had some of it before. Besides which, as soon as the stuff wore off, his foot would start giving him hell after all the use it had had when it should have been in plaster propped on the mantelpiece.

In small, falling jerks the gyro descended to land with a bump in the twilight. Opening the door, Carver looked out. About a hundred yards away stretched the main road, winding up towards the town he wanted to reach. And along the road lights bobbed. He got out and slammed the door shut. He was in what had at one time been a park, but which was now a small jungle.

"Hey!" he called, running towards the road.

"Who's there?" came an answering voice.

A light detached itself from the others. It was a rush torch held in a fat man's hand. "Who are you? Didn't think there was anyone left about here. Where d'yuh come from?"

"Oh, over that way," said Carver, gesturing vaguely behind him. "What gives? All going to a funeral, or what?"

"Ain't yuh heard? They've got a spaceship up north. Yeah—a real spaceship. Been working on it f'r years, so they tell me. We're all goin' up there for medicals. See if we can get on the ship. Goin' off to Venus, it is. Starting up the old colony up there. Up to Venus, by heck. That should be really something."

Carver looked past the man, watching the people travelling up the long road. "Who do I see about this? Is there any organization or do you just walk and walk until you get to the ship?"

The fat man's eyes rolled. "Organization? Sure there is. All you gotta do is walk back a bit an' yuh'll find a guy in a peaked cap. Looks like a cop, but he ain't. He's one of the guys from up north. Anything yuh want t' know he'll tell yuh."

"Thanks," said Carver, walking down the road. He found the man in the peaked cap just as the fat man had said. He was sitting on a fence ticking off names on a sheet of paper.

"You wanta go on the rocket?"

Carver shook his head. "Right now I want to get my gyro up to Nelson Warner," he said.

The man in the peaked cap smiled. "And I want to bring the spaceship to show it to Napoleon. Who do you think you're kidding? If you want to go on the rocket you just give me your name and then keep walking with the others. Ain't got no time for cranks." He went on ticking names on the paper.

It took Carver twenty minutes to convince the man that he was sane and in a hurry. After that things moved quickly enough. The man found a friend to take over his job and then went with Carver to look at the gyro. Next they found another man who had an old jet-cycle (which had been converted to a push bike since there was no fuel for its jets), and the man in the peaked cap commandeered the vehicle and rode.

northwards furiously.

Carver sat down in the long dry grass beside the gyro and put his head in his hands. He could feel the throbbing starting again in his leg and his head felt as though it was encased in a metal helmet three or four sizes too small for it. This was the bethydryne wearing off, he thought. I shall be lucky if I ever get to see that spaceship. I shall be lucky if I ever see Claire again. Claire, *Claire!* I must see her. Now. This moment. There isn't anything else left. Nothing but her. Get up. If you keep going you'll manage it to the road. They'll carry you up there. Someone might even have a cart they could put you in so that you get to see her. Don't just sit here. Get up, man.

He tried to rise, but found that he could no longer support the weight of his body. A great numbness and a great coldness had settled about the base of his neck and his head was a ball of iron on a slender stalk too weak to hold it. Vaguely he realized that this was only the bethydryne wearing off.

Then he rolled to one side and lay with his head in the long brown grass, with the warm summer wind sighing over him.

He was still sleeping when the men came for him. He did not see them mount the guard over the gyro. He was not aware that men were taking the equipment out and loading it into small carts. He was still sleeping when they picked him up in a stretcher and put him in the back of a horse-drawn ambulance to take him up the long road to where the men were preparing the spaceship for take-off.

XIII

"YOU must like this place," said the nurse. It was the same nurse; the one with the leer.

Carver struggled up from under the sheets. He was in the same bed, too. "Where's everyone?" he gasped. His head was better, his leg was better. He must have slept for a long time, he thought.

"Everyone's coming to see you in a minute. Now just lie still while I go tell the doctor you've come round. Mr. Warner's been pestering us to let him speak to you for the last three days."

"I've been asleep that long?"

"You have."

Carver rubbed his eyes. "How far have they got with the rocket—has it left yet?"

"No, it hasn't left yet. Now just you stay in bed while I get the doctor."

The doctor gave Carver a brief examination and then went out again. Carver's next visitor was Nelson Warner, who hurried in with two or three scientists in tow. "Well, well, well," said Carver. "Do you always visit invalids or am I privileged?"

