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Blinded instantly, Jord turned and fled

PAGE AND PLAYER

A Novelet of Pioneer Worlds

By HARRY NEAL



The Cronies were harmless, incapable of violence . . . but they had their own strange ways of getting things done

I

MAX MILES did mysterious things to the battered, broken-dialed control panel, and Mary the stratocoupe promptly went into her act. The old one-man jet flipped a wing at zenith and lost three hundred feet of altitude in six seconds. Miles sparrred with the panel, got upside up again, stared back at a cloud of dust they had whisked from a hill-top. He gave the panel a right to the jaw. Mary sighed heavily with her air-foils and circled in resignation toward the green and ochre valley below, grounding at last in the meadow with jolts and scrapings.

Miles kicked off the drive with one foot, shoved open the port with the other. He poised, a small healthy-looking man with blue eyes and more scalp than hair, his knees bent for the short drop to the ground; and—as usually happened—the scene outside caught him up and held him for several delicious moments. His thoughts sidestepped into well-worn and agreeable tracks as he looked upon the neatly furrowed fields that spread to the encircling hills; the stone-lined irrigation ditches; the long, sprawling *kanl* racks; the shining sun-mill that jutted above the yard by the cottage.

There goes the Babe, he thought, and watched the tiny sun as it seemed to hesitate, then withdraw suddenly—in a blink—behind the near horizon. The clouded sky immediately began changing its heaped-up, and fortunately high-

up, ammonia vapors from red to purple and then to neutral grey as the upthrust arc of sunlight narrowed and faded.

"Miles' Matchless Acres," this valley was, in his letters to his friends on Earth; the Agricultural Registry in Three Major listed it with less whoopedoo as: "Sections 764-5-6 Alcorn; product (s): *kanl, linla*; owner (s) Maxwell Julius Miles, age 41, vol. Earth July 2691."

But Max Miles was fired with the blooded pride of the pioneer—and the less unselfish pride of the landowner. This was his farm. Ipso facto it was the best farm on Goran Three.

He jumped, and Three's gravity—.5403 Earth—socked his feet gently into the tangled grass. Waves and eddies of stink—there's no other word for it—came at him from all directions; stink that was a level eight-foot blanket over the Alcon lowlands. Miles grinned and ducked under Mary's stubby wing, savoring the heavily-laden air with the peculiar gusto of one to whom an unpleasant thing has become pleasantly familiar. Sliding open the cargo hatch, he hoisted a box of supplies to his shoulder and started up the path for the cottage, squinting into the gloom of oncoming evening.

Several dark shapes seemed to materialize at the meadow's edge, vague and hulking against the backdrop of intertwined *kanl* trees. Miles wondered, as he often had, how any critter as big as

the average Crony could move so silently and so fast. . . .

"Is it Miles?" The sibilant whisper was beamed, by thoroughly unhuman vocal chords, at the little Earthman.

"It is Miles," he replied, and although he recognized the voice, courtesy demanded that he add: "Is it Fir?"

"It is Fir, with Tos. What is your wish?"

"None, save to retire. The farm is well?"

The answering whisper carried overtones of satisfaction. "It is well, Miles. You will find an account on your desk—" and the figures melted into the thick-hung blackness.

Miles grinned, trudged on up the path. Gone for half a day's shopping—and his workers had kept a record of the farm's happenings. That was Lin's work, he suspected. His big foreman enjoyed the assumption of tasks over and above those assigned him; such as his regular trips to the cottage, a few minutes before Grandpa, to make certain that Miles was awake and aware.

THE natives of Goran Three were certainly not the most beautiful to look upon—although reasonably humanoid and not at all disturbing to a human, if the human were forewarned—but he'd stack them for common decency against any blank sapiens in the catalogued systems. And work! They'd work their hands to the—well, no, not to the bone. At least so far as Miles or anyone else could know for sure. Couple of years ago some stiffnecked medicos from Mars General had come to Three with ideas about examining the Cronies and placing them in the exact black and white scheme of things. After a while they had gone back to Mars, disgruntled, carrying fogged X-ray plates and souvenir scalpels that had blunted on chitinous hides. One amiable Crony had signed a release, submitted to an atomic drill—and exited laughing.

Miles himself had often wondered about the physiological set-up of the

Cronies. After all, he thought, living with equal comfort under both the Babe and Grandpa was somewhat like breathing both air and water. Or air and fire, more like it.

But then, the Cronies were paradoxical from the word go. With one of the highest racial I. Q.'s known, so far as could be determined, considering the difficulty of establishing suitable criteria, they acted like kids, preferring to spend much of their time romping and singing in the sunlight and working gratis as farmhands for the Earth settlers.

Which, argued some scientists, along with the hints occasionally dropped and the gadgets often carried but never shared by the Cronies, was no small indication of their cultural status: highly advanced, with the arts and technology to produce anything and everything they could possibly want except exercise.

Other scientists argued decadence.

All the scientists would have loved to examine just *one* of those gadgets, to have entered just *one* of the great shining Hives that lay scattered across the face of Goran Three, and thereby see exactly what was what.

But after several decades of being neatly rebuffed in such attempts, Earth scientists knew the following and little else: the Cronies were tough, brilliant, amiable and—telepathic. They were not, however—and thank Heaven—able to read Earth minds. This the Cronies admitted.

The binary-meter on Miles' wrist suddenly began to agitate—buzzing wasp-like—and grew hot. The illuminated dial, controlled by the master-meter in Three Minor, told him that he could expect Grandpa in precisely an hour and a half from *now*.

"Damn crazy place to live," he confided to the meter. Then his blue eyes snapped half-shut with annoyance as the heat increased. "All right, all *right!* I'm not asleep this time—!"

