

worlds

of



All New Stories

**science
fiction**

JULY, 1963

Vol. 13, Number 3

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IF published bi-monthly by Galaxy Publishing Corporation, Robert M. Guinn, President, Vol. 13, No. 2, Main Office: 421 Hudson Street, New York 14, New York. 40c per copy. Subscriptions 12 issues \$3.60 in the United States, Canada, Mexico, South and Central America and U. S. possessions, elsewhere \$4.60. Second-class postage paid at New York, New York, and at additional mailing offices. Copyright by Galaxy Publishing Corporation, 1963. All rights including translations reserved. All material submitted must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelopes. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. All stories are fiction, and any similarity between characters and actual persons is coincidental.

Printed in the U. S. A. by the Guinn Company, Inc., New York 14, N. Y.

DOWN TO THE WORLDS OF MEN

BY ALEXEI PANSHIN

ILLUSTRATED BY NODEL

The ancient rule was sink or swim — swim in the miasma of a planet without spaceflight, or sink to utter destruction!

I

The horses and packs were loaded before we went aboard the scoutship. The scout bay is no more than a great oversized airlock with a dozen small ships squatting over their tubes, but it was the last of the Ship that I might ever see, so I took a long final look from the top of the ramp.

There were sixteen of us girls and thirteen boys. We took our places in the seats in the center of the scout. Riggy Allen made a joke that nobody bothered to laugh at, and then we were all silent. I was feeling lost and just beginning to enjoy it when Jimmy Dentremont came over to me. He's red-headed and has a face that makes him look about ten. An intelligent runt like me.

He said what I expected. "Mia, do you want to go partners if we can get together when we get down?"

I guess he thought that because we were always matched on study I liked him. Well, I did when I wasn't mad at him, but now I had that crack he'd made about being a snob in mind, so I said, "Not likely. I want to come back alive." It wasn't fair, but it was a good crack and he went back to his place without saying anything.

My name is Mia Haverro. I'm fourteen, of course, or I wouldn't be telling this. I'm short, dark and scrawny, though I don't expect that scrawniness to last much longer. Mother is very good looking. In the meantime, I've got brains as a consolation.

After we were all settled, George Fuhonin, the pilot, raised the ramps. We sat there for five minutes while they bled air out of our tube and then we just . . . dropped. My stomach turned flips. We didn't have to leave that way, but George thinks it's fun to be a hot pilot.

Thinking it over, I was almost sorry I'd been stinking to Jimmy D. He's the only competition I have my own age. The trouble is, you don't go partners with the competition, do you? Besides, there was still that crack about being a snob.

The planet chosen for our Trial was called Tintera. The last contact the Ship had had with it — and we were the ones who dropped them — was almost 150 years ago. No contact since. That had made the Council debate a little before they dropped us there, but they decided

it was all right in the end. It didn't make any practical difference to us kids because they never tell you anything about the place they're going to drop you. All I knew was the name. I wouldn't have known that much if Daddy weren't Chairman of the Council.

I felt like crawling in a corner of the ship and crying, but nobody else was breaking down, so I didn't. I did feel miserable. I cried when I said good-bye to Mother and Daddy — a real emotional scene — but that wasn't in public.

It wasn't the chance of not coming back that bothered me really, because I never believed that I wouldn't. The thought that made me unhappy was that I would have to be on a planet for a whole month. Planets make me feel wretched.

The gravity is always wrong, for one thing. Either your arches and calves ache or every time you step you think you're going to trip on a piece of fluff and break your neck. There are vegetables everywhere and little grubby things just looking for *you* to crawl on. If you can think of anything creepier than that, you've got a real nasty imagination. Worst of all, planets stink. Every single one smells — I've been on enough to know that. A planet is all right for a Mud-eater, but not for me.

We have a place in the Ship like that — the Third Level — but it's only a thousand square miles and any time it gets on your nerves you can go up a level or down a level and be back in civilization.

When we reached Tintera, they started dropping us. We swung over the sea from the morning side and then dropped low over gray-green forested hills. Finally George spotted a clear area and dropped into it. They don't care what order you go in, so Jimmy D. jumped up, grabbed his gear and then led his horse down the ramp. I think he was still smarting from the slap I'd given him.

In a minute we were airborne again. I wondered if I would ever see Jimmy — if he would get back alive.

It's no game we play. When we turn fourteen, they drop us on the nearest colonized planet and come back one month later. That may sound like fun to you, but a lot of us never come back alive.

Don't think I was helpless. I'm hell on wheels. They don't let us grow for fourteen years and then kick us out to die. They prepare us. They do figure, though, that if you can't keep yourself alive by the time you're fourteen, you're too stupid, foolish or unlucky to be any use to the Ship. There's sense behind it. It means that everybody on the Ship is a person who can take care of himself if he has to. Daddy says that something has to be done in a closed society to keep the population from decaying mentally and physically, and this is it. And it helps to keep the population steady.

I began to check my gear out — sonic pistol, pickup signal so I could be found at the end of the month, saddle and cinches, food and clothes. Venie Morlock has got a crush on Jimmy D., and when she

saw me start getting ready to go, she began to check her gear, too. At our next landing, I grabbed Ninc's reins and cut Venie out smoothly. It didn't have anything to do with Jimmy. I just couldn't stand to put off the bad moment any longer.

The ship lifted impersonally away from Ninc and me like a rising bird, and in just a moment it was gone. Its gray-blue color was almost the color of the half-overcast sky, so I was never sure when I saw it last.

II

The first night was hell, I guess because I'm not used to having the lights out. That's when you really start to feel lonely, being alone in the dark. When the sun disappears, somehow you wonder in your stomach if it's really going to come back. But I lived through it — one day in thirty gone.

I rode in a spiral search pattern during the next two days. I had three things in mind — stay alive, find people and find some of the others. The first was automatic. The second was to find out if there was a slot I could fit into for a month. If not, I would have to find a place to camp out, as nasty as that would be. The third was to join forces, though not with that meatball Jimmy D.

No, he isn't really a meatball. The trouble is that I don't take nothing from nobody, especially him, and he doesn't take nothing from nobody, especially me. So we do a lot of fighting.

I had a good month for Trial. My birthday is in November — too close to Year End Holiday for my taste, but this year it was all right. It was spring on Tintera, but it was December in the Ship, and after we got back we had five days of Holiday to celebrate. It gave me something to look forward to.

