

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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lazarus bell

by STANLEY MULLEN

His mind tried to reach out to the shadowy figures. The men hunting him were near, tensed and trigger-happy...

EVER been in a hospital for a long stay? It seems to go on and on, as if somebody has bribed the staff to let you lie in your room while the world forgets you. Your patch-up job after the accident must have been a good one, since you feel better than you have in years, and now you want to be up and out and doing. Doctors keep promising, but nothing happens and continues to happen. So one day you get tired of it all and just put on your clothes and walk out.

THINK, says the sign over the receptionist's desk. But you are in no mood for thinking in capital letters, and all of your thinking lately has been done in hospital vacuum. The receptionist is not there to call someone in authority to do the thinking for her. So, by a fluke, you are actually free. Just keep walking.

A door is open, and beyond that spreads everything you remember about Earth. Real air in your lungs instead of the oddly stale and reprocessed atmosphere of a dome-city on a far-off world. Real sound, instead of the hollow

Stanley Mullen, widely-known Colorado writer, returns with this provocative story of a society, in a not-too-distant Tomorrow, hostile to departures from the norm. A thousand years earlier, Armstrong would have been released into the world to wander like a leper. And now?

echoes inside a space-suit helmet. Around you is a real world with real people, instead of the hushed and sterile unreality of the hospital with starchy-bleak gnomes representing sanitation and right-thinking.

Earth is still here, not something you just imagined in your long years in space. Home, you think nostalgically. And ten years out there is a long time. Spaceman's return. With everything as mellow and beautiful as you remembered. All here, as it had to be to justify your dark odyssey across the empty gulfs, your endurance of the drabness and tedium of strange worlds. A bright-sunny afternoon, expanses of green-smelling grass, the wind rich in scents of familiar things. Golden light streaming over streets and buildings. You are here now, and it is still here. So enjoy it.

For contrast, as you walk along, you recall blurred images of space, and life as you lived it on other worlds. Domed cities in small Lunar craters, troglodyte existence in underground workings on Pluto, the sealed honeycomb world inside Callisto, and Ganymede as porous with caverns as dried sponge, the eery glow of eternal twilight on Venus, Mars with its broad and desolate wastes, Mercury where men squeeze into insulated bubbles be-

tween the extremes of heat and cold. Your memories of all these places seem dulled, as if belonging to another lifetime. Recall of those interminable watches in journeying spaceships are clearer, but oddly undetailed, unreal.

Shock does blunt a mind, you explain to yourself. In bad cases, memory often scatters to the winds of space. But time has passed since the accident out there, just how much you don't know. But you know you are recovering; time will do the rest, not prolonged hospitalization.

At first, nothing seems to have changed much. Earth was good to look at, and still is. Breeze feels good on your face. Think of that, and let yourself soak in the mellow pink glow of nostalgia. Real trees and lawns, real homes and stores, a glimpse of bright water one way, distant mountains the other, the moving walkways with their loads of people. Just as it was the day before that morning when you took off for Luna. Nothing has changed nearly as much as you had expected. And a sudden chill of doubt touches you.

Time has passed. Children have grown up, everything should be ten years and more older. Styles in vehicles and clothing fashions have gone through their regular cycle. You had accounted for that. But something has changed—

dreadfully. You stare anxiously about, trying to evaluate the difference, and a vague suspicion grows into certainty. People are not the same as you remembered. Faces about you reflect a wide variety of emotions, the same as you knew, but now you are conscious of the pettiness, the greed, the harried and fretful driving forces which shape their individual lives. And you are appalled by your reaction to this generic ugliness.

Are these the very people who are even now, somewhere, building the starship, to take them out of their own solar system and glut the galaxy with multiplications of their culture, or lack of it? Can such a race, full of its own selfishness and small cruelties, construct a ship capable of making the Big Jump? And you remember your own dreams, how you hoped that the starship would be finished in your time, so that you could have a part in that greatest adventure of all.

Yes, this is the race, and you were part of it. For all their individual insignificance, they have dreamed a great dream. They were building the Starship, and by now may even have it finished, waiting only for its crew to be selected to start that long haul out and out

toward the stars. You shiver a little with excitement, and then ask yourself if you still want a place in that venture, if you are too old or banged-up, or if you still feel that the aims and aspirations of such a people are too pretty for you. A people who could imagine and implement a new principle supposed to evade the barriers of light and space and time, since no atomic-drive spaceship could hope to reach even the nearer stars in the span of a man's life.

You stare about you with new interest, but the faces of your fellows still disturb you. There is more hate and fear and greedy ambition in them than love or simple kindness. Their minds seem tangles of emotional drives, with more confusion than confidence, more of a desperate need to escape from themselves and each other than from their world. They may conquer the stars, but you doubt if they can conquer themselves, their smallness, their pitiful insecurities.

You muse grimly over this new perception in yourself. They have not changed, but you have. You never used to be aware of such things. It is almost as if you could read thoughts and emotions directly, not grope at them through a maze of codes and conventions. You sense a harsh ma-

turity in yourself, and you are almost frightened by it. Partly to reassure yourself, you stop and stare into a shop window with darkness behind it. Not a good mirror, but it will do for a quick check. Hospitals go in for a scarcity of mirrors, and you have not been shaving yourself lately. You want to know if your internal changes are reflected in your face. One quick glance and—

A scream strangles itself in your throat. You take a longer look and try to gulp down the thrill of horror.