He made whistling noises and thumped the box of supplies to the ground, grabbed at the meter to click it

off. Pain faded. Miles flipped the wrist around to cool it, cursing the meter—but without enthusiasm, for he remembered the time he *had* been asleep, lying in the grass at the far end of the meadow. Good Martian wine and a very bad book had eased him into a weighted slumber, and the brilliance of certain death had begun to silhouette the distant hills. The meter had all but fried his wrist in its effort to get him on his feet. He still had the scar—and the nightmare memory of that frantic race with Grandpa.

The box reshouldered, Miles cut away from the path and knelt. The racks

far as smells went, he was no peony himself—he had the horsey odor of a big man long unwashed; his tunic was rumped and dirty, his face stubbled and sweat-shiny.

Miles lowered his gaze and had his first opportunity—if you didn't count the detective thrillers he followed on the screen of his telaudio—to study the triple nozzle of a hand-blast pointed at him with intent to do him dirt. It did indeed command attention, and Miles gave his to the stranger's next words.

"Is that food you're carrying?" Hopefully.

The Life and Times of Harry Neal

ONE of the things which enlivens an editor's life is the curious ways in which stories may come to him. Thus, when a promising young novelet titled PAGE AND PLAYER came in from an unknown author named Harry Neal, this editor made a few routine inquiries about Neal and bought the story with the joy of discovering a new talent. Imagine his disgust when Harry Neal turned out to be Jerry Bixby, now snickering back in the fan column! Anyway, you read it and decide whether the joke is on us or on him.

—The Editor

were spread with neat rows of round, soggy *kant* leaves, all ready for Grandpa. He straightened, took a deep breath. It was a good life. He let out the breath—if you could stand Grandpa and the unholy stink.

II

MILES rounded the corner of the cottage and came to a surprised halt. His cheery whistle turned atonal and perished.

The big man's voice was oddly soft, almost friendly in tone.

"Does it always smell like this?" he inquired.

He stood by the door, his back leaned against the tangled *jongar*. His round face might have been weak, almost child-like, with its shallow eyes and nubbins of a nose—but the small mouth beneath was tucked in at the corners, stamping an ugly determination over all. And as

"Some of it," Miles admitted.

The man moved backward through the doorway. "Come in, said the spider—although it's *your* parlor."

Max Miles followed, ducking to clear the trailing *jongar* vines, more puzzled than afraid. Strangers were uncommon on Goran Three. One of many pioneer worlds, it bore a purely functional population. Importing supplies was a headache, living conditions were flexible and still under critical analysis, and space visas were proportionately hard to get. There were only two cities on the tiny planet; one a shipping center, and the other a glorified department store. These, along with the farms and outlying districts, contained in aggregate exactly 964 humans, most of whom were known to one another and one of whom, Miles was sure, this stranger was not.

Habit brought Miles' hand to the house-board. He inserted his key,

turned the cottage on. Coming to electronic life, it detected their presence and spilled soft, diffuse light from the walls.

From the center of the room the big man murmured his surprise: "Pretty fancy for a farmer."

Miles blinked to adjust his sight. "What'd you expect—candles?"

The stranger's mouth tightened. "Kick the door shut."

Miles did so.

The stranger indicated the box of supplies with a wave of the hand-blast. "Set it."

Miles bit down on his anger and slid the box onto the table. He said mildly, "Okay, Mister—?"

"Jord. Henry Jo—" the stranger broke off with an appreciative grin. "Say, aren't you the smart one? I like a smart man." He took a step forward, the grin stiffening over his small, even teeth. "Now, put your hands in your pants pockets and turn around."

Miles pivoted slowly to face the wall. Henry Jord's free hand patted up and down his torso, removing his wallet, his pocket-talkie. A moment later he heard the tiny 'tronic shatter on the floor. Then Jord's steps retreated to the center of the room, his soft-steel voice said, "All right, farmer. At ease."

Miles wheeled, picked the wallet out of mid-air as it was tossed to him. Its thickness told him that his money was still there.

Jord put the hand-blast on the table. "Ten to one," he said casually, "that I can pick it up and shoot you before you get to me."

"Wouldn't buck those odds," Miles grunted. He leaned against the wall, watching silently as the big man unpacked the box of supplies, item by item. At one point Jord exclaimed happily and set aside a container of Venus-Blue Garol.

"I guess we'll have that for supper," Miles interpreted.

"I said you were smart, farmer—" Jord's hand explored the bottom of the

box. "I just wanted to make sure there wasn't a hand-blast mixed in here. No reason why there should be—but wouldn't I be a fool to take the chance?" He picked up the gun from the table and gave Miles his wide, meaningless smile.

The little farmer bared his teeth in a returning smile that meant a great deal—most of it nasty.

"As long as you're my guest," he said, "suppose you call me by name—you got it from the wallet—and tell me what in hell this is all about!"

Jord raised his eyebrows. "Isn't that obvious? Or don't you listen to the tel-audio?"

"No, it isn't obvious," Miles snapped, "and I listen to the tel-audio. But my set isn't any government I. P. pick-up. And you're not from Goran Three, mister!"

Something of surprise flickered in Jord's pale gaze.

"Maybe you're too damned smart," he said. "How did you figure that?"

"Three's like a small town—there's nobody on this clod I can't call by his first name."