In two days of riding, I ran onto nothing but a few odd-looking animals. I shot one small one and ate it. It turned out to taste pretty good, though not as good as a slice from Hambone No. 4, to my mind the best meat vat on the Ship. I've eaten things so gruey-looking that I wondered that anybody had the guts to try them in the first place and they've turned out to taste good. And I've seen things that looked good that I couldn't keep on my stomach. So I guess I was lucky.

On the third day, I found the road. I brought Ninc down off the hillside, losing sight of the road in the trees, and then reaching it in the level below. It was narrow and made of sand spread over a hard base. Out of the marks in the sand, I could pick out the tracks of horses and both narrow and wide wheels. Other tracks I couldn't identify.

One of the smartest moves in history was to include horses when they dropped the colonies. I say "they" because, while we did the actual dropping, the idea originated with the whole evac plan back on Earth. Considering how short a time it was in which the colonies were established, there was not time to set up industry, so they had to have draft animals.

The first of the Great Ships was finished in 2025. One of the eight, as well as the two that were being built then, went up with everything else in the Solar System in 2041. In that sixteen years 112 colonies were planted. I don't know how many of those planets had animals that *could* have been substituted but, even if they had, they would have had to be domesticated from scratch. That would have been stupid. I'll bet that half the colonies would have failed if they hadn't had horses.

We'd come in from the west over the ocean, so I traveled east on the road. That much water makes me nervous, and roads have to go somewhere.

I came on my first travelers three hours later. I rounded a tree-lined bend, ducking an overhanging branch, and pulled Ninc to a stop. There were five men on horseback herding a bunch of the ugliest creatures alive.

They were green and grotesque. They had squat bodies, long limbs and knobby bulges at their joints. They had square, flat animal masks for faces. But they walked on their hind legs and they had paws that were almost hands, and that was enough to make them seem almost human. They made a wordless, chilling, lowing sound as they milled and plodded along.

I started Ninc up again and moved slowly to catch up with them. All the men on horseback had guns in saddle boots. They looked as nervous as cats with kittens. One of them

had a string of packhorses on a line and he saw me and called to another who seemed to be the leader. That one wheeled his black horse and rode back toward me.

He was a middle-aged man, maybe as old as my Daddy. He was large and he had a hard face. Normal enough, but hard. He pulled to a halt when we reached each other, but I kept going. He had to come around and follow me. I believe in judging a person by his face. A man can't help the face he owns, but he can help the expression he wears on it. If a man looks mean, I generally believe that he is. This one looked mean. That was why I kept riding.

He said, "What be you doing out here, boy? Be you out of your head? There be escaped Losels in these woods."

I told you I hadn't finished filling out yet, but I hadn't thought it was that bad. I wasn't ready to make a fight over the point, though. Generally, I can't keep my bloody mouth shut, but now I didn't say anything. It seemed smart.

"Where be you from?" he asked.

I pointed to the road behind us.

"And where be you going?"

I pointed ahead. No other way to go.

He seemed exasperated. I have that effect sometimes. Even on Mother and Daddy, who should know better.

We were coming up on the others now, and the man said, "Maybe you'd better ride on from here with us. For protection."

He had an odd way of twisting his sounds, almost as though he had

a mouthful of mush. I wondered whether he were just an oddball or whether everybody here spoke the same way. I'd never heard International English spoken any way but one, even on the planet Daddy made me visit with him.

One of the other outriders came easing by then. I suppose they'd been watching us all the while. He called to the hard man.

"He be awfully small, Horst. I doubt me a Losel'd even notice him at all. We mought as well throw him back again."

The rider looked at me. When I didn't dissolve in terror as he expected, he shrugged and one of the other men laughed.

The hard man said to the others, "This boy will be riding along with us to Forton for protection."

I looked down at the plodding, unhappy creatures they were driving along and one looked back at me with dull, expressionless golden eyes. I felt uncomfortable.

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

What the man did then surprised me. He said, "I do think so," and reached for the rifle in his saddle boot.

I whipped my sonic pistol out so fast that he was caught leaning over with the rifle half out. His jaw dropped. He knew what I held and he didn't want to be fried.

I said, "Ease your rifles out and drop them gently to the ground."

They did, watching me all the while with wary expressions.

When all the rifles were on the ground, I said, "All right, let's go."

They didn't want to move. They

didn't want to leave the rifles. I could see that. Horst didn't say anything. He just watched me with narrowed eyes. But one of the others held up a hand and in wheedling tones said, "Look here, kid. . ."

"Shut up," I said, in as mean a voice as I could muster, and he did. It surprised me. I didn't think I sounded *that* mean. I decided he just didn't trust the crazy kid not to shoot.

After twenty minutes of easy riding for us and hard walking for the creatures, I said, "If you want your rifles, you can go back and get them now." I dug my heels into Ninc's sides and rode on. At the next bend I looked back and saw four of them holding their packhorses and the creatures still while one beat a dust-raising retreat down the road.

I put this episode in the "file and hold for analysis" section in my mind and rode on, feeling good. I think I even giggled once. Sometimes I even convince myself that I'm hell on wheels.

III

When I was nine, my Daddy gave me a painted wooden doll that my great-grandmother brought from Earth. The thing is that inside it, nestled one in another, are eleven more dolls, each one smaller than the last. I like to watch people when they open it for the first time.

My face must have been like that as I rode along the road.

The country leveled into a great rolling valley and the trees gave way

to great farms and fields. In the fields, working, were some of the green creatures, which surprised me since the ones I'd seen before hadn't seemed smart enough to count to one, let alone do any work.

But it relieved me. I thought they might have been eating them or something.

I passed two crossroads and started to meet more people, but nobody questioned me. I met people on horsback, and twice I met trucks moving silently past. And I overtook a wagon driven by the oldest man I've seen in my life. He waved to me, and I waved back.

Near the end of the afternoon I came to the town, and there I received a jolt that sickened me.

By the time I came out on the other side, I was sick. My hands were cold and sweaty and my head was spinning, and I wanted to kick Ninc to a gallop.

I rode slowly in, looking all around, missing nothing. The town was all stone, wood and brick. Out of date. Out of time, really. There were no machines more complicated than the trucks I'd seen earlier. At the edge of town, I passed a newspaper office with a headline pasted in the window — **INVASION!** I remember that. I wondered about it.