Warner sat on the edge of the bed, smiling. "We've heard what you did to Marakee, Carver. Good work. Tell us about it."

Carver told them everything that had happened, describing the finding of the record spools in the thought wave receiver that recorded his encounter with the mutant. Then he went on to tell them about Harding.

One of the scientists looked up. "This robot seemed convinced that he was not the only one in existence, you say?"

"That's right. He didn't appear to *know* of any others, but he thought there would be, somewhere. He was setting out to see if he could find them."

"And the scientists in Oklahoma?"

"Apparently all dead. At least, that's what he said."

"H'm.m. Our numbers get less and less," said Warner, scowling.

"But surely now that the mutant and this robot are no longer here to bother us things should go ahead O.K. You tell me that the rocket is finished and being loaded up right now. After that—more rockets and so on. What have we got to worry about?" Carver looked at them, puzzled.

"I'm afraid it isn't as simple as that," said the scientist who had spoken before. "We're getting better communications now. Not just in the U. S. A. Others places, too. Uganda sports a small colony of scientific-minded people. There's a group in Tangier, another in Ceylon. And we keep getting the same sort of reports from all over."

Carver twisted the edge of a sheet in his hands, over and over; over and over. "What sort of reports?"

Warner broke in. "Reports that make us think our mutant was no lone wolf. It seems there are others. Not only human mutants, either."

"Animals?"

"Exactly. Animals. Not a pleasant thought, is it?"

"You mean animals that are *mental* mutations?"

"Mental *and* physical. For example, the guys over in Uganda reported an intelligent lioness, whose fore paws were like furry *hands*, not like paws at all. She couldn't move fast, because of the difficulty of running on hands instead of feet. They managed to capture her."

A knock on the door, then.

"Hullo," said Warner, turning.

"Professor Wilson. He said you were expecting him. He's got a cage with him," said the nurse.

"That's right. Ask him to come in and to bring the cage with him."

In came Professor Wilson, slim, pink and untidy, pulling a small cage on wheels, which was covered by a tarpaulin.

"You'll be interested in this, Carver," said Warner, smiling. "What would you say if I told you that a creature had evolved capable of sailing a boat across the Atlantic? You'd say I was crazy? Yes. Well, so far as we can make out such an animal *has* evolved, unless this thing escaped from a zoo somewhere. Show him, Wilson."

Wilson took off the tarpaulin with a swish. Inside the cage, blinking in the sudden light, sat a lemur.

"They live only in Madagascar, as you well know," said Wilson, looking down at the beast possessively. "This fellow was picked up off Rhode Island, in a boat, a sailing boat. There was water stored in gourds, plenty of fruit—all of which was mouldy—and a stock of dried—yes, *dried*—meat. All these stores were under a large heap of banana leaves to keep the sun off them. The boat was similar to native canoes and had a reed sail. Incredible, isn't it?" He's as intelligent as a man, maybe more so."

The lemur looked at the men solemnly.

"It looks as though we're going to have our work cut out for quite a time," said Wilson. "We've proved that the human mutants are against us—if the one you just dealt with is any indication. As for the animals—we can't be sure one way or the other. I'm of the opinion they bear no animosity at all."

"What's your plan?" asked Carver.

Warner shrugged his shoulders. "We have no *real* plans. As you know the first rocket is ready. We're sending a large number of people off to Venus tomorrow afternoon. After that we've got to start on another rocket. With the first we were lucky. We found the hull already completed in the old Northern Steel Corporation factory. They'd abandoned work on it to turn over to armaments, and by some freak the bombs they received must have missed the rocket. But this time we shall have to start from scratch, and that won't be at all easy. On top of that we've got to build up something here on Earth for those who can't go on the journey to Venus. Crops, houses to be built, livestock. We've got a thousand years of work to do in ten. And despite the number of people about here we're still short of workers. Most of 'em just want to get away from Earth for good and all. There aren't many who want to stay back and help get things into shape."

Carver saw what they were getting at. "You want me to carry on helping you, is that it?"

Wilson leaned forward. "We've got to organize some sort of search for these mutants. If we don't do something we may find we're outnumbered before very long, because there's the possibility that they may be able to pass on their un-human powers to their offspring."

"We'd like you to take on the job of organizing that search," said Warner.

