

ROCKET STORIES

JULY, 1953

Vol. 1, No. 2

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BREATHES THERE A MAN

BY CHARLES E. FRITCH

ILLUSTRATED BY SMITH

Someone in the place where Dunlop worked was an agent of the World Bureau Investigation. But how could they suspect him at a time like this? His tracks were covered and tangled until even Julie had no knowledge of them. Then the robot came....

Arthur Dunlop busied himself over the blueprints as though he had a deep and sincere interest in them, unmindful of the scurry of sounds in the office. The incessant clicking of electronic typewriters, muffled though they were, combined to form a hum of angry bees. Papers shuffled that were important somehow to the welfare of the State, and men and women sat and looked at them, checking and rechecking, checking and rechecking, for it was important that nothing should go wrong, any place, in even the slightest aspect.

The small square of paper had been dropped on his desk unobtrusively, and for a brief moment he had stared at it in surprise. Then he covered it with

a casual hand and glanced up in apparent thoughtfulness. A blonde girl was making her way down the space between rows of metalloid desks, a bundle of vital-appearing documents in her hands. Arthur studied the swaying body, as though that were the only thought on his mind, but the paper burned curiously at his palm.

He returned quickly to his work of checking blueprints, for idleness even in a trusted employee was looked upon with suspicion. He bent over the three-dimensional diagram, feigning interest, and slowly opened the folded square of paper. On it were written the words: "WBI. Careful." The words leaped up at him in a green ink that would

fade in seconds, leaving no trace.

He crushed the paper in his hand, trying hard not to look around him. WBI. World Bureau of Investigation. Did they suspect? he wondered. He thrust the thought from his mind and made a conscious effort to study the drawing on his desk.

Drawing 2b, one-tenth of the plan for a respirator, newly-designed and improved, streamlined for the year 2108. Arthur could just imagine the advertising they'd do on this model. But the other thought crowded it aside: the underground knew there was a WBI man in the office.

And just why would there be a WBI man here? Routine? Possibly. Yet more likely, somebody smelled a rat. This was no time for plans to go awry.

He looked up, glancing with apparent disinterest at the faces near him hovering over their respective desks. They, too, were busy with blueprints. Part 3d of a new atomic engine. Part 14c of a three-dimensional television set designed to bring in bigger and better commercials. Et cetera. Et cetera. For security reasons, no two worked at the same project.

He scanned their faces, searching for something indefinable, something that might outwardly betray hidden thoughts.

There was Hawkins, a middle-aged, eagle-faced person, been with the local office of State Enterprises for more than twenty years—unquestionably loyal to the government. Merker, a chubby person with shifting eyes behind thin-lensed glasses; he was okay, for shifting eyes or not, they had all been checked, even as *he* had been checked. And Austen, the newcomer, only twenty-five and fresh from college, a nervous, restless type of person; he was the most likely suspect for a WBI man, although some might think it would be too obvious—which might in turn tend to prove the point.

Arthur shrugged mentally and returned to his work. He stared at the design of coils and condensers and wires and felt a little sick, which was strange for he should have become used to it by now. This design, together with nine others, would form the complete pattern for printing a mechanism on a thin disc which would be inserted in the watch-like affair known as a respirator. It was somehow ironic, he thought that he should be working on it.

His intercom buzzed and he reached to flick on the switch. A business-like voice said: "Dunlop, this is Samson, can you come in for a minute?"

"Of course," Arthur said calm-



ly, but he wondered what his superior wanted. First, the note about a WBI man; now this.

The big door marked "Charles L. Samson, Mgr., Dept. 40" confronted him. As he neared it, electric eyes probed him, timed his approach, opened the door automatically.

Charles L. Samson, Mgr., Dept. 40, graying and cleanly mustached, was intently studying a sheet of paper on which were typewritten several paragraphs. Arthur drew to a halt before the man's desk, unconsciously fidgeting mentally and wondering if the item of interest on that paper concerned him.

The manager carefully put the paper down and raised his eyes. "Everything okay, Dunlop?"

"Simply great," he answered automatically.

The older man leaned back in his chair. "Dunlop," he said, "you've been here for some time now, I believe."

"Five years this month," Arthur supplied, trying to put pride in his voice.

