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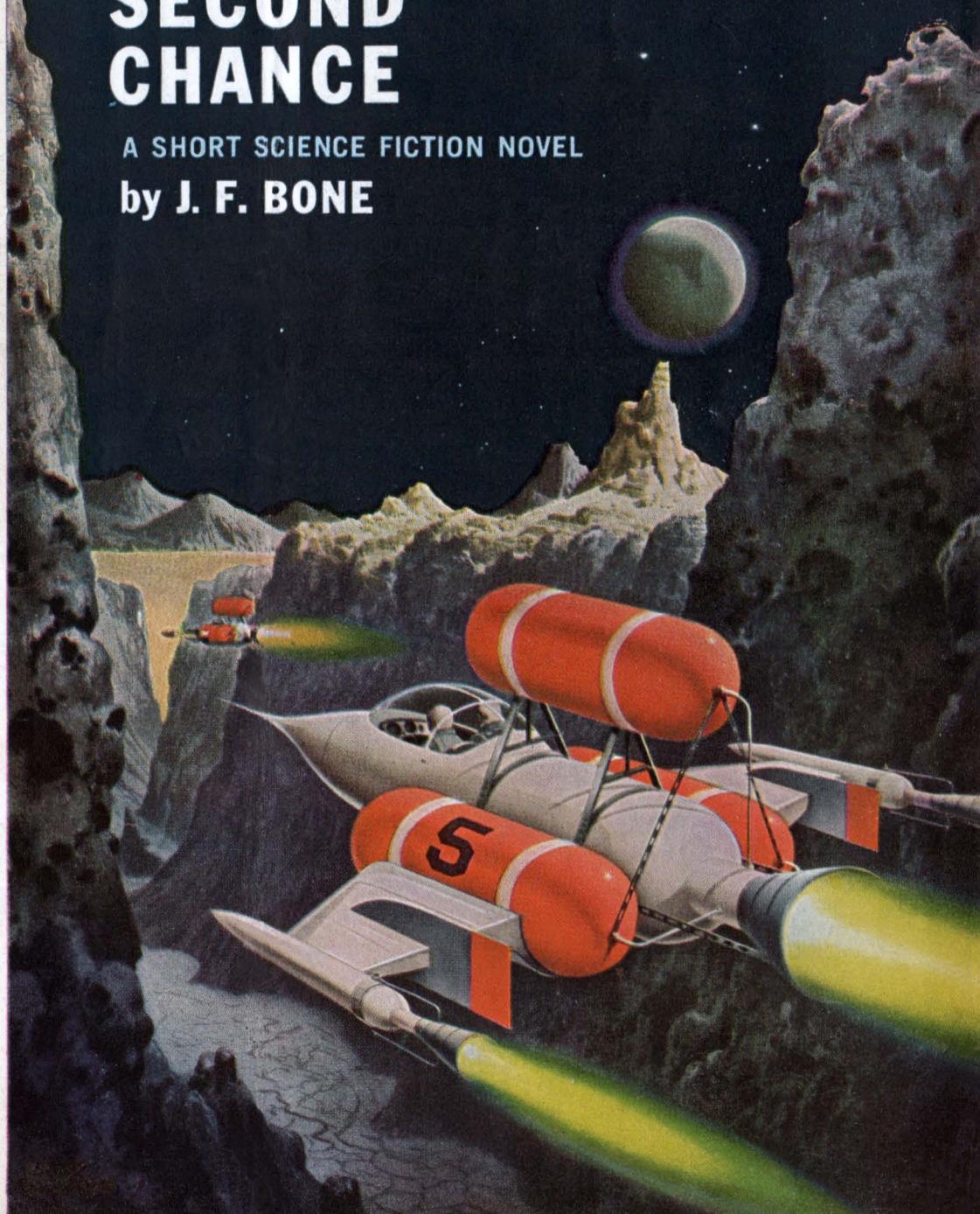
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SECOND CHANCE

A SHORT SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL

by J. F. BONE



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science fiction

FEBRUARY, 1959

Vol. 3, No. 3

Short Novel

SECOND CHANCE J. F. Bone

It was a strange and terrifying world of machines, robots startlingly on the human side, and plants more keenly intelligent than vegetable growths had a right to be. No wonder Time itself took a holiday!

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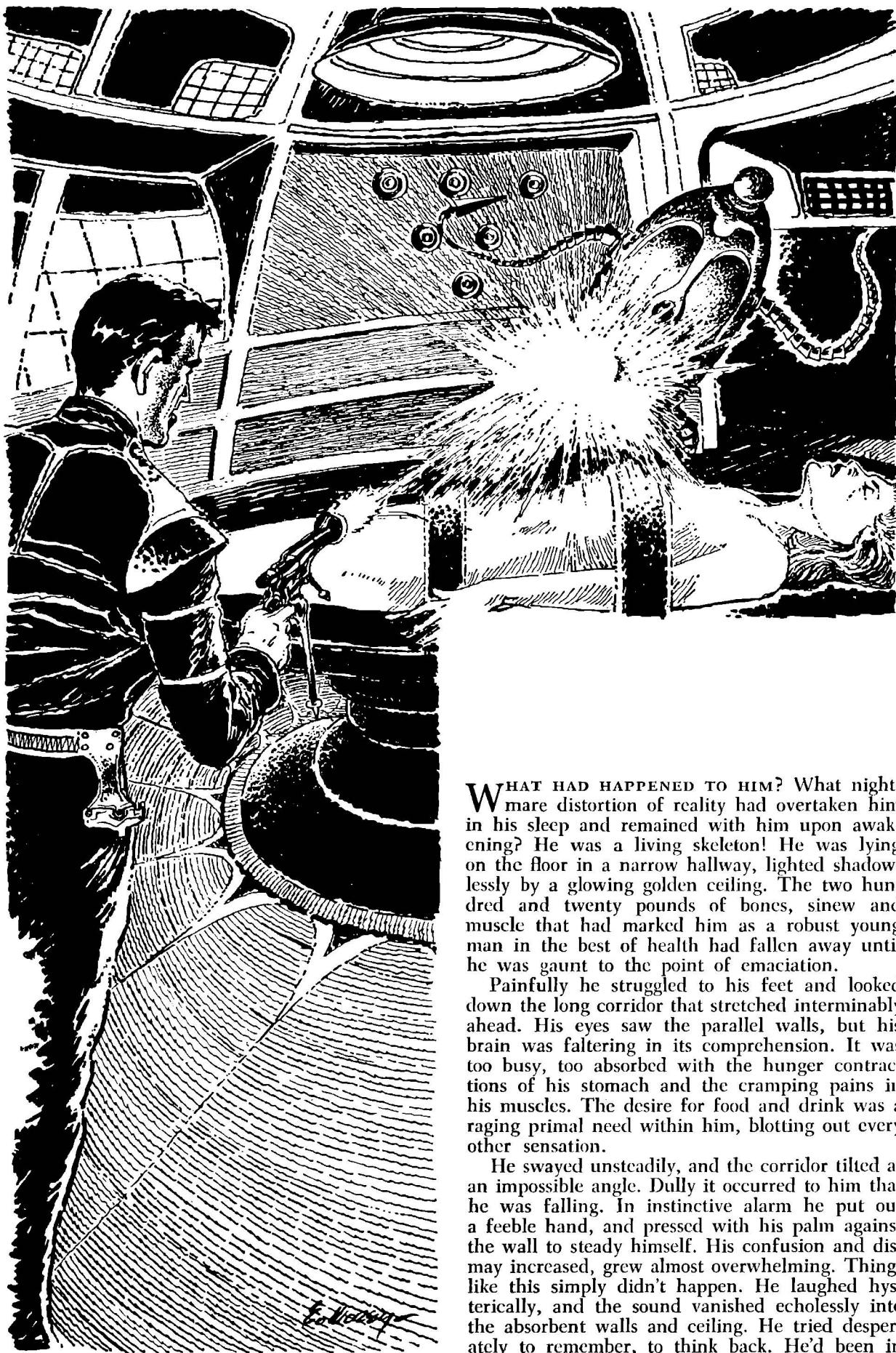
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WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO HIM? What nightmare distortion of reality had overtaken him in his sleep and remained with him upon awakening? He was a living skeleton! He was lying on the floor in a narrow hallway, lighted shadowlessly by a glowing golden ceiling. The two hundred and twenty pounds of bones, sinew and muscle that had marked him as a robust young man in the best of health had fallen away until he was gaunt to the point of emaciation.

Painfully he struggled to his feet and looked down the long corridor that stretched interminably ahead. His eyes saw the parallel walls, but his brain was faltering in its comprehension. It was too busy, too absorbed with the hunger contractions of his stomach and the cramping pains in his muscles. The desire for food and drink was a raging primal need within him, blotting out every other sensation.

He swayed unsteadily, and the corridor tilted at an impossible angle. Dully it occurred to him that he was falling. In instinctive alarm he put out a feeble hand, and pressed with his palm against the wall to steady himself. His confusion and dismay increased, grew almost overwhelming. Things like this simply didn't happen. He laughed hysterically, and the sound vanished echolessly into the absorbent walls and ceiling. He tried desperately to remember, to think back. He'd been in

SECOND CHANCE

*In that nightmare world of strange machines
Time flowed in more than one direction. But
the Masters had known that someday a robot
would quote Lamarck—to Man's eternal glory.*

A SHORT NOVEL OF FUTURE, MIRACLE-AGE SCIENCE

by J. F. BONE

the Officers Quarters at Prime Base last night, and now— He paused, swaying a little. Where was he?

Slowly he made his way down the corridor, leaning against the wall for support. And his fingers found what his eyes failed to see—a doorway that opened to his touch to reveal a gigantic room, brightly lighted and filled with the smell of water and vegetation. Dense rows of feather-delicate foliage met his eyes, leaves of thick stalked plants that bore huge clusters of dark purple fruit.

Bennett looked up at the glowing ceiling overhead, wondering what made it shine with the light and warmth of sunlight, and why the light seemed to come from no place in particular. He knew, of course, that General Electronics was making new discoveries every day. But somehow the room and its strange illumination didn't look like a G.E. development. It looked—*alien!* In fact, nothing within his field of vision bore the stamp of a mundane intelligence.

He watched a gleaming black machine float slowly down a nearby row of plants in one of the long black tanks, trimming excess greenery, harvesting ripe fruit, occasionally uprooting one of the older plants with a pale pencil of force, and disposing of it with a flash of blue flame.

There was no sound, no smoke, no ash. One instant the plant was dangling below the polyhedral body, the next it was gone. He grimaced, wondering whether that flash of flame would be as fatal for human protoplasm as it was for the

plant. At any rate, he would give it a wide berth until he learned more about it.

There was something wrong with this place. It was too still, too quiet. He shook his head in bewilderment. That was the understatement of a lifetime. Everything was wrong with this place. Strange, frightening, unbelievable. It didn't exist and he was the victim of some freakish distortion of human thinking, some undreamed of weakness in himself.

But, of course, that was crazy. Oh well, he'd probably find out, unless the place was as deserted as it looked. He smiled deprecatingly at the thought. Deserted places weren't left running. Or if they were, they didn't stay running very long. Even with full automation the supply of spare parts would eventually run out. There must be intelligence of some sort around here. The only problem was finding it—or perhaps the problems would really come when it found *him*.

The enormous size of the building dawned on him as he left the hydroponics room and looked down the corridor in which he had awakened. It stretched endlessly onward, disappearing in a dull glimmering far ahead. He began to walk down its length, backtracking his earlier trail, his feet stirring up faint spurts of impalpable yellow dust that hung tenuously in the air, and swirled after him as he moved forward.

The floor possessed a smooth yellow velvety texture which was marred only by a staggering

© 1958, by J. F. Bone

track of booted feet—his feet—and a broader splotch where he had slept the night before. The significance of the dust registered immediately. His wry thought of a moment before was more accurate than he had dreamed! The place *was* deserted!

There was no sign that this hallway had been traversed by feet other than his own, and dust of great density simply didn't accumulate in a matter of days or weeks. It took years—perhaps even centuries—for a patina such as this to form!

He skirted an odd, bulbous machine standing in the middle of the corridor and looked at it curiously before he went on. Judging from the smooth nozzles that extended from wall to wall below the mechanism's barrel-shaped body, it was in all probability some sort of cleaning device. But it had stopped long ago, if the dust that covered it was any criterion. Probably the dust in the hall had started accumulating when the machine had stopped. But how long before that the machine had traversed empty halls was an unanswerable question.

He came to a cross-corridor and turned into it, ignoring the spiral ramp that led downward from the intersection. At the moment one direction was as good as another, and the unsteady footprints seemed the best guide in a maze of imponderables.

He was starkly incredulous when he saw other tracks mixed with his own, prints of small, high-arched bare feet obviously human in conformation. A double line of prints came from a door beside him and marched off down the hall. The prints seemed as fresh as his own, and he could feel his heart beat faster. Apparently there was life here after all!

The strange tracks grew thicker as he progressed, and his own prints also became more numerous. It was impossible to doubt that he had been in this area before, but he had no recollection of ever having traversed it.

He trailed the footprints through scores of empty living quarters, laboratories, communal areas, machine shops, and hydroponics gardens. He searched methodically, eliminating areas one by one until he opened the door to another hydroponics room. The neat green rows of plants and their attendant machines were no different from those he had seen in a dozen other rooms, except that the plants bore elongated yellow fruits that looked vaguely like bananas.

A girl came to the door when he opened it, a slender girl in her middle twenties, thin to the point of gauntness and dressed in a one-piece spacesuit that emphasized the leanness of her body. Her eyes were clear and bright as she returned his startled scrutiny.

"Hello, who are you?" she asked in perfect Terran.

He felt oddly disappointed. Instead of an alien she was merely a fellow human being. "Ensign George Bennett, ESN," he said automatically, "And you?"

"I thought you knew," the girl replied. "I'm Laura Latham, of course. Don't you recognize me? I thought most people knew what I looked like."

"You don't look like anyone I know, and certainly not like Mrs. Latham."