But I looked most closely at the people. In all that town, I didn't see one girl over ten years old and no grown-up women at all. There were little kids, there were boys and there were men, but no girls. All the boys and men wore pants, and so did I, which must have been why Horst and his buddies assumed I was

a boy. It wasn't flattering; but I decided I'd not tell anybody different until I found what made the clocks tick on this planet.

But that wasn't what bothered me. It was the kids. My God! They swarmed. I saw a family come out of a house — a father and *four* children. It was the most foul thing I've ever seen. It struck me then — these people were Free Birthers! I felt a wave of nausea and I closed my eyes until it passed.

The first thing you learn in school is that if it weren't for idiot and criminal people like these, Earth would never have been destroyed. The evacuation would never have had to take place, and eight billion people wouldn't have died. There wouldn't have *been* eight billion people. But, no. They bred and they spread and they devoured everything in their path like a cancer. They gobbled up all the resources that Earth had and crowded and shoved one another until the final war came.

I am lucky. My great-great-grandparents were among those who had enough foresight to see what was coming. If it hadn't been for them and some others like them, there wouldn't be any humans left anywhere. And I wouldn't be here. That may not scare you, but it scares me.

What happened before, when people didn't use their heads and wound up blowing the Solar System apart, is something nobody should forget. The older people don't let *us* forget. But these people had, and that the Council should know.

For the first time since I landed on Tintera, I felt *really* frightened. There was too much going on that I didn't understand. I felt a blind urge to get away, and when I reached the edge of town, I whomped Ninc a good one and gave him his head.

I let him run for almost a mile before I pulled him down to a walk again. I couldn't help wishing for Jimmy D. Whatever else he is, he's smart and brains I needed.

How do you find out what's going on? Eavesdrop? That's a lousy method. For one thing, people can't be depended on to talk about the things you want to hear. For another, you're likely to get caught. Ask somebody? Who? Make the mistake of bracing a fellow like Horst and you might wind up with a sore head and an empty pocket. The best thing I could think of was to find a library, but that might be a job.

I'd had two bad shocks on this day, but they weren't the last. In the late afternoon, when the sun was starting to sink and a cool wind was starting to ripple the tree leaves, I saw the scoutship high in the sky. The dying sun colored it a deep red. Back again? I wondered what had gone wrong.

I reached down into my saddlebag and brought out my contact signal. The scoutship swung up in the sky in a familiar movement calculated to drop the stomach out of everybody aboard. George Fuhonin's style. I triggered the signal, my heart turning flips all the while. I didn't know why he was back, but I wasn't really sorry.

The ship swung around until it was coming back on a path almost over my head, going in the same direction. Then it went into a slip and started bucking so hard that I knew this wasn't hot piloting at all, just plain idiot stutter-fingered stupidity at the controls. As it skidded by me overhead, I got a good look at it and knew that it wasn't one of ours. Not too different, but not ours.

One more enigma. Where was it from? Not here. Even if you know how, and we wouldn't tell these Mud-eaters how, a scoutship is something that takes an advanced technology to build.

I felt defeated and tired. Not much farther along the road, I came to a campsite with two wagons pulled in for the night, and I couldn't help but pull in myself. The campsite was large and had two permanent buildings on it. One was a well enclosure and the other was little more than a high-walled pen. It didn't even have a roof.

I set up camp and ate my dinner. In the wagon closest to me were a man, his wife and their three children. The kids were running around and playing, and one of them ran close to the high-walled pen. His father came and pulled him away.

The kids weren't to blame for their parents, but when one of them said hello to me, I didn't even answer. I know how lousy I would feel if I had two or three brothers and sisters, but it didn't strike me until that moment that it wouldn't even seem out of the ordinary to these kids. Isn't that horrible?

About the time I finished eating, and before it grew dark, the old man I had seen earlier in the day drove his wagon in. He fascinated me. He had white hair, something I had read about in stories but had never seen before.

When nightfall came, they started a large fire. Everybody gathered around. There was singing for awhile, and then the father of the children tried to pack them off to bed. But they weren't ready to go, so the old man started telling them a story. In the old man's odd accent, and sitting there in the campfire light surrounded by darkness, it seemed just right.

It was about an old witch named Baba Yaga who lived in the forest in a house that stood on chicken legs. She was the nasty stepmother of a nice little girl, and to get rid of the kid, she sent her on a phony errand into the deep dark woods at nightfall. I could appreciate the poor girl's position. All the little girl had to help her were the handkerchief, the comb and the pearl that she had inherited from her dear dead mother. But, as it turned out, they were just enough to defeat nasty old Baba Yaga and bring the girl safely home.

I wished for the same for myself.

The old man had just finished and they were starting to drag the kids off to bed when there was a commotion on the road at the edge of the camp. I looked but my eyes were adjusted to the light of the fire and I couldn't see far into the dark.

A voice there said, "I'll be damned if I'll take another day like this one,

Horst. We should have been here hours ago. It be your fault we're not."

Horst growled a retort. I decided that it was time for me to leave the campfire. I got up and eased away as Horst and his men came up to the fire, and cut back to where Ninc was parked. I grabbed up my blankets and mattress and started to roll them up. I had a pretty good idea now what they used the high-walled pen for.

I should have known that they would have to pen the animals up for the night. I should have used my head. I hadn't and now it was time to take leave.

I never got the chance.

I was just heaving the saddle up on Ninc when I felt a hand on my shoulder and I was swung around.

"Well, well. Horst, look who we have here," he called. It was the one who'd made the joke about me being beneath the notice of a Losel. He was alone with me now, but with that call the others would be up fast.

I brought the saddle around as hard as I could and then up, and he went down. He started to get up again, so I dropped the saddle on him and reached inside my jacket for my gun. Somebody grabbed me then from behind and pinned my arms to my side.

I opened my mouth to scream — I have a good scream—but a rough smelly hand clamped down over it before I had a chance to get more than a lungful of air. I bit down hard — 5000 lbs. psi, I'm told — but he

didn't let me go. I started to kick, but Horst jerked me off my feet and dragged me off.

When we were behind the pen and out of earshot of the fire, he stopped dragging me and dropped me in a heap. "Make any noise," he said, "and I'll hurt you."

That was a silly way to put it, but somehow it said more than if he'd threatened to break my arm or my head. It left him a latitude of things to do if he pleased. He examined his hand. There was enough moonlight for that. "I ought to club you anyway," he said.