"Precisely," Samson agreed. "And because you have been a loyal and dependable worker," he smiled blandly, "you'll find a little something extra in your pay envelope from now on."

Arthur breathed a sudden sigh of relief. So that was it, the automatic pay increase. It meant no

financial gain, of course, since he would also automatically be put in a higher tax bracket which would just offset the increase. Pay raises were for "morale" purposes only.

"Thank you, sir," Arthur said, hoping he sounded as though he meant it.

"Quite all right," Samson said, turning once more to his papers.

"Yes, sir." Arthur strode, relieved, from the office.

The rest of the workday passed uneventfully and it was time to leave. The soft hum of preparations testified to that. Plans were folded, locked securely into desks, and workers filed past probing mechanical eyes that scanned them for anything hidden. Doors whirred open electrically, and humanity poured through them into tubecars which hissed with sickening speed to the helibus terminal.

Arthur flowed into a helibus with the others, and his heart gave a sudden jump as he saw a familiar blonde form ahead of him. Julie! He wormed his way forward and sank onto the air-cushion beside her. She did not look at him. The helibus lurched skyward.

She was staring out the window, at the blue sky and the cloudfaces and the sun beginning to dip low at the horizon. The

building they had left glowed with the million setting suns reflected from its great bank of windows. After awhile, her fingers moved restlessly. Arthur Dunlop watched them idly. The movements were swift, seemingly random but actually precise and predetermined.

They said: "I couldn't hesitate at your desk; I had to take a chance with the note."

Arthur glanced complacently about him, stifling a yawn. His fingers rippled: "Who is the WBI agent?"

"Underground doesn't know yet," she told him silently. "Meet me tonight."

"Will I see the leader?" he asked.

"Meet me tonight," was all she would reply.

He nodded, as though to himself, and stared at the signs adorning the inside of the bus. Names made familiar by television leaped at him. There was Ronson, Franklin, Stallman, Eliot, names of all kinds to give the impression of existence to a long-dead free enterprise; all were government owned, competing to enhance the illusion.

Who was the leader, he wondered, and why the secrecy? Some government bigwig probably, who kept his secret from all but a few. Well, time would tell.

He glanced out the window at the countryside rushing below. Trees. Green fields. The beginnings of the city of small square dwellings. A man got up, went to the rear of the helibus. After awhile, Arthur rose, went down the aisle to the exit platform. He paused for a minute, and then he stepped into space.

The air whirled about him; twin rotors, appearing from his clothing, churned and scraped the air, lowering him gently through the five hundred feet to the ground. Overhead, the helibus continued its prescribed journey, discharging passengers who resembled fluttering insects. He came to rest gently atop his roof, and the rotors ceased and folded invisibly beneath his coat.

The moon had risen well into the twilight sky, that moon which only a few hundred years before had furnished lovers with inspiration. Now, looking at it, one thought inevitably of the Lunar Prison Colony that occupied its entire surface, of the persons who had been sentenced to spend years on its ugly barren wasteland. Inspiration came possibly, but it was of a different nature.

He descended into the house, into the single room that was bedroom, living room, parlor. Helen, brunette and beautiful, attired in the semi-transparent

slacks that were the decreed style, rose from the couch and gave him a wifely peck on the cheek.

"Everything okay?" she asked, not appearing particularly interested. The standard question.

"Simply great," he said.

He settled into a hard plastic chair, uncomfortable but designed to improve posture.

The television set was blaring: "Nothing could be greater than to have a respirator made by Fra-a-a-a-nklin!" On the 40-inch screen a happy couple, Franklin respirators on their happy wrists, were bouncing happily across a miniature solar system, using planets for stepping stones.

I must be an atavist, he thought. How can people actually put up with this stuff. He could not subdue the grimace that rose automatically, but he managed to turn it into a grin as he saw Helen looking at him curiously.

"Something funny?"

"Nothing in particular." He couldn't very well tell her he thought a government-sponsored commercial was amusing. That was the equivalent of treason, for which the Lunar Prison Colony had been constructed.