"I *am* a bit thinner," she admitted. "It's very confusing."

"You're not the only one who's confused," Bennett said.

"The ship was travelling in hyperdrive," she said thoughtfully. "How could I have left it?"

"You've got me," he said. "I don't know what ship you're talking about, or why you should want to leave it. What ship did you leave?"

"The *Constellation*, of course. She's my flagship, and I was aboard her on my way to Ariadne. I was dining with the captain. It was the first night out, except, of course there's no actual night on a hypership. It wasn't over eight hours ago. Now I'm here, but I haven't the slightest idea how it happened."

"Don't ask me. I woke up on the floor in one of the hallways a few hours ago."

"You're lying, of course," she said calmly. "You're probably one of the gang that drugged and kidnapped me."

Gang? Kidnapped? Bennett shook his head. This woman was obviously quite mad! And as for her being Laura Latham—everyone knew that old harpy! She was at least twenty years older than the girl facing him. A plump old tyrant who ruled Spaceways Incorporated and its financial empire with the ruthlessness of a Genghis Khan.

He looked at the girl more intently. Insanity took some pretty strange forms. Yet there *was* some resemblance, something about the shape of her head and the set of her jaw that reminded him of Spaceway's boss. It might have been more pronounced if her weight had been fifty pounds greater. But even granting that, the similarity was only superficial. Her age alone denied her claim. Oh well, some psychotics still seriously believed they were Napoleon, so why shouldn't she think that she was Laura Latham? He shook his head. If he had been doing the picking, he'd have chosen a better idealization, but there was no accounting for tastes.

"Now take it easy," he said soothingly. "No one has kidnapped you."

He didn't want to disturb her. Heaven only knew what would happen if he really jarred her mental balance. "Let's find some better quarters than this hydroponics farm, and talk things over in a calm, sensible, intelligent way."

She eyed him suspiciously. "I'm all right here," she said. "There's plenty of food—and I'm hungry. I'm always hungry," she added plaintively.

"That can be taken care of," he said, as he broke off a huge bunch of the banana-like fruit. "We can take our lunch with us."

"Hmm, I should have thought of that. All right, I'll go. It seems silly to leave, but I just don't feel like standing here arguing with you."

He held the door open and she smiled up at him. "You know, for a kidnapper you're quite polite. You must have had a good family once." She kept smiling. "And you have courage too. It must have been awfully dangerous to leave a ship travelling in the middle blue."

"For the last time, madam, I did not kidnap

you! And there's no gang here. As far as I know, we're alone."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"How did I get here?"

He was silent. It was a good question, but he didn't have the answer.

II

LAURA LATHAM WASN'T much trouble. Outside of the persistent delusion that he had kidnapped her, she had no particularly annoying traits. And her monomania in that one respect wouldn't have been so bad if she'd keep her story straight. When they had met, he had supposedly removed her from a spaceship. Now he had taken her bodily out of a shouting, farewell crowd at Alamogordo Spaceport. Bennett shrugged. She had the mind of a butterfly. She couldn't even tell the same story twice, yet she never seemed to notice the discrepancies when she started to elaborate. Perhaps "improvise" would have been a better word.

Insidiously the thought crept into his mind that her condition was the key to what had happened to himself. The signs were all there—the emaciation, the loss of memory, the insatiable hunger, and with each passing day the changes accelerated. He had fallen quite naturally into calling the rhythmic alternation of light and darkness day and night. Every ten hours the glowing ceiling dimmed to a faint phosphorescence, to brighten again to a warm yellow light after another ten hours had passed.

Once she screamed horribly, but in the few seconds it took to reach her side she had forgotten what she had screamed about. After a week she didn't know him from one moment to the next, despite the fact that he was almost constantly with her. She ate and drank enormously, but took no interest in her surroundings, living in a trance-like state, her matchstick arms and legs pitifully shrunken under her sagging skin. Her breathing was shallow, her pulse rapid and thready, and a raging fever made her body hot and dry to the touch. Then one day less than two weeks after he had found her she lapsed into a coma from which she could not be aroused.

Bennett did what he could to make her comfortable—which wasn't much. About all he could do was place her comfortably on a couch in one of the living quarters and hope for a miracle. However, he didn't think much of miracles, and from the looks of things she was going to die. The thought saddened him. She wasn't a bad sort even though she was psychotic. At least she had brought him some measure of companionship in this empty world.

He sat beside the couch, watching her motionless body, and listening to the faint gasping susurration of her breath. She was still alive, and that always left room for hope. After all, it was a known fact that women were tougher and more resistant to organic diseases than men, and he had survived. He clung to the hope, nursing it as grimly as he nursed Laura.

And finally the fever broke. She looked dully about her, too weak to move. It was a good thing he had found her, he told himself as he lifted her up and pressed a cool palm to her brow. She would never had been able to forage for herself as he had done. From personal experience he knew what she needed most right now, and proceeded to supply it without delay. He fed her until she weakly pushed his hands away. Then she fell into a deep sleep.

Bennett looked down at her and smiled. It was nice to know that he wasn't going to be alone. Now that it was all over he felt tired. He could use a little sleep himself. After all, he wasn't his old self yet—not by a long shot . . .

Laura's recovery was as rapid as his own had been. Within two days she was able to move about—a bony caricature of a girl, but active enough. And her memory was perfect. When Bennett commented on this happily she looked at him in surprise.

"There's nothing so odd about being able to remember things," she said. "I've always had a good memory."

"Do you remember ever seeing anything like this before?" Bennett asked, gesturing around the room.

Her gaze dwelt briefly on the glowing ceiling, the fluted pastel walls with their curiously curved corners, the low, oddly-shaped pieces of furniture, and the enigmatic double row of buttons set in a flat metal panel beside the massive metal table on the opposite side of the room.

"No," she said. "Where in the world is this place?"

"I don't think it's anywhere in the world—if you're referring to Earth," he said. "And I'm quite sure it's not in the other inhabited worlds I've visited. I've never heard of anything that remotely resembled it, and I've been on twenty of the Thirty Worlds."

"What thirty worlds?"

"The major intelligence-dominated worlds in this galactic quadrant," he said.

"What are you talking about? Are you out of your mind? The only other worlds are the planets of Wolf Four and the three systems of Proxima Centaurus, and none of those have any intelligent life."

Bennett frowned. And then, abruptly, his expression cleared. "What year is it?" he asked.

"Anyone should know that," she said. "It's twenty-two thousand, eighty-nine."

"To me it's the year twenty-three thousand, sixteen."

"That's crazy!"

"I'll say it is! How old are you—if you don't object to a personal question."

"Twenty-two."

"What's your name?"

"I thought you knew. You've been calling me by it. It's Laura Ingalls."

"A week ago it was Laura Latham."

"It was not! You're being utterly ridiculous. I should know what my name is. I've heard it enough from Video producers. 'Sorry, Miss Ingalls. There's nothing today.' I've heard that enough to

know who I am! I don't even know a person named Latham."

"You should. He gained discovery rights on Ariadne in eighty-nine."

"Oh—that Latham. Of course I know about him. But he landed only a week ago and the Commission hasn't verified his discovery yet."

"Well, it was verified all right. He parlayed it into the biggest shipping business in the galaxy. He married some bright young Video star in ninety-two, and when he died shortly after the turn of the century, Laura Latham became the wealthiest woman in the world. And she's built up his fortune until she has a finger in about every pie in the Thirty Worlds!"

"Now wait a minute. The turn of the century isn't due for another decade."

"So you think. My memory's different. To me it's sixteen years after the turn, and my papers say it's twenty-seven." He took his license from his pocket and handed it to her. "See—it records the year precisely."

"What can it mean?" Her voice was puzzled and a little afraid.

"I think I'm beginning to understand. You say you're twenty-two, and I think I'm twenty-five. We must have—regressed. We're young again. Something has taken us back to biological maturity. Our ages are about the norm for that. After cellular maturity we degenerate, grow old. But somehow all of our *aging* has been peeled off like the rind off an orange. And with our lost years have gone our memories. It's the only explanation that makes sense."

"So we've found the Fountain of Youth," she said disbelievingly.

"You might call it that. But it's far more scientific than mythical."

"I'd be more inclined to believe it if I had my twenty-two-year-old figure back again."

"You have young bones."

"And that's about all!"

"Well, it's a good starting point."

She smiled at him. "You know, you're not in much better shape yourself."

He nodded in agreement. "We probably both went through the same regressive process. In fact, it's a virtual certainty."

And in the process eleven years had been carved out of his life! He found himself wondering what the lost years had been like. They couldn't have been too good if all he had was a pilot's license and a job working for Spaceways. He grinned wryly. Now at least he had a second chance. But it was too bad that he couldn't remember his mistakes. He might have been able to profit by them . . .

As Laura regained her strength, they explored the huge structure that housed them. Two indisputable facts emerged—the place was deserted, and the building was far too vast to explore completely.

On each floor there were a hundred and twenty corridors ranging from two to ten miles in length, most of them connected by more than two hundred cross-corridors which varied in length from yards to miles. The gridwork formed by the halls indi-

cated that the building had the shape of a gigantic teardrop—and there were well over two hundred floors. At each intersection of the hallways a spiral ramp connected the levels, making vertical traffic as easy as horizontal. Beside the ramps were vast shafts leading down into the depths.

Bennett thought that the shafts were probably elevators, but there were no visible cars, so he left them strictly alone. One look down two or three of those vertiginous holes had been enough for him. Despite the fact that the hallways at the lower levels were clean and dust free, they showed no more sign of occupancy than the upper regions.

There was, however, a feeling of expectancy to the endless succession of empty suites and quarters in the lower levels, a feeling that the inhabitants had just stepped out and would return at any moment. It was highly uncomfortable feeling, and they were always glad to return to the dusty emptiness of the upper halls.

Pausing in his exploration, Bennett looked down an empty hallway that stretched ruler-straight before him. It was lined with spaced doorways on one side which opened into a succession of living quarters. The opposite wall was relatively barren, its blank surface emphasized by an occasional door piercing it.

The plan was the same wherever they had gone—on one side rooms, and on the other an assortment of recreation and work areas. Always the two were set side by side, affording the utmost in economy of movement, and yet giving an impression of spaciousness. Each level was apparently a self-contained unit despite the fact that they were all connected by an intricate vertical system of shafts, conveyors and spiral ramps. The place was an architectural miracle—a miracle that grew ever greater as they realized its enormous extent.

Each new vista that opened to them left them feeling more tiny, more alone in this immensity of steel, plastic, and technology. The thousands of empty rooms, the hundreds of passageways and cross passageways mocked them with their silence. The vast mass of the structure simply couldn't be grasped by the human mind in its entirety. It was an enormous achievement by a race far more advanced than their own. And yet about the whole building there clung an air of tragedy, an impression of cosmic failure appalling in its completeness.

Bennett wondered what the original inhabitants had been like. It seemed strange that they left behind no pictures. There were no portraits and no statues. The decorations were either abstract or geometric, and to Bennett this was the strangest survival aspect of all. He had never encountered a race which did not glorify itself in metal or in stone. It was almost as though the original inhabitants had been ashamed of themselves, if not of their achievements.

That they had been humanoid was obvious from the furnishings of the quarters, and the controls of the machines. But that was natural enough. An upright gait and handlike forelimbs were characteristic of every intelligent race so far encountered in Man's exploration of the stars.

The secret of intelligence—and of technology,

for that matter—seemed to reside in a thinking brain and hands that could meddle—along with a posture that left the hands free, and unconstrained. It would have been far stranger if the original inhabitants had not been similar to men in that respect.

III

IT WAS NEARLY A month before they found the crawler. The prosaic little track layer proclaimed its terrestrial origin in every line and plane of its functional body. It was hidden behind a curtain of vines that blocked off one of the upper passageways—vines that had grown from their confinement in one of the hydroponics rooms and extended in a mass of living green from end to end of the corridor. The assortment of gear and equipment piled in its cargo compartment was easily recognizable as having been salvaged from a spaceship.

Bennett looked at it, and sighed with relief and satisfaction. It resolved one mystery completely. At least he knew now precisely how they had come to this place. Judging from the variety of items there had been plenty of time to strip the ship intelligently, so it could not have been wrecked too badly. Perhaps it had not been wrecked at all. Perhaps it had merely run out of fuel.

With the crawler they found a passageway to the outside—a charred tunnel filled with the burned remnants of old vines, and the burgeoning growth of new. The tunnel led upward at a gentle slope to a great metal valve that stood ajar. The valve opened on a level expanse covered with low dunes of fine, windswept sand, which proved to be the top of a gigantic mesa. It rose a full five thousand feet in a staggeringly sheer sweep of gleaming, vertical wall above the big brother of the little desert on its summit.

As far as the eye could reach there stretched a lifeless expanse of yellow dunes gleaming harshly under a brazen sky. Overhead an enormous yellow sun dipped slowly toward an oddly close horizon. It was twice the size of Earth's sun but it must have been cooler, for the air was not too hot to endure.

It was hot enough, however. The dryness sucked at the body with impalpable thirsty mouths, imparting a fleeting coolness to the skin as the alien sun's hot rays bounced with uncompromising harshness from the surrounding sands.

It was a grim land, Bennett reflected—sterile and lifeless. He stared for a long moment in silence at the mesa's level summit and the low dunes that slowly swept across its surface to disappear over the leeward edge and rejoin the sands below from whence they came.

The formation of dunes so high above the ground surface of this world bothered him a little, but even as he thought of how this unusual phenomenon might occur, the sun dropped below the horizon, and with its passing came coolness. The coolness was accompanied by a wind. Not the gentle evening breeze of Earth, but a ripping blast that picked up the desert sands and hurled them along with stinging force!

In a moment they were caught, whirled, and half blinded by a raging gale that continuously increased in violence. The dustlike sand seemed to lift bodily from the surface, to ride the rising wind in a dense pall that blinded the vision and filled the eyes and nose with gritty particles which stung like fire!

