



# WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION

SEPTEMBER 1959

All Stories New and Complete

Editor: H. L. GOLD

Feature Editor: FREDERIK POHL

## SHORT NOVEL

**SUMMER GUESTS** by James H. Schmitz **4**

## NOVELETES

**HOMECOMING** by Gordon R. Dickson **66**

**ESCAPE INTO SILENCE** by Wynne N. Whiteford **102**

## SHORT STORIES

**FAIR GAME** by Philip K. Dick **33**

**THE SCARLET HEXAPOD** by Margaret St. Clair **46**

**BARGAIN BASEMENT** by Charles L. Fontenay **54**

**AN HONEST CREDIT** by Kirby Kerr **84**

**HORNETS' NEST** by Lloyd Biggle, Jr. **119**

## FEATURE

**WORLDS OF IF** by Frederik Pohl **95**

COVER by Pederson: "*Basic Research In Heat*"

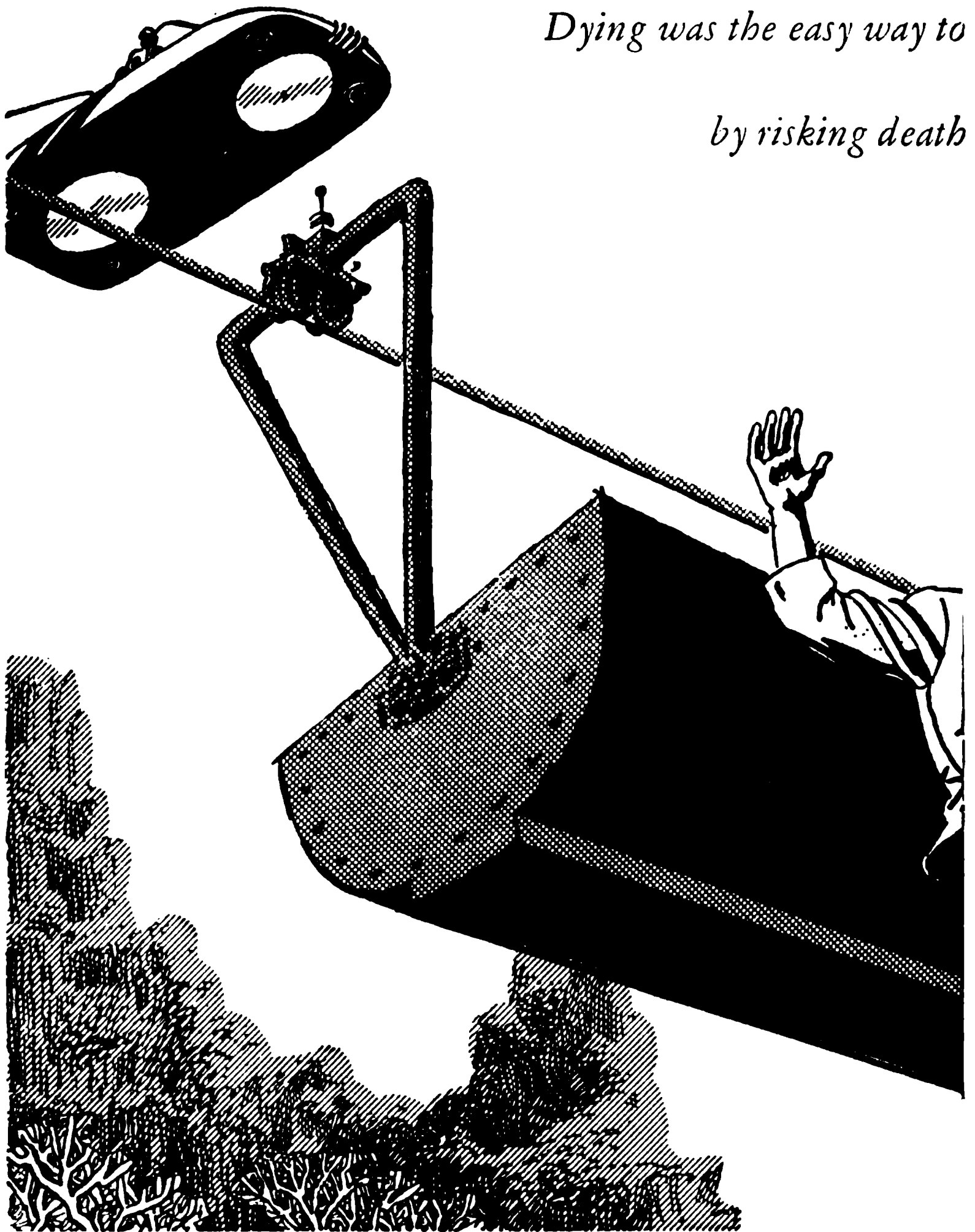
Illustrations by Wood and Morrow

IF is published bi-monthly by Digest Productions Corporation, Vol. 9, No. 4 Main offices: 421 Hudson Street, New York 14, New York. 35¢ per copy. Subscriptions 12 issues \$3.00 in the United States, Canada, Mexico, South and Central America and U. S. possessions, elsewhere \$4.00. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office, New York, New York. Copyright New York 1959 by Digest Productions Corporation. 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 printed in this magazine 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. Title registered in the United States Patent Office.

**Next Issue (November) on sale September 1st.**

# Escape

*Dying was the easy way to  
by risking death*



# *into Silence*

*get to Xaron—so what was Marno gambling  
to arrive alive?*

By WYNNE N. WHITEFORD



**T**HE whistle sounded for the meal break, and the operators switched off their machines and began to stream toward the door. Marno took a long time cleaning his hands, watching the figure of Bellen, the inspector, at the far end of the machine shop, waiting for him to go into his office. As soon as he saw Bellen move, Marno picked up his satchel and strolled out of the door after the others.

The air outside shook with the incessant roar of the ore-reducing plants, a tumult of sound that pounded on day and night, year after year. Marno didn't notice it, for it had thundered in his ears throughout his life. In front of him was the long bridgelike structure that supported the great conveyor belt, reaching straight out across the arid

slopes to the ragged line of red hills that stood out sharp and hard against the mauve sky. At one point, their skyline dipped in a V-shaped notch, the cutting that the conveyor belt passed through on its way to the Port.

Marno's pulse hammered in his temples. Either he made his escape now or he would spend the rest of his life here in the Valley. The idea of escape had been in the back of his mind for a long time, and today, with Carn, the overseer, away at a conference, Marno had an opportunity that mightn't come again.