Not that Helen wasn't understanding. Their marriage had been lacking in many things, true, but she was inclined to be

fair and broadminded on most issues which were not controlled. But when it came to things like the State and its directives, most people got emotionally patriotic. It was something like trying to discuss religion a century earlier, except that in the present case arguments could be easily won by sending the "treasonous" person to the prison satellite. The law made plain what was right and what was not.

"I was just thinking," he said, hoping to explain the grimace, "about a fellow at the office. He suggested that we should get a rebate on the airtax, because we don't utilize all the air we breathe in."

"You reported him, of course."

"Worse than that. We told him if he didn't like it he could stop breathing. Crime doesn't pay anymore."

"I should hope not," she said, and she seemed perfectly serious.

There was no point in arguing with Helen, so he didn't. She apparently had little interest in politics other than a layman's desire to see justice prevail, and if the government wanted to tax the air they breathed, why—let them; they were taxing everything else.

That's why he found himself drawn irresistibly to Julie; she wasn't a slave to convention. That's why he liked to meet her

in the darkness of the outside, when the curfew forbade anyone venturing into the night—at least, that was one reason. She was part of the forbidden fruit he secretly desired and vowed would have.

A government official's benign face appeared on the television screen to announce the Super State program. The World Flag materialized, waving in a studio-inspired breeze, and a chorus chanted: "Super State, Super State, Simply great is Super Sta-a-ate!"

"Sixty minutes of uninterrupted commercial," Arthur Dunlop thought with distaste. Plays and songs subtly presented to show that contemporary living was equivalent to a golden age. He was careful, however, not to let his face reveal his mind's opinion.

"The airtax man will be around to read the meter tonight," Helen reminded him.

"Fine," he murmured, but already he was only half-aware of the world around him as he dozed while appearing outwardly alert.

There was a time, he remembered vaguely, when there were no such things as respirators, when the air you breathed was free. For twenty of his thirty-four years he had known that golden era. There were taxes, of course, but only on the food you

ate, the money you earned, the entertainment you saw, et-cetera, almost ad infinitum. Air, it seemed—much to the government's evident dissatisfaction—was an untaxable commodity, a luxury which even the poor could enjoy without restriction.

Then came the war. The war that caused all peoples to finally unite under one government to insure peace. Arthur Dunlop knew of the war, for he was a part of it. He fought back to preserve his life, and they gave him a medal for it, a piece of cloth and metal which indicated that he was lucky enough to survive. It was another war to make the world safe for something or other, and he still recalled with a shudder the Battle of Boston, the Siege of New York, the great topplings of great cities into greater dust.

To counteract the poisonous by-products of civilized weapons, the respirators had been developed—small watch-like mechanisms that enabled the wearers to breathe in practically any atmosphere. After the war, they had been adapted to a new use.

"What?" Arthur Dunlop said.

Helen was extending a carton marked "6-C." "Mealtime," she declared.

He took the box, another development of the Last War, and opened it. Standardization was

the keynote, he remembered, for in that there is unity. Standardization of clothing, of living, of eating, of thinking.

He plopped a pill marked "steak" into his mouth, nibbled absently at the ones labeled "bread" and "potatoes and gravy," and then followed with a pill called "coffee." It might have been funny had he been able to view the scene objectively, but the time when he had been able to do that had long passed. They were the best government-made pills and tasted not a bit like their labels.

From the television set, an enthusiastic voice declared: "Ronson Rotors are the best, Try the thousand foot drop test, Be convinced it'll break your fall, Ronson Rotors are the best of all!"

Furiously, Arthur Dunlop chewed on his pill marked "apple pie."

There was a knock at the door. "Air tax," an authoritative voice called, and the door slid open to reveal an impassionate face surrounded by uniform. "Your respirators, please," the face directed in a monotone. "Monthly check."

Arthur Dunlop extended his wrist, and the man, frowning importantly, noted several numbers from the respirator dial and wrote them in a small black book; he carefully examined the part

that would tell if the device had been removed.

Arthur resisted an impulse to ask the man for a refund for the Carbon Dioxide he had exhaled during the past month to see what reaction he might get. But the man, eager to get ahead, would welcome the opportunity to report someone less patriotic than he, and there would follow an investigation. Investigations were taken as a matter of course, naturally, and even investigators were being investigated with confusing regularity. But under the present circumstances, Arthur could hardly afford the risk. Entirely too much was at stake.