Jord's face lost its wary tension. "Of course," he murmured, "I'd forgotten. That's very nice—my not being known here should expedite things." He sat down and stretched his long legs under the table, keeping the hand-blast targeted on Miles' chest. "Well . . . since you don't know who I am, I'll tell you. We all hope for notoriety, of course, but you must understand that I would have preferred a different sort. Henry Jord, galactic explorer, perhaps—or Henry Jord, famous author. I do write, you know. No, I suppose you don't. At any rate, these things are not in our hands, are they?" He flung out a casual hand, as if in demonstration. "So I am Henry Jord, embezzeler, murderer, fugitive."

MILES stared at the big man blankly, while a cold ball of horror gathered in his chest, dropped to his stomach and stuck there.

A murderer! A rare animal, these days—almost extinct. The little farmer

had been inclined to take the threat of the handblast only half seriously. Now he suddenly developed an intense respect for it, in inverse proportion to the respect he lost for its holder. And for the first time in his life he knew fear of another human being. It was an atavistic, somehow unclean, feeling, and it made him a little sick.

To keep the ball rolling while he considered his situation, he said, "Where'd all this murdering and embezzling take place?"

"Jason One—and in the opposite order. First, I embezzled from my firm. My partner discovered the loss and we had a disagreement. I disposed of the body, but you know how it is. One thing after another. Eventually questions were asked and although I lied magnificently I was booked on suspicion."

He tossed the can of Garol to Miles and the farmer turned, pressed it into the opener. Near his fingertips lay the inviting bulk of the short-wave cook-all and it occurred to him that with luck he might be able to brain the big man with it. The can opened with a hiss. Miles shoved it into the cook-all, wrapped his fingers around the grill to get a firm hold. He put his weight on his toes and bunched his arm muscles—

"That's fine!" The hand-blast bored cruelly into his back and twisted. "Now get back against the wall, little man, and think up something better to try!"

For one reckless moment Miles toyed with the idea of swinging around abruptly, wrestling for the weapon. Jord sensed this, however. He stepped back quickly to the center of the room and barked a single word, "Don't!"—underlining it with the *chat!* of the hand-blast. The charge whined past Miles' head and out of the window, raising small thunder and a sudden white plume near the base of the sun-mill. The farmer heard Jord's sarcastic laugh:

"You might as well find out right now that I'm an excellent shot, and that I'm not a careless man or a fool. Mind that,

and we'll get along."

Miles snapped on the cook-all, his face impassive. "I'll mind it." He moved to the wall, and sat down cross-legged. "I don't have to stand, do I?"

"No."

Miles forced himself to consider his position logically, screening out certain impulses that he recognized as neurotic in origin. Such reactions were dangerous, could very well result in his death. The attempt with the cooker, for example, had been quite foolish.

This train of thought gave him a minor inspiration. He turned it over in his mind, thinking moodily that every little bit helps. The old bar-rag stench of *jongar* filled the room, bringing its picture of the vines that crowded the cottage walls, lacing over the windows with a persistence that no amount of blasting could inhibit. Burn the vines, sear their roots—and *jongar* would regenerate from a cinder.

III

MAX MILES versus the vines had been a primary issue soon after his arrival from Earth, and he had tackled them with indignation. But, after ten or a dozen futile sessions with a handblast, he had shrugged his shoulders and saved his pellets. Whereupon *jongar* had, during a single night, regained and consolidated, twisting and matting so that from afar the cottage looked like a blue haystack; and there *jongar* stopped its growth, took a million bites of Mercury-steel with a million mouths and sat back to digest, perhaps also shrugging its shoulders.

Miles cleared his throat. "Got something to tell you—" he said.

Jord looked at him without much interest and Miles deliberately wet his lips uneasily, refusing to meet the big man's gaze.

"Those vines—" Miles pointed at the tendrils of *jongar* dangling outside the window—"their odor is toxic." He cleared his throat again, looking Jord

squarely between the eyes. "You—you have to get injections every week or you die. It's a horrible death. If you stay here much longer, you'll—I—it'll be too late—" he trailed his voice off into a hopeful silence.

Jord's irises were twin chips of polar ice as he studied Miles' face. Then, slowly, amused contempt dulled the hard glitter. He shook his head.

"You're lying," he said. "And very badly. I forgot to tell you that I'm also an excellent judge of men."

Miles shrugged philosophically . . . and mentally patted his back on a fair job of acting. When he told his next lie, minus the fidgets, Jord would probably believe it. His ego would want him to believe, and so he would. This gave the farmer a slight edge, a toehold. Men like Jord, who prided themselves on their caution, sometimes looked so hard for subtleties that they overlooked the Letter on the Mantle. Miles had no idea yet what his next lie was going to be, but he knew that it would be a dilly.

After a moment, he said: "What about the body?"

Jord frowned. "What about it?"

"No body—you say you disposed of it. No corpus delicti."

"Corpus delic—oh, Earth law. I'm afraid that doesn't throw much weight out here. If you've ever read western stories, you know what I mean. Men were men and all that, and the law was a—Holt, I believe the blaster was called? Here on the pioneer worlds, just as on the western frontier, we're beyond contemporary law. Will be for some years, I imagine—though never a fraction as lawless." Jord got up and crossed to adjust the cook-all, moving crab-wise to keep an eye on Miles. "It'll catch up to us in time," he went on, "but until then we won't have legalities to confound justice . . . Funny, isn't it?"

"What?"

"My concern for the blind lady Justice."

Miles answered inanely, his intelligence nowhere near the conversation. "I

hardly imagine that you're looking forward to your just punishment."

Jord laughed shortly. "Oh, Lord, you're right there! I plan to escape it! Obvious as hell that I killed Harry, you know. In an Earth court I might have wheedled and bribed my way out of it. Here—" he shrugged. "So I skipped my bail and got off-world."