The last of the men ahead of him turned into the canteen, but Marno walked straight on until he reached the end of the building. There was no one in sight. In front of him was the squat bulk of the powerhouse that drove the conveyor belt, with the ore-reducing installations towering beyond it. Away to the right, the dry ground sloped upward, dotted with straggling clumps of purple scrub.

Sweating, he began to run, past the open door of the powerhouse through which came the hum of vast nuclear motors. Above him, the giant conveyor belt rumbled out across innumerable rollers, an endless band that moved on for miles across a countryside unknown to him, for in the twenty-five years of his life Marno had never been beyond

the fences that lined the Valley's rim. It was supposed to be unsafe to go beyond the wire fences. Most of the planet was alive with radioactivity, or so they had been told.

**M**ARNO crouched against one of the metal pylons supporting the belt, his knees trembling. There was still nobody within sight. Fifty feet above him, the belt roared endlessly on its way, carrying with it the whole of the industrial output of the Valley, dark bricks of a dense compound that could be made fiercely radioactive, supplying atomic power for a thousand and one industries in the civilizations beyond. The speed of the belt was not too great for a man to jump aboard it.

Steadily, as he had planned, he began to climb the girder-work. He was unaccustomed to heights, and he climbed without looking down. He climbed right to the top of the pylon, inching his way out over the moving belt. It moved much faster than he had thought, but nothing would have made him turn back now.

His breath had a sound like a sob in it as he let himself drop, and then he was spinning over on the hard rubber-like surface. He lay flat on his back, feeling every second or so a sharp jar as the belt passed over another set of rollers.

There was no return now. As he was carried farther and

farther away from the powerhouse, he felt a growing elation. He was on his way to freedom. He had only the vaguest ideas of what he would find at the far end of the conveyor. He knew it was a place called the Port, where ships called to take cargoes of the astrium compound away to other places where it was used to generate power.

He had never seen one of these ships close at hand, but he had often watched them take off in the night, sharp daggers of flame stabbing into the dark sky. He knew that they used rockets to lift them above the atmosphere, and he had heard talk about something called an isolator that enabled them to make inconceivable journeys to the planets of other suns. But his knowledge of these things was hazy.

His own people never made such journeys. The spaceships were operated by men of the alien race that had controlled Marno's world since before he had been born—men like Carn, the overseer. Marno had been told that they came from a place called Xaron, somewhere in the planetary system of the great white star Altair. They were strange, alert men with unbounded energy.