"You could use a new respirator," the air tax man said in the tone of a man who had said this same thing many times before.

"Yes," Arthur agreed mechanically. "What kind would you suggest?"

"What kinds do you like?" the man said testily.

Arthur named the various kinds and the merits professed by each, to show that he had been attentive to the telecasts. The man, secure in the knowledge that Arthur was loyal to the cause, left.

Arthur sighed a vague sigh that could mean almost anything and watched Helen stretch her long limbs, smooth and sensuous

beneath their thin coverings. He wondered what thoughts, if any, were in her mind, but her lovely face was vacuous and non-committal as she reclined to dutifully watch the screen as a good citizen should.

The evening grew old, and with its aging came the insistence of various televised personalities that each product cavorting about the screen was undoubtedly the best possible, and anyone who didn't agree was most certainly an idiot of the most idiotic sort. Actually, since the government directed the manufacture of all commodities, it mattered little which product was bought, so long as they were bought. Finally—

"Time to go to bed," a grandfatherly individual intoned gently from the set. "Remember: to bed and to rise at a time not late, makes one healthy and wise for the Super State."

Arthur grimaced at the benign gentleman's countenance, but Helen set about pushing the buttons that would transform the room into a bedroom. Tables slid from sight, twin beds appeared, the lights dimmed.

They undressed in the dimness, without conversation, as they had these many years. It was as though they were separated by miles instead of only

a few feet, each unaware of the other's presence.

"I'm going to grab a fast shower," he told her and headed for the shower stall. He heard her answering murmur, as he closed the door of the airtight cubicle. Fingers ran over the dials, and invisible rays caressed his naked body, cleansing it of impurities with swift silent radiation.

When he stepped once more into the main room, Helen was lying unmoving on her bed. The television set was blank, and an almost inaudible hypnotic hum came from it, soothing, compelling, lulling. He sat on the edge of the bed, listening in fascination to the sound. Slowly, it faded, slowly, slowly . . .

He caught himself starting to doze, and he sat upright on the bed straining to hear the evasive hum. He shook his head violently to clear it. He wondered how many persons were aware that the noise was actually a high-frequency voice-recording which in effect hypnotized persons into sleep, and then instilled into each one's subconsciousness a faith in the glories of the government. Yet even when you knew, it was difficult to resist.

Stealthily, he rose and dressed again in dark silence. He then made his way across the room to the shower stall, entered,

closed the door securely. A manipulation of the dials, a soft pressure on a portion of one wail, and a section slid back to reveal a radio apparatus.

Arthur put the microphone to his lips, spoke swiftly into it, making contact. A furtive voice, crackled and staticky answered in code. Arthur gave his part of the ritual.

"Right," the voice said, relaxing a bit. "Everything okay?"

"Simply great," Arthur said, putting a smile into the phrase. It was good to hear George Keating's voice again. "How's everything up there?"

"Not bad. Nobody suspects anything as far as we know. Shipments are getting a bit slow, but I expect they'll be heavier before long. Ready to spring it?"

"Yes," Arthur said. "Oh, one thing though," frowning, "the underground suspects there's a WBI man in my unit."

"Anything further? Have they narrowed him down at all?"

"I don't think so. I'm going to a meeting tonight; I managed to talk Julie into it. If I can, I'll contact you later."

"Right-o."

Arthur closed the circuit and sealed the wall again, turning the dials to a random location. He opened the door of the cubicle and peered cautiously into the

gloom. He thought he detected a furtive movement, but it was only Helen turning on the bed.

He crossed the room, noiselessly ascended to the roof and leaped outward. Blades unfolded to churn the darkness. It was a Stallman Rotor—their commercials seemed the least offensive—and it deposited him gently beside his house; just as gently as any Ronson would have done.

Ahead of him, the stars glittered frostily in the night. He breathed the crystal air in great intakes of breath, trying not to remember it was taxed. Lines from Walter Scott leaped unaccountably to his mind: "Breathes there a man," he thought, "with soul so dead, who never to himself hath said, 'This is my own, my native land.'" He felt the last word could be justly changed to "air" to fit this overtaxed era in which he lived.