A face stares back at you. Not a familiar face. Not quite. Sensitive, with built-in intelligence, liveliness of expression and a streamlined beauty. A suggestion of character, even dignity, a face you might be proud to wear, but without associations. Not your face at all, though there is resemblance to someone you nearly remember.

Stand and grimace, and the stranger matches your facial gymnastics item by item. What has happened to the known, scarred, unlovely badge of your identity? How could the doctors make such a mistake? There must be pictures on file, other data. If they had to rebuild you with plastic surgery, why this face? Far too fresh and youthful for your face. But, like it or not, this is the one

you're wearing. Better get used to it. Better—

Turn and walk away. Fast. Try to forget what has happened. Or try to remember...

DR. VERNEY stared uncomfortably at his colleague. "Why do anything about it?" he asked. "He doesn't know anything about himself, and we don't know much. His tests show a variation from the norm, true. He may have unusual perceptions and even unknown powers, but you can't control the complete experiment in a case like this. We did our best. Now we can only wait. We don't even know that he is dangerous."

"We can't wait to find out. I'll admit Armstrong seems all right. But so did the others—until they ran amok and caused so much damage they had to be killed. One set fires merely by thinking about them. Another looked at people and wished they would drop dead, so they did. We were lucky that neither one got out of the hospital alive. But Armstrong is outside and potentially dangerous. More than the others, because he shows his difference less. He may be the man of the future, but the present is not ready for him. The risk is too great."

"What risk? The others were failures. Armstrong is the first success. He doesn't even guess about himself, and he won't if he's left alone.

Not ten people in the world know about him."

"He'll find out," Dr. Sentar said bluntly. "And so will the public. When that happens, they'll hound him, and he'll react. We can't be sentimental. Notify the police. He's different enough to stand out. They'll find him and—"

"And that will only start trouble sooner. It's not as if he were a criminal, or had some contagious disease. He hasn't done anything, and we don't know that he will. What bothers me is that he walked out of here, unchallenged. As if skipping his bill. Why would he do that? And where would he go?"

"You're sure you told him . . . nothing?"

Dr. Verney frowned. "What could I tell him. Anyhow, I never worked up the nerve to try. Now I know how God must have felt if he ever tried to explain himself to Adam. Embarrassment is the least of it. The rest is worse."

"Only one thing to do," insisted Dr. Sentar. "Notify the police. Send out a general alarm and pickup order."

"On what charge? Armstrong's no criminal. I'm not so sure about us. A Guinea pig has some rights."

"So have we. So has society. We have the right to go on stumbling and fumbling through the universe in search of our private destiny.

No individual, superman or demigod or demidevil, has any right to interrupt that search. We did a good job on Armstrong, but successful or not, he's the first and last of his kind."

Dr. Verney shuddered. "You talk as if he were some kind of robot or monster. He's just a man, maybe not exactly like us, but very close. He came from the same source. He's not even anything completely new. Every phase of the operation is standard practice. We've grown new brains for the diseased, or the criminally insane. We've grown spare parts in vats to replace damaged organs and limbs, using the original cells as seed. God must have meant for such processes to be possible, since he placed complete blueprints for the whole organism in each cell. Armstrong is a masterpiece, and a scientific miracle, not a horror created out of spells."

"True, Armstrong's a miracle," grudgingly Dr. Sentar. "But I doubt if anyone really likes miracles. Certainly not the public. We don't trust them ourselves, because we know we can't. Any real miracle is beyond scientific control. By definition. So we don't know, any more than Armstrong does, what we've created in him. And I'm not sure I want to know. I doubt if he'll like us. I wonder if he'll like . . . ordinary people."

Dr. Verney shook his head stubbornly. "I'm as frightened for Armstrong as I am of him. A thousand years ago, we'd have hung a bell around his neck—a Lazarus Bell—and released him into the world to wander like a leper or living dead man. We'd have made him shout 'Unclean, unclean!' wherever he went, to warn away the frightened, the curious, the ignorant. Nowadays, in 2196, we imagine we're more civilized. We know only that he's different, and that the human wolfpacks hate any difference. So we let him walk out of here, unwarned, into an unwarned world. He's the first completely regrown man, created in laboratory vats to his own specifications, from his own salvaged cells. Is he to blame if we did a better job than his natural environment?"

"Nobody's blaming anyone," said Dr. Sentar. "The question is not when we notify the police, but how?"

"If we tell them the truth, they can think up a charge. But we'll have to temper the facts a little if we want him brought back alive."

"I'm not sure that's what I want," admitted Dr. Sentar soberly. "I'm not really civilized myself. What happens when he presents his bill to us? Can we pay it?"

"Maybe they'll never catch him." Dr. Verney sounded almost hopeful...

IN A CITY of unfamiliar, and unimpressive faces, you hurry along, glancing uneasily about. Like a paranoid, you imagine people staring after you, distrustful, talking about you, possibly threatening you. But everyone is too intent upon his own shabby affairs even to notice you.

You have changed, and your environment has changed. All the elements are there, but subtly altered, like that face which is not quite your own. Some demon has tapped the giant's kaleidoscope that is the world, and all the bits of colored glass have rearranged their snowflake patterns within the mirrors.

Your name, you think, is Armstrong, but you are no longer sure even of that. Surely someone can tell you about yourself and help you explain to yourself what has happened. Armstrong must have had one friend, one enduring relationship, something or someone solid and unalterable in the midst of chaos. You feel as if the stage-setting of your world has shifted, but the cast of characters must be the same. Not everyone you knew, you or that other Armstrong, could have died or vanished in a mere ten years.