As the traveling belt climbed toward the cutting in the hills, he was able to look back over the whole of the Valley—the towering structures of the

reducing plants, the colored aluminum houses, the beetle-like electric cars gleaming in the orange sunlight. Away to the right, the crushing batteries threw long plumes of dust into the air, and down by the lagoon a group of girls walked along the beach, limbs dark, dresses bright. He could see the yellow house where he had lived until now with his married brother. This valley had been his world—the whole of it.

**S**UDDENLY he found the walls of the cutting rising on either side of him, shutting the Valley from his view. He was tempted to spring off the moving belt while there was yet time, but even as he thought of it, he felt it tilt down over the hillcrest, and he knew it was too late.

He had expected the crossing of the ridge to bring him within sight of the Port, but all he could see was a vast wilderness of seamed red hills and purple scrub, sloping down to a flat metallic sea that gleamed like bronze under the deep orange disc of the sun. A desert in which only the conveyor belt moved, snarling away to a horizon lost in heat haze.

Marno was conscious of an appalling loneliness, a feeling that he had been a fool to think of leaving the Valley, where generation after generation of his ancestors had

lived and worked and died. He thought of the comradeship of the machine shop, the gaiety of parties by the lagoon, the games he had played with his friends. The fear of the unknown grew in him with each mile the moving belt carried him onward.

The sun dropped slowly over a sea that glared like molten iron as he neared and passed another ridge of wind-scored hills. Once he saw in the distance the corroded wreckage of gigantic machinery, but apart from that there was only rock and sand and scrub, and the miles after endless miles of the conveyor.

He was staring blankly ahead of him at the hazy skyline when he became abruptly conscious of something seen from the corner of his eye—a black shadow skittering over the parched ground. It took him a second or two to grasp its meaning, and then his head went back and he shaded his eyes to look up at the gleaming aircar sweeping down over the belt.

He sprang to his feet. The belt was moving almost at ground-level here, and without hesitating he jumped. As he rolled down a slope of loose sand, he heard a deep-throated shout from above him, but he scrambled up and ran without looking back. The car's air-stream whistled and thrashed about him, but he raced on with his eyes fixed on

a sparse line of scrub ahead of him.

He never reached it. Something like an electric shock numbed all his muscles, and he fell headlong. He looked up at the man standing over him, huge and blond, looking at him with strange cold eyes. He felt himself picked up as though he were a child and passed up into the hovering aircar.

**T**HEY acted with a quick efficiency that left Marno dazed. Almost before he had time to wonder what was going to happen to him, he found himself in Carn's office, a cold room with metallic walls bathed in a brilliant green-white light. Carn's massive figure sat facing him across a broad emerald desk, while Bellen stood against the wall with a scornful smile on his thin lips. Marno found himself hating the inspector with an intensity he wouldn't have thought possible, because Bellen was one of the Valley people like himself.

"Why did you run away?" asked Carn.

"I wanted to see the Port," Marno said.

"But why, man—why?"

Marno felt confused. Everything about the Xarian seemed to advertise his alien origin—his size, his vast physical energy, the direct stare of his strange eyes. He couldn't bring himself to answer.

"You thought you might have been able to get aboard one of the ships. Is that it?"

Marno was conscious of nothing but the blank, penetrating stare that seemed to reach into his thoughts. Although he didn't answer, his expression must have told the Xarian what he wanted to know, because for the first time since Marno had entered the room, Carn turned his concentrated gaze away from him, looking down as he spoke in a low voice into some small instrument on his desk. Some of the tension went out of Marno's muscles, and he was able to glance around the room.

The walls were lined with what he had taken to be small round windows, but he now saw that they were video screens giving views of every part of the plant, so that Carn could sit here in his office and see at a glance everything that was going on in and about the building. There was even a screen giving a telescopic view for miles along the conveyor belt on which Marno had tried to escape. When he realized that his attempt at escape had been hopeless from the start, a hot gust of anger swept through him, but there was no way he could express it.

"You don't give me much choice," said Carn, looking at him again. "I'll have to move you."

And so it was that Marno found himself transferred next morning to one of the ore-crushing batteries. Socially, it was a step downward, and he worked all the morning in moody silence. It was easy work, but dull, keeping him isolated from all but two of the others who worked in the place. One of these was a wiry, gray-haired man who supervised the unloading of the ore trucks that tipped their contents into the hopper that fed Marno's crushing mill. He introduced himself as Greg.