The one I'd dropped the saddle on came up then. The others were putting the animals in the pen. He started to kick me, but Horst stopped him.

"No," he said. "Look through the kid's gear, bring the horse and what we can use."

The other one didn't move. "Get going, Jack," Horst said in a menacing tone and they stood toe to toe for a long moment before Jack finally backed down. It seemed to me that Horst wasn't so much objecting to me being kicked, but was rather establishing who did the kicking in his bunch.

But I wasn't done yet. I was scared, but I still had the pistol under my jacket.

Horst turned back to me and I said, "You can't do this and get away with it."

He said, "Look, boy. You may not know it, but you be in a lot of trouble. So don't give me a hard time."

He still thought I was a boy. It

was not time to correct him, but I didn't like to see the point go unchallenged. It was unflattering.

"The courts won't let you get away with this," I said. I'd passed a courthouse in the town with a carved motto over the doors: EQUAL JUSTICE UNDER THE LAW or TRUTH OUR SHIELD AND JUSTICE OUR SWORD or something stuffy like that.

He laughed, not a phony, villain-type laugh, but a real laugh, so I knew I'd goofed.

"Boy, boy. Don't talk about the courts. I be doing you a favor. I be taking what I can use of your gear, but I be letting you go. You go to court and they'll take everything and lock you up besides. I be leaving you your freedom."

"Why would they be doing that?" I asked. I slipped my hand under my jacket.

"Every time you open your mouth you shout that you be off one of the Ships," Horst said. "That be enough. They already have one of you brats in jail in Forton."

I was about to bring my gun out when up came Jack leading Ninc, with all my stuff loaded on. I mentally thanked him.

He said, "The kid's got some good equipment. But I can't make out what this be for." He held out my pickup signal.

Horst looked at it, then handed it back. "Throw it away," he said.

I leveled my gun at them — Hell on Wheels strikes again! I said, "Hand that over to me."

Horst made a disgusted sound.

"Don't make any noise," I said,

"or you'll fry. Now hand it over."

I stowed it away, then paused with one hand on the leather horn of the saddle. "What's the name of the kid in jail in Forton?"

"I can't remember," he said. "But it be coming to me. Hold on."

I waited. Then suddenly my arm was hit a numbing blow from behind and the gun went flying. Jack pounced after it and Horst said, "Good enough," to the others who'd come up behind me.

I felt like a fool.

Horst stalked over and got the signal. He dropped it on the ground and said in a voice far colder than mine could ever be, because it was natural and mine wasn't, "The piece be yours." Then he tromped on it until it cracked and fell apart.

Then he said, "Pull a gun on me twice. Twice." He slapped me so hard that my ears rang. "You dirty little punk."

I said calmly, "You big louse."

It was a time I would have done better to keep my mouth shut. All I can remember is a flash of pain as his fist crunched against the side of my face and then nothing.

Brains are no good if you don't use them.

IV

I remember pain and sickness, and motion, but my next clear memory is waking in a bed in a house. I had a feeling that time had passed but how much I didn't know. I looked around and found the old man who had told the story sitting by my bed.



"How be you feeling this morning, young lady?" he asked. He had white hair and a seamed face and his hands were gnarled and old. His face was red, and the red and the white of his hair made a sharp contrast with the bright blue of his deep-set eyes. It was a good face.

"Not very healthy," I said. "How long has it been?"

"Two days," he said. "You'll get over it soon enough. I be Daniel Kutsov. And you?"

"I'm Mia Haverro."

"I found you dumped in a ditch after Horst Fanger and his boys had left you," he said. "A very unpleasant man ... as I suppose he be bound to be, herding Losels."

"Those green things were Losels? Why are they afraid of them?"

"The ones you saw beed drugged. They wouldn't obey otherwise. Once in awhile a few be stronger than the drug and they escape to the woods. The drug cannot be so strong that they cannot work. So the strongest escape. They be some danger to most people, and a great danger to men like Horst Fanger who buy them from the ships. Every so often, hunters go out to thin them down."

"That seems like slavery," I said, yawning.

It was a stupid thing to say, like some comment about the idiocy of a Free Birth policy. Not the sentiment, but the timing.

Mr. Kutsov treated the comment with more respect than it deserved. "Only God can decide a question like that," he said gently. "Be it slavery to use my horses to work

for me? I don't know anyone who would say so. A man be a different matter, though. The question be whether a Losel be like a horse or like a man, and that I can't answer. Now go to sleep again and in a while I will bring you some food."

He left then, but I didn't go to sleep. I was in trouble. I had no way to contact the scoutship. There was only one way out, and that was to find somebody else who did have his signal. That wasn't going to be easy.

Mr. Kutsov brought me some food later in the day, and I asked him then, "Why are you doing all this for me?"

He said, "I don't like to see children hurt, by people like Horst Fanger or by anyone."

"But I'm from one of the Ships," I said. "You know that, don't you?"

Mr. Kutsov nodded. "Yes, I know that."

"I understand that is pretty bad around here."

"With some people, true. But all the people who hate the Ships don't realize that if it beedn't for the Ships they wouldn't be here at all. They hold their grudge too close to their hearts. There be some of us who disagree with the government though it has lost us our families or years from our lives, and we would not destroy what we cannot agree with. When such an one as Horst Fanger uses this as an excuse to rob and injure a child, I will not agree. He has taken all that you have and there is no way to reclaim it, but what I can give of my house be yours."

I thanked him as best I could and then I asked him what the grudge was that they held against the Ships.

"It ben't a simple thing," he said. "You have seen how poor and backward we be. We realize it. Now and again, when you decide to stop, we see you people from the Ships. And you ben't poor or backward. You could call what we feel jealousy, if you wanted, but it be more than that and different. When we beed dropped here, there beed no scientists or technicians among us. I can understand. Why should they leave the last places where they had a chance to use and develop their knowledge for a backward planet where there is no equipment, no opportunity? What be felt here be that all the men who survived the end of Earth and the Solar System be the equal heirs of man's knowledge and accomplishment. But by bad luck, things didn't work out that way. So ideas urged by the Ships be ignored, and the Ships be despised, and people from the Ships be treated as shamefully as you have beed or worse."

I could think of a good example of an idea that the Ships emphasized that had been ignored. Only it was more than an idea or an opinion. It was a cold and deadly lesson taught by history. It was: Man becomes an organism that ultimately destroys itself unless he regulates his own size and growth. That was what I was taught.