Dip into your memory and you will think of someone. A relative, or just a friend. You feel like a stranger trying to

shake loose coins of memory from your own piggy bank, but you persist. Fuzzy and indistinct at first, your recollections slowly become clear.

There was such a friend. Just the sort to remain himself in all possible situations. Whether your friend, or Armstrong's, he was a character. Probably he will be at home, living his oddly leisurely life as always, surrounded by comforts and the small luxuries which were his necessities. He will have his feet on the table, his head in the clouds, beer or mixed drinks beside him and his collection of artistic grotesquerie around him. He will be listening to Bach or Beethoven or the Modern Martian composers and contemplating life from the pinnacle of his isolation from it.

All this, he will eagerly share with you, or even his silence, understanding and listening power.

Greggi, of course...

BEFORE Armstrong reached Greggi's, several things happened to him.

First, the police visicast. A street-intersection screen and speaker was blattering out his name and description. There was a picture, too, but he was too far away to see the image clearly. It was a general alarm and pickup order. Not expecting such a weird development, Armstrong had trouble associating the visicast with himself. He missed

most of the 'cast, but he heard enough to send him slinking away from the street corner like any other fugitive.

Others heard the broadcast, too. A woman stopped and stared blankly, her mouth falling open. Then, as if breaking from a trance, she darted into the nearest doorway. A man, catching sight of Armstrong, behaved in much the same fashion.

Walking quickly on, Armstrong grew both uneasy and self-conscious. Confusion reigned in his mind. True, he had left the hospital without formalities, but only to go for a short walk, on impulse, intending to check back for the night. Now, he was a hunted fugitive. Not a criminal, he knew. He had heard too little of the broadcast to learn his offense. But the name was his, and so far as he knew, his description. From results, the latter must be painfully accurate. Instinct of the hunted took him into back streets and deserted alleyways.

Briefly, he wondered about Greggi, but memory reassured him. Even in a mad world, such as this one had suddenly become, Greggi would always react sanely. He would do better than that. He was a good friend, and would help.

Outside Greggi's apartment, Armstrong hesitated, wary of a pushbell which would acti-

vate hidden scanners to flash an image of himself inside. Such a device might also make a recording or touch off an alarm. If a man could be hunted like a mad dog merely for walking out of a hospital, who could guess what further police invasions of privacy might have taken place? A knock would summon Greggī without touching off any possible hazards.

As Armstrong's knuckles brushed the door, it sprang in violently. Hands reached out and dragged him inside, then the door shut like a trap, its lock clicking solidly.

"I hoped you'd come here," Greggī explained. "When I heard the visicast, I stayed handy, waiting."

Armstrong studied his friend eagerly. Greggī, at least, looked the same. Sounded like himself. Always a little odd and unpredictable. A little greyer, perhaps, but still the owlish self Armstrong remembered. Goggly glasses, too heavily tinted for indoors. A general dusty-featherish quality about him. Thin, wiry but strong, nervous but self-contained.

"I had to come to you, Greggī," Armstrong said, his voice close to panic. "There was no one else. I'm alone, confused, and frightened. Possibly I'm going crazy. Everything's changed, or I have. What's going on?"

"Don't you know?" demanded Greggī.

"I didn't catch the whole visicast. I don't even know what I'm supposed to have done. It's all a mistake."

"Yes," agreed Greggī easily. "It was a mistake. But it's nothing you've done. The damage was done to you. I suspected something like this when they wouldn't let me see you at the hospital. One look at you, and I know I was right."

"Then you do know what's wrong?"

Greggī shrugged. "I don't know anything. But I can make an educated guess. So can you, if you'll stop and think about it. How's your memory? Not just recent events, but the past?"

Armstrong closed his eyes, thinking hard. "Vague. Most of the patterns, but no details. A feeling of unreality. Also, I felt uneasy even before the visicast. When I looked at myself in a store window, a stranger looked back at me. Am I crazy, or what?"

"Mostly or what. You're sane enough, I think. You've changed, in ways you don't even know yet. And you may as well face the fact that things are going to be rough, whatever you do or don't do. It's what you may do that worries the doctors and the public. How bad it has to be is largely up to you. Wait till you do something that really jars them, and you'll see what I mean."

"Don't play games with me, Gregg. I can't stand much more at the moment. Tell me in plain words what's wrong. Maybe it's not too late to straighten everything out."

Greggi maneuvered a pair of strong drinks from his robot bar-butler and handed Armstrong one.

"One won't make you any fuzzier than you are now. And you may need it. Medicinal, of course."

Armstrong took the drink, but balanced it as cautiously as if it might explode in his hand.

"The whole trouble," Gregg went on calmly, "is that you are not the same man I used to know. You're not the Armstrong, my friend, who went off into space in search of something which never really exists anywhere. In the accepted use of the term, you're not really a man at all. Not like the rest of them. Sometime between your accident and now, you reluctantly resigned from the human race."

"That's plain enough, but I don't understand. Do you mean that I'm dead?"

"Not dead, but you will be quickly enough if you wander around the streets. Harboring a fugitive from the police is a dangerous game. I'm doing it partly for old time's sake, and partly to convince you that I'm your friend. I'm Armstrong's old

friend, or your new one, whichever you like, but you're not the old Armstrong. I'm hoping you'll trust me and let me help."