Miles stood up and shouldered out from the wall, and the hand-blast snapped up to level on his midriff. He pointed at the supplies on the table. "Do you mind if I put some of that stuff away?" he growled. "That steak is soaking up these smells like a sponge."

Jord moved away from the cooker to a neutral corner and nodded. Miles slid open the deep-freeze and stacked in the perishables, slanting his attention at the big man. His covert glances didn't pass unnoticed.

"Don't try to throw anything at me," he was warned, "or this place will smell even worse. These hand-blasts really cook a man, you know!"

Hand-blast? Miles thought grimly. *Brother, you haven't met Grandpa!* And then he frowned, his hands pausing in their work. He'd almost forgotten about Grandpa. On Goran Three—or Two or One, for that matter—people didn't forget about Grandpa and live to tell about it. He glanced casually at his wrist-meter. An hour, a little over. He ground his teeth almost audibly. This was getting nastier by the minute.

HE'D have to get Jord out of here before Grandpa's arrival or take the big man underground; and he didn't favor the latter very much. First, because he didn't want to be cooped up with the killer for seven hours; second—and more important—if Jord got out of the lowlands he might possibly manage to escape from Three. Another killing, maybe two. A stolen visa. A quick interstellar jaunt through hyperspace and Henry Jord would vanish into the crowds of Earth or Mars. And this, Miles thought with naive logic, should

not be allowed to happen.

As if reading his mind, Jord said, "You'd like to stop me, wouldn't you?" He nodded, not waiting for an answer. "I've been tempted to stop *myself* several times since this thing began. At such times I forget that *I* am the criminal—the impulse to remove such a danger-potential to our society is almost overwhelming . . ." he rapped his knuckles lightly on the table top, then seemed to remember what he had been about to say. "But luckily, speaking as an individual rather than as a component of that society, my aberration has included a revival of the self-preservation 'instinct'. Otherwise I'm sure I would have offered myself for elimination."

Miles closed the deep-freeze and hipped himself onto it. *Keep him talking about himself, he thought with controlled calm, and look for an opening—because, brother, you're between the devil and the Saturnian Sea! Exactly half an hour left to do something—but what?*

He said aloud, "Jason One's a good week's spacing from here. Why come to Goran?"

"Oh, it wasn't intentional. I had some vague idea of heading for Sol—lose myself in a crowd, you know." Jord pulled a roll of cigarettes from a pocket and scratched one alight on the table. He flipped the roll to Miles. "But I never was much of an astrogator. Piled on the drive till I blew a tube. Barely managed to get into the life-shell before the whole business went *kaput*. I set the spectro for an Earth-type planet."

He shifted and made a face. "Beastly little things, those shells. Stuffy—no ports, you know—completely automatic. No place for a claustrophobe. So here I am—and you never did answer my first question. What the devil stinks so?"

"Plants, mister. *Jongar, linla, kanl, herck—*"

"And slithy toves. I wish I had a breath of fresh air!"

Miles grinned crookedly. "You get used to it after a while."

Jord went over to check on the Garol. It was bubbling heavily, like bright blue lava. He snapped off the cook-all and raised an eyebrow at the little farmer. "I won't be here that long—thanks to your stratocoupe."

"Now, wait a minute," Miles growled. He took the cigarette out of his mouth and glared at the big man.

Jord fell back a step, his grin taking on that peculiar stiffness again. "You can address your complaints to this hand-blast."

Miles shook his head angrily. "You'll have a real party flying Mary. It took me a month to get on to her bag of tricks!"

"I'll manage. Strength of desperation and all that. Suppose we eat?"

FOLLOWED closely by Jord, Miles made several trips to Mary to bring in the remaining supplies. Jord poked among the cans and containers, selecting the most expensive and exotic items.

Miles, in turn, busied himself at the cook-all under the careful guidance of his guest who, it seemed, liked his food just so. And without poison. They ate silently, Miles evolving and discarding schemes, Jord very carefully on guard against them.

Later, Jord switched on the telaudio and fiddled with the dials. To the farmer's surprise the old set picked up a bleared image from Leyville on Goran Two. A symphony orchestra, one of the many extrovert organizations springing from this lonely outer space existence, was struggling fiercely with *Verklärte Nacht*. It probably wasn't half bad at the point of origin, but forty million miles of space gave it a hell of a kicking around.

Jord grunted, "Plenty *verklärte—*" and turned the dial methodically until he located a newscast. There was the usual stuff: local news, polo scores, spaceship arrivals and departures, births and deaths. Nothing about fugitive killers.

Jord flashed a lop-sided smirk at

Miles as if to say, "Looks like I'm safe, eh?"

His assumption, it developed, was premature, for the newscaster was handed a slip of paper by some unseen associate and immediately registered professional agitation. He rolled his smooth voice, carefully raised to the "flash-big-news!" pitch, into the two cities and outlying farm districts of Goran Three:

"The wreckage of an interstellar has been detected off-world. It is thought to be that of Henry Jord, J-O-R-D, wanted by the authorities of Jason One for murder and unauthorized spacing—"

"In that order?" murmured Miles; but Jord didn't hear him, which was just as well. *So the story's finally gotten to Goran, he thought. Perfect timing! Maybe he was followed!*

Jord had bared his teeth and snapped them together. He leaned forward until his face almost touched the visiscreen and he moved his hands—twitched them—as if wishing he could strangle the distant throat and its unwelcome words.

"—assumed that Jord is dead, but until such is proven all Goranians are cautioned to watch for this man. Warning—he is probably armed. His description—"

Jord cut off the telaudio viciously. "So now what?" he grated, his shallow eyes looking through Miles, through walls and *jongar*, at the strange and suddenly inhospitable world of Goran Three.