There was silence. The men had said their piece and now they waited for Carver's reply. And Carver was thinking again of Claire. Would she want to get on the spaceship for Venus? And if she did, would she want him to go with her? And did he want to go with her? Yes. She would want to go, he knew that, and they would both want to be together. He'd had his fill of war and fighting. Certainly they would have a hard time of it on Venus, but it would be worth while up there. A new life, a new land. He'd done more than his fair share of trying to save the old one.

"Well?" coaxed Warner.

"I—I'll have to think it over," said Carver. And he did not meet Warner's eyes as he said it.

The men had gone and Carver was up and dressed when Claire called.

They held each other very close. And they stayed like that for a long moment. Then Claire said: "Tell me about it all. Tell me what happened."

So, sitting on the bed, Carver told her, omitting only the last part of his conversation with Warner and the scientists. "So there we are," he finished, kissing her nose.

"Well," she said. "I guess you'd better get out of here while the medical exams are still on. You don't want to miss that rocket, do you?" She stood up and walked over to the window, staring out. "There are many more applying than they'll ever get in that thing. But then a lot of 'em aren't fit to go up in it, so they tell me."

Carver watched her back, thinking, trying to decide. He had not told the scientists he would stay. He could apply right away; go up there with Claire to the spaceship, have his medical and then tomorrow they'd both be away.

Or he could stay on Earth and let Claire go on her own if she wanted to. But if he said he was staying would she decide to stay with him rather than go on to Venus alone? And would that be fair to her, making her stay on a planet where there was so little left.

She was young and pretty and capable and he was ten years her senior. It wasn't fair on the kid.

She turned from the window and Carver saw that there were tears in her eyes, like gold spangles in the sunlight streaming in through the open window. And then Carver realized what she had been saying. "*You'd* better get out of here while the medical exams are still on. *You* don't want to miss the rocket, do *you?*" She wasn't going. That's what it meant. She thought he was going off and leaving her behind. Suddenly a thought struck him.

"Did you apply for a medical?" he asked.

"Yes," she nodded. "They told me I couldn't go. Said they only wanted women who—who were fit."

She's lived down near the radio-active

area all her life, thought Carver. That might mean . . .

Her lip was quivering. "They—they said they could only take the people who were one hundred per cent O.K. They've got a big job on hand. They've gotta start a new colony up there and—and they don't want women who can't *ever* have any children."

Her cheeks were wet with tears and Carver knew that his suspicions were correct. Radio-activity and sterility often went hand in hand.

"Then you'll be staying here with me?" he asked, holding out his arms. She ran at him and buried her face in his shoulder, sobbing.

He held her and stroked her golden hair for a long time until her body stopped shaking.

It was on the following day that they stood on the field in the fine warm sun of the afternoon to watch the spaceship leave. The green of the fields was coated with the black waves of people walking, standing, talking, watching. Here were those who could not go because of illness, here those who did not want to go. And there was a small knot of folk who were too old to go, and the longing for Venus was in their eyes.

A mile away the rocket skimmed in the sun, brightly.

Then, in the great hush, in the great quietness that came over the assembled people, the rocket roared. And the afternoon was a sudden burst of fire and flame. There was a shouting and a crying as people saw their one escape taken away from them. There was a wailing as mothers thought of the sons they would never see again.

Like a pointing finger the rocket rose in its flames and its thunder, like a spearhead pushing at the sky.

Watching it rise, Carver thought of something. He squeezed Claire's arm. "How would you," he said, "like to adopt a daughter who's already been named 'Scamp?'"

And then the rocket passed up like a pencil, a bullet, a speeding pin, and was lost to sight.

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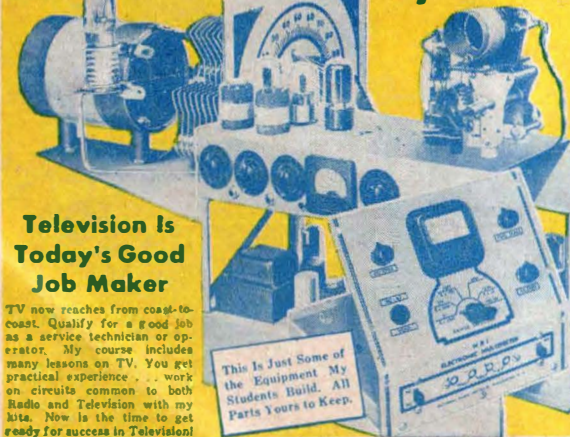
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