I said, "I can understand how they might feel that way, but it's not fair. We pretty much support ourselves.

As much as we can, we re-use things and salvage things, but we still need raw materials. The only thing we have to trade is knowledge. If we didn't have anything to trade for raw materials, that would be the end of us. Do we have a choice?"

"I don't hold you to blame," Mr. Kutsov said slowly, "but I can't help but to feel that you have made a mistake and that it will hurt you in the end."

I didn't say it, but I thought — when you lay blame, whom do you put it on? People who are obviously sick like these Mud-eaters, or people who are normal like us?

After I got better, I had the run of Mr. Kutsov's house. It was a small place near the edge of Forton, surrounded by trees and with a small garden. Mr. Kutsov made a regular shipping run through the towns to the coast and back every second week. It was not a profitable business, but he said that at his age, profit was no longer very important. He was very good to me, but I didn't understand him.

He gave me lessons before he let me go outside into the town. Women were second class citizens around here, but prejudice of that sort wasn't in Mr. Kutsov. Dressed as I was, as scrawny as I am, when people saw me here, they saw a boy. People see what they expect to see. I could get away with my sex, but not my accent. I might sound right on seven Ships and on 111 other planets, but here I was wrong. And I had two choices — sound right or shut up. One of these choices was impossible for me, so I

set out to learn to sound like a Tinteran, born and bred, with Mr. Kutsov's aid.

It was a long time before he was willing to give me a barely passing grade. He said, "All right. You should keep listening to people and correcting yourself, but I be satisfied. You talk as though you have a rag in your mouth, but I think you can get by."

Before I went out into town, I found out one more important thing. It was the answer to a question that I didn't ask Mr. Kutsov. I'd been searching for it in old newspapers, and at last I found the story I was looking for. The last sentence read: "After sentencing, Dentermount was sent to the Territorial Jail in Forton to serve his three-month term."

I thought, they misspelled his name. And then I thought, trust it to be Jimmy D. He gets in almost as much trouble as I do.

Though you may think it strange, my first stop was the library.

I've found that it helps to be well-researched. I got what I could from Mr. Kutsov's books during the first days while he was outdoors working in his garden. In his library, I found a novel that he had written himself called *The White Way*.

He said, "It took me forty years to write it, and I have spent forty-two years since living with the political repercussions. It has beed an interesting forty-two years, but I am not sure that I would do it again. Read the book if you be interested."

I did read it, though I couldn't

understand what the fuss was about. It seemed reasonable to me. But these Mud-eaters were crazy anyway. I couldn't help but think that he and Daddy would have found a lot in common. They were both fine, tough-minded people, and though you would never know it to look at them, they were the same age. Except that at the age of eighty Mr. Kutsov was old, and at the age of eighty Daddy was not.

It cost me an effort to walk through the streets of Forton, but after my third trip, the pain was less, though the number of children still made me sick.

In the library, I spent four days getting a line on Tintera. I read their history. I studied their geography and, as sneakily as I could, I tore out the best local maps I could find.

On my trips through town, I took the time to look up Horst Fanger's place of business. It was a house, a shed and pen for the Losels, a stable, a truck garage (one truck — broken down) and a sale block, all house in one rambling, shanty building. Mr. Horst Fanger was apparently a big man. Big deal.

When I was ready, I scouted out the jail. It was a raw unpleasant day, the sort that makes me hate planets, and rain was threatening when I reached the jailpen. It was a solid three-story building of great stone blocks, shaped like a fortress and protected by bars, an iron-spike fence and two nasty-looking dogs. On my second trip around, the rain began. I beat it to the front and dodged in the entrance.

I was standing there, shaking the rain off, when a man in a green uniform came stalking out of one of the offices that lined the first-floor hallway. My heart stopped for a moment, but he went right by without giving me a second look and went upstairs. That gave me some confidence and so I started poking around.

I had covered the bulletin boards and the offices on one side of the hall when another man in green came into the hall and made straight for me. I didn't wait, I walked toward him, too. I said, as wide-eyed and innocent as I could, "Can you help me, sir?"

"Well, that depends. What sort of help do you need?" He was a big, rather slow man with one angled cloth bar on his shirt front over one pocket and a plate that said RO-BARDS pinned over the pocket on the other side. He seemed good-natured.

I said, "Jerry had to write about the capital, and Jimmy got the Governor, and I got you."

"Hold on there. First, what be your name?"

"Billy Davidow," I said. "I don't know what to write, sir, and I thought you could show me around and tell me things."

"I be sorry, son," he said. "We be pretty caught up today. Could you make it some other afternoon or maybe some evening?"

I said slowly, "I have to hand the paper in this week."

After a minute, he said, "All right. I'll take you around. But I

can't spare much time. It'll have to be a quick tour."

The offices were on the first floor. Storage rooms, an arms room and a target range were in the basement. Most of the cells were on the second floor, with the very rough cases celled on the third.

"If the judge says maximum security, they go on the third, everybody else on the second unless we have an overflow. Have a boy upstairs now."

My heart sank.

"A real bad actor. Killed a man."

Well, that wasn't Jimmy. Not with a three-month sentence.

Maximum security had three sets of barred doors plus an armed guard. Sgt. Robards pointed it all out to me. "By this time next week, it will all be full in here," he said sadly. "The Governor has ordered a round-up of all political agitators. The Anti-Redemptionists be getting out of hand and he be going to cool them off. Uh, don't put that in your paper."

"Oh, I won't," I said, crossing off on my notes.

The ordinary cells on the second floor were behind no barred doors and I got a guided tour. I stared Jimmy D. right in the face, but he had the brains to keep his mouth shut.

When we had finished, I thanked Sgt. Robards enthusiastically. "It sure has been swell, sir."

"Not at all, son," he said. "I enjoyed it myself. If you have time some evening, drop by when I have the duty. My schedule bees on the bulletin board."

"Thank you, sir," I said. "Maybe I will."

V

Before I scouted the jail I had only vague notions of what I was going to do to spring Jimmy D. I had spent an hour or so, for instance, toying with the idea of forcing the Territorial Governor to release Jimmy at the point of a gun. I spent that much time with it because the idea was fun to think about, but I dropped it because it was stupid.

I finally decided on a very simple course of action, one that could easily go wrong. It was my choice because it was the only thing I could pull off by myself that had a chance of working.