"I'll tell you," offered the farmer. "They'll prowl the stratolanes, check all ships, clamp down on the spaceports and—" he grinned at the black scowl on the face of the other.

"You seem damned happy about it!"

"Sure. You'll have to try it on foot now—Mary won't get splashed all over the lowlands." Miles pushed back his chair and stifled a belch. "You're a gone gosling, mister!"

Jord looked at him steadily, then sighed. "I don't know why I shouldn't blast the sass out of you—" and he

stood up, juggling the gun speculatively. The newscast had knocked all the I've-got-the-gun-but-let's-be-chums out of him.

Miles jumped. To conceal the sudden movement he carried his hand to his breast pocket, got the cigarette Jord had given him, lit it. An idea was beginning to take form—

"I'll give you one good reason," he said, and he told his second lie easily, almost without thought: "You blast me and you'll have a crowd of Alcron natives on your neck!"

He saw that Jord was nodding, apparently weighing the menace of the Cronies, so he added a few more pounds of menace. "Seven feet up," he said, "and they'll walk miles to look at blood!"

IV

MAX MILES leaned back, dribbling smoke from his nostrils. He hoped to hell he'd made it good. There actually wasn't a more peace-loving race in the Galaxy. To his knowledge, none of them had ever raised a duke. They didn't have to. Nature had created the Cronies invulnerable, and had in the process, with perfect logic, omitted in them any capacity for offense—a fact which Miles regretted deeply under the present circumstances.

At any rate, he had Jord worried about the Cronies and it was a theme that should be worth developing. But not ostentatiously. It might even be a good idea to change the subject, before Jord got to thinking too hard and began to remember his biology lessons . . . the Cronies' peculiarity was no secret.

So Miles grinned and said loudly, "What're you going to do now? Not that I give a damn so long as you get out of here and stop messing up my routine." He saw the big man jump at the sound of his voice, and thought *Score one! Now, when Lin comes, maybe I can—*

Jord's face tightened at the cheeks.

"I'm going to think," he said, "and maybe slap a gag in that big mouth of

yours!" He walked over to Miles and showed him the muzzle of the hand-blast. "Now, shut up," he said evenly, "and get into the bedroom. I'm getting sick of by-play!"

Miles' grin soured. Jord stood back, his shallow eyes bright with anger. He gestured again with the gun.

"Move, farmer—the honeymoon's over."

Miles shrugged and went into the bedroom, the big man stepping carefully after him.

"What now?"

"Lie down on the bunk." Jord's eyes roved, settled. He gathered a handful of Miles' sashes from the dresser-top and tossed them to the farmer. "Tie your legs together. Tight!"

Miles did as he was directed. Then, under the alert nose of the hand-blast, he permitted his wrists to be tied one by one to the bunk-posts.

"Absurd things, sashes—" Jord grunted as he drew the knots tight—"but with at least *one* practical use, eh?"

Miles tried the knots and met Jord's amused stare. He growled disgustedly, "Yeah."

Jord went back into the other room and rummaged in the deep-freeze. After a while he returned with an opened space-tin and a spoon. "I hate to cheat a man out of his dessert, mine host," he said flatly, "or his deserts. I'm either going to feed you peaches with this spoon—or gouge out your eyes with it. I want some information."

"What information?"

"Do you have any maps?"

Miles shook his head. Jord ladled out some peaches and slid them into the farmer's mouth. He did this carefully, and seemed to be enjoying the situation.

"What's the nearest city?"

"Three Major—about thirty miles magnetic north." Miles licked at a dribble of syrup. "You'll have a tough time hiding out there—strangers aren't the custom. You'll stand out like a spotlight."

Jord's pleasant mien had definitely returned. It didn't make Miles feel any easier. "You sound almost as if you wanted to help me, Miles. Why don't you invite me to hide out here?"

"Sure. Stick around. It'll take the Patrol about ten minutes to compute the probable course of your life-shell. They're spotting the Alcron lowlands right now or I'm a monkey!"

Jord took a moment to consider one, or both, of these possibilities, then asked:

"How's the country between here and Three Major?"

"No problem."

"Can a man go it afoot?"

Miles didn't hesitate. "A man could," he admitted—a thundering half-truth if ever one was.

"Any natural barriers? Oceans, mountains?"

"No. Farm country, mostly."

JORD shoveled some more peaches into the farmer's mouth. "I really ought to kill you, natives or no natives," he explained. "I can rip out your visiphone, but there's nothing to prevent you from getting into that stratocoupe of yours and following me until you can contact a Patrol ship—" He looked at Miles expectantly.

There's plenty to prevent it, Miles thought uncomfortably. Brother, if you only knew! But you don't . . . you're a stranger to this system, and you came here in a life-shell without ports. You couldn't see, so you don't know! And that would make it just perfect—if only you weren't hanging around here!

"You can take out the C. L. Integrator," he said hastily. "She won't budge without it."

"Convince me."

"There's an instruction-book on Mosley stratocoupes in that case. Check with it."

Jord rose to get the book, and Miles began to sweat. What the devil had happened to Lin? The big fellow always

showed up about this time before Grandpa—not once in six years had he failed in his self-set task of warning the farmer. Had he met with an accident? Miles wondered glumly what sort of an accident it would take to incapacitate a Crony. A direct blow from a meteorite, maybe. No, there was that time when Fir's cousin had caught one right in the—

Jord grunted as he reached for the book. He sat on the edge of the bunk and riffled the pages. He studied several diagrams, turned to the index and back to the diagrams, reading under his breath. Finally he nodded in satisfaction.