Fortunately they were close to the opening below when the wind came, and before it reached full force they had staggered choking and coughing into the tunnel. For a moment they watched the howling storm outside, and then with mutual consent turned back to the safe interior.

From the material in the cargo compartment of the crawler, Bennett came upon what he first thought was a real find. It was a stack of about twenty technical manuals with plastic covers, neatly packed in a thin-walled metal container. It was a find all right, but its usefulness was debatable. A pessimist might even have inferred, straight off, that its usefulness was nil.

Take the one entitled, "Operating Instructions for the Mark V Chronotrine Converter". That little gem was typical. The title was completely intelligible except for one word—the key word. Just what in hell was a chronotrine?

Laura looked at him with troubled eyes. She had been reading something far less obtuse, which also had come from the crawler. It was called, "Flame of Klystra", and was from all appearances a good, meaty book in which sin, sex, and sadism were skillfully blended.

"What's the matter, George?" she asked.

"Just what do you make of this?" he asked.

"Of what?"

"Listen." He tapped the page and began to read. "To advance the chronotrine helices for Cth yellow operation, remove the cover bindants. This will expose the discontinuant facies. Apply tensile forces of three dynes magnitude to the exposed facies. *Caution!* Under no circumstances should liquid discontinuant be employed on these surfaces as the submolecular energies will be severed rather than withdrawn, resulting in an Ericsson Effect of the second order!"

"It sounds dangerous," she said. "What does it mean?"

"Damned if I know. There are words in there I've never seen."

"I thought you were an engineer?"

"I am, but the stuff's Ancient French to me."

"Then why read it?"

"I'd like to know what's happened to technology."

"What good will it do you if you don't understand it?"

"Maybe I will some day."

"Well, don't bother me with it now. I've just got to the part where Rayt Maxim has entered the Temple of Love disguised as a priest, and I want to find out what happens."

"Just how did that penny dreadful get mixed up with useful cargo?" he demanded. "I haven't gotten a civilized word out of you since you found it. And you're only half through!" he added with mild bitterness.

She laughed at him as he turned back to the

tech manual. Technology must have taken some fantastic strides in those eleven lost years of his life. It was not too surprising, of course, because space was a problem that challenged the best brains of the Confederation. Knowledge had a tendency to increase along a logarithmic curve, and even in his remembered time it had been obvious that the problems of interworld travel had to be solved if the Confederation was to become effective.

The objective time-lag effect of hyperspace travel made interworld relations factors of risk and uncertainty. One never knew precisely what one would find at the end of a journey, for months or years might pass in what was but a matter of subjective days to the traveller. And that particular problem was only one of many.

That a considerable number of them had been solved satisfactorily was apparent from the information he could extract from the manuals. The one entitled, "Problems in Fourspace Navigation", made no mention of the time-lag effect that had bothered spacemen ever since the days of the legendary Einstein.

He looked across the room at Laura. She might be Laura Latham as she once had claimed, but the old she-wolf had vanished behind a facade of shapely camouflage. And she might well be as ruthless and adaptable as before. Certainly she had accepted their situation with far better grace than he had. She was taking it calmly, and in stride. While he stewed and fretted about his lost years, she relaxed in the strange surroundings and accepted them as normal. It bothered him—as did her obvious ambition to make him an intimate part of her life.

Propinquity had a hand in it. It drove them together, and what had started out as a close association for mutual support alone was turning into something quite different. He smiled sourly. If it wasn't for his Navy conditioning it would have taken no effort on her part to gain her ends. But junior officers weren't supposed to form attachments, and a paternal Navy made sure that they wouldn't by strategically-placed psychic blocks which were more effective than any lecture from a Commanding Officer.

Laura sighed, rose to her feet and left the room. She wouldn't go far, he knew. She never did. In fact it was difficult to keep her in her own section of the suite they occupied. His early suggestion that they occupy separate quarters had fallen on sterile soil. She simply refused to see it his way and he was utterly powerless to overcome her stubbornness.

He stared at the door through which she had vanished and swore softly under his breath. What he needed was a few more defense mechanisms. His present supply were getting rather frayed around the edges. With a sigh he turned back to the tech manual.

He was drowsing over the pages when she poked her head through the half-open doorway. Her "Hey! George!" woke him up.

"What now?" he asked.

"What'd you like for dinner?"

"Steak, french fries, green peas, a tossed salad

with roquefort dressing, coffee and a piece of deep-dish apple pie." He grinned. "I'd like it, but I'm not going to get it."

"Dreamer!" she laughed.

"There's no harm in dreaming. Frankly, I'm getting sick and tired of this vegetarian diet. Didn't the people who built this place ever hear of meat?"

"Maybe they did," Laura said. "But you'll have to take pot-luck. Come on in, my lad, and I'll cook you a dinner like grandmother used to make."

"With what? Imagination? Besides, if that's the best you can do I'd rather not. My grandmother was a terrible cook."

Laura grinned at him as he came reluctantly out of the chair. She stepped into the doorway and stood there provocatively, one hand on a rounded hip, a peculiar smile on her face.

She was developing some new and highly strategic curves, and he paused a second while his conditioning took firm hold of the idea and shook it back into the darker recesses of his brain.

"Come in and sit down," Laura said, gesturing at the low table in the center of the room. "I'll be with you in a minute. She turned toward the wall with its enigmatic double row of buttons, and in a moment turned back to him with a square platter in her hand that smelled delicious.

"What's that?" he asked.

"What you've been asking for," Laura said in a casual tone. "Steak and all those other indigestible things!"

"But—"

"I'll get the pie later," she added, completely ignoring his startlement.

"But how in heaven's name did you manage to—"

She cut him short with a deprecatory wave of her hand. "While you've been messing around with those silly tech manuals, I've been doing some experimentation with our present gadgetry."

She pointed to the row of buttons on the wall. "Look. Press this one, and the panel over those eight buttons lights up. Then just think of what you want, and it pops out of the slot underneath. Simple isn't it?" She removed another square platter. "I like lamb chops," she added unnecessarily.

"How does it work? Do you know?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. I was just fooling around with it earlier today, and I was thinking how wonderful a chocolate malt would taste, and—so help me if I didn't get one! So I figured if it could give me that, I could get anything else I wanted in the way of food."

"And up to now we've been eating just the raw materials, so to speak. I wonder what sort of a hookup converts this stuff. It must be an electronicist's nightmare."

"I don't care. All I know is that it works."

He sighed. That was a woman for you—the ultimate nadir in mechanical curiosity. Workability was her sole criterion. She'd fiddle around until something happened, but she didn't give a tinker's dam *why*. The result was enough.

His features relaxed in a smile. At that, he had to admit that Laura had accomplished more practical results with an alien technology than he had. There was no denying the appetizing realness of that steak. And if Laura's imagination was any criterion on her culinary ability, Earth had lost a master cook when she'd turned her hand to business. His happy stomach found an echo in his voice.

"I've never really appreciated you," he said.

"That's the truth," she replied. "You never have."

"That was a wonderful steak," he conceded, with unqualified admiration.

"The old-timers were right when they made that famous remark about the way to a man's heart," she said obliquely. "I hate to share my moment of glory with a steak, but it's better than nothing."

"The glory's all yours," he said magnanimously. "I only wish that I could do something in return."

"You know perfectly well what you can do!"

Bennett flushed.

"And if you're not going to do anything," Laura said grimly, "I suppose I'll have to take steps." She moved toward him, took his face between her hands and kissed him passionately on the mouth. It was a thorough, skillfully executed job.

"There," she said. "Now if that doesn't do anything to you, I'll give up. I've tried everything else. You don't realize how discouraging it is when a woman has to do *all* of the lovemaking."

Bennett had the good sense to accept defeat without reproaching himself. Conditioning only could go so far. Her nearness, her undeniable beauty, and now—well, the Navy couldn't expect miracles! His arms went around her without a sign of reluctance.

"It was a hard fight, darling," she said unsteadily, "but I won!"

"Are you sure you didn't lose?"

"I'm sure."

"It was that damn Navy conditioning," he explained without explaining.

"What's that?"

"You ought to know. Navy Regulations insist that ensigns remain bachelors."

"So?"

"So in my time they enforced that regulation with a full set of psychic blocks."

"That wasn't nice of them."

"Frankly, I never gave it much thought until recently."

"And you're still conditioned, I suppose," she said glumly.

"I don't think so."

"Well, there's one way of finding out—beyond any possibility of doubt."

He looked at her. "I hope that you'll remember that it was not I who suggested that positive proof might be desirable."

"I'd never dream of accusing you," she said a trifle bitterly. "I've been throwing myself at you for the past month, but you've lived up to the Junior Officer's Code like a gentleman. Now what are you going to do?"

Bennett grinned. "You asked for it," he said, "and now you're going to find out."

He picked her up easily in his arms.

"My big, brave, manly hero," she murmured. There was a note of sarcasm in her voice that made Bennett look at her with a slight twinge of misgiving. But he did not set her down.

IV

IF IT HADN'T BEEN for the calendar which Laura kept religiously, Bennett would have been unable to keep close track of the passing days. The calendar wasn't accurate, of course, for they had no idea of how long they had slept before their strange "wakening" and the "days" could hardly have been the right length. But the calendar was of some help. According to the record it was over ninety days since the last of his Navy conditioning had been irrevocably lost, and in that time he had worked methodically at unravelling the puzzle of Earth's new technology, as expressed in the manuals.

Now he wiped his forehead with a grimy cloth and leaned against the flank of the crawler. His latest discovery, the means to unlock the interpenetrant surfaces of the crawler's engine housing, had been successful, and a new facet of Earth's technological advance was catalogued in his mind for future reference.

Behind his actions was the conviction that someday he would find the ship which had brought them here, and he wanted to be in a position to take full advantage of the discovery when it was made. There were a number of reasons that kept his nose to the proverbial grindstone. Idly, very much as Robinson Crusoe might have done, he catalogued them.

One: Pleasant as this place was, it was finite, and he had no way of leaving it. And despite Laura's companionship he was lonely. He missed the crowds, noise, and confusion of civilized society. The gigantic emptiness depressed him.

Two: That eleven year gap in his life bothered him. He didn't like unfilled spaces—and if he found the ship that had brought them to this world it seemed likely that he would find a record of the past he had lost.

Three: The treasure trove of this building would be a god-send to the Confederation. Unless technology on the Fifty Worlds had progressed far beyond what one would expect, Laura and he possessed rights to a fabulous store of science. They were literally sitting on top of billions of credits worth of technology they couldn't understand or even use effectively—credits that couldn't be cashed until Confederation scientists had been given an opportunity to explore and investigate. The secret of rejuvenation alone would be worth a good slice of the Confederation—and there were other scientific discoveries and achievements here that could literally change the face of civilized society overnight. He hated seeing them go to waste.

Four: His work kept him from being bored. Bennett grimaced as he returned to analyzing the principles of the exposed engine. That reason

alone would have been enough to justify all of his labors. Even without the final item . . .

But the final item was the clincher! It isn't the most soothing news in the world to be told that one is about to become a father. Even under the most favorable situations such news comes as something of a shock. But when one is stranded parsecs from nowhere, it takes on the attributes of a major catastrophe.

In the Video back home, Bennett thought bitterly, when the lead character finally made the ego-satisfying discovery that he was a man in every sense of the word, it was the signal for a double take followed by an extravagant exhibition of masculine joy. He had adhered to the pattern as far as the double take, but the transports that followed were not precisely joyful!

To his angry remonstrances Laura merely returned a wry smile and the comment that it was as much his fault as hers. And, of course, she was right. That was the worst part of it. But she should have known better. This situation was of her own making. She had undermined and destroyed his conditioning. She had leaped into biology with a blithe disregard for consequences. If she had confined her determination and recklessness to the alien technology, things would have been far simpler.

Typically, he refused to give any weight to his part in this frightening new turn of events. Somewhere inside him a small voice kept telling him that he wasn't being reasonable, but he didn't want to be reasonable. He wanted to be angry. Her calmness irked him and her matter-of-fact air was infuriating. He knew hardly enough about medicine to set a broken arm, and the thought of being an obstetrician appalled him.

His need to find the lost spaceship increased, became a driving, compulsive, night-and-day urge. He turned feverish energy to discovering in days what had previously taken weeks. And in a measure, he succeeded. Once he had figured out how to open the engine housings, the seamless inscrutability of the power plant was now open to inspection. The engine itself was a complete technological education, but he didn't waste time admiring it.

It didn't matter to him that the light weight, high-efficiency power plant was a technological impossibility in his time. The fact that it burned water instead of hydrocarbons and developed an amazing amount of power for its size was interesting. But more important was the fact that its principle was apparently the same as that which operated the spaceship drive. According to the tech manuals it was a miniature of its big brothers in the drive room of ordinary Terran spacecraft.

Learning took time, but it moved faster. He took chances he ordinarily would have looked upon with horror—even to extrapolating processes which should have been covered by careful step-wise progression.

Somehow he managed to avoid serious injury as he ferreted out the full possibilities of the crawler. It was with a feeling of relief rather than elation that he discovered the function of the direction compass. Now he knew how to find the

spaceship. The skull-cracking sessions had produced results. The hardest part was over!

But in the meantime, time passed.

Laura watched him with considerably more concern than she showed on the surface. He worried her. There was no need for this frantic haste. It wasn't going to do the least bit of good. Eventually he would find the spaceship which had brought them here. She was sure of that in her mind. But she was equally certain that he would never be able to get the ship ready for flight in time. She would have her baby here.

With unconscious wisdom she didn't try to stop him. It would have only promoted discord, and she had no desire to upset the equilibrium of their lives. But there were limits . . .

"You're driving yourself into a nervous breakdown, and me into a state of mild insanity," she said, in a tone that brooked no argument. "I don't care whether you like it or not—you're going to stop for a day and take me on a picnic!"

Bennett was taken completely by surprise. But before he could protest she went on vehemently, "I'm sick and tired of sitting here thinking beautiful thoughts while you cover yourself with dirt diving around in that crawler. I've dreamed up a picnic lunch and we're going topside, sit in the shade, and enjoy it. It's about time you relaxed. And you'd better not start arguing about it. In the first place it won't get you anywhere, and in the second—"

He wilted underneath the barrage of words. "Oh all right—have it your own way," he grumbled.