Before I left the jail building, I copied down Sgt. Robards' duty schedule from the bulletin board. Then I went home.

I spent the next few days shoplifting. Mr. Kutsov was laying in supplies, too, loading his wagon for his regular trip. I helped him load up, saving my shopping for my spare time. Mr. Kutsov wanted me to go along with him, but I couldn't, of course, and I couldn't tell him why. He didn't want to argue and he couldn't *make* me do anything I didn't want to do, so I had an unfair advantage. I just dug in my heels.

Finally he agreed it was all right for me to stay alone in the house while he was gone. It was what I wanted, but I didn't enjoy the process of getting my own way as much

as I did at home. There it is a more even battle.

The day he picked to leave was perfect for my purposes. Mr. Kutsov said, "I'll be back in six days. Be you sure that you will be all right?"

I said, "Yes. I'll be careful. You be careful, too."

"I don't think it matters much any more at my age," he smiled. "Stay out of trouble."

"I'll try," I said, and waved good-bye. That was what I meant to do, stay out of trouble.

Back in the house, I wrote a note of explanation for Mr. Kutsov and thanked him for all he had done. Then I dug my two small packs out of hiding and I was ready.

I set out just after dark. It was sprinkling lightly, but I didn't mind it. It surprised me, but I enjoyed the feel of the spray on my face. In one pocket I had pencil and paper for protective coverage. In another pocket I had a single sock and a roll of tape.

Just before I got to the jail, I filled the sock with wet sand.

Inside there were lights on in only two first floor offices. Sgt. Robards was in one of them.

"Hello, Sgt. Robards," I said, going in. "How be you tonight?"

"Well enough," he said. "It be pretty slow down here tonight. They be busy up on the Third Floor tonight, though."

"Oh?"

"They be picking up those Anti-Redemptionists tonight. How did your paper go?"

"I handed it in," I said. "I should

get a good grade with your help.”

“Oh, you found out everything you needed to know.”

“Oh, yes. I just came by to visit tonight. I wondered if you’d show me the target range again. That was keen.”

“Sure,” he said. “Would you like to see me pop some targets? I be the local champion, you know.”

“Gee, would you?”

We went downstairs, Sgt. Robards leading the way. This was the place I’d picked to drop him. He was about to slip the key in the door to the range when I slugged him across the back of the neck with my sock full of sand. I grabbed him and eased him down.

I tried the keys on either side of the target door key and opened the arsenal on the second try. I dragged him in there and got out my roll of tape I took three quick turns about his ankles, then did the same with his wrists. I finished by putting a bar and two crosspieces over the mouth.

I picked out two weapons then. They had no sonics, of course, so I picked out two of the smallest and lightest pistols in the room. I figured out what cartridges fit them, and then dropped guns and cartridge clips into my pocket.

I swung the door shut and locked it again, leaving Sgt. Robards inside. I stood for a moment in the corridor with the keys in my hand. There were only ten keys, not enough to cover each individual cell. Yet Sgt. Robards had clinked these keys and said that he could unlock the cells.

Maybe I would have done better to stick up the Territorial Governor. Well, here goes.

I eased up to the first floor. Nobody came out of the second office to check on the noise made by my pounding heart, which surprised me. Then up to the second floor. It was dark here, but light from the first and third floors leaking up and down the stairs made things bright enough for me to see what I was doing. There were voices on the third floor and somebody laughed up there. I held my breath and moved quietly to Jimmy’s cell.

I whispered, “Jimmy!” and he came alert and moved to the door.

“Am I glad to see you,” he whispered back.

I held up the keys. “Do any of these fit?”

“Yes, the D key. The D key. It fits the four cells in this corner.”

I fumbled through until I had the key tagged D. I opened the cell with as few clinking noises as possible. “Come on,” I said. “We’ve got to get out of here in a hurry.”

He slipped out and pushed the door shut behind him. We headed for the stairs and were almost there when I heard somebody coming up. Jimmy must have heard it, too, because he grabbed my arm and pulled me back. We flattened out as best we could.

Talk about walking right into it! The policeman looked over at us and said, “What are you doing up here, Robards? Hey, you’re not...”

I stepped out and brought out one of the pistols. I said, “Easy now. If things go wrong for us, I have noth-

ing to lose by shooting you. If you want to live, play it straight."

He apparently believed me, because he put his hands where I could see them and shut up.

I herded him into Jimmy's cell and let Jimmy do the honors with the loaded sock. We taped him up and while Jimmy was locking him in, I heard somebody in one of the cells behind me say, "Shut up, there," to somebody else. I turned and said, "Do you want to get shot?"

The voice was collected. "No. No trouble here."

"Do you want to be let out?"

The voice was amused. "I don't think so. Thank you just the same."

Jimmy finished and I asked, "Where is your signal? We have to have that."

"In the basement with the rest of my gear."

The signal was all we took. When we were three blocks away and on a dark side street, I handed Jimmy his gun and ammunition. As he took them, he said, "Tell me something, Mia. Would you really have shot him?"

I said. "I couldn't have. I hadn't loaded my gun yet."

I led him through town following the back ways I'd worked out before. Somebody once said that good luck is no more nor less than careful preparation, and this time I meant to have good luck. I led Jimmy toward the Losel-selling district.

Jimmy is short and red-headed with a face that makes him look about four years younger than he is.

That's a handicap any time. When you stand out anyway, it's likely to make you a little bit tart. But Jimmy's all right most of the time.

He said, "We're in trouble."

"That's brilliant."

"No," Jimmy said. "They have a scoutship from one of the other Ships. This is going to sound wild, but they intend to use the scout to take over a Ship and then use that to destroy the rest of the Ships. They're going to try. The police are rounding up everybody who is opposed who has any influence and is putting them in jail."

"So what?"

"Mia, are you mad at me for something?"

"What makes you think so?"

"You're being bitter about something."

"If you must know, it's that crack you made about me being a snob."

"That was a month ago."

"I still resent it."

"Why?" Jimmy asked. "It's true. You think that because you're from a Ship that you're automatically better than any Mud-eater. That makes you a snob."

"Well, you're no better," I said.

"Maybe not, but I don't pretend. Hey, look, we can't get anywhere if we fight and we've got to stick together. I'll tell you what. I'll apologize. I'm sorry I said it, even if it is true. Make up?"