The moon was out, and he stopped to stare at it. Across its surface, in letters of fire, were the words: "Buy Air Bonds, A Solid Investment." There was little practical need for the ad; pay deductions were arbitrary. Shaking his head sadly, Arthur Dunlop walked into the night.

Night beckoned, and Arthur Dunlop followed its call. He went willfully, but he could not have resisted had he wanted to. The

streets were dark, lit only by the moon and the stars, and houses were dark phantoms rising in the night, their owners lulled to sleep by the omnipresent television receivers. But he tried not to think of that. He thought of the cool velvet evening which lay before him, and of the girl who waited quietly in the shadows of a deserted park.

He thought of that as he walked into the night, and he thought also of things more serious, and suddenly—

—a voice cried: "Stop!" It was a mechanical voice, tinny, without emotion. "It is the time of curfew. You are not allowed out. Your name?"

Arthur stood, petrified, and stared at a black robot face before him. He heard a click, loud in the darkness, and knew that his picture had been taken.

The sound jarred him from his immobility, and he turned and scampered into the darkness.

"Stop," the robot commanded, "Stop!" and a shaft of light darted from its forehead, piercing the darkness, shriveling grass beneath Arthur's feet. But the ray missed him, and he darted down the street, amid the pounding echoes of his flight.

After several blocks, he threw himself panting into a doorway and looked back down the street. Nothing. Silence and moonlight

and darkness, and only his own labored breathing while his chest rose and fell in unaccustomed gasps.

But they had his picture! In seconds, a giant machine could find a similar picture in its files, complete with every detail of information concerning him. They might get him before the work was complete. If he could only evade them until he could turn this to advantage. He felt in his pocket for the radioactive silver disc he knew was there.

Down the street, a shadow moved, and he held his breath. In a shaft of moonlight, black metal glinted darkly. With a muffled cry he slipped from the doorway and flew down the street, trying to still the noise he made. Behind him, no sounds came to indicate pursuit.

He darted across the street, went into an alley, crossed another street. Finally, he came to the park. He stopped. Fearfully, he looked behind him. No one. He walked forward.

The park was a mass of tree and shadow, indistinguishable. Softly, he called, "Julie." No answer. "Julie."

A gentle movement, and someone disengaged from the shadows, glided to him. Someone soft and warm—and feminine. He could smell the elusive taint of

her perfume even before she entered his arms.

"You're late," she said.

"I was detained."

She looked sharply at him. "Trouble?"

"I—I don't know. A robot surprised me. He took my picture."

"A robot!" she said in alarm, drawing away from him. "They probably already know who you are. Were you followed?"

"Part of the way, but I think I dropped him."

"You *think*?" Her tone was worried. "Do you realize you might have led him here. We can't go to the meeting place now. They'll be searching for you."

"And they'll find me if I stay here," he said mournfully. "Now, you've got to take me, Julie. I've got to go someplace."

"Where?" she said. "Where can anyone go—except up there? With a motion of her head she indicated the moon, hanging like a grim reminder of the Prison Colony it contained. She shook her head. "I should've suspected it when that WBI man showed up. Somehow they've gotten wise to you. Do you realize you've jeopardized our entire position?"

"I didn't mean to—"

"It matters very little whether or not you meant to," Julie said sharply; "the fact is, you've

done it." Her tone softened, "I'm sorry, Arthur, it's just that—"

"I understand how you feel," Arthur said gently, taking her in his arms. "Believe me, Julie, everything will turn out all right."

"I hope so," Julie said, "Well, we have to do something; we can't stay here."

"Take me to the hiding place, Julie," he begged; "we can work out something from there."

She looked at him briefly, considering the alternatives, her mind torn between affection for him and fear for the underground's safety. He knew she was recalling the many plans they had made for when all this was over, the legal matter of Helen, their home in a world where the air was free.

"If I stay here they will get me," he reasoned. "At least we have a chance the other way—if we hurry!"

In sudden determination, she said, "Come on, then."

She took him by the hand and led him deeper into the park. During the year he had been an unofficial member of the underground, supplying them with blueprints, he had never seen their headquarters, but he suspected it was close by, right under the noses of the authorities, and Julie did not disappoint him. She led him to a stone-

block monument commemorating heroes of the Last War, and effortlessly pushed aside one of the blocks to reveal the darkness of a tunnel.