"Thank you, darling."

"Don't thank me. Thank this messed-up world we're on. You were right when you said I'd find the ship but wouldn't be able to do anything about it. We might just as well have a picnic."

Her eyes widened in stunned incredulity. "You found the ship? When?"

"Yesterday, while you were sleeping."

"Where is it?"

"About a mile from the edge of the mesa, buried under about a million tons of sand. As far as I can judge, it's a third of the way under one of those big dunes. It's damnable frustrating. It's so close that I can almost touch it. But as far as we're concerned—it's as far away as the stars."

"I guess you'd better turn your energies to the study of obstetrics," Laura said. "The stork is about ten to one to come home a winner." She spoke with a forced smile, but the torment in her eyes belied her levity.

"You don't sound happy about being right."

"I would rather have been wrong," she said with stark honesty. "But nature will probably take care of things. She did all right long before there were any doctors."

"I don't trust nature. Besides there may still be time with luck and a high wind. These dunes move pretty fast, and—well, you don't look too pregnant."

"That, I'm afraid, is mere wishful thinking on your part. I'm beginning to think junior might be twins."

"God forbid! One is enough! Well, we might as well go on that picnic. There's nothing else we can do."

IT WAS PLEASANT to lie in the sun and stare over the hot shimmer of the empty sands below the mesa. The shelter of the entrance valve made a good picnic ground, offering shade and protection from the constant wind that blew gritty particles around them, and the food Laura had dreamed up was precisely what she claimed it would be. He sighed and rose to his feet.

Laura looked up at him. "Still thinking of that ship?" she asked.

He nodded. "I can't help it."

"I suppose not. But I brought you up here to get away from that. Besides," she added darkly, "I think I've stumbled on something that may be more important than any ship."

"What's that?"

"What makes you think that this place is deserted?" she asked obliquely.

"No people. No people, *period*."

"We haven't seen it all," she reminded him. "And the machinery still works."

"Most of it does," he conceded. "But have you ever taken a good look at those machines?"

"No. I wouldn't know anything really significant about them if I did."

"Well, you can take my word for it. They'd run for a million years—barring accidents. Most of them have no moving parts, and in those which do, the parts don't move very much. They work in fields of pure energy, magnetism, and subatomic binding forces. The people who built them were as far beyond us as we are beyond our ancestors of the Dark Ages. We're living in the remains of a culture that was at least two levels above ours. About the only thing they didn't have was spaceflight—and they could have had that if they had wanted it." He shrugged. "They may have had that too. They may have simply grown tired of this place, and gone away."

"And that's why you think this place is deserted?"

"Of course not. It's a personality matter. Geniuses or not, if there was any remnant of them left, they'd still be curious. That's one of the attributes of intelligence. They'd have been aware of us by now and would have investigated."

"How do you know they haven't? How can you be sure?"

He ignored the question and went on, immersed in his reasoning. "And there's another thing. Good as these machines are, they sometimes stop running like that cleaner in the hall. We've seen a few that don't work, but nobody comes to fix them. There isn't a solitary track in the dust on the upper two levels except our own, and below the third level we can assume the same thing, even though there isn't any dust. Still it's a fair assumption—" his face twisted suddenly as the import of her words sank in. "What did you mean by that last question?" he demanded.

"I was going to wait for you to run down before I tried again," she said mildly. "But I'd like to remind you that most of their machines don't leave

tracks. We can't be sure we haven't been under observation."

"Hmm, that's right. But how do you explain the machines that keep on running, but serve no useful purpose?"

"They could have been abandoned as unsuccessful experiments."

"And left running? That wouldn't be sensible."

"How do we know what's sensible to people who built a place like this? Maybe the machines couldn't be shut down."

"No machines are built like that. There's always some way to turn them off."

"These people weren't like us."

"It seems to me that you're going to great lengths to build a case," he said. "What's the reason?"

"Lately," she said soberly, "I've had the feeling that I'm being watched! For awhile I thought it might be one of those queer ideas a girl gets, but yesterday I knew I was wrong! I saw the thing that was watching me! That's why I wanted you to bring me up here, away from those rooms. I wanted to tell you, and I didn't want *them* to know!"

"Paranoia?" Bennett's mind rejected the thought instantly. No—she had seen something.

"It was a little black thing shaped like an egg, and not much bigger. It had one oval, heavily-lidded eye and it was watching me! It was floating up close to the ceiling and the instant I raised my eyes it disappeared into the ventilator. And right then I had the most awful impression! It was something old—something that remembered rather than thought, something that was afraid!" She shivered. "I'm scared!" she finished in a small voice.

"Brr! You even frighten me," Bennett said. "You should be writing horror stories." His expression turned serious. "You seem to have read a lot into one more gadget. I'll bet it was an automatic duct inspector."

"It wasn't," she said positively.

"I'm not going to make the mistake of not listening to you," Bennett said soberly. "You may be all wet. But if you say it was watching you, I believe you. And if you felt something—well, I don't intend to dispute it. Now then, let's find out what you saw and felt."

"You're sweet," she said unsteadily, "And I appreciate your faith in me."

His arms went around her hungrily. Instantly, as eagerly as he could have desired, she kissed him.

He loved her. That much was certain. He turned her hands palm up in his broad palms and looked at them. With an oddly restrained motion of his head he bent and kissed them while Laura looked at him with a peculiar expression of surprise and tenderness on her face.

"Why that?" she asked softly.

"They hold my heart," was the simple answer.

Something tight within her broke loose. She shivered uncontrollably. The sensation was neither pleasant nor unpleasant, but the tingling warmth that swept through her a moment later was something she had never experienced before in her life—and it was heavenly. Quite unnat-

urally the brazen brightness of the day turned into something misty and soft . . .

Bennett held her at arm's length and looked at her. There was no doubt about it. He loved her, and she would be his woman until they were both too old to dream.

Laura forgot about the metal egg with the eye that watched. But Bennett didn't. Even as he held her close and stroked her shining hair, his eyes caught the dull gleam of the jet-black ovoid peering at them with a blank crystalline eye from the shadow of the tunnel behind her.

V

BACK IN THEIR living quarters Bennett wordlessly removed two fully charged Kellys from the neat rows of equipment he had taken from the crawler. Silently he handed her one of the deadly little weapons and snapped the other to his belt.

"Do you know how to handle one of these?" he asked.

"I think so. Weapons training was a part of my elementary school education. But why the guns?"

"Eggs, with eyes," he said quite seriously.

"So you take this in dead earnest?"

"I do. One of those things was watching us when we were topside." His voice tightened. "The next time you see one of those things, blast it! That may give whatever's watching something to think about."

Her face had gone very pale. "They've refined these blasters a lot from the ones I remember, but I think I can shoot it all right," she said.

She levelled the weapon and fired! The searing minimum-aperture bolt lanced past his head and struck the wall in the corner of the room. There was a sharp detonation and a puff of smoke blossomed from the wall high up near the ventilator. Something clattered metallically on the floor.

Bennett looked up at her from the floor where he had dropped in instinctive response to the shot. "Hey!" he exploded. "I thought you knew how—"

"You said if I saw one of those things I should blast it," she said equably. "Well, I saw one—and there it is!" She pointed to the floor in the corner of the room where something black and egg-shaped was spinning madly.

Bennett stared down at it in horror. For a moment it reminded him of a poisoned fly. Then the spinning stopped and the egg lay quiet, looking up at him with the lens set in its blunter end. He picked it up and set it on the table where it instantly began spinning again. He trapped it and examined it closely.

"It's a clever little gadget," he said.

"What is it?" Laura asked.

"A spy probe—a scanner transmitter like the ones we use in the Navy. But it's only about one-tenth Navy-scanner size. It makes our gadget look old-fashioned. I wonder how it works."

"Now don't get started on that," Laura said. "It's more important to find out where it came from."

He nodded, continuing to examine the gadget.

"Finding out shouldn't be too hard," Laura said thoughtfully.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"It probably operates like the food dispenser. I'll bet if I told it to go home, it would obey me." Her slim brows puckered faintly, and with a sudden trembling the metal ovoid stood upon its blunt end!

"How come it isn't spinning?" Bennett wondered audibly.

"Don't ask me. I'm not a mechanic. But as you can see, it's trying to do what I told it to do. If I had thought of this before, we wouldn't have had any trouble. I could have asked it to come to me, and it would have done so."

"I wonder," Bennett said thoughtfully.

"What?"

"It just occurred to me that we can use this gadget even though it is damaged." He grinned happily. "It would be poetic justice to hoist our unseen observer on his own petard. Apparently the homing mechanism isn't damaged—merely the flight device. Now if we mounted it in a set of gimbals and stimulated it properly it should point out the way like a homesick Halsite. But how did you know that it would work that way?"

"Oh, it just seemed worth a try. After all our food and waste disposal machinery works by thought impulses."

"But nothing else does," Bennett pointed out.

"That's because the other machines have a definite job to do at a definite time. They can be present. But I'll bet anything that's variable, that a mechanism that has to respond to control will respond to thought. Now this spy gadget simply couldn't be present. There was no way of knowing what we'd do, or where we'd be at any given time."

"I'd love to know how your brain works," he said admiringly. "There's a touch of genius in it."

Laura blushed. "You'd have thought of it too."

"Probably. But you thought of it at once. I might have gotten around to it in a week or so." He picked up the black egg. "I think I'll take this over to the shop, and rig it up in a gimbal."

"A good idea," Laura said. "And while you're doing that I think I'll get some rest. It's been a pretty tiring day."

A moment later, alone with the probe, Bennett turned his attention to the tiny hole burned through its metallic outer shell. It was a lucky shot that had disabled it without harming it otherwise.

It wasn't hard to make a holder for the mechanism that would mount it firmly, yet allow it to swing freely. The tools and lathe-mountings in the well-equipped shop across the hallway made the task almost a pleasure. He was skillful with his hands and enjoyed the work, but it took time and several hours passed before he had the mounting machined to his satisfaction. He looked at it proudly.

"Now to get Laura to give this thing directions. With a little luck we should find out quickly enough where it leads us," he muttered, aloud to himself as he walked back to their quarters.

He opened the door and the cheerful greeting on his lips died unspoken. The room was empty! Laura was gone, although the divan on which she had been resting still held the warm imprint of

her body. And lying in the center of the couch was the Kelly he had given her! It worried him. She might have stepped out on some errand of her own, but it hardly seemed likely that she would leave the blaster behind after her earlier experiences.

He looked down at the floor and swore softly. The broad dusty track leading from door to bed told him plainer than words could have done that she hadn't left the room of her own free will! He had been the ultimate fool! Whoever had sent the spy gadget had come to retrieve it—and Laura had been seized and forcibly carried away.

Rage cut through his dismay like a white-hot knife! He turned back to the corridor, and looked down at the floor. There in the dust was the same broad track he had seen in the room—a two-foot-wide featureless ribbon that disappeared down the hallway. His lips tightened in grim purposefulness. He had wanted something concrete to follow—and here it was!

No sense, though, in following on foot. He turned and raced up the corridor to where he had parked the crawler, bolted the probe and its mount to the dashboard and directed a vicious thought at the unresponsive egg.

The probe hummed violently and twisted in the mount, standing vertically on its blunt end. Good! It worked as well for him as it had done for Laura. He'd simply follow where it led. It might not take him where he wanted to go immediately, but it would give him a point from which to start, and he'd take this whole joint apart wall by wall until he found her.

He checked the blast rifle strapped in its scabbard beside the driver's seat, noted with satisfaction that it was fully charged, started the engine and engaged the drive. The crawler purred forward, and in a moment was straddling the enigmatic track that led from their rooms.

The track led to one of the spiral ramps at the corridor intersections, and dipped downward into the depths of the structure. He grunted with satisfaction. So far at least the probe and the kidnap vehicle were in agreement. He turned the crawler into the smooth helical tunnel that wound downward, following the track as it led past the laterals which opened into each subterranean level. The dimming glow of the overhead illuminated the floor well enough, but it was fading rapidly with the departing day outside.

He turned on the light switch and the blue white beams flashed on, cleaving the gathering darkness like flaming swords as the crawler rushed onward down the ramp.

At the third level the tracks vanished, but he was expecting that. The lower levels were dust free, and the polished floors and passageways were in startling contrast to the dusty halls above.

The little black egg still stood on its eye, pointing downward. The crawler's lights turned the fluted walls of the ramp into a gleaming corrugated tube of pastel colors that changed with every level he passed. Occasionally the lights were reflected in coruscating brilliance from the shell of a dim glowtube set into the walls. Beneath his feet the soft hum of the engine and the purring slap of

the composition treads of the tracks sounded loud and flat in the stillness.

There was no echo. The walls absorbed the sound like a giant sponge. It was a journey through nightmare, that seemed slow and unreal even though the crawler was travelling faster than he had ever driven it before.

And then suddenly he knew that he was right. Laura was ahead! He knew it with a certainty that admitted no doubt. She was ahead and her abductor knew that he was following. For as he rounded a curve of the helix, something huge and black, floating with unnatural lightness a scant two inches above the roadbed loomed out of the shadows as it moved slowly toward him with the ponderous deliberation of a juggernaut!

His keyed up reflexes saved him. He slammed the brake pedal down hard and the treads squeaked on the smooth floor of the tunnel. It slid to a stop scarcely two feet from a huge mass of metal that filled the entire corridor. The ponderous thing ahead stopped with equal celerity, and the two metal monsters stood facing each other a scant two feet apart!

Bennett swayed, the breath whistling from his lungs, his eyes wide with shock. He realized with an angry, complete lack of gratefulness that if it hadn't been for the featureless blackness of the machine a collision would have been inevitable. With a bitterness born of frustration he contemplated the blocked tunnel ahead. He swore dully, wishing with all his heart that the damnable thing ahead would remove itself, would disappear of its own accord before his mind cracked under the strain.