"I came here," said Armstrong dubiously.

"How well do you remember the crash?"

"Not at all, except what they told me. Everyone asked that same question. They showed me the film-tapes and told me all the details, then I thought I remembered. Now, I'm less sure."

"You couldn't remember. Have you ever heard of anyone living through a crash like that?"

"I wondered about that. Nobody could have survived as they told me I did. But I'm walking around, talking—"

"So they scraped up the pulped and charcoal-broiled hunks of Armstrong, brought them back in a deep-space version of vacuum deep-freeze, and rebuilt the wreckage."

"Nobody ever restored life to a corpse like that."

"Nobody ever did before. There are nasty hints about a couple of experiments that went sour. Nightmare fables, which nobody believes, and which wouldn't count anyhow. You were just organic wreckage chiselled from a tin-can spaceship which blew inside out and burned while its oxygen lasted. Starting from that was like starting

from scratch. But we know that's what they did, because that's what they must have done. You're a laboratory-type scientific ghost."

"It makes a horrible kind of sense," admitted Armstrong, shuddering. "And makes me some kind of monster."

"Not that, unless you were before. Maybe they left out some ingredients, or put some in which frighten them. Actually, though, I think you're just the man any human might have become if given a decent chance. You're brand-new, a practically mint adult, not battered and warped from birth like the rest. By the time any average human reaches maturity, he's too tired, or bitter, or angry to care about anything. Most people use only a tenth of their potential brain-power, largely because they are afraid, or because education channels them into a rut."

"You're guessing about a lot of things. I don't feel bright and new. And confused as I am, I have memories. Even a sense of my own identity. Would I have either?"

Greggi laughed cynically. "Identity comes with the original package. You couldn't escape that. The memories are Armstrong's, or somebody's idea of what he should have. But they are synthetic, dumped into your empty brain while you slept. Have

you never heard of hypno-tapes? Your brain was picked clean when you took your tests for spacepilot. They've patched together a mind-montage from your own tapes and the record files. Even your memory of me is false. Partly Armstrong's, and partly the fact that I signed your references. Synthetic memories won't hold, of course, since there are no emotional scars for traction. I'll bet your clinically sterile brain made a hash of sorting those ideas and memories into the right pigeon-holes."

Armstrong sighed wearily. "It's a file cabinet kept by an idiot. Every drivelly thought you can imagine. Ghosts of people and places. There's one persistent, uncomfortable ghost of a girl that I wish they'd left out. I remember vaguely that I never asked her to wait, since a spaceman has no future to offer. But I feel guilt, and a terrible sense of loss. Was Janet real, Greggi, and if she was as wonderful as I thought, how could I ever have left her to go into space?"

Greggi's lips twisted wryly. "A lot of us wondered about that. Janet was as real and wonderful as you remember. She still is, but it takes a man in love to see all the wonder in a woman. You'll see her, but it will be better for everyone to remember that you're not the Armstrong she knew."

"Ten years is a long time. I'll remember, Gregg. She didn't wait, did she?"

"Ten years is a long time. She didn't wait. Janet and I were married...about five years ago."

Silence lengthened and deepened between them. Armstrong broke the strain. "I suppose it's a little late for congratulations."

"A little. But we're both happy you're back, even if you're not the Armstrong we knew. That makes a difference. She will know that better than I do."

Armstrong laughed. "Things get complicated in ten years, I imagine. You still want to help me?"

"You're still my friend. And I would for Janet's sake, if you weren't. You'll need both of us. But you may not like the kind of help we offer."

"Offer it and see. I'm grateful, Gregg. You don't think my coming back will make a difficulty between you and Janet. I won't see her, except on your terms. Actually, I'm relieved about her."

Greggi chuckled good-naturedly. "It might be awkward for you, not for us. And don't breathe too deeply with relief. Janet has a younger sister you may not remember, if you ever noticed her. Petey improved a lot in growing up. While I'm not matchmaking, she's more

your type. But we'll get around to that later. Right now, we'll have to get you away from here, and fast. This is the second place they'll look for you."

"The second? What's first?"

"The starship," said Gregg. "Don't forget they've picked your brains for their records. And you've always had one thing at the top of your mind. They know the starship would attract you, and once they start thinking things out, they'll go there."

"I might have gone there if I'd thought—"

"Better start thinking. You might come up with something interesting."

"The starship sounds like a poor place to hide."

"It would be. But we're going there just the same. Not to hide you. To steal it and escape."

"That sounds insane. Is it finished? I wondered."

"Finished enough for us. Not for them. It has never been tested, and no crew is trained to operate it. But I think we'll manage, between us."

Armstrong shook his head violently. "Even if we could, where could we go?"

"Let me worry about that, for now. Time is short; I'll explain as we go. But take my word for it, we have to go there, and we must steal the ship."

"If they're looking for me there, won't they still—"

"No need. It's heavily guarded, by robots and booby traps. If you went there, you'd have to break in and set off alarms. They'll figure you know what a trap it is, and are staying away. Then they'll come here."

It was true that his mind was not operating at top efficiency, but Armstrong's mind was operating. It was beginning to stir into life, observing, analyzing, classifying, dealing with assorted facts, projecting them to various possibilities logically, of possibly with some process faster and more accurate than logic. Events were moving almost too rapidly to have meaning, but his brain was accelerating, slowly catching up.