"Okay," I said. But that was a typical trick of his. Get the last blow in and then call the whole thing off.

When we got to Horst Fanger's place, I said, "I've got our packs all set up. This is where we get our

horses." I'd left this until last, not wanting people running around looking for stolen horses while I was trying to break somebody out of the police jail pen. Besides, for this I wanted somebody along as lookout.

There was a fetid, unwashed odor that hung about the pens that the misting rain did nothing to dispel. We slipped by the pens, the Losels watching us but making no noise, and came to the stables, which smelled better. Jimmy stood guard while I broke the lock and slipped inside.

Ninc was there, good old Nincompoop, and a quick search turned up his saddle as well. I saddled him up and then stood watch while Jimmy picked himself out a horse and gear. I did one last thing before I left. I took out the pencil and paper in my pocket and wrote in *correct* Inter E, in great big letters: I'M A GIRL, YOU STINKER. I hung it on a nail. It may have been childish, but it felt good.

We rode from there to Mr. Kutsov's house, still following back alleys. As we rode, I told Jimmy about Mr. Kutsov and what he'd done for me.

When we got there, we rode around to the back.

"Hold the horses," I said. "I'll slip in and get the packs. They're just inside."

We both dismounted and Jimmy took Ninc's reins. I bounded up the steps.

Mr. Kutsov was waiting in the dark inside. He said, "I read your note."

"Why did you come back?" I asked.

He smiled. "It didn't seem right to leave you here by yourself. I be sorry. I think I underestimated you. Be that Jimmy Dentremont outside?"

"You're not mad?"

"No. I ben't angry. I understand why you couldn't tell me."

For some reason, I started crying and couldn't stop. The tears ran down my face. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry."

The front door signal sounded then and Mr. Kutsov answered the door. A green-uniformed policeman stood in the doorway. "Daniel Kutsov?" he asked.

Instinctively, I shrank back out of sight of the doorway. I swiped at my face with my sleeve.

Mr. Kutsov said, "Yes. What can I do for you?"

The policeman moved one step inside the house where I could see him again. He said in a flat voice, "I have a warrant for your arrest."

There was only one light on in the house, in the front room. From the shadows at the rear I watched them both. The policeman had a hard mask for a face, no more human than a Losel. Mr. Kutsov was determined and I had the feeling that he had forgotten my presence.

"To jail again? For my book?" He shook his head. "No."

"It be nothing to do with any book I know of, Kutsov. It be known that you be an Anti-Redemptionist. So come along." He grasped Mr. Kutsov's arm.

Mr. Kutsov shook loose. "No. I won't go to jail again. It be no crime to be against stupidity. I won't go."

The policeman said "You be coming whether you want to or not. You be under arrest."

Mr. Kutsov's voice had never shown his age before, but it shook now. "Get out of my house!"

A sense of coming destruction grew on me as I saw the policeman lift his gun from its holster and say, "You be coming if I have to shoot."

Mr. Kutsov swung his fist at the policeman and missed and, as though the man could afford to let nothing pass without retaliation, he swung the barrel of his pistol dully against the side of Mr. Kutsov's head. It rocked Mr. Kutsov, but he didn't fall. He raised his fist again. The policeman struck once more and waited but Mr. Kutsov still didn't fall. Instead, he swung again, and for the first time he landed, a blow that bounced weakly off the man's shoulder. Almost inevitably, it seemed, the policeman raised his pistol and fired directly at Mr. Kutsov, and then again, and as the second report rang Mr. Kutsov slid to the floor.

The silence was loud and gaunt. The policeman stood looking down at him and said, "Old fool!" under his breath. Then he came to himself and looked around. Then he picked a candlestick off the table and dropped it with a thud by Mr. Kutsov's empty outstretched hand.

The noise was a release for me and I moved for the first time. The policeman grunted and looked up

and we stared at each other. Then again, slowly, he raised his gun and pointed it at me.

I heard a snickering sound and the three reports rang out, one following another. The policeman stood for a moment, balanced himself and then, like a crumpled sheet of paper, he fell to the floor. I didn't even look at Jimmy behind me. I started to cry and I went to Mr. Kutsov, passing by the policeman without even looking at him. As I bent down beside him, his eyes opened and he looked at me.

I couldn't stop crying. I held his head and cried. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry."

He smiled and said faintly, but clearly, "It be all right." After a minute he closed his eyes, and then he died.

After another minute, Jimmy touched my arm and said, "There's nothing we can do. Let's leave now, Mia, while we still can."

Outside, it was still raining. Standing in the rain I felt deserted.

VI

The final morning on Tintera was a fine day. We and the horses were in a rock-enclosed aerie where we had dodged the day before for shelter. In the aerie were grass and a small rock spring, and this day, the final day, was bright with blue and piled clouds riding high.

From where we sat, looking from the top of the rock wall, we could see over miles of expanse. Lower hills and curving valleys all covered

with a rolling carpet of trees, a carpet of varying shades of gray and green. There were some natural upland meadows, and clearings in the valleys, and far away a line drawn in the trees that might be the path of a river. Down there, under that carpet, were all sorts of things — wild Losels, men hunting us, and—perhaps — some of the others from the Ship. We had seen the Losels and they had seen us; they had gone their way and we had gone ours. The men hunting us for blowing up their scoutship we hadn't seen for four days, and even then they hadn't seen us. As for the others, we hadn't seen them at all. But they might be there, under the anonymous carpet.

Jimmy got up from the ground and brushed himself off. He brought the signal over to me and said, "Should I, or do you want to?"

"Go ahead," I said.

He triggered it.

George Fuhonin was piloting and we were the sixth and seventh aboard. The other five crowded around and helped us put our gear away. Jimmy went on inside and I went upstairs to talk to George.

I was up there by the time we were airborne. "Hello, Halfpint," George said.

"Hi, Georgie-Worgie," I said, dealing blow for blow. "Have you had any trouble picking us up?"

"No trouble yet. You trying to wish me problems?"

"No," I said. "This is a real nasty planet. They had Jimmy D. locked up in jail. They hate everybody from the Ships."

"Oh." George raised his eyebrows.

"Well, that might explain the board." He pointed to the board of lights above and to his left. Twenty-nine were marked for the twenty-nine of us. Of the twenty-nine, only twelve were lit. "The last light came on two hours ago. If there aren't any more, this will be the most fatal Trial Group I've ever picked up."