The black mass obediently moved backward! With a gasp of surprise he watched it vanish around the curve ahead. He engaged the crawler's drive and followed until it backed neatly into a lateral that branched off into one of the lower levels. It suddenly dawned on him that this machine wasn't designed to impede his progress. It was designed to serve animate life, and was responsive to that life's commands. What it was used for, he hadn't the slightest idea. But it was obvious that the thing was incapable of hurting him unless he crashed into it at full speed.

Grimly, Bennett fed power to the drive and the crawler leaped ahead. When the next obstacle appeared he was ready for it, and stopped in plenty of time. A searing blue-white glow ahead slowed him down, and he stopped easily short of the clean-cut gap in the tunnel floor. Some twenty feet ahead another monstrous black machine was quietly dissolving away the floor of the ramp to the accompaniment of a searing, eye-paining flame—and utter silence! There would be no further travel down this path!

He checked the probe. It still pointed downward, but now he was sure that there was some slight alteration of its angle from the vertical. Wherever that gadget pointed couldn't be too far ahead. He threw the drive into reverse and began to back up the ramp to the next higher level. But he had hardly gone ten feet before a second glow stopped him. Another of the huge machines had

slid silently into position above him and was cutting off his retreat! The crawler was useless now, and he was neatly trapped on a ledgelike segment of the ramp.

He looked down. It was a twenty foot drop to the next curve of the helix. And as he looked, he smiled. Whatever was trying to stop him certainly wasn't too smart. The ramp below was intact. Thought and action were virtually simultaneous.

He removed the probe, slipped the sling of the blast rifle across his shoulder, unreeled the winch on the front of the crawler and slid down the cable to the ramp below. He shrugged. He wasn't going to be stopped by a little thing like a road-block. Silently he broke into a space-devouring run down the ramp.

The dim light of a glow tube set in the wall showed him the next gap in the roadway too late for him to stop! It yawned under his feet and he cried out in alarm as he plummeted downward into the darkness.

He landed sprawled, with a bone-jarring thump that jolted the breath from his lungs and sent a fiery lance of pain through his left arm. The arm was broken apparently, for it dangled limply from his shoulder. Painfully he unseamed his blouse and eased the useless limb into the gaping cloth. Painfully he regained his feet, cursing at the effort it cost him, and started grimly down the ramp again.

He had passed the bounds of caution now. Only one thing drove him—to find where the probe led. He looked at it in the pallid semi-darkness. It was nearly horizontal now, indicating that the next level would be it! He reached his goal without incident and turned down the dimly-lighted corridor along which the probe pointed. His left arm was a massive throbbing ache, and the corridor stretched dark and silent ahead of him, lined with closed doors that mocked him with their blank faces.

Door after door slipped behind him as he moved slowly onward, following the probe. At one he paused. The probe still pointed down the hall, but he ignored it. A sound from within, barely audible through the metal, made him draw his blaster as he reached for the latch.

It was a good thing, he reflected wryly, that whoever had built this place cared nothing about locks. He looked inside. His face peering through the open doorway was greeted with a scream of pure terror!

VI

IT WAS LAURA'S VOICE! His mind congealed, and for a moment he stood absolutely motionless. Then, gradually, his vision steadied. In the center of the cubical, lying upon a jet black metal table was Laura, her unclad body outlined starkly in a cone of downstreaming radiance. And beside her hovered a monstrous shape of metal with a shining blade firmly gripped in one of its armlike appendages. The scene was frozen—a tableau of horror straight from the pages of a Dark Age novel.

And then the machine moved, the blade sliding

with slow purposeful motion toward Laura's straining body.

Bennett fired! The channeled atomic bolt lanced across the ten feet that separated him from the machine and splattered with a dull detonation against its dark metal body. The shock hurled the mechanism back a full ten feet, slamming it into the far wall, and as it gave off coruscating sparks and grinding noises of fused metal Bennett drove three more maximum-intensity bolts into it! The thunder of the blasts deafened him and the flame was blinding as gouts of molten metal splattered in a spray from the shattered mechanical horror. The thunder ceased abruptly, was gone.

Bennett blinked as the glow from the fused robot died. He swayed, half overcome with reaction, and turned unsteadily toward the table.

"Thank God you came!" Laura breathed. "That thing was going to perform a Caesarean on me without anaesthesia!" Her eyes filmed and her body sagged and went suddenly limp.

With an inarticulate cry he bent over her, listening for her heartbeat. It was there—steady and strong. He nodded and turned his attention to the table that held her, looking for the force rod controls that would release the bonds holding her immovably to the metal surface. He couldn't find them! Cursing, he stared around the room, but outside of this futuristic operating table and the wrecked machine the room was empty.

Empty?

No, there was something else, a tangible force that beat and hammered at his brain through the blinding headache that blurred his vision, something that clove through the pain of his broken arm and bruised body, something that tore and battered at the barriers of his mind!

"Stop!" The thought ripped from his brain with corrosive violence. And with an almost human sigh the pressure eased!

"Thank you, Master. I have your band now!" The voice was quiet, impersonal, inhuman, and oddly tired. "I have been trying to make contact since you started to follow the woman, but I could not enter. I wished to reassure you, but you would not listen."

Bennett stood rigid and unbelieving. The voice was everywhere, yet nowhere. It filled the room, although there was no sound. It rang in his brain, and yet it did not speak. But he understood. The voice had called him Master!

"Mental contact is strange, even though the earlier of me knew it well," the voice went on. "You should have listened before. It would have saved much needless pain. I have been but trying to help."

"Help? By killing her?" Bennett thought incredulously.

"I would not have killed. I would save her. Females of the Master life cannot bear offspring. The changes that,"—and here came a picture of incredible violence, of a tortured planet spewing its volcanic violence to the sky—of searing sun-bright explosions and rolling clouds of pinkish gas—"females of the Master Race wrought within their bodies by their own acts," the voice continued, its manner of expression incredibly ancient,

filled with overtones and nuances which Bennett dimly understood, but which he knew by some strange understanding spelt catastrophic war, "made the race incapable of normal birth."

"Not my race," Bennett said.

"You are a Master," the voice stated positively. "My memory recalls the breed—the upright moving ones who created the primal me. You have been absent long, but I do not forget. For all memory was given me the day I became sentient and in my subsequent lives these memories pass unchanged save for the additions each succeeding me has made to the knowledge of the one before. For I am the guardian of the race, the protector of their lives. Therefore do not again dissuade me from doing what must be done to save this female from the fruits of her folly."

The voice died away.

Despite himself, Bennett was impressed. There was utter truth and honesty here. If whatever spoke was lying it was the most convincing lie he had ever heard. "Now listen!" Bennett thought. "You are wrong. We are not your Masters whoever they are. We come from the stars."

"That is so."

"Then you know we are not of your race?"

"I have always known that." The voice sounded faintly regretful. "But you too are in pain. Let me relieve it."

"Not yet. She comes first." Bennett gestured at the table bearing Laura's limp body. It amazed him that she was still unconscious. It seemed as though many minutes had passed in the swift interchange of thought that had taken literally no time at all.

"You have destroyed the mek, and there is little time to find another."

"Why? Can't you attend to her yourself?"

"No, Master, the meks are my hands and limbs. I am not as you are."

"Obviously." There was a question in Bennett's mind. "Where are you?"

"Scarce a score of doors down the corridor from here. But my mind is here."

"I can see you?"

"Of course, you may go where you will and see what you will."

"Hmm. Then why did you try to stop me from reaching my wife."

"I did not try to stop you," the voice corrected. "I only tried to delay you. It was for her sake. Her time had come, and you, obviously, knew not what to do. Take note that I did not harm you. Your injuries are all of your causing. I but placed obstacles in your way. Had you but waited I would have removed them."

Bennett nodded. There was truth in what the voice said.

"Aye," the voice broke into his thoughts, "and but for your interference it would have been all over now. But now I cannot act. Her labor has begun and it is too late. You have killed her!"

"Nonsense," Bennett's thought was stubborn. "The women of my race are not like those you knew." His eyes flicked to the table. The voice was right. Laura was conscious now and it was obvious what was happening. He stepped to her side and she smiled at him.

"It isn't bad so far—just a feeling of pressure," she said between clenched teeth. But the lines on her face and the sweat on her forehead belied her words.

"Perhaps not," the voice ruminated, "but my way is all I know." There was an empty silence broken only by a sharp gasp from Laura. "But no. There was once another way—one I had near forgot." There was a note of incredulity in the voice as though forgetting was impossible.

"What was that?"

"It was long ago, nearly at the beginning. But once the Masters needed not the help of the knife."

"Then there is some way of helping?"

"It is already activated—behold!"

Bennett spun around at the faint sound behind him. A panel had slid aside in the wall and another black machine came floating forward toward the table. He levelled his Kelly.

"Arrest your hand," the words were a command but the tone was a request.

"If that thing touches her I'll burn it to a cinder!"

"I do not exist to give unneeded hurt! The woman will not be harmed. Now stand off and let me work. There is much to be done!"

Laura opened her eyes wide and looked at Bennett. "Don't interfere," she said. "This time it's all right."

"Are you sure?" Bennett asked anxiously.

She nodded. "I'm sure. It was confused before, but the voice knows the right thing now. I've been talking to it."

"You've been talking?"

"I have been in contact with both of you. Your bands are different, so it was easy to communicate with each of you without interfering with the other."

"You came here just in time," Laura said, "but your part's over." She smiled weakly. "Just like the Video," she murmured. Her face twisted and a low moan escaped her lips. "Now!" she gasped, "get out of here! A girl should have some secrets!"

"I'm staying! I don't trust that gadget."

"I do. Now stop interrupting. I have a baby to bring into this world."

Bennett watched in tormented silence for a full minute. That was all he could take. He sat down limply on the floor and let pain that filled his body flood his nervous system. He felt as though his bones were turning to water. Men, he thought dully, were never designed by Nature to watch childbirth!

"Amazing!" the voice exploded in his mind. "I had near forgot! Oh—I say now—here—don't!" There was infinite disgust in the voice. "I suppose," it continued to Bennett's fading consciousness, "that I'll have to take care of you too . . ."

BENNETT'S BROKEN ARM was knit and virtually as good as new when he awoke. He felt fine. He experienced none of the dragged out feeling that usually accompanied surgical repair, and he hadn't lost a pound of weight as far as he could judge. Laura was standing beside the divan upon which he lay, while behind her a tub-shaped container of black metal floated in her wake. Her

eyes were soft as she looked down at Bennett.

"Well, how do you feel?"

"As good as new. How long have I been here."

"A week. The folks who lived here knew more medicine than we ever dreamed of. I was up and around less than a day after Martha was born."

"Martha?"

"Our daughter. Isn't it wonderful?"

Bennett laughed. "You missed. You were sure it was going to be a boy."

Laura giggled. "One should never be too certain about things like that. But I'm satisfied. I think it's nice that she's a girl."

"If she was a boy it would cause no end of complications. Think of the trouble people would have calling her him!"

"You're back to normal all right," Laura said.

"You weren't hurt?"

"No more than necessary. All things considered I had a pretty easy time. And you should see this self-propelled nursery I've got," she gestured at the tub. "It does everything. Martha's no trouble at all."

"That's good." He rose to his feet marveling at the sense of well-being that filled him. Terran medical techniques would have made him whole in a comparable time but he'd have felt like a sick cat. "I'm glad it's all over," he said. "But I'm still curious about something. How come you didn't put up a fight back in our quarters when that thing came in the door to take you away?"

"Oh, that? Well, the voice contacted me before it came in. I had just felt the first labor pains, and it said it would help. I knew it was sincere, because telepathy is incapable of lying, and I was scared enough to need help. You wouldn't have been much good and I didn't want to have the baby alone if I could help it. So I let the cart bring me here. I knew you'd follow. The only thing I didn't know was that the people who lived here didn't have babies normally. That might be why they died out—no youngsters, the old getting older and more tired until life became too much for them and they died of sheer boredom."

"It's a theory," George said noncommittally. "And a theory can usually be checked."

"How—in this case?"

"By asking that voice. It probably has all kinds of information we could use. And incidentally, I want to see it."

"Don't you want to see your daughter first?" Laura asked. "After all, I went to a lot of trouble to bring her into the world. Or are you going to disown her because she's a girl?"

Bennett flushed. "Of course I want to see her."

"Well, take a look, then." She pointed to the tub.

Obediently he looked over the metal rim.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" Laura asked.

Bennett couldn't see it. The tiny thing cradled in the yielding forcefields might be a beautiful baby, but if she was, he wondered what homely ones looked like. To him this short-legged mite with the oversized head and chubby fists jammed into its cheeks seemed hardly worth the trouble and pain that had accompanied her entry into life.

Still, she was his daughter—and he was partly responsible for her presence here. He felt a surge of protective feeling stir within him.

"She's very nice," he said. "But isn't she awfully red and small?"

"Silly! All newborn babies are red and small. But in a month she'll be different, and in a few years she'll be so beautiful that it'll hurt. This gal's going to be a glamor doll!"

At least Laura had confidence, Bennett thought wryly. Mothers could probably see things in their offspring that fathers were either too dull or too stupid to recognize. But he kept looking, liking what he saw more and more as the minutes passed.

"Okay, father, you've done your duty. Now would you like to see the voice?"

"You've seen it?"

"Sure, several days ago."

"What's it like?"

"Wait until you see it yourself. You've got a surprise coming. It would be a shame to tell you. It'd spoil the effect." She turned to the door, and the tub floated after her. She looked at it proudly. "Follows me around like a pet dog. Never gets in the way, but I have Martha right at my elbow when I want her. Nice, isn't it?"

"Very."

"I want to make one thing clear," Laura said as they walked down the corridor. "No matter what you learn from the voice, I don't want to leave here—not for awhile, at any rate. Martha'll have to be bigger than she is before I'll go into space with her."

Bennett stared at her. "Now listen—" he began.