Greggi seemed to be a friend, but actually he was a stranger. If sincere in his offer of help, he could get into serious trouble helping a fugitive escape the police. And if not sincere—

"I can't let you help me, Greggi," said Armstrong. "By coming here, I've already put you out on a limb. Any more is too much to ask."

Greggi paused, grunting. "Let me do the worrying. You go down and make sure the street is clear upfront. I'll try the back. If the buzzards are gathering, come back up here. If not, I'll decide which way is safest.

Stay put and out of sight until I come for you."

Because Greggi was an oddly dominating personality, Armstrong followed orders. But a core of corrosive worry started eating at his mind. With a general manhunt in progress, the pair of them would stand as much chance of getting through the streets and out of the city as an ice cube on Sunside Mercury.

From the sheltering doorway, Armstrong watched the street outside. He waited. Then suddenly the area was swarming with uniformed men. A police vehicle moved into position blocking the nearby alley. Others closed off the street both ways. Like smoothest clockwork the manhunt machine functioned.

Then Greggi touched his shoulder and drew him back inside.

"I must have underestimated them by about six minutes," he whispered calmly. "We're sewed up, front and back. Let's try the roof."

Quickly Greggi led the way through a maze of corridors, shoving Armstrong into a service elevator.

"We'll be trapped up there," argued Armstrong. "I don't think my newly acquired faculties include levitation. And don't tell me you can fly."

"Anybody can fly with the proper tools."

"You mean there's a hell-

copter up top we can steal."

"Not that I know of."

"So you just wave your hand—so!—like an amateur magician?"

"I'll try waving my hands and see what happens," said Gregg, grinning.

From the roof, they cautiously looked down upon the army of encircling police. The building was besieged.

"Keep your head down," counseled Gregg. "Cops nowadays are trigger-happy at best. If you try to resist, or keep running, that's it, brother. To stay alive, you give up quickly, and present your fat head on a platter."

"That might be the best thing, all round. I don't want you in trouble for harboring and helping me. Maybe I should call down to them and surrender."

"Try it, if you feel lucky. Stick your head over that parapet and they'll blow it off."

"Why would they do that?"

"Ever see kids pick on the one that's different from the rest of them. Just being different is enough. And if people are scared enough, they don't wait to find out if there's reason to be scared. You're a wanted man. And if you are taken, they won't know what to do with you. If you're dead, it's simpler, and no arguments."

"Don't you want me to turn myself in?"

Greggi shrugged. "I'm not making your decisions. Suit yourself. But I hate waste. Who ever asks what happens to Guinea pigs?"

"I'm just curious enough to find out," Armstrong told him. He stepped to the edge and shouted to attract attention. He got it. Heads turned up. Guns followed. Splintered stone sprayed his face, cutting savagely. A slug whined into infinity. Armstrong ducked.

"I guess I thought you were exaggerating," he muttered.

Greggi nodded soberly. "That settles that. I wish you were superman. Now I'll have to work the miracle." He broke off, staring into the sun glare. Standing up, carefully out of sight from the street, he started wigwagging frantically. A 'copter moved out of the dazzle, hovered and started to slant down toward a cleared parking area. "Help me signal them," ordered Gregg.

There was a good big stage and strong lighting for the magic show. And the occupants of the 'copter were not blinded by sun glare. Both men waved and danced like maniacs.

"The kids were supposed to pick us up at the parking lot," Gregg shouted jerkily. "But I cut it too fine. Now, if they don't spot us up here, we're all in trouble—"

The aircraft had seemed to

hesitate. Now it was rising again. It hovered, then started a long sweep toward the roof. The hail of police bullets stopped momentarily, then redoubled. Still the copter settled slowly. Gregggi waved Armstrong toward it, and the pair swarmed up the dangling rope. Armstrong almost lost his hold and fell back to the roof when he made out the 'copter's occupants.

"You said kids," he accused angrily.

"Sure. Janet. And Petey, her kid sister." Gregggi was red-faced and panting.

"I was bad enough involving you. I won't get them fouled up in my affairs."

"Nobody's involving anybody," Janet said quickly. "Get secure, you two. You're rocking the boat. It's too late for argument, even if you knew what you're talking about. We're thrill chasers, or we wouldn't be here."

As the 'copter shot upward, Armstrong felt embarrassment flood hotly through him. Janet spared him a quizzical sideways glance. He stared grimly at her and Petey, but any memory of either slid away from his touch like a droplet of mercury. Both were strangers. Smiling strangers who were risking a lot for him. Too much.

Outreaching the bullets, the copter rose swiftly and flung away toward screen-

clouds, overhead and far distant.

"Well be all right now if we can puzzle the sky patrol," said Gregggi.

Always one more hazard, mused Armstrong. Life was like that. You faced them one at a time, but you never came to the end of the obstacle course. Not alive. You accepted hazards when they were part of the life you had chosen. In space, hair-raising incidents were daily routine. But, as in baseball, you expected to be safe at home. If you had a home...

Incubator man. Worse than being an incubator baby, you had been incubated all the way. You were completely orphaned, with not even a world you had been born into. No wonder you felt like Satan in Paradise. You are a stranger. A stranger everywhere.

Janet was staring at him. She beckoned him close as she sat primly at the controls.

"We'll both feel less awkward if we remember that we've never met," she told him warmly. "It's as if the man I knew had died out there, and you are his younger brother. So I'm happy to meet you, sincerely."