"I've been around here longer than anyone," he told Marno. "Why did they send you here?"

"I tried to get to the Port—rode out on the conveyor belt," said Marno.

Greg stared at him, then threw back his head and laughed. "You hadn't a chance!" He became serious. "I went there once. Hid in the back of an aircar."

"What was it like?"

"I don't know. They flew me straight back. I've been here ever since." Greg looked around and moved a little closer to Marno as he spoke. "Things were a bit confused then. The Xarians had just taken over control—but you wouldn't remember that, of course."

**M**ARNO looked at him in surprise. "Just taken over control, did you say? I

thought the Xarians had always controlled the place.”

“Rot!” Greg spat out the word with a sudden savagery. “I can remember when all this place was ruled from Earth.”

Marno smiled tolerantly. “I’ve heard there was a place called Earth, of course. Supposed to be where our first forefathers came from, wasn’t it?” He grinned a little self-consciously.

“Supposed? *Supposed?* It’s the truth, man! That’s the hell of this education through video. They can make you swallow anything. *Anything!*” Greg walked up and down as he shouted the words, then spun and gripped Marno by the arm, his face coming very close to the younger man’s.

“Do you believe all this stuff they give you in the philosophy sessions? This rubbish about reincarnation?”

Marno hesitated. “Well . . .”

**G**REG shook him. “Do you really believe after you die here you’ll be born again on Xaron? As a Xarian?”

“That’s what they tell us, and we’ve no other way of knowing these things—have we?”

“Fool!” Greg threw the younger man from him, turning his back and striding away. A few yards off, however, he stopped, standing with his feet apart and his head down. Then he returned, planting himself directly in

front of Marno and looking at him searchingly.

“You’ve got guts, though,” he admitted abruptly, “or you wouldn’t have tried to escape. Listen. The things I’m telling you are the truth. D’you understand? Not the sort of rot the Xarians put over the video to keep you quiet. I can remember when they came.” He gave a sour smile. “You know, we all come from the same stock, if you trace it far enough back. We’re all descended from people who came from the Earth—the Xarians as well as us.”

“But that’s impossible! They’re so different—even a different color!”

“It’s only environment that does that. Different sunlight, stronger gravity. But they’re still men, like you and me. They just know a bit more, that’s all. You might say they have hit on a more successful technique of living.”

Marno stared broodingly at the ore fragments cascading into the crushing mill.

“I’ll have to go,” said Greg. “Here’s Raxon coming. I’ll see you in the canteen.”

As Greg went off, Marno watched the Xarian overseer approaching, moving with long, bounding strides. He vaulted up onto the platform where Marno was standing and dropped a huge hand on his shoulder.

“How’s the explorer settling down?”



“Explorer?” Marno looked at him blankly. “I’m from the machine shop.”

**R**EXON laughed. “I heard about your ride on the conveyor belt. I get all the explorers up here.” He put a long green cigarette between his lips and lit it with an electric lighter.

Seen closely like this, the Xarian gave an overpowering impression of rugged strength, aggressively and blatantly masculine. His hair was neither the black of a young man’s hair nor the gray that came with age, but a strange bleached yellow like the color of dry grass, and his eyes were the color of steel that has been heated and then chilled. Ridiculous, thought Marno, to maintain that these beings were of the same race as the Valley people. Who had ever heard of a man with blue eyes?

“Don’t take much notice of what old Greg tells you,” said the Xarian suddenly. “He’s like this.” He tapped his finger against his temple.

Marno grinned, but inside he felt taut and uncertain. He looked thoughtfully after Rexion, who sprang off the platform and strode on his way, speaking in a low voice into his wrist radio as he went.

Marno was resentfully conscious of the shallowness of his knowledge of things beyond his immediate surround-

ings. After all, it was obvious that human life hadn’t started here in the Valley. The very plants from which their food was processed had been introduced here from somewhere else—things that grew in tanks of water enriched by chemicals. The local vegetation was all poisonous, life based on a different chemical cycle. So Greg might easily be right in what he had said.

When Marno went along to the canteen during the meal break, he found Greg sitting alone at one of the smaller tables, and sat opposite him, glancing around the room. The other operators were younger than Greg, crowding together in three or four voluble groups of half a dozen or so.

High in one corner of the room, Marno found the wide-angle video lens that watched the whole scene like a Cyclopean eye, and the sight of its void stare sent a cold tingle down his spine.