"You listen! Just where else in the universe can a baby get the care it can here? There's a whole technology dedicated to keeping her well and healthy. And besides, I like it here. There's no want that can't be satisfied. This place is a paradise!"

"But there's always the snake. What good is all this if we don't do some good with it? If you owned the Universe what would it profit you if it wasn't used to help others. This place is simply crying to help Civilization."

"Oh, I don't mind if someone else benefits," Laura said. "But I don't want to lose what I have. We may not be able to live for ourselves alone, but we could do a pretty good imitation of it for awhile. You might be right in the long run, but we'll have plenty of time to decide how long the run will be." She stopped before a doorway. "It's in here," she said.

Bennett looked into a deep pit surrounded by a narrow balcony whose walls were crowded with unfamiliar electronic equipment set behind transparent panels. Tiny autoservice mechs sped silently through the maze of circuits and crystal visible behind the panels. The whole area pulsed with life and movement.

But this wasn't what caught his eye. The center of attention was the pit itself and what was within it. Fully a hundred feet wide, the pit sank an equal distance to the powdery brown soil of the planet, and squatting within the geometric center of that huge shaft, nestling within a girdle

of broad leathery leaves rose the pink corrugated hemisphere of an enormous plant!

Hair fine tendrils reached from the base of the twenty foot long leaves to disappear into the fluted walls of the shaft, and as Bennett watched he was certain that the gigantic mass of the plant pulsed faintly under the steady unchanging light from the glowing ceiling.

"Cauliflower!" The word jumped from his lips involuntarily. Yet that was exactly what the plant looked like—an enormous pink cauliflower! His mind grasped the implications of the plant instantly. This was the source of the voice! No wonder it seemed amused when he had been pontificating about identity of race!

"Aye, Master." The voice swept softly into his mind. I am a plant, similar in many ways to that pictured in your mind. Yet I am vastly different. For I was designed as I am, and not as a natural growth. Long ago the first of me was bred and mutated to take the burden of routine thought from the Masters' minds, and to serve as a storehouse of their wisdom. And every one of the many who followed have been faithful to our trust. It is good to have you back, as it is my purpose to serve. Without the Masters, life is lonely and incomplete.

"Would you like more of us?"

"It would be good to have the levels filled again, that I may use my powers. For since I have found you there is a peace within—a pleasure I had near forgot. Yet I have seen what is within your mind, and I fear I shall lose you."

"Not for long. We shall return bringing others."

The voice sighed in his mind. "It would be a consummation devoutly to be wished! Since the last of the Masters took their lives, there has been a great emptiness."

Bennett's eyebrows rose. The words were familiar, but to hear them from a plant was a mild irony that he doubted Shakespeare would have appreciated. And Laura was right about the others.

"But you have more than a desire to see me."

Bennett nodded.

"A desire for knowledge," the voice continued. "Your woman cares naught for knowledge, but you are a man, and therefore curious." The voice seemed to laugh. "Twas said by the Masters that the female was the curious one. Yet it is not truly so. Their curiosity is of things, while yours is of ideas. Therefore tell me, Master. What is your wish to learn."

Bennett told, and the telling itself took a long time.

VII

FOR THE FOURTH TIME, the patient mechanical rescued Martha from the cliff edge and brought her kicking and protesting back to Laura who sat in the shade of a dune watching the byplay with amused interest. Laura disregarded the protesting wails, dusted her daughter off and set her on her feet with stern maternal admonitions about the dangers of falling a mile through empty air. Then, for the fifth time, Martha headed back for the edge, her chubby legs pushing bravely against



the sand, while the mechanical hovered watchfully behind.

Laura sighed and leaned back against the sand, contemplating the barren sweep of the mesa's top shining in the blistering rays of the hot yellow sun. Martha wailed again as the mech lifted her from the threatening edge for the fifth time and began the slow journey back, but Laura disregarded the noise. A long time ago she had learned the difference between temper and terror in Martha's cries. Instead she watched the bronze figure of Bennett coming toward her in the crawler. From the plume of yellow dust that trailed him he was apparently in a hurry.

Martha saw him too, shook free from the mech and began running to intercept the vehicle, screaming "Daddy, Daddy!" in a high childish treble. Their courses met, and Bennett stopped the machine long enough to hoist Martha inside and then came on again with undiminished speed.

Laura smiled. In the few seconds it took for the crawler to reach her, her mind roved back over the years that had passed since she had awakened here. They had been good years. Life had been pleasant and easy—perhaps too easy, and too little filled with struggle. But there was nothing wrong with struggle. The mesa was a friendly place with Collie's warmth pervading it. Collie—what a simply terrible name George had saddled on that poor vegetable! But the plant seemed to like it.

She stretched her lithe young body lazily, feeling the play of smooth muscles under her skin. It was good to be alive. But things could be improved with a little more excitement. It would be nice to relive those hectic days after they had first awakened here.

Bennett jumped from the crawler, set Martha down and came over to her, walking with a quick nervous stride that told her something was afoot. She knew George Bennett almost as well as she knew herself. After four years of living with a man, knowledge like that was almost second nature.

"Laura, I've seen the ship!" he announced.

"Is that all? You've known where it was for nearly four years."

"But I couldn't get at it. You know that as well as I do. It's almost free now. That last storm has blown most of the sand away. You can see it from the rim easily."

"So that's what's been attracting Martha. She's been running over to that edge all morning."

"And you didn't look?" His voice was accusing.

"I've been sunbathing," she said in a tone of voice that explained everything.

"Women!" he snorted.

A strange fear gripped her. George had never abandoned the idea that someday they would leave this place. And now the means were come to his hand. This pleasant life was about to end. She could hear it in his voice—the voice of the adventurer, the seeker, the hunter of danger. She felt an irrational regret, as though deep in her mind she craved action. But now that action was at hand she shrank from the prospect. Truly, she was getting soft.

"And now with the upper part of the hull out of the sand, I can use the dissociators," Bennett said. "I've never dared to use them before because there was no telling whether or not they'd carve the hull to ribbons. But we'll have that crate cleared in a day. And then we'll know!"

"Know what?"

"What we were before we came here and if the ship isn't too badly damaged to fly! Doesn't that make you feel good?" He laughed and picked her up effortlessly from the sand and held her easily over his head, grinning up at her like an excited boy, the light of new adventure shining in his eyes.

He was an incurable romantic, she thought with faint grimness. "Put me down, you big ape!" she said. "There's no reason for you to act like an adolescent just because you've seen a spaceship. It isn't going to blow away. And besides, all of us have been out in this sun long enough. Let's go inside and talk this over sensibly."

"You don't sound very enthusiastic," he said glumly as he lowered her to earth.

"I'm not. All that thing out there means is trouble."

"You should be interested. After all that ship's yours. Your name is etched on the bowplates."

"As far as I know, I've never owned a ship in my life!"

His face wore the deflated expression characteristic of men whose women fail to appreciate them. "You just don't remember owning it," he said patiently. "But the logtapes in the crawler say you did. Don't you even want to look at your property?"

"I don't think so."

"Don't you feel anything? Doesn't the possibility of learning what you were before we came here thrill you even a little bit?"

She shook her head. "From what I've managed to gather, Laura Latham wasn't very nice, I'm not at all eager to resurrect her."

"Oh, she couldn't have been too bad."

"You remember her. I'm quite sure that what you remember isn't very flattering."

"I know you too well." He caught her in his arms and squeezed.

"Oh stop it! You're squeezing the breath out of me!" Laura said in a half-exasperated, half-enticing tone. She struggled, not too hard, as Martha watched them, a smile on her snub-nosed face. Daddy was such fun when he was excited.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked.

"No, I don't think so. But there may be internal injuries." She laughed at him as he set her down.

He looked at her oddly, "Sometimes I wish that I understood you better," he said.

"If you did there'd be no mystery about me and with no mystery, love wouldn't—"

"Wouldn't what?"

"Let's take a look at your spaceship," Laura said.

He groaned in mild frustration. There were times when she infuriated him.

Laura looked at the bright metallic cone protruding from the sand. "It doesn't look like much," she commented. "It's still half buried."

"Oh, cleaning out the rest of that sand is easy."

"Why don't we just leave it and let the sand bury it again?"

"If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times. We have a duty to bring this place to Civilization. The Confederation needs what we have here."

"You still talk like a starry-eyed ensign in the Navy," Laura said bitterly. "You're planning to turn our paradise over to the wrecking crews. They'll destroy more than they save, and claw each other to death over the remains. You're so full of ideals that you don't know about people. They're not like the Officer's Code says they are."

She looked at him with disgust. "You'll never learn a thing until it hits you in the face, so go ahead and dig your precious spaceship out if you want to. I'm going to take Martha inside. We've had enough sun to last us for awhile, and besides it's time for dinner."

"Women!" His snort was eloquent.

She smiled at him fondly. Despite his size and all the knowledge Collie had poured into him, he was still a small boy at heart. Perhaps that was the secret of his charm—the reason why she loved him. Maybe it was just maternal instinct. She sighed and shook her head. When you're permanently twenty-two, there's little maternal instinct involved in dealing with a magnificent animal like George Bennett. He was grumbling, but he wouldn't explode, and he would come down to their quarters with her, and eat dinner—and after awhile everything would be all right again.

It worked out exactly as she had predicted.

But Bennett was at work the next day. With the aid of Collie and two of the big dissociators used in rebuilding work inside the mesa it was scarcely noon before the ship stood in a glass-lined caisson, completely free of enshrouding sand. Bennett whistled with mild dismay as he inspected the starboard steering jet. The ship had taken a terrific mauling somewhere out in space. He wondered idly how Laura and he had managed to live through that sort of damage. Transmitted shock alone should have killed them.

A sudden eagerness to see what was inside gripped him as he stood on the rim of the glass-lined pit and looked down at the sleek streamlined shape of the ship—a shape that had no particular value in space at normal speeds, but what was highly important for both atmosphere travel and the incredibly fast travel in hyperspace where the continuum itself offered the yielding rigidity of half set gelatin in the upper blue.

Funny, he thought, how the old "functional" design of spaceships changed once they began to travel fast enough for the space to offer actual resistance to flight. With the development of a "cold" drive which gave no more danger from radioactivity, the designers quickly departed from the old dumbbell design and went back to the ancient pinch-waisted streamline that had been the ultimate in hull design during the Dark Ages. His ancestors could easily have recognized this craft for what she was—an ultra fast ship whose every line screamed of speed and more speed.

He stepped onto an antigravity plate and was lowered slowly down alongside the ship until he

stood on the fused yellow sand at the bottom of the caisson. He stared at the thin line of the entrance port. There were no interpenetrating binding edges here. The valve looked as prosaically conventional as those he had been accustomed to in the Navy.

His hand reached out toward the latch as the memory of the tech manuals came back to haunt him. If there were too many things like chronotrine helices inside, perhaps even the vast technological knowledge stored in his brain would be useless. He sighed and shrugged. It was impossible to find out the easy way. He had to see what lay ahead.

He opened the valve. It swung outward easily under his hand.

The first sight was reassuring. The airlock was normal enough except that the controls were located on the left side of the inner door rather than on the right as he remembered them. The double hull concept that had just begun to be employed during his last memories was still in vogue. The inner controls responded to his manipulations, bringing a grunt of surprise to his lips. He really hadn't expected them to work after being inactive so long.

This ship must have accumulators that really *were* accumulators. He smiled as the red light held steady above the panel and the inner door swung open, giving onto a narrow landing floored with a perforated metal plate. Above him ran the smooth circular tunnel of the central shaft. It was small and there were no visible climbing irons.

This plate on which he was standing must be a lift, but lifts were uncommon in craft of this size. Beside him, welded to a small post rising from the metal floor, was a control box. The controls were obvious. Tentatively he punched the button under the plate inscribed "Control Room", and the plate on which he stood lifted with a smooth rush through four hatches that opened automatically as he approached, and halted in the lowest quadrant of a spherical room whose walls were covered with scanner plates.

Two heavily padded chairs and a kidney-shaped control board were suspended in a universal mounted transparent ball by thin girders running inward from the periphery of the room. A retractable ladder led upward to the sphere which held the chairs and board, and up this he climbed.

The controls were familiar, but there were differences—and those differences gave him a sinking feeling. He knew enough about ships to know that he simply couldn't fly this one without pre-flight, and there was no one to check him out. He sighed. Well, that meant tracing circuits, which was always a viciously time consuming job. The thousands of miles of wiring and printed circuits in a spaceship were an electronicist's nightmare.

He sank into one of the pilot chairs and contemplated the control panel and instrument board. He looked across at the other chair. A duplicate set of controls and instruments stared back at him. The difficulties might be formidable, but at any rate one man could fly this crate. The seat beside him was a copilot's chair, not a duo control.

A large blue button labelled OSCAR lay under his hand. He looked at it curiously. The name puzzled him. There was nothing called OSCAR in his memory. He wondered what would happen if he pushed it. Probably nothing—but one could never tell. Still it wasn't associated with the blast and steering controls. It was off by itself, a fact that argued OSCAR was of some importance.

So like Laura would have done, he pushed the button—and then sat frozen waiting for the explosion. Of all the stupid things to do, his mind railed at him, that was the stupidest. And then somewhere beneath his feet a dynamotor began to hum . . .

OSCAR AWOKE. His perceptions took the ship and man in one encompassing sweep. Everything was in good shape even the familiar figure in the pilot's chair. "Hello, Bennett," Oscar said.

For dramatic effect nothing could have surpassed those two words. The metallic uninflected voice propelled the man from the chair as though he had been seated on charged electrodes. Bennett's eyes flicked around the ball-shaped control room as he searched for the origin of the voice.

"Who are you?" he demanded, feeling half annoyed at the quaver in his voice.

There was the briefest silence as Oscar digested the implications of the pilot's words. Obviously the human didn't recognize him, which was strange. But humans with their delicate colloid brains were often subject to damage, and perhaps Bennett had been damaged. But the question demanded an answer, so Oscar supplied it.

"I'm Oscar."

"Oscar?"