"Follow me," she directed and disappeared.

Arthur did, but first he dropped the silver disc a few feet away. When they were in the tunnel, Julie closed the entrance again and produced a flashlight. By its beams, they made their way downward.

They walked for perhaps a half-mile, when the tunnel broadened into what seemed a cavern. Their footsteps echoed from the opposite wall with a click-click-click, click-click-click.

"The old subway," Julie explained, her voice hollow, and Arthur nodded. With the coming of the helibus system many years ago, the subways had been discarded and their entrances sealed and checked periodically. Of course, they couldn't know about the monument entrance. At least, they hadn't, Arthur amended, thinking of the silver disc whose emanations could now be easily picked up by the robots.

"Here we are," Julie said, after awhile, coming to a halt before a door. She tapped carefully with the flashlight according to a prearranged signal. The door slid open slightly, emitting a finger of light from the room's

glowtube. A man's face appeared to survey the corridor briefly, then the door went wide.

They entered a large room and the door slid into place behind them. Arthur strained his eyes, blinded temporarily by the light. Unfamiliar faces stared at him, about twenty of them. Men and women of all ages. He started suddenly. There, grinning pleasantly at him, was Austen, the young fellow from the office.

"Are we all here?" Julie wanted to know.

"Yes, we were waiting for you," a voice said.

Arthur whirled. "You?"

"Everything okay, Dunlop?" Samson asked, smiling.

"Simply great," he answered, a little weakly.

"What kept you?" Samson asked Julie.

"He was delayed by a robot."

"What?"

Austen was at the door, frowning. "I thought I heard a noise." His voice was a whisper.

Samson pulled out a gun. He glared at Dunlop. "If they followed you—"

The door gave way with a sudden blast that threw them all to the floor. In the smoking entrance a robot appeared. With an effort, Samson forced himself erect and leveled his blaster.

Before he could fire, Arthur leaped at the man, wrenched the

weapon from his fingers. Then the robot was in the room, then another, and another, their forehead-rays ready for instant use. There was no escape.

"Arthur!" Julie cried hoarsely.

"There's your WBI man," Samson accused.

Arthur smiled crookedly and held on to the blaster in his hand. He did not look at Julie, for there was silent contempt and shame in her eyes.

The trial was short and simple, for justice had ceased to be a complicated thing and was governed by facts considered in the light of pre-established premises. To offset any possibility of human error, a great machine unemotionally sifted and weighed facts presented to it and arrived at a decision. Either those accused were guilty or they were not guilty, and obviously they were, so the trial itself and Arthur's testimony were matters of formality. The prisoners were, of course, duly convicted and sentenced to life on the Lunar Prison Colony, where life was rumored to be not long.

However, an unexpected development arose. The Court, it seems, had fed also into the machine various newly discovered facts concerning Arthur Dunlop, and the machine, with a figurative eye prefocused on

State security, had arrived at a further pronouncement.

"You are to be commended," the Court said, as spokesman for the machine, "for your excellent work as a member of the World Bureau of Investigation. However, there is a little matter of a radio set concealed in your home—"

Arthur's face went white. Helen, he thought. That movement in the darkness—she hadn't been asleep! Of course. She was loyal to the cause, even to the extent of betraying her husband; perhaps she even suspected about Julie. He almost laughed aloud.

"But that was for emergency use," he pleaded, knowing it would do no good, "to contact the WBI when necessary."

"That may be," the Court conceded. "However, it was unauthorized, and it is even possible that its use might be harmful to the State. Until we can investigate further, you will be sentenced to a temporary term of one year on the Lunar Prison Colony, after which your case will be automatically up for review. I understand you applied for Lunar duty. This will give you an excellent opportunity to become acquainted with conditions firsthand."

The Court's gavel fell, an archaic but effective symbol of the passing of judgment. He did

not look at the other prisoners who sat gloating nearby, even in the losing of their cause. Strange, Arthur Dunlop thought almost unemotionally, the way things had turned out . . .