“Greg,” he said. “Just where is this place they call Earth?”

The older man looked furtively about him, then leaned forward. “You know how to pick out the stars at night?”

“Some of them.”

“You know the fairly bright yellow one near Sirius—the one called simply the Sun? It’s called that because it was the original one. The Earth is one of its planets, and that’s

where the human race started.”

Marno smiled tolerantly. “Sounds as good a theory as any.”

“Damn it, man, it’s true!” Greg slammed his fist down on the table, a lock of gray hair falling over his eyes. “They used to tell us more, before the Xarians came. Listen, it was like this. Hundreds and hundreds of years ago, all the human race lived on that one planet. They found a way to use atomic power to drive a ship through space—first the space between the neighboring planets—later, the space between the stars. Got that?”

Marno nodded doubtfully.

“Well, you can see what’s happened. Wherever they found worlds they could live on, they established colonies. They were overcrowded on Earth, and apart from that some of the other planets they discovered had raw materials that were valuable to them. Like the radioactive minerals here.”

Marno looked into the black, glittering eyes. “But most of our astrium goes to Xaron, not to Earth.”

GREG nodded. “It does now, yes. Because Xaron was a colony that grew up. I’m damned if I know why—some people used to say the Xarians had some method of selective breeding. Others say that it’s just because Xaron was a

bigger and naturally richer planet than Earth, and it attracted the best brains from everywhere else. Anyhow, the fact is that they control all of the inhabited systems, even Earth.”

Marno leaned back. “Where did you get all this?”

“From the last of the Earthmen here. I was young then, but I remember them.”

“Why did they leave?”

“I think the Xarians simply bought the place outright, or bartered some technical secret in exchange for it. It was all done quickly and smoothly and quietly. The Earthmen went and the Xarians came. Put in better machines, gave us all cheap electric cars, cheap video sets, polaroid windows—everything we wanted.” Greg’s lips twisted in a lopsided smile. “Then they put wire fences around the settlements and told us the fences were to keep us from the danger of radioactivity outside—oh, they had the answers to everything, those boys.” The smile widened until he showed his teeth with a sudden pent-up savagery. “It’s taken me most of my life to realize that they’ve told us just what they want us to believe, whether it happens to be true or not.”

Marno frowned. “But you have got to take some things on trust.”

“Like the philosophy sessions?” Greg’s shoulders began to shake in silent laugh-

ter. "You mean you really believe that you're going to have another life after this one—a fresh new life as a Xarian?"

"If it isn't true—well, nothing would have any meaning, would it?"

Greg laughed aloud — a laugh without any warmth in it. "Does it have to have a meaning?" He got slowly to his feet, while Marno sat staring in front of him. "I've lived a lot longer than you, son," he said quietly. "And I haven't seen any meaning to it yet. Think it over."

And then he was gone.

The whistle sounded for the return to work, and Marno went back to his job of watching the ore thunder down into the roaring mill. The noise and dust and vibration seemed to deaden the turmoil of his thoughts, yet after a while he found his mind running back over the things Greg had told him. The more he thought of them, the more possible it seemed that Greg's fantastic ideas might have had some germ of truth behind them.

*"They've told us just what they want us to believe, whether it's true or not."*

By God, when you thought of it, you realized it could be true.

**F**ROM the platform where he stood, Marno was able to look out through a window to the landing area where

Rexon's aircar was parked. In the middle of the afternoon he saw a smaller aircar land neatly alongside it, and a few minutes later Rexon walked through the plant with a woman visitor, showing her the various machines.

Marno watched, fascinated, for she was the first Xarian woman he had seen. She had the same strange coloring as the men of her race, the same look of eager zest. She was strongly built, yet active, and she laughed easily, a deep laugh that shook the whole of her body.

Rexon helped her up on to the platform, and as Marno listened to him explaining the details of the crushing mill to her, he realized that he had stumbled on something that supported Greg's theory that their ancestors had originally come from the same place. Even between themselves, they spoke the same language that the Valley people did.

"Glad to be going back?" asked Rexon after a pause.

"Of course," said the woman. "Hard to realize I'll be on the ship tomorrow. It's good to feel that I'll soon be under white sunlight again, breathing good fresh air. I think I'll spend the first day just touring the city."

"I'll have time to see you go, before I come here," said Rexon as they moved away.

Marno stared after them as they went. So the woman was

going back home to Xaron in the morning. To the hub of all the vast, complex civilization that Greg had hinted at.