"Nice person," thought Armstrong, yielding Gregggi a brief twinge of jealousy, and wondering how his other self would have felt at finding her married to someone else.

"I'd be happier under other

circumstances," he growled. "You seem to know all about me."

"More than you know yourself, apparently."

"I appreciate your interest, but you've all gone far enough. Set down at the first opportunity, and I'll get out of your lives. Suppose you do help me escape, to the starship, or elsewhere. I'll only be buying a little time, and you people are paying too high a price for that. Sooner or later, I'll be caught, or give myself up. All I need do is get past the police to someone in real authority."

"Then what?" asked Petey.

"I don't know," Armstrong answered stubbornly. "But I won't find out by running away. If I'm different, I'll have to adjust myself to it. Perhaps the doctors can help someone, and surely the world will give me a chance to prove myself."

"Perhaps you'd better tell him about us," said Janet.

Greggi's face was sober as he spoke. "I said you might not like the help we could offer you. I'm not stealing a starship merely to rescue you. I'm going home. Did you think you were the only one different on Earth? You've always sensed that I was different, but you never guessed how different. I'm an alien."

"You, Greggi?" Somehow the thought did not surprise Armstrong as much as he felt it should. But he frowned,

puzzled, glancing at the two women. "How about them?"

"Ordinary Earthfolk. Contact with me has changed some of their ideas, that's all. Don't worry about miscegenation—basically the stocks are identical. We're human, too. A race like yours, except that our environment gives us a better chance. We live longer. I could spare twenty years on Earth as a student observer as easily as you spend a year in study."

"I always thought you seemed oddly mature, civilized in a way most people are not. You have a talent for leisure."

Greggi laughed. "By our standards, I will not be really mature for a hundred years. The difference in life span is chiefly a matter of sunlight. Your sun is the source of all life and power, except possibly atomic. But its very radiation erodes your bodies and minds, ages you too rapidly. With you, a life span of a hundred years is rare. With us, one of a thousand is not. Thus we can live more leisurely and gracious lives, there is time to develop naturally. In a sense we are supermen, but not beings with weird and supernatural powers. We are too lazy to develop any mental or mechanical gadgetry to force each other, or force nature. We live simply. Wider ranges of perception in smell and sight and hearing, greater

delicacy of touch and taste. No more."

"You're not joking?"

"Never more serious. We run some danger in studying on Earth, for people under such time-pressure are always dangerous—and there is the solar radiation, which must be avoided so far as possible. We study Earth-life as an aid to understanding ourselves. Much as a scientist studies the briefer life-spans of insects under a microscope. Only the passage of generations make a true study of genetics possible."

"Bugs under a microscope! Is that what you think of us?"

"Of course not," responded Greggj irritably. "We respect you as we respect ourselves. Would I have married Janet if we felt contempt for her people? She knew all about me first, and when I told her and Petey something of my world, they decided to come along with me when my term expired. Such marriages are not rare, though there is always difficulty of adjustment for the Earth-partner. We knew the risks, and wanted to take them."

"Where do I fit into this?"

"We're asking you to come along. For you, with your body practically unexposed to sunlight, and a mind untrammelled by false knowledge and ruts of thinking, there will be less danger, and no trouble in adjustment.

And no organized manhunt to face."

"That, at least, is attractive," admitted Armstrong. "I am not so sure about the rest. I don't feel like superman, and I'm not sure I'd be comfortable in your world."

"You're not a superman—yet. When you get rid of those indigestible ideas and false memories force-pumped into your brain, you may learn to be one. Most education here is equally bad. It is usually nationalistic or economical propaganda disguised as history, a few incomplete and unsatisfying philosophies, and some paradoxical formulae in mathematics. My world is no dull Utopia, which would be the ultimate boredom if possible, but a place of constantly expanding horizons. The bigger the men, the bigger the problems. Life is never easy, and never complete."

"You sound like a missionary. But if I can't adjust here as a kind of alien, how could I adjust in an alien world."

"The difference is that you would be let alone, helped if you asked for help. We would try to make it easy for you."

"Thanks, but no thanks. I think I'll try it the hard way —here."

Greggi shrugged. "Suit yourself. We'll never force you or try persuasion. We never interfere on Earth, if it can be helped. An occasional rescue, in extreme cas-

es, when a person seems hopelessly out of place in this environment. We never force people, and never kill, even to protect ourselves. We'll have to land soon, separate, and each make our way to the starship, alone and on foot. In this 'copter we would be traced too quickly. If you change your mind, join us at the starship. We'll wait for you as long as we dare."

"Don't wait too long. I'm not coming. Do you always steal a spaceship to go home?"

"There are other ways, sometimes more adventurous, and always less comfortable. But our experts wished to study this ship for some interesting possibilities in its drive. One can learn from any culture. However, we only borrow the lovely toy, and my replacement will return it, almost before it is missed. We function on a different rate of time flow. Does that solve your tender conscience?"

"Somewhat. I suppose you think I'm a fool for wanting to stay here. Perhaps I have some idea of helping people, though I don't know what I can do for anyone. The roots I have here may be synthetic, as you say, but I would feel like a deserter, just running away from something I don't understand."

"I sympathize with your feelings," said Greggj sadly, "but you're lying to yourself about your situation. You

think the right word in the right place will solve your difficulties. It's never as simple as that. Humanity will never accept you, except as a freak, potentially dangerous. Nobody will trust you, even if you want to help. They won't wait for you to become a menace. They are too frightened, too insecure. They will hate and envy you for any extra abilities you have."