The Lunar Prison ship came down out of the sky like a gray-metal coffin, settling with infinite slowness to the dock where the prisoners waited silently. The airlock opened and a gangplank stretched its finger towards them. A blond uniformed man strode from the ship, his Captain's bars glinting in the afternoon sunlight.

The Earthguard came forward, holding out a list of names. "Some additions to your labor camp, my dear Captain," he said jovially.

"And welcome they'll be," the Captain said, an indefinable glint in his eyes. "We have a lot of work to accomplish up there."

"So I've heard," the guard said.

The Captain smiled. "You haven't heard the half of it," he said, winking, and the guard guffawed.

"All right, all right," Samson growled irritably. "If we're going, let's go."

"Patience, friend," the blond Captain admonished. "Right this way now, that's right, through the airlock, take your seats as .

I call them off. Dunlop, one; Samson, two; Austen, three . . ."

Arthur filed silently into the spaceship, Samson and Julie and the others behind him. He took a seat and looked around.

He cried out at what he saw, and then Samson's hands were upon his neck, squeezing with the fury of a man possessed by one thought. He felt his breath being cut off, the room darken. They fell into the aisle. He could hear shouts of vengeance around him, and he thought he heard Julie's frantic voice telling them to stop. Julie—

The airlock clanged with awful finality, and there was a sickening rush as the spaceship darted aloft. Uncushioned bodies flew, and Arthur felt the pressure on his throat ease.

He blinked open his eyes, forced himself erect. The blond Captain was bending over him. "You okay?"

"Still alive, George," he said, massaging his throat, "but I think we'd better tell them before I need a new head."

"George?" Julie said, puzzled. "You two know each other?"

"We were in the war together," the Captain said.

Arthur rose unsteadily. "I'd like you people to meet my best friend, George Keating."

"But—"

"We decided some time ago

that Earth is no place for an underground movement," Arthur said. "There's too much secrecy, too much danger involved in the slightest movement away from the established pattern. People are too involved with the Super State idea and the dangers to their own particular skins." Like my wife, Helen, he thought to himself.

"There's one place, though," George Keating supplied, "where the inhabitants are in perfect accord with overthrowing the government as it now exists."

"Where?" Samson asked skeptically.

"Where else," Arthur told him, smiling, "but the Moon, on the prison colony where people were sent because they didn't like the way things were turning out politically and otherwise on Earth. It was a comparatively simple matter to replace the guards with our own group."

"Then," Julie exclaimed, "then you were in on this all the time. It was part of a plan."

Arthur nodded. "All except Helen's turning me in, which was unexpected but just as well I suppose. We're almost ready for the ultimatum, and we wanted this group to aid us, which is why I betrayed you. We could have whisked you away secretly, but there was greater danger in that and the disappearance of an

individual, much less a group, couldn't go unnoticed in that society. Besides, this way they'll be more complacent."

"As I told that guard," Keating added, "we've still got a lot of work to do, chiefly on the other side of the Moon where Earth can't see—put the finishing touches on spaceships we've been building, assemble the weapons and the guided missiles. A lot of work. We may not have to use them—I hope we don't—but they'll be ready, just in case."

Samson wet his lips. "It's a big project," he said testily.

"Of course," Arthur admitted, smiling. He indicated a porthole. "But look at Earth down there."

They crowded to see. It was a large green ball, glowing iridescently, becoming smaller as they approached the prison colony that was not a prison colony. Julie shrank into Arthur's arms.

"It's beautiful," she said.

Austen said, "Why, it looks fragile, like you could reach out from here and—and smash it." There was awe and wonder in his voice.

"You can," Keating said, "if necessary." His eyes narrowed. "It's a perfect target, a sitting duck from the sky. Who owns the Moon controls Earth."

"I'd like to apologize," Samson said, offering his outstretched hand to Arthur.

"Me, too," Julie said.

"I'll accept both apologies," Arthur Dunlop said, "but from you, Julie, I won't settle for a handshake."

Julie took the hint.

"We have a lot of time yet, so we may as well all relax," Keating announced. "Arthur and I can brief you on the situation

as it stands." He grinned. "If he ever comes up for air!"

They laughed the laughter of free men and gazed through the porthole at their destination. The bright face of the Moon floated towards them. Behind them, the Earth hung at peace—unsuspecting that anything had changed.