In a flash, a plan formed in his mind, dazzlingly complete. Outside was the woman's air-car, with a large luggage compartment similar to the one Greg had hidden in when he had been taken to the Port. Greg had been brought straight back, but Marno felt that once he got there, he would escape—he was forewarned, and on arrival he would have only the woman to deal with. Certainly she was strong and quick, but with the factor of surprise on his side, he should easily get away from her. And tomorrow a ship was leaving for Xaron. All he had to do was get aboard during the night. Could he? He refused to think of failure. He simply had to be aboard.

As soon as Raxon and the woman were out of sight, Marno slipped away from his machine and ran down the length of the plant. Recklessly, he dashed through the Xarian's office and out on to the cement landing stage. Raxon would pass around the other side of the plant, and wouldn't be back near Marno's machine until after the woman had left.

Marno tried frantically to open the luggage compartment, but without success. He looked up at the windows of the plant, but they were blank

with reflected sky. Any minute now, Raxon and the woman might return.

It occurred to Marno that the compartment might be controlled from inside the cabin. He opened the door, stared at the glittering banks of instruments. Then he found that the rear seat could be swung forward, giving access to the luggage compartment while in flight. He wormed his way in, pulling the seat back behind him, sealing himself into darkness.

**T**HE thudding of his heart seemed to echo through the metal compartment; then, after what seemed an age, he heard voices. He felt the movement of springs as someone climbed aboard. There was the solid click of a door, the vibrant hum of the compact little nuclear motors. Then the machine was climbing, lifting straight up from the ground with a speed that forced him hard against the floor. The air began to whistle about the smooth hull. The flight was bumpy at first, but soon they had climbed into smoother air.

He had a feeling of exultation, the feeling that this time he must succeed. He would have liked to be able to look out at the country over which they were flying, but it could not be helped—the main fact was that he was escaping. They flew level for a long time. Then he suddenly dou-

bled up, gasping as a sharp dive caught him in the pit of the stomach.

The note of the motors changed and he felt the machine hovering. Then it was on the ground and the hum of the motors ceased.

Marno suddenly began to tremble, a chill fear gripping him. He found himself listening, listening, wondering what had caused this irrational terror that was rising in him. And then he knew.

It was the silence. The abysmal silence. Never in his life had he heard anything like it. Even in the arid desert there had been noise—the rumble of the conveyor belt—and in the Valley there was always the sound of machinery, roaring endlessly on through day and night. Yet here there was only this deafening stillness.

As he listened, though, he realized that there *were* sounds in the background. An occasional voice. Footsteps. The hum of some passing vehicle or aircraft, fading quickly away again.

Then, suddenly, light, blinding him. The whole side of the luggage compartment was open. He blinked out into a walled courtyard bordered with exotic plants. A strange house with translucent sapphire walls towered over one side of it, and a hangarlike building of yellow metal opened off one end, the whole

scene bright and pallid in a harsh artificial lighting that blazed from somewhere high above it.

Before his eyes were used to the glare, the woman came briskly around the side of the car. She stopped, rigid.

“Come out of there.” Her voice was amused rather than angry.

Marno slid quietly out of the car, his eyes on the walls of the court yard. At the end—a metal gate, open. At once he was running.

He heard the click of plastic heels behind him. When he was halfway to the gate, he felt the woman’s arms around him, lifting him off the ground.

“Lars!” she called. “Lars!”

Frantic, he tried to kick back at her legs, but his feet thrashed the air uselessly.

A massive-shouldered giant of a man with stiff yellow hair appeared at the door of the hangar. In an instant, he was across the courtyard in a tremendous, springing run, arms held wide. The woman released Marno, and even as he fell the man called Lars caught him, swinging him to his feet with an arm twisted behind his back. There was no question of a struggle—the man could have snapped Marno’s arm like a dry twig.

“Where was he?” asked the yellow-haired giant.

“In there,” indicated the woman. “One of Raxon’s boys.”

MARNO felt as though all the strength had been drained out of him. The giant marched him toward the strange house, while the woman walked ahead, the metallic fabric of her dress gleaming under the fierce white light, with its highlights showing the movement of her muscles as she walked.

They went into a large room, more beautifully furnished than any place Marno had ever imagined, with the same dazzling light pouring down from a luminous ceiling. The woman closed the door, while the man sat Marno in a chair that seemed to have been molded of a single block of plastic foam.

"We can give him to Raxon tonight," he said.