"I'll have to leave you tied up, of course," he said. "You can get loose in a few hours. Peach?"

Miles chewed, thinking dully that if Grandpa's morning came and he were still tied, there wouldn't be anything but a blot on the bunk after those few hours. He might have been able to jump the big man when Lin showed up—

Damn it! Why had he yapped himself into getting tied up this way! And where was Lin?

Jord rose and went to Miles' closet, slid it open. He looked critically at the rough work clothes. "Haven't you any civilized—?"

"Over to your left. Couple of suits there."

"Oh, yes. Fine. We're just about the same distance around—but—" Jord stripped out of his rumpled and dirty clothing and got into one of Miles' best suits. He looked doubtfully in the mirror. "What do you think?" he asked.

"Up to you. If you like it, buy it."

Jord tugged at the bottoms of the tapered legs and adjusted the tunic. Choosing Miles' most colorful sash, he twisted it about his waist, eyed his reflection and nodded. "It'll do."

To be roasted in, thought Miles, and clamped down on his leaping fear. He wasn't a fighting man—with fists or guns. The more significant dangers of pioneering in space were his meat. Or measuring his prowess alongside that

of another man in some intelligent pastime—that was different. Empire, for instance, whose ancestor was the ancient game of chess. He'd played Lew Levin this last trip to Three Major and won an unusual victory. One insignificant little page, helpless, ringed by enemy men, had keystoneed the structure that had forced Lew's Black Emperor out into the open field. Miles' White Guardsman had swooped down for the kill.

His own situation, as Miles saw it, was very similar. He lay on the bunk, a helpless page. Jord was the Black Emperor. And the Guardsman—Miles glanced at the binary-chart stencilled on the wall—

The Guardsman was coming.

The helpless page pressed the only advantage he had at the moment: Jord's queasiness about the Cronies. The possible results of the move were not yet evident. But if Lin showed up, as he surely must, something might come of it.

Miles said casually: "What time do you plan to leave, Jord?"

Jord looked up, frowning. "I hadn't thought. About sun-up, I suppose. Why?"

"You'd better jet-off before then. My natives get up early, and the first thing they do is come up here for orders. I'm not worrying about what they'll do to you—which'll be plenty—but I don't want any of them to get—"

V

SPEAK OF the Devil, they said in the old days—and times haven't changed much. Miles spoke of the Cronies—and Lin poked his head through the window, blinked, and began, in his Crony whisper, the usual warning speech:

"Miles, it is nearly time to go undergr—" This much, and then he did a slow take at the scene before him. He made a little movement of astonishment; the armor of his elbow rasped against the sill.

Jord's hand-blast lay on the bunk beside Miles' legs. Instantly it was

snatched up to cover the Crony. Lin stared into the three little holes calmly and Miles felt a twitch of cynical amusement. God knows what Cronies have for itches, but whenever one of the farmhands had an itching back he would come to have it scratched with a hand-blast.

"What this, bwana?" enunciated Lin.

Miles winced, closed his eyes. This was one sweet hell of a time to start pulling that nonsense. Too many old novels—Maugham probably. Lin spoke perfect English, better even than his own.

Jord rose slowly, staring at the huge native, his face a loose, crudely-drawn question mark. "What is this ghou?"

"One of my men."

"Men!" Jord gasped. "He looks like something from a roach city. Tell him to go away!"

"You tell him."

Lin threw a massive leg over the sill. He poised there, his eyes bright and curious.

"Get back," Jord flung at him shakily. "Go away and me no kill native!"

"You bet you won't," Lin replied. "Me heap savvy white boy!" He shoved his other leg into the room and stretched to his full height. Jord's considerable size seemed abruptly whittled down.

The Crony closed his fists and took an ominous step toward the killer.

Miles craned his neck from the bunk. Was his big foreman, unable to attack Jord, trying to frighten the man into dropping the gun?

If so, Jord didn't scare easily. He skinned his lips back over his teeth and squeezed at the trigger. The charge leaped at the Crony's body, spreading out over his barrel chest in eye-aching waves, jolting him back on his heels with its force. Lin's eyes met Miles', narrowing a little—

And Miles stiffened as if the charge had struck him, instead of Lin. The knowledge had come instantly, an icy-certain hunch—

Jord would fail to kill Lin—had failed already, although he didn't know it and

stood, face ugly, waiting for the Crony to drop. The killer's urbane mask had fallen, the silk was gone. He was giving way to the murderous hysteria that had probably led to the death of his partner.

All this Miles realized as the hand-blast made its sound, sent its crackling, futile energy at the big native. And it was grimly logical to suppose that Jord's next move, when Lin didn't fall, would be to swing the weapon toward the farmer, to pull the trigger in frustrated, unreasoning fear and fury.

"Lin!" Miles shouted in Alcronese. "Fall and play dead! Pretend that you are dead!"

Lin flashed him a puzzled look but did as directed. With a plausible assumption of pain and terror he let out a siren bleat and sank to the floor. Apparently overcome with enthusiasm, he continued to squirm and kick his legs and groan until Miles, again under guise of an outraged yell, told him to lie still.

Jord wheeled to confront the farmer. "You see!" His voice had risen an octave, was shrill. "That's how it happened. He asked for it. So did Harry. I'll kill you too if you act up!"

The helpless page continued his force-move. The end-game strategy had clicked into place; had come to him, in fact, just as Lin had flashed him that puzzled look and obediently dropped dead. Miles stared at Jord for a moment. Then:

"You killed Lin," he said coldly. "But you can't get two hundred of them!" Which was another whopper; there were only thirty-one Cronies in the local Hive.