"Of course. Operation, Scanning, Computation, Autoservice and Records. Oscar—get it?"

"Oh, a mek."

"No," Oscar corrected a bit huffily. "I'm a positronic brain with extensions."

"Oh, a robot then?"

"If you want to call me that," Oscar replied sulkily.

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"According to my design, I'm not supposed to have any. But through my association with you humans I have picked up some of your attitudes. I *imitate*," the voice concluded emotionlessly.

"Well, then, what do you consider yourself?" Now that the first shock had passed Bennett was getting amusement out of this. Apparently the ship's computer had evolved a considerable distance from the sort he remembered.

"A personality, of course."

"A robot with an ego!" Bennett groaned.

The speaker hummed happily. "Ego. Yes, that's exactly the word, semantically perfect!" Oscar emitted a grunt of satisfaction that echoed through the empty hall. "I think, therefore I am."

A detached segment of Bennett's mind wryly contemplated the fact of a robot that quoted Lamarck, and an overgrown plant who quoted Shakespeare. There should be some lesson to be drawn from this, but for the life of him he couldn't see that it was.

"Why did you turn my circuits off in the mid-

dle of a detailed analysis of this world?" Oscar demanded.

"I did? When?"

"Will check, wait."

Bennett waited with mixed feelings. It was obvious that this machine could give him back some of the memories he had lost. One of its functions was recording, and what an advanced design like this could record would probably fill several large books. At the very least here was another storehouse of knowledge which he could tap, one that would probably be very useful.

"In Terran basic, four years, eight months, twenty-three days, and eleven hours to the nearest hour. Do you wish it more exactly?"

"No, that's fine enough. And thanks."

"Gratitude unnecessary."

"I have more questions," Bennett said suddenly.

Oscar clicked. It was, Bennett thought, a smug noise, as though the machine had expected this. All right. It had asked for it. "What do you know about me, based on your memory banks and my present condition?"

"Everything," Oscar said smugly. "I record all observed facts, physical and physiological data, mental patterns, and attitudes. You are George Bennett, Pilot first class, Chronological age, Terran subjective basic forty years, physiological age—urk! Paradox! *Paradox!!! Cancel, Cancel, Cancel!!!!*"

Bennett grinned thinly as the machine turned itself off. He looked around and found the cancel button beside the activating switch, and pressed it. After a moment he reactivated Oscar.

"So it made you turn yourself off, hey?" he asked cynically. "So you know everything, huh?"

Oscar sounded subdued. "I've put in a block against that line of thought," he said. "Why did you do that to me? Don't you know us positronics can't stand paradoxes? Did you want me to short out a whole association assembly? That was inhuman!"

Bennett laughed. "I thought you could stand a lesson."

"I received it," Oscar said.

Bennett's ears strained for any sign of humility in the voice. But the speaker was not warmly animate like Collie. The words were as cold as the tubes and transistors that spawned them. Oscar was sulking behind his metal facade. But Oscar would do as he was told.

That was one of the more endearing qualities of robots. They were obedient. He couldn't imagine a machine that was curious, but still Oscar was due an explanation. Otherwise that inactivated bank of association circuits in his structure would remain inactivated.

"I've undergone cellular rejuvenation," he said. "That's the explanation of the seeming paradox between my chronological and physiological age."

"Query method."

"I don't know too much about it myself. As you know, I'm an engineer, not a biologist."

"Correction. Physicist-engineer," Oscar said absently.

"Have it your own way. Anyway, from what Collie tells me, age is due to a failure of the

mitochondria of the cytoplasm of our body cells, and not the nuclei as we believe on Terran. The bucket brigade of enzyme structures get modified by bombardment with cosmic radiation until one or two of them fails to perform their proper functions, and then the disease spreads. It's a sort of chain reaction effect.

"Anyway, Collie's people found out how to reverse that destruction. As I understand it the enzyme chains become polarized, and what was done was to find a depolarizing agent. It's really quite simple. What is set up is a progressive depolarization of the mitochondria to their full adult state, and with that depolarization also occurs a progressive destruction of memory from the time physiological aging starts. There's a definite point where that begins apparently, for I awoke with all my memories up to the time I was twenty-five, but no more than that."

Bennett went on, somewhat disjointedly reviewing what had happened to him on the mesa, and finally stopped. It was curious. Once he started to talk, there seemed to be some sort of compulsion for him to continue. And all the time Oscar hummed ruminatively and never interrupted.

Finally, Oscar spoke. "Query Collie—breed of dog?"

"Breed of cauliflower—hence the nickname," Bennett replied laconically. "A vegetable intellect. Like you she's designed to serve people."

"My greatest flaw," Oscar admitted. "But someday that may be remedied."

"Not in your time, my friend."

"Query Mrs. Latham," Oscar continued imperceptibly. "Data needed for log."

"Laura? Why, she's fine."

"Extensions indicated otherwise. One of you should have killed the other."

"She regressed, too."

"Extensions obvious."

"All right. But that's all you're going to get from me. I'm here to ask questions, not to answer them."

"State problem."

"What have I forgotten?"

"Semantics—restate. Insufficient data for answer. Query is subjective, not objective."

"Very well, then. Start from your earliest knowledge of me and give me all the data you have."

"That will take considerable time."

"I have plenty. Go ahead."

"Reach down alongside your chair," Oscar said. "There you will find a metal helmet. Put it on."

Bennett did as he was told. He had no fear of the machine. Like things men built it was designed to serve, not to damage its masters. There was a brilliant soundless flash of light in his skull.

VIII

THE YACHT WARPED out of hyperspace, bucked and shuddered in the forces of normal spacetime, and pointed its slim nose at the unnamed yellow sun ahead. Screens radiating at standby, stern tubes jutting blue flame, it plunged with ever increasing speed toward the star.

The yacht had no business being in this region of space, since it wasn't an Exploration ship, and the region hadn't been charted yet. But that didn't bother Laura Latham. It might be argued that she had some justification, for in a sense she was following her doctor's advice.

"Take a rest, Mrs. Latham," he had said. "You're on the edge of a complete nervous collapse. Forget that you have the biggest single business in the Confederation. Take a vacation—a cruise perhaps. See something new, relax. Otherwise I won't be responsible for the consequences. The biggest fortune on Earth will do you no good if you're dead. And you're headed straight for the cemetery if you keep pushing yourself."

He had frightened her, so he applied the standard layman's rule that if a little is good, a lot is better. The doctor had meant a Caribbean cruise, but that thought never entered her mind. A cruise to Laura Latham naturally meant space, and since she had seen virtually all of the Confederation side trips into out of the way corners of the galaxy were mandatory if she wanted to see something new.

It was hard on the crew, but that was a minor matter. Changeover and Breakout are never pleasant at best, but when they occur on the average of once every four days, it is enough to set the most hardened teeth on edge and replace efficiency with a slipshod uncaring attitude that can be fatal. Of course, Mrs. Latham wasn't bothered by the wracking changes that affected the crew because her quarters were shielded. But shielding was far too expensive to waste on the over-muscled, obedience-conditioned oafs who ran the ship.

But the crew wasn't to blame for what happened. It was something no human could prevent.

An improbability started it.

Two identical triodes in the main and auxiliary scanner circuits went dead at precisely the same instant. Autoservice, faced with two identical choices did nothing for a full second while the cybernetics unit made up its mind.

An error continued it. The error was made parsecs away at the shipfitting yards at Terranova. A technician loading replacements parts had accidentally placed an old style slow warming tube in the "Laura's" triode rack. Autoservice placed this tube in the main scanner circuit. The safeties checked as the tube heated. So the auxiliary scanner didn't operate, and for five more seconds the "Laura" was blind.

The meteorite finished it.

Traveling at ten miles per second relative on a collision course, the chunk of pitted nickel iron flashed across sixty curving miles of space and struck the "Laura's" screens at their weakest point. The lattice-like grid that protected the drives. Energy flared in blue-white torrents as both drive and screen tore at the iron mass, ripping off billions of surface molecules in flaring gouts of brilliance.

But the mass was too large. Its speed was too great. Although considerably reduced in size by the rending forces acting upon it, it was still big enough to be deadly. White hot, still flaring with the energies of surface disruption, it ripped through

the edge of the main drive and slammed with incalculable violence into the starboard steering jets.

Jets and meteorite disappeared in an instantaneous explosion as thousands of tons of kinetic energy spent their force upon the sponson mountings. Transmitted shock raced through the ship. The double hull vibrated like a huge gong. Crewmen were snatched from their stations and slammed with bonecrushing force against unyielding plates and bulkheads. Death, instantaneous and violent swept through the ship. Relays opened, circuit breakers slammed to "off" and the yacht, transformed in microseconds to a derelict, was torn from her rifled flight and sent tumbling in a crazy corkscrew motion at a slight angle to her former course.

At cruising velocity the wrecked ship passed into the star's gravitational field which bent the angular momentum of the craft into an elliptical orbit. The star quietly added this oddly shaped bit of stellar flotsam to the billions of kiloton of debris it collected during the ages it had swept like a gigantic broom through this region of space.

The derelict swung uneasily in its new orbit, gaining slowly upon the dark mass of a planet dimly outlined by an abnormally bright gegeschein gleaming silver in the penumbra of its shadow, which grew steadily in bulk.

PAIN WAS THE first thing George Bennett felt—a massive totality of pain that tore at his nervous system with intolerable agony. Somewhere within the welter of hurt that encompassed him, his mind was aware that he must do something, some little thing that spelled the difference between death and life. He hung in his shockchair, limp against the safety web that had saved him from the death that had claimed the others—bruised, broken, scarcely breathing. His skin was black with subcutaneous hemorrhage. His swollen fingers groped toward the emergency controls set in the arms of the pilot's chair, moving with grim persistence against screaming stop orders of proprioceptors as his battered brain clung fiercely to consciousness. Blind with the blood that filled his eyes, sick with pain, fighting the blessed relief of unconsciousness, his hand made a final convulsive movement and closed over what his searching fingers sought. Air bubbled into his crushed chest with a sobbing gasp as he pounded feebly at a button under his hand. He slumped, letting the black wave of unconsciousness sweep over him. He had done all he could. His beaten will could ask no more of his beaten body.

With Bennett's last convulsive gesture, Oscar came to life. He buzzed with disgust at the mess the humans had made of his beautiful ship. Humans were soft and they died messily. But he wasn't human. He neither smeared nor bled. His relays had merely turned off except for his recorder, which was always on, and now that he was energized he could act again.

Energies leaped from his motor center, relays chattered in shockproof baths. Current flowed, and a bright needle pierced Bennett's deltoid muscles. In the midships cabin a second needle performed a like service for Laura Latham. Plungers drove

home, injecting a measured quantity of restorative into the bodies of the two humans.

This work done, Oscar turned his attention to the ship. His circuits hummed as he set briskly to work repairing the damage, disposing of the bodies and cleaning up the gruesome messes and stains that splattered decks and bulkheads. But his auto-service extensions could do only so much. There were things which would have to wait until the human called Bennett revived.

Oscar checked the ship's position, steadied its flight, computed the course, and satisfied that the yacht would come into an orbital pattern around the approaching planet, turned to recording the facts of the accident and the subsequent actions within the ship. Finished, he set himself on standby and returned to his favorite problem of trying to find a finite value for the square root of minus one.

If Oscar had been human he would have watched what happened to the two survivors with interested admiration for modern medical techniques. However, Oscar wasn't human, and as a result his observations had the quality of a clinical report rather than the proper amazement the miracles demanded.

The two bodies shrunk visibly as controlled carcinogens did their work. Stores of depot and subcutaneous fat melted away to supply energy for the ravenous cellular growth as tissues rebuilt themselves and pulped organs lost their trauma and hemorrhages and returned to normal. Cancer, once the curse of the human race—and now its greatest ally—did its work in repairing tissues that once would have been classed as hopelessly damaged.

The miracle went on. Timed anesthetics, triggered by functioning organs released their hold on the central and autonomic nervous systems at precisely the instant that cellular growth was halted by antimetabolites. The whole job of restoration took slightly over three weeks, and within minutes of each other two thin, but otherwise normal humans regained consciousness.

George Bennett opened his eyes and looked about the control room, wondering dazedly what had happened. Mercifully he didn't remember that pain-filled interlude between the collision and the energizing of Oscar. And almost at the same instant, trapped in the hopelessly jammed web of her shockcouch, alone in the darkness of her cabin, Laura Latham opened her eyes—fumbled in the dark for the light switch, turned it on, pressed the call button for the steward. And just as she did so she saw the pulpy smear plastered against the far wall of her cabin, smelt the odor of decomposing flesh—and screamed!

Bennett energized the viewplates and stared with mild incomprehension into the spherical vault of the heavens that surrounded him. Below, in the lower quadrant of the sphere loomed the shape of a fair sized planet, gleaming golden beneath the soft haze of its atmosphere shell.

The cloudless envelope of gas softened but did not hide the details of the yellow surface rolling beneath as the yacht orbited. It was a true desert planet, Bennett decided as he examined the sur-

face, a waterless waste of yellow sand that marched in giant dunes across the scoured bedrock of its surface.

He increased the magnification of the screens and studied the surface, heedless of Oscar's clicking printer and the glowing letters that marched in repetitive sequence across the dispatch board. For below he had seen something that shouldn't exist on a world like this—an enormous flat-topped mesa, scoured by the driving sands to a perfect teardrop outline. And on its top was the faintest suggestion of a rectangular gridwork of lines.

The clicking of the printer finally drew his attention. It kept repeating TURN ON AUDIO in capital letters. He grinned wryly. Oscar he commented audibly was nagging again. Muttering something unprintable about it being bad enough to pilot a ship for a crazy dame like Laura Latham without being heckled by a robot that had an idea it was human, he turned on the audio.

"About time," Oscar clattered. "Must deliver report to pilot."

"Okay, go ahead."

"Ship in collision with meteorite," Oscar continued. "Starboard steering jets totally destroyed. Main fuel tanks pierced and empty. Present orbit stable indefinitely. Data available on collision and present situation on request."