I stayed upstairs through two more pickups. Joe Fernandez-Fragoso, and then another double of which Venie Morlock was one half. I went downstairs to say hello to her:

We were just settling down when George set off the alarm. He was speaking in the elder brother tone that I can't stand.

"All right, kids — shut up and listen. One of our people is down there. I didn't get close enough to see who. Whoever it is is surrounded by some of the local peasantry and we've got to bust him out. I'm going to buzz down and try to land on some of them. Then I want all of you outside and laying down a covering fire. Got that? I'm starting on down now."

Some of the kids had their weapons with them, but Jimmy and I didn't. We hopped for the gear racks and got out our pistols. There were ten of us and four ramps to the outside. Jimmy and I had No. 3 to ourselves. George is a hotrodder, as I've said, and after he gave us a long moment to get in place, he started down, a stomach-heaving swoop. Then he touched down light as a feather and dropped the ramps.

Jimmy and I dived down the

ramp and I went left and he went right. We were on a slight slope facing down and my momentum and the slant put me right where I wanted to be — flat on my face. I rolled behind a tree and looked over to see Jimmy almost hidden in a bush.

Here, hundreds of miles from where we had been picked up, it was misting under a familiar rolled gray sky. In my ears was the sound of gunfire from the other side of the ship and from below us. Our boy was pinned fifty yards down the slope behind some rocks that barely protected him. He was fighting back. I could see the sighting beam of his sonic pistol slapping out. About thirty feet away from him toward us was the body of his horse. I recognized him then — a meatball named Riggy Allen.

I took all this in in seconds, and then I raised my pistol and fired, aiming at his attackers. They were dug in behind trees and rocks, at least partly hidden from Riggy as he was hidden from them. From where we were, though, above and looking down, they could be picked out. The distance was too great for my shot and it plowed up earth ten feet short, but the man I aimed at ducked back behind cover.

There was a certain satisfaction in one of these guns. Where a sonic pistol is silent, these made enough noise that you knew you were doing something. And when you missed with a sonic pistol, all you could expect at most was a shriveled branch or a sere and yellow leaf, but a miss with this gun could send up a gout of earth or drive a hole in a tree

big enough to scare the steadiest man you can find.

I aimed higher and started to loft my shots in. Jimmy was doing the same thing, and the net effect was to keep their heads down. Riggy finally got the idea after a long moment. He stood up and started racing up the hill. Then my gun clicked empty, and a second later the firing to my right stopped. I started to fumble for another clip.

As our fire stopped, those heads popped back up again and took in the situation. They began to fire again and our boy Riggy took a long step and then dived over the body of his horse and went flat.

In a moment I was firing again, and then Jimmy was, too, and Riggy was up and running again. Then I started thinking clearly and held my fire while Jimmy emptied his clip. The instant he stopped, I started again, a regular squeeze, squeeze, squeeze. As I finished, Jimmy opened with his new clip and then Riggy was past us and up the ramp. He went flat in the doorway there and started firing his sonic pistol; its range was greater than our peashooters and he hosed the whole area down while Jimmy and I sprinted for the ramp.

As we hit the inside of the ship, I yelled, "Raise No. 3!" George had either been watching or listening, because it lifted smoothly up and locked in place.

Shots were still coming from the other sides of the ship, so I yelled at Jimmy to go left. Riggy just stood there for a moment fuzzy-headed,

but Jimmy gave him a shove to the right and he finally got the idea. I cut through the middle. In the doorway of No. 1, I skidded flat on my face again and looked for targets. I dropped all my clips in front of me and began to fire. When the clip was empty, in two quick motions I pulled out the old one and slapped in the new and fired again. The three I was covering for used their heads and slipped in one at a time.

As the second one came aboard, I heard Jimmy's voice call to raise No. 2 from my left. My third was Venie Morlock and as she ran aboard, I couldn't resist tripping her flat. I yelled to George to raise No. 1.

Venie glared at me and demanded, "What was that for?" as the ramp swung up.

"Just making sure you didn't get shot," I said, lying.

A second later, Riggy yelled that his side was okay and the last ramp was raised. My last view of Tintera was of a rainsoaked hillside and men doing their best to kill us, which all seems appropriate somehow. As the last ramp locked in place, George lifted the ship again and headed for the next pickup.

I went over to say hello to Riggy. He'd been completely unhurt by the barrage, but he had a great gash on his arm that was just starting to heal. He *said* that he was minding his own business in the woods one day when a Losel jumped out from behind a bush and slashed him. That may sound reasonable to you, but you don't know Riggy. I do. My opinion is that it was probably the other way around —the Losel was walking along in the woods one day, minding his own business, when Riggy jumped out from a bush and scared him. That is the sort of thing Riggy is inclined to do.

Riggy had been sneaking a look at my gun, and now he said, "Where did you get that neat pistol? Let me see it."

I handed it over.

After a minute of inspection, Riggy asked, "You wouldn't want to trade, would you?"

"For your sonic pistol?"

"Yes. You want to?"

I considered it for a minute, and then I said, "All right," and we traded. There is a certain amount of satisfaction in shooting an antique like that, but I know which is the

more effective weapon. Besides, I only had one full clip of ammunition left.

There is a certain amount of prestige in coming back alive from Survival. It's your key to adulthood. There were no brass bands waiting for us when we got back, but our families were there, and that was enough.

The fifteen of us went down the lowered ramp, and when I stood again on solid rock, I looked around that ugly, bare scout bay and just drank it in. Home.

I turned to Jimmy then and I said, "Jimmy, it's a relief to be back, isn't it? And that isn't snobbery. It might have been before, but I don't think I am now."

And Jimmy nodded.

The waiting room wasn't bare. They had the decorations up for Year End, colored mobiles with

lights that ranged through the spectrum, and more decorations on the walls. In the crowd of people waiting for us, I saw Jimmy's mother and her present husband, and Jimmy's father and *his* wife. When they saw Jimmy, they started waving and shouting.

Just as I said, "I'll see you tonight," I saw Mother and Daddy standing off to one side, and I waved. It was as though I had left the real world entirely for a month, and now at last I was back where things were going on and I wasn't missing a thing. I ran to them and I kissed Mother and hugged Daddy. Mother was crying.

I leaned back in Daddy's arms and looked up at him. He put a measuring hand over my head and said, "Mia, I believe you've grown some."

It might be so. I felt taller.

END