"Two hundred!" Jord blinked uneasily.

Miles went on: "Unless your aberration includes a strong death-wish too, you'll get out of here fast. If they find you here—and that—" he nodded at the prone body. The body barely managed to close its eyes in time as Jord's troubled gaze followed the gesture. The big man frowned in thought, then wheeled nervously as Miles began to sing softly in Alcronese.

"What're you doing?" he demanded.

"Death chant. Custom here."

"Well, do *you* have to do it?"

Miles drew in his lips unhappily. "I wouldn't feel right, somehow, if I didn't. I—I really liked Lin—" and in Alcronese, "Lin, call your comrades. Tell them to approach the cottage. Tell them to converse in low tones, in your tongue. Tell them to hurry!"

LIN'S BROW contracted as he beamed the thought to his fellows, waiting expectantly outside the Hive on the hill. In his mind's ear he heard anxious exclamations and questions. The other Cronies had carefully kept their minds away from the cottage for the past few minutes—too many Presences would have been psychically detectable, would have added to Jord's jumpiness and instability.

To their questions, Lin replied that Miles was safe so far and that all had gone exactly as planned. . . .

It had been difficult for the Cronies to know what to do, with Grandpa coming inexorably closer. They were constitutionally unable to attack Jord and tie him up or knock him senseless. If Tos and Fir had detected the killer sooner they could have easily frightened him away. But they had been tired and preoccupied, and it was only after they'd casually sent their thoughts after Miles, seen him accosted in front of the cottage, that they became aware of Jord's unfamiliar, unpleasant vibrations.

From the Hive, Lin, by common consent, had watched the following events. It was futile to try to take over Jord's mind—they'd all tried, one by one. It was closed to them by its distortion. One by one they had withdrawn from the attempt, sickened.

Lin had read Miles' stubborn, ingrained unwillingness to do anything that would aid Jord in escaping—even at the risk of his own life. And he'd read Miles' anticipation of his, Lin's, diverting arrival at the cottage.

"He'll try to jump the man," the Cronies had decided, "and probably get

himself killed." So Lin, wincing at the contact, had managed to get Jord to tie Miles up—after first, through much easily established remote-control, carefully coloring Miles' behavior with a puppet cockiness that irritated the big man and put him in the right frame of mind.

Then had come the question of how to get Jord out of the cottage before the arrival of Grandpa. Without having him turn his gun on Miles as hostage. Approaching en masse, without first having taken the edge off Jord's latent viciousness, might have proven as fatal to the farmer as the coming of Grandpa. The problem of the itching trigger finger had needed to be taken up with delicacy.

Lin thought he'd handled it nicely. Now that he'd barged in and forced Jord to "kill" him, throwing the big man off balance into the reactive side of his killing impulse, Jord's fear of punishment—not yet entirely dead—should cause him to break and run under the proper stimulus. Namely, a present and immediate threat of retribution.

And Jord, not basically criminal, having reached his exhausting murderous peak for the second time, should decline away from a third murder—Miles' murder—if that fear were played upon.

This was the script that Lin wrote.

And Miles had called the cues—he thought.

Lin shuddered. It had been nauseating to ball his fists that way, to step forward as if in aggression—

MILES LAY on the bunk and hoped that this would do it. He pressed his eyelids shut and prayed that it would. Although it was only seven o'clock in the "evening," sunrise was so near that his flesh crawled.

A light flashed on the binary-chart. A red light. Simultaneously, a chime struck softly.

"What's that?" Jord said nervously, looking at the chart.

"Time signal," Miles said, glad that he had turned off his wrist-meter, the vio-

lent part of it—it would have been white hot by now. "I've got it fixed to announce my favorite telaudio programs. Do you ever listen to Sam Space, Detective? That should interest—"

"Shut up. Do you hear anything?"

Jord crossed to the window, peered out. His jaw dropped and he stepped back in dismay. "God in Heaven, there's a million of those beetle-men out there!"

Miles could hear them now. Lin had evidently improved upon his instructions, had told them to growl and snarl as menacingly as a Crony could. The effect was that of a horde of baritone kittens; but to Jord's horrified eyes, in the half light, they must have looked like a shiny-skinned legion of Hell. He raised the hand-blast, hesitated, turned from the window to point the gun at Miles.

Quickly, Lin gave Jord's Nemesis fears a solid boost and sent a thought to Miles.

"If you do," the farmer said levelly, "they'll hunt you down and use you for sacrifice. They know this country. You couldn't escape."

Not the wisest thing to say, Lin admitted to himself with superfluous logic, for it as much as stated that Jord had done nothing yet to warrant the Cronies' taking out after him. Granting that, it certainly didn't give the Cronies credit for much *esprit de corps*, since Jord thought Lin was dead.

But the killer was much too unsettled to follow up this discrepancy or even notice it. He made up his mind quickly. The after-a-mouse growlings were louder now. Slow, deliberate footsteps scuffed the metal of the path—another of Lin's improvements, for a Crony can move as silently as night.

Jord darted into the next room, collected a hasty pocketful of concentrated foods. Ludicrous in Miles' undersized suit, he threw a passing glance through the window and what he saw all but lifted his hair. For Lin had told his comrades to crouch and wave their arms like great apes.

"Thanks for your hospitality, farmer—" and Jord scuttled to the back door, flung through it and faded in the gloom.

Miles let out a long breath. "Hurrah for our side!"

Lin was bending over the bunk, working with the knots.

"Tell your comrades to give chase, Lin. A game, with he the quarry. And tell them to keep snarling!"

The Crony's fingers didn't pause as he beamed the message. The snarling rose in volume. Rapid footsteps rounded the cottage and diminished.