"They already seem to hate me."

"It was war between you and them from the moment you came into being. To survive, you will have to master them, and no slave ever loves a master."

Amstrong was thoughtful but unconvinced. "You say you never kill, even to save yourselves. Doesn't that mean rough usage here?"

"Sometimes. But we feel about their violence as you might about obstreperous eight-year olds. They can hurt, but you forgive."

"I'm not sure I could, always. But then I'm an obstreperous eight-year old myself. And maybe I'm the yeast needed to stir this batch and raise it to the ten-year old plateau. I know this world, its ugliness, its dreariness, its cruelties and frustrations. At worst, I know what I'm fighting. If I don't like this world as it is, I'll try to help change it."

"Well, good luck. The door

is open, but the decision is yours. The starship is guarded by electrified fences and gates which open to coded electrical charges on metallic ident-cards. The girls have tags, since they worked on the ship, and can get through all right. I can manage, somehow. And so can you if you come."

"Don't worry about it."

Janet was landing the 'copter. She threw the ship at the ground, fast and hard. A small clearing in a patch of woods came up, expanding like an elastic miniature. They struck with a jar. Petey busied herself assembling some oddments of luggage and Armstrong wondered how anyone, a woman particularly, could leave a world and take so little of it along. As he remembered women—

He hauled up the thought shortly. Actually, his memories were second-hand synthetics drilled into his subconscious by the hypnotic machines.

As Armstrong helped Petey, handing the burdens from the 'copter to Janet on the ground, neither woman would meet his eyes. He seemed to feel into their minds and emotions, sensing both warmth and curious disappointment. This momentary telepathy startled him. Was this some new faculty, incompletely functioning? He felt oddly disconcerted by this reaching out to minds

and emotions. Almost embarrassed.

"If they catch me, I'll try to foul up their hunt with some lie about you three," promised Armstrong. "Maybe somehow, I can lead them off your trail first."

As if conscious of his invasion of her privacy, Petey stared at Armstrong from veiled eyes, and her mind clamped down suddenly blank. Janet's lips tightened, but she said nothing.

The group scattered quickly. At the edge of trees, the girls hesitated long enough to wave back, and call, "Good luck!"

Greggi scorned conventional goodbyes, except to clasp Armstrong's wrist roughly. They parted....

NOW you are alone again. Alone, in a worldful of strangers, even though it is your own world. You miss Greggi. Alien or not, he is your one friend in any world. With the girls, by definition your own kind, you felt less sure of yourself. And with everyone else in this world, you are definitely at odds—through a fantastic twist of circumstance.

Your mind is made up. Lead off the pursuit. Give Janet and Petey and Greggi their chance, as they gave you yours.

Perhaps you have no right to connive at the theft of the starship. As a spaceman, you understand the dream behind

symbol. But this is no time for doubts or divided loyalties. Right now, you are Satan in Paradise, or an unfrocked angel in Hell. You owe something to the few friends you have. The landing copter will have drawn attention to the woodlands and the clearing. You linger by the ship to give the others a chance to clear. Then set fire to the 'copter. That will be a beacon to light the hunters to you.

Not that you expect them to believe the 'copter crashed and burned. That would be too simple. They will examine the wreck and find no bodies. Then the hunt will be on. A real manhunt now. No paper chase. No paper trail.

Wild sunset hangs low in the sky. Twilight follows quickly as clouds smudge and glow rose-grey, then darken. The column of oily smoke rises skyward, fire-tinted with dancing reflections. From sheltering trees, you watch the burning. You wait, ears tuned for the slightest sound. Your mind tries to reach out, and you feel a stir in you of senses beyond the familiar five. You first become aware of shadowy figures stalking among the trees. Manhunters, who know their business. Armed and ready, they move in methodically. Tensed, trigger-happy, for man is the most dangerous of big game.

You slip silently among them, through their lines,

your newly enhanced senses giving you real advantage in the gathering dusk.

Now, rout them out, stir them up. Give that careless one a tumble into the brush. Start running, noisily, and make it good. Bright lines of fire interlace the darkness. For the moment, they are confused, shooting at shadows. Run. Now that they have the scent, the chase is hot. Keep moving, keep low, give them a moving target, or none. These are trained marksmen.

The hunt continues, and you begin to enjoy its exhilaration. You know how a hunted animal feels. Excitement balances fear. Now brush crackles close by. Somebody gives crisp orders, and confusion becomes pattern. Systematically they comb the brush, spreading out through the patch of woodland, heedless of noise, like beaters driving game before them. You are their quarry, but you are no frightened game. You watch, skulk, listen, move on, outguessing them.

Woodcraft is an art nobody thought to include in your synthetic education. But you learn quickly, or the race memory is buried deep within the cells from which you were remade. You are not superman, perhaps. Nor even superbeast. But survival skill comes naturally to a savage, and all hunted men become

savages as instinct takes over. You are a savage against a world.

They group, fan out and regroup. They consult. They try tricks, and you counter their tricks with yours. This is a grim game, but make it a good one while it lasts. Nothing can go on forever. Not one against so many. That thought suggests another, grimmer. Nobody can civilize a world. Inertia is too great. Your boast of helping to make over the world was a finger held against the wind. The few who have tried always ended on a gallows, at the stake, crucified, shot, or merely ignored to death. Break the pattern and the pattern breaks you. The race goes on its own way, out of sheer momentum, rolls over you and you are forgotten. They like their world and want no part of one you might want for them. So you have no holdings in theirs.