Marno put his head in his hands. His eyes felt hot and moist. The man shook him by the shoulder with a gentleness he hadn't expected.

"Why did you come here, son?" he asked.

Marno looked up, and once his eyes met the other man's bright, cold stare, he couldn't look away.

"Just relax," he heard the deep voice telling him. "Relax. That's it. Breathe deeply and let yourself go. That's right. Now you know you can trust us. All we want to do is help you. Tell us all about it."

Marno felt dazed and confused. He wasn't conscious of anything but the weird, pale

eyes, and somewhere behind them the feeling that these were people to whom he could confide his most secret thoughts.

"I want to go to Xaron," he said.

"But you've been told you'll go there some day, haven't you?"

"Yes. But I—I wasn't sure. They tell us that, but I don't think I believe it. Do you?"

The woman's sudden ripple of laughter brought his attention back to his immediate surroundings. The man called Lars glanced at her and said something quickly that Marno didn't understand. Then Lars brought his eyes back on him.

Lars was about to speak again when the woman said, "Lars, what about Deren? He wanted to examine one of them. Why couldn't we take this one with us?"

The man looked at her again. "Why not? It might as well be him." Once more he turned to Marno. "You really want to go to Xaron, do you? Without knowing what it's like?"

"Yes," said Marno emphatically.

The man left him and walked down the long room. He walked straight toward the far wall, yet just before he reached it an arched doorway suddenly opened in it, so that he walked through into another room beyond. After he had passed through, Marno

found that he was looking at what appeared to be solid wall again.

The woman came across the room toward Marno with a long glass filled with a sparkling violet liquid.

"Drink this," she said in a quiet voice.

The stuff seemed hot and cold in his throat at the same time, and fumes seemed to rise at the back of his nose, but after he had finished the glass he felt better. He looked up to find Lars standing beside him again.

"Young fellow, you're lucky. We'll be able to take you with us. A friend of ours back home wants to examine one of you Valley people."

Marno began to stammer incoherent thanks, but Lars raised his hand.

"I can't promise to bring you back. But they'll find something for you to do there."

Marno was afraid to show his eagerness. "I don't care if I never come back."

"All right. But remember what I said."

**T**HE woman touched a control on one of the walls and a section of it became transparent, so that they were able to look out over the courtyard. Marno could see varicolored metallic and crystalline buildings beyond the wall of the yard, and he was amazed at the rich diversity of their

design. The great red disc of the sun was touching the horizon now, but the scene was still lit by the chill glare of a regular pattern of lights suspended or floating in the air high overhead.

The woman pointed upward.

"Look," she said. "The ship's coming down."

Marno rushed across to her side and stared up. Dropping down out of the darkening purple sky was the spearpoint of flame from the braking rockets of the spaceship. The thing was colossal, bluntly cylindrical, gleaming like silver high up in the red sunlight. The hissing scream of its rockets was the most stirring sound he had ever heard. He watched it until the roof of the neighboring house cut it from his view.

"We'll be on it at sunrise," said Lars.

"You'll like it on Xaron," the woman told Marno. "It's a huge garden, compared to this place. Try to imagine a city with fifty million people in it, stretching for a hundred miles along a coastline, with hundreds of little islands linked by bridges. Buildings as high as your mountains, aircars everywhere like a swarm of insects. There are so many things to do—you'll see for yourself."

They gave Marno a meal of strange varied foods that he didn't like, then showed him to a room with a divan of



plastic foam. Lying alone in the dark, he thought over all the things that had happened to him since the afternoon. He was hardly able to believe his good fortune. And then a thought came to him that swept away his dreams like an icy gale.

Rexon. He remembered listening to him talking to the woman back at the ore-crushing plant. "I'll have time to see you leave in the morning"—that was what he had said.

When Rexon saw Marno in the morning, he would want to take him back. The thought of the last-minute loss of everything he had fought for kept him awake, sweating in the dark. Somewhere out near the white splendor of Altair was a world of shining cities and luxuriant forests, of broad turquoise oceans spangled with islands that sparkled like jewels. And a stone's throw away in the darkness was the ship that was leaving for this world in a few hours. The fear of missing the journey kept him rigid and wide-eyed.

**M**ORNING was a bewildering nightmare. They forced Marno to eat something, hustled him into an air-car, and whirred over the rooftops toward the gleaming bulk of the spaceship that towered in the dawn air. They landed on the nearer side of a great embankment marked here and there with black and

yellow signs that read "*Danger—Blast Zone*" and waited near the entrance to a narrow high-walled passageway that zigzagged through to the other side.