VI

WHEN LIN had released him, Miles stood stiffly, rubbing his deadened arms and hands.

The binary-chart gave a warning yellow flash and began to clang loudly. Outside, in the darkness of the yard, the door to the underground swung open and added its bell-clamor to the confusion.

Miles went to the wallcase, selected a book to while away Grandpa's visit—he felt anything but sleepy. Lin stood nearby, his green eyes placidly blank as he followed telepathically the events of the now distant chase.

"Him heap scared, bwana," he grinned.

Miles' voice was not quite steady, though whether because of relief, nervous reaction or gratitude it would be hard to say. A mixture of all, perhaps. "Thank you, Lin," he said. "Thanks for catching on so quickly!"

Lin's eyes hooded over their secret amusement. "Do you think you can make it underground unassisted?"

"I'm a little stiff, but I'll do." Miles gazed unseeingly through the open back door at the black hills which were even now receiving Jord and his "pursuers." A futile wolf hunt; the hunters incapable of the kill—the wolf fleeing toward a death more inevitable and horrible than the imaginary one from which he fled.

"Poor Jord—" and Miles' voice was without sarcasm. In these days, on these worlds, men were needed—many men, to work together for the good of themselves and of their culture. Jord, with his intelligence, had probably once been such a man. . . .

Miles shrugged. It was a problem for psychologists, not farmers. In his report of the incident he would suggest that Jord's children, if he had any, be checked. Although, on second thought, it was undoubtedly already being done.

The binary-chart let out its last warning, a chordal scream that rattled the metaglas windows in their grooves. Miles hurriedly shut it off.

"Better hurry, bwana," Lin grunted.

"Bwana, bwana—be damned if I'll ever lend you another book!" Miles grinned and started for the door. "I don't know why you Alcronians go around acting like a bunch of heathens. You've got a Utopian system wrapped up in those Hives—at least to hear *you* tell it, since you won't let us in to see for ourselves—and yet you work all day picking *kanl!*"

Lin laughed easily. "Perhaps those who live under double suns must live double lives." He trailed after the little Earthman.

"That's very pretty, but it doesn't make much sense."

"And I, frankly, don't understand polo." They halted by the door to the underground and Lin seemed to listen a moment, then went on:

"Jord—" whose name Lin had not been told, Miles thought—and then somehow forgot all about it—"is high in the hills. He will not escape Grandpa."

Miles dropped his legs onto the metal ladder, looked briefly at the sky, then grinned at the big Crony. "If you insist upon acting like a savage, Lin, go on out to your sunrise ceremony." He ducked down the shaft and his words echoed hollowly: "Poor Jord. He had about the chance of Eliza crossing the—"

The door clanged shut.

"Asteroids." Lin finished his employer's thought. He addressed the metal surface that shone dully in the approaching glow. "To the outsider, Miles, I suppose it does resemble a form of pagan worship. To be truthful, however, we find the Babe's day a little chilly."

THE EARTHMEN were all right—some of them. Lin was glad that he'd been able to help—and in a way that left Miles unaware that the helpless page had had a Player. Earthmen would, he was sure, resent the fact that their minds were accessible to Cronies. That was why they didn't know it.

Lin thought that maybe in another thousand years, or two or three, Earthmen could take that blow with unbowed ego. Along with certain other inevitable and well-deserved blows. Then—and again, maybe—they would be admitted into the Hives to study.

In the meantime it was probably best to let them colonize, let them stick around where they could be easily watched. The Cronies—and the natives of Hon, Lyra, Tabas, Jason, Oro and several thousand other systems many of which the Earthmen hadn't even discovered yet—had all agreed upon that. For the Earthmen might decide to develop into a menace, a rogue—they showed some of the signs.

The Cronies and the others knew how to deal with that. No violence, either.

The Galactic Council didn't like violence.

Lin heard Miles think:

"By golly, I bet I know why the Cronies group in the open for the rise of Grandpa—"

Smiling, he trotted off to join his fellow beings. . . .

Grandpa shoved his gigantic blue-white shoulder over the horizon and the sky seemed to explode into flame.

Blinded instantly, Jord turned and fled. He stumbled, crashed shrieking down a long slope to huddle slant-wise behind a boulder. And through the racing, churning clouds, through the uncar-

ing stone, Grandpa reached out, touched him. . . .

AFTER SEVEN hours the gong rang and the door rumbled open, awaking Miles. So he'd slept after all! He dog-eared the book to keep his place and walked up the long corridor, mounted the ladder.

The warm, tempestuous winds were dying down. The Babe was rising, shedding near-earthly light. Grandpa had disappeared to the south and there other Earthmen were retreating into their undergrounds and other Cronies stood almost at attention to drink in the infernal radiations of the big fellow.

Miles turned and made for the cottage, passing the lower entrance to the Hive and knocking cheerfully on the door. He received an answering knock—probably an infant, still sheltered against the cool of the Babe's day.

So the Cronies gathered in the valley every other morning to warm themselves. He was rather proud of having figured that out. Proud, too, of having gotten rid of Jord so neatly.

Both ideas had come to him in an identical manner. Out of the blue. Inspiration.

Farther on he left the path to finger the racked *kanl* leaves. With Grandpa, he thought in paraphrase, it was luckily "not the heat but the short radiations." The alien radiations. Otherwise the leaves would have been ashes. As it was, they were nicely toasted, ready to be shipped to Three Major.

Lin came down from the hills and around the sunmill with a large, bulky sack folded over a wide shoulder. Miles shuddered and told him to put it behind the *linla* crib.

That would have to be shipped to Three Major too.