Suddenly the forest is quiet. Too quiet. Too suddenly. They have stopped, waiting. You suspect another trick. You stop, listening, waiting, wondering.

Off in the denser underbrush a tiny animal is caught by something. Its body threshes wildly. The whimper comes faintly even to your superhearing. But you picture clearly every detail of the small tragedy. Panic is implied in the very desperation of the sounds. Your

mind reaches out to sense that panic, the pain, the awareness of its tiny self, and the torture of the trap which holds it. Empathy between you and the tiny forest-dweller is strong. You long to approach the beast, to comfort it and end its sufferings if the injuries are beyond help.

But caution holds you frozen. Is this but bait upon the larger trap society has set for you. Applied psychology, they call such tricks, and you know that the subterfuge is not beyond them.

You know the hunters are all about you, silent, waiting. They hope this incident will throw you off guard, bring you into the open.

But the panic and pain of the beast is real. You can go to its succor, or you can walk away, escape the larger trap. Pity is always a trap of one kind or another. Though no longer blinded by pity, you cannot leave the beast to a lingering pain-filled death. Not to save yourself. Not for any reason.

Belly-down, worm-crawling, you inch toward the thicket. Instinct and your new awareness gets you through the ring of concealed men. Unseen, unheard, you work closer. A rabbit is torn, bleeding, terrified, cruelly held. With you night-vision in a spectrum of curious reds, you see clearly. Large, luminous eyes watch you, fascinated, pleading. As you feared,

the beast is past help, needs only swift mercy. With a quick blow, you close the tragedy.

Silence slaps down in the brake. Silence louder than sound. By its dying, the rabbit has betrayed you. Your enemies spring toward you, closing their trap. Flashlights weave a pattern of beams, but only enhance the darkness. Hunters grope blindly, guns ready.

On your feet, you are running. Your rush finds a hole in the circle, and by sheer surprise you break through.

The chase becomes a race. In close order. Perilously close. Someone is practically on your heels. Brush tangles your feet, branches slash your face, breath burns hard in throat. Run hard to string them out. Then strike back at them, one at a time.

Prolong it, if you can. Your ears sort out the sounds behind. One still crashes close. He must be a woodsman, a runner. You are not. But the rest have fallen back, far enough possibly to give you time to deal with this one. You turn and hurl yourself at him. Locked together, the pair of you roll and thresh in the rough brush. Hammering with fists, you give and take punishment. His hate and fear and savage bloodlust strikes at your sensitive mind like a physical blow.

You break apart, both scrambling to your feet. He

stands swaying, dragging out a handgun. Dark-blinded, he stares, trying to aim. You kick out, surely. As the gun spins upward, you catch it from the air. Your mind touches his. Sickened, you retch. There is deeper ugliness beyond the surface motivations. He wants to kill you not only because of his orders or his fear and hatred, but also because he will enjoy killing. Your mind thrust out among the others searching for you. You find the same hideous thought and emotion in all of them. They kill because they like it.

Your adversary cannot see that you have the gun. He gropes toward you, eyes blank. He is dangerous, because he can delay you, can call the others to you. Already you can hear the trampling of many boots, feel the ugly minds closing in. He cries out to guide them. Then, kill-crazy, he leaps.

Gun ready, aimed, enemies circling you, one charging at close range, for you this is a moment of decision.

Your finger tightens on the trigger....

LATER, standing in the moonlight, you look up at the great ship. Mirror-bright, it stands as a symbol of man's eternal challenge to the infinite, a promise for the long-distant future when man has learned how to live with himself and others. Still ground-

ed, man is aimed at the stars. But you will not be with him on that great adventure. Your adventure is now.

Pain and nostalgic sadness twisting inside you, start up the ramp. Inside, Janet and Petey and Gregggi are waiting for you. With them, you are not a stranger and alone—anywhere. Gregggi is standing just within the airlock. You let him help you inside.

Abruptly the ship takes off, strangely and silently riding a beam of light skyward. Thoughts and emotions spinning, you are dimly aware of the ship, the people, the way ahead.

"You're hurt," Petey cries, moving toward you. Something warm and sweet and glowing emanates from her, enfolds you. You are comforted to realize that telepathy, within limits, may not be too bad a sense.

"Glad you made it," says Gregggi. "I had given you up. The girls hadn't. What happened to your idea of sacrificing yourself to reform the world?"

"They caught me in the forest. It was not what they tried to do to me, but what

they made me want to do to them. I couldn't—but I couldn't stay here without wanting to hurt them. And if I could make over the world, I haven't the right. Nothing I could give them would make up their loss if I took away the privilege of working out their own destiny. They're not my people. It's not my world."

"They'll be a great race—someday," predicts Gregggi.

"They will—if they learn how to be kind," you agree, with reservations.

"Have you learned?"

You shudder. "I don't know. I hope so. What's your world like, Gregggi. Will I fit there?"

"That's up to you. You'll get along all right with the supermen. They're easy-going, good-natured, good fun. Anyone can get along with supermen. But I think you'll be glad Petey came along."

"Petey! Why?" you ask, nakedly aware of her nearness, disturbed by your own emotions.

Gregggi hesitates, grinning. "I speak from experience—you can get very tired of superwomen...."