Another aircar swept down in a wide arc and landed. It looked somehow familiar, and Marno realized why when he saw the man who stepped out of it.

It was Rexon.

Marno shrank against the side of the car, edging his way round it to keep out of Rexon's line of sight. He thought of making a dash for the passageway through the embankment, but he realized that would bring him into full view. He could only stand there with a tense emptiness in him.

Rexon walked into view; he shook Lars by the hand, put his arm around the woman's shoulder. Then he seemed to see Marno for the first time.

"So you weren't content to wait for your next life to see Xaron, were you?" he asked.

Marno forced himself to look straight into the coldly observant eyes, although his knees shook with the tension. He didn't know what to say. If he gave the wrong answer, he might be taken back to the crushing plant. He thought suddenly of Greg, with his untidy gray hair and his sour, defeated smile, and the tiredness that showed now and then about his eyes. He had



tried to escape once, only once, and they hadn't given him another chance.

Then he realized that Rexon's eyes had a flicker of laughter in them, as though they were sharing some joke, and with an effort he managed to smile.

"Sometimes I think we underestimate you fellows," said Rexon thoughtfully. He turned to Lars. "You know, I think the standard philosophy is due for some revision, don't you?"

Lars nodded. "I'll take it up with Deren. This alters things, doesn't it?"

The ringing note of an amplified bell sounded from the ship. Lars and the woman made their farewells to Rexon, and led Marno through the angled passageway that cut the embankment, bringing them out onto the scorched cement of the blast zone. They climbed the great escalator that reached up a hundred feet or more to the airlock of the ship. Lars touched Marno's arm.

"Take a last look at it," he said, waving his hand toward the dry red hills with their patches of purple scrub.

Marno gave a brief glance over his shoulder, then continued to gaze up at the flange of the airlock. At last, they stood on it, and Marno was able to look into the interior of the ship, into a room crowded with complex apparatus. Brilliant light reflected from

metal surfaces. He waited alongside the woman as Lars went quickly inside.

"It's beautiful where we're going," the woman told him. "Cool and fresh and peaceful. No roar of crushing batteries, no dust. All so quiet."

"Quiet?"

"I don't suppose you'd be able to imagine what that's like. You've never been where it's really quiet."

A siren warned them of the impending takeoff.

"Come on," said the woman, and stepped in through the massive door.

Marno looked back. The escalator's steps were motionless now, and it was automatically disconnecting from the flange, beginning to fold back. Marno stepped to the edge of the flange.

"Marno!" called Lars from the doorway. "Come in. Quick!"

Trembling, Marno poised for a second on the edge of the metal platform. Then he sprang across the widening gap to the escalator.

"Marno!" thundered the voice behind him, but now he was running down the steps three or four at a time. In seconds now, the blast would be starting.

**H**E WAS panting when he reached the ground, but he rushed on across the flame-blistered cement toward the shielding embankment, his

ears keyed for the first sound of the rockets. If they began to fire before he reached shelter, he was finished.

He was just at the passageway when the first hollow roar broke the tight-stretched silence, its shock-wave hitting him like a fist between the shoulder blades. With his shadow flung ahead of him by the flame, he lurched on, heart pounding. Then he was around the first of the corners.

He came out on the far side of the embankment like a leaf blown by the wind. Behind, the rockets lifted in an eerie scream.

He saw Raxon just getting into his aircar. The Xarian looked up at the rising bulk of the ship, and as he did so, he caught sight of Marno. He waited while Marno staggered up to the car.

"Could I—" began Marno, and leaned against the side of the car, gulping air. "Could I ride back with you?"

Raxon opened the door. "Get in!" he shouted above

the roar of the blast, and Marno slid in alongside him.

As the car lifted and skimmed away over the parched red wilderness, Marno said nothing. He stared ahead along the straight line of the conveyor belt until he saw the buildings of the Valley come up over the horizon, the familiar lines of identical little houses, the beetlelike electric cars, the slender dark girls in their bright dresses, and as they swept down to land he felt an odd sense of satisfaction.

But only when he stepped out of the aircar did he realize what it was that he had really missed. It was the unending roar of the machinery, the eternal torrent of sound that had filled the Valley before he was born, sound that would some day thunder in the ears of his children. As he walked into the plant through the vibrant air, he felt at peace.

He was home.

**END**