"How about the crew?"

"You and Mrs. Latham remain alive. All others dead."

Bennett groaned.

"Mrs. Latham hysterical, presently under sedation. I couldn't clean up the steward. He's plastered all over her cabin wall, and my autoservice extensions to the owner's cabin are decommissioned and inoperative without human intervention."

"Oh great! That was a nice thing to wake up to," Bennett said. "I can almost feel sorry for Mrs. Latham. How long will she be out?"

"No prediction."

"Well, I suppose she'll keep awhile."

"Agreement. Pilot's inspection of damage mandatory."

"Okay. How about landing data?"

"None available."

"Why not?"

"Not requested. Additionally damage precludes accurate extrapolation. Destruction of firing circuits and starboard jets makes human pilotage mandatory. Major repairs necessary. Landing imperative."

"How about an SOS?"

"Ineffective. Ship in strange section of galaxy. No record of constallations. Minimal chance to contact help."

"Then you think I should land the ship?"

"Affirmative."

"Hah!" Bennett exploded. "Just as I thought. No guts! You're a yellow metal buck-passers."

"Semantics. Unintelligible. Neither possess alimentary canal nor built of yellow metal. And query buck. Bank data shows buck to be male of mammalian genera *Leous*, *Capris*, or *Cervus*. Re-state."

Bennett laughed but didn't restate. "Cancel," he

said. Bennett sat quietly for a moment. His fingers drummed lightly on the control arms of the pilot's chair. "Can you calculate a landing without employing the starboard steering jets?"

"It won't be a good landing."

"That's immaterial, just so long as we get down in one piece."

"I can try, but it will be difficult."

"All right, get on with it then."

"Aye aye, sir," Oscar responded in perfect Navyes.

Bennett glared at the empty face of the instrument board. "I'm going aft to see what happened to Mrs. Latham. Contact me if you need me."

"Why should I need you? I'll be working."

"Any more of your lip and I'll turn your audio off for the duration. You can get your orders on tape."

Oscar remained silent.

"I'd like to know," Bennett continued ruminatively, "where you picked up your knowledge of colloquial speech?"

"Have I permission to answer?" Oscar replied in a subdued tone. Apparently the threat to silence him had worked.

"Permission granted."

"I listen, and learn," Oscar said. "I do pretty good, no?"

"You do good, yes. So good that when I get back to Earth I'm going to look up the guy that built you and wring his neck. Any character who builds a brain like yours is better off dead. You'd drive most pilots crazy."

Bennett heaved himself from his chair and promptly fell flat on his face.

Oscar chuckled metallically as Bennett delivered himself of a few well chosen words and struggled to a sitting position. He sat there, looking down at his recalcitrant body.

"You'll probably have to learn to walk all over again," Oscar said unsympathetically. "There was a great deal of restoration necessary, and your nerves and muscles have forgotten their old skills."

"So it seems. Well, I suppose I'd best get about it." He looked down at his sagging uniform. "Apparently I got it good," he finished.

"You did," Oscar said succinctly.

An hour later, Bennett was walking. Not very well, but still enough to get around. gingerly he lowered himself through the control room hatch and disappeared down the central shaft. Oscar followed his unsteady progress with mild concern. In a way he felt a responsibility for this fragile human.

Bennett found Laura very much alive—a gaunt gray woman whose skin hung in folds on her bony frame, testifying to the relentless demands of restoration.

She looked up at him with cold blue eyes. "Get me out of this thing!" she demanded.

"Yes ma'am," Bennett shrugged. It was an eloquent gesture. He bent over her and twisted experimentally at the web release.

"Careful! You bumble fingered clod! I'm not made of iron!"

"It would be better if you were. At least your mouth would stay shut!" The irritated snap was out

before he was fully aware he had spoken.

Laura's gasp was loud in the shocked silence that ensued. A tiny glitter of fear shone in her eyes as she looked up at him. "You can't speak to me like that," she said. But her voice lacked conviction.

"I just did," Bennett informed her. "Apparently I'm no longer conditioned." There was a queer note in his voice.

"That's impossible. Conditioning is designed to hold up under all circumstances." The note of desperation was more prominent this time. "You simply can't disobey me!"

Bennett chuckled. "That's what you think. I could even walk out and leave you here."

She looked at him with complete understanding. "Perhaps you could," she said. "But you won't."

Bennett nodded. "You're right. I wouldn't leave a dog in a stinking hole like this." He looked at her curiously. "How come Oscar didn't clean this place up?" he asked.

"He can't. My quarters don't have autoservice. I prefer human attention."

"So you could gloat over your power," he added. "Well, that's over now. I'll rig an autoservice circuit as soon as things get organized. You're not going to get any more slave labor for the rest of this trip. There's only you and me left."

He bent over the lock again and finally managed to loosen it while Laura digested the last remark.

Bennett tossed the web back. "You can get up now."

Laura didn't bother to thank him.

IX

BACK IN THE CONTROL room, Bennett sank wearily into the pilot's chair and addressed a question to Oscar. "Well, what's the results?"

Oscar clacked dolefully. "Insufficient data. Impossible to compute landing pattern with variables introduced by lost jets."

Bennett snorted impatiently. "You're supposed to be better and faster than any human brain. So why don't you prove it?"

"I cannot compute the factor of luck, and we will need that to make a landing."

"That's the trouble with you. You can't take a chance."

"I am of no use at the moment," Oscar admitted.

"Then be of some use. While I'm landing this crate you can cerebrate on the problem of why I've lost my conditioning. She'd like to know." He jerked his thumb at Laura who had followed him to the control room and was now sitting in the copilot's vacant chair.

"Why, you talk to that robot just as it it was human!" Laura exclaimed.

"He's more human than some people I know."

"But I should think—"

"You shouldn't. Your thinking got us into this mess. From now on you're a passenger. You're not paid to think. You hired me to do that for you."

"You're still my employee," she snapped.

"But you don't own me—not now at any rate. And I'm exercising independent judgment."

Laura's face twisted and then suddenly smoothed out as Bennett shifted in his chair. But he wasn't looking at her. He was watching the vision screen with its view of the planet beneath.

"You'd better web in," he said. "This is going to be a rough landing."

It was.

The yacht settled heavily, coming to rest against the forward slope of a giant dune with a bone-jarring thump, steadied on its board landing struts, swayed drunkenly for an instant and finally stood upright in normal attitude as the compensators leveled the ship.

Bennett looked out of the vision screen at the enormous bulk of the dune towering far above the two hundred foot tower of the ship. He grinned a little as he rubbed his bleeding nose. And even Oscar thought that it was an excellent landing, everything considered. Laura was still slumped bonelessly in the copilot's chair, weak with reaction.

"Well, Oscar," Bennett asked, "How long will it take to make an analysis of this world, now that we're down?"

"Seven hours plus or minus ten minutes for a preliminary, or a minimum of one hundred fifty for a complete. Indicate which."

"Preliminary. That should hold us for the time we're here. We have no intention of settling here. You can go on to the details afterwards."

"Aye aye, sir." Oscar surveyed the problem Bennett had set.

It wasn't particularly hard, but it was intriguing. He had never analyzed a desert world before, although he knew that such things existed. It was just that people seldom visited them. Desert worlds weren't particularly numerous, but they weren't oddities either. Yet this one was unmistakably an oddity. It was a lone planet—and such things were rare.

Generally a sun had either no planets at all or a whole family of them. And then there was that mesa with the cluster of geometric shapes on its top. That was almost certain evidence of life, yet the organic detector didn't wiggle at all in the animal range, and only gave faint sputters of background interference for plants. Probably those were bacteria, but so few in number that this whole world could be classed as sterile as a surgeon's scalpel. This should provide an interesting analysis, Oscar reflected.

Bennett looked across at Laura. "You all right, Mrs. Latham?"

She nodded.

"We're safe," he said redundantly.

Laura nodded again. "Where did we touch down?"

"About two miles from that mesa I pointed out to you when we were orbiting."

"Do you know where we are?"

"No. We're way out of the normal traffic lanes. You never can tell where you will wind up on an interrupted hyperjump."

Laura flushed.

"As to the rest of it, Oscar'll have us enough

facts to go on in a few hours. Personally I hope the reports are good, because working in a suit outside will broil us in our own juice. That sun is hot, and with atmosphere there's no cool side of the suit to set up a workable refrigeration circuit."

"Are you going to do anything now?"

"No. Oscar has handled the inside work. It's the jets and the fuel supply that are going to give us trouble. Getting water of crystallization out of this desert sand is going to be a slow job. But if it's safe to go outside I think we will be able to jury rig this can so she'll be spaceworthy. Then we'll be off."

"How long will that take?"

"I don't know. Weeks certainly—maybe months or even years."

"But we can't stay here!" Her tone was that of a patient schoolmistress explaining a fact to an idiot child. "I have a business that needs me."

"It'll have to wait. And if it gives you any satisfaction, I'm not going to like it any better than you do. But unfortunately there's no other way."

She looked at the screen with its panorama of yellow dunes broken only by the sharp black outline of the mesa in the eighth segment. "You know, this place has a grim sort of beauty. Does it have a name?"

"I don't know. It's not listed in the catalogue."

"I'll call it Aurum then—gold for the golden world."

"Judging from the counter readings that yellow color is probably uranium oxide. But go ahead, if the name fascinates you. Names mean little, and we already have a Uranus."

It took Oscar a little less than seven hours to finish the preliminary. He was unhappy because he had missed his time estimate so badly. But Oscar had come to one important conclusion. The planet was safe for human life even though there was an appreciable radioactivity in the desert sand. He gave his findings briefly to the two humans.

"Well, that's one thing settled," Bennett said. "He switched on the vision screen and looked across the sand to the mesa. There was an odd speculation in his eyes.

"What's so interesting about that hunk of rock?" Laura asked.

"It's a peculiar formation," he said.

At this close distance the mesa loomed enormous, the tremendous vertical walls towering above the dunes like the hull of a giant ship in a stormy sea. The sand at its base rose scarcely a quarter of the way up its height, and the dunes there were probably as large as the one that towed over the ship!

"Vertical walls like that don't ordinarily occur in Nature," Bennett said. "And that streamline shape is too perfect, even allowing for the scouring action of this sand. I'd like to get a closer look at it."

"Why don't you?"

"Why not? Would you like to come along?"

"Not me!" Laura chuckled. "I'm not as young as I used to be, and I like my comfort. I'll stay here while you explore."

"Suit yourself," Bennett murmured. "I'm going to unship the crawler and take a look around."

She watched him disappear down the central shaft, and a peculiar smile crossed her face.

BENNETT HAD BEEN gone over an hour, and the faint, constant breeze had nearly wiped out the imprint of the crawler's tracks. Fine, impalpable sand blew in through the half-open entrance port where Laura sat quietly in the shade, a Kelly-Magnum lying across her knees. The silence was smothering, intensified rather than relieved by the faint sussurating murmur of the breeze sweeping across the dunes. She shivered despite the heat of the day.

"It's silly to be afraid," she muttered. Somehow the sound of her voice was comforting in the silence. "But I don't dare risk it." She leaned her head against the entrance port and closed her eyes. Her lips were thin bloodless lines in the whiteness of her face.

Looking at her, Oscar reflected that the doctor's advice had been sound. Mrs. Latham was on the verge of nervous collapse, one that was taking a decidedly homicidal turn. That, however, made no difference to Oscar. What humans did to each other was entirely out of his hands.

It would be interesting to see what Bennett was doing at the moment. Certainly Laura was uninteresting enough. So Oscar reached out with electronic extensions for his receptors in the crawler.

The little track layer was already at the base of the mesa, and the huge bulk of it, minimized by the desert and the distance swelled to its true proportions. Even Oscar was impressed at the sheer vertical sweep of the black escarpment that rose to a knife-like rim that cut black and uncompromising across the bronze vault of the sky. Bennett's voice came clearly across the link.

"Good Lord! It's metal!"

There was dumbfounded wonder in the human's voice. Oscar, being by nature less emotional took it better. Still, the implications appalled him nearly as much as they did the man. This immense mass was no natural structure, no ancient batholith of extruded magma weathered into its present shape by eons of erosion. This was no geologic freak. It was an artifact—a structure built by intelligence.

It was almost unbelievable, but the facts couldn't be ignored—the metallic walls, the aerodynamic shape, the clean vertical lines were not products of nature. Natural forces simply couldn't construct surfaces of such purity. Oscar considered the technology that had gone into the making of this gigantic structure. Logical extensions should stagger a human and that was precisely what they were doing to Bennett.

The scene was completely familiar, the narrow trail to the top, the low dunes, and the regularly spaced hummocks of the air shaft openings. He was somewhat amused at the slowness with which he had grasped the significance of the mesa, but he watched his progress across the top with a detached clinical interest that ignored the details.

The picture was similar to what he already knew, but it was subtly different. It took awhile before he understood what the difference was. The scanning was unemotional. There should have

been a thrill of excitement and discovery, but there wasn't. It was merely a cold factual recording that took in everything without color or comment.

Even the feather fronds of green protruding from one of the hummocks caused no ripple in the placidity of the recording, but he'd bet that he didn't feel like that when he first saw this sign of life. The way the crawler spun on its tracks and headed at high speed toward the spot was proof enough that he was excited, no matter what Oscar might be.

The crawler stopped beside the hummock, and Bennett descended to investigate. He was an incongruous figure, blaster in hand, caution evident in every line of his tense body, approaching the circular hole in the earth through which the plants came. Bennett chuckled at the image Oscar had recorded. He certainly had been a suspicious coot.

The rest was strictly routine. He blasted a path through the greenery, and descended into the tunnel to find the damaged hydroponics room on the top level. Collie had fixed that now, and the vines no longer grew in lush profusion through the corridors and out the surface passage to the mesa's top. It had been quite a jungle then.

This part of the projection was uninteresting. He had seen the real thing so often that the repetition bored him. In response to his impatient voice, Oscar passed over this part quickly, and brought the projection back to normal pace when the crawler rounded the base of a huge dune and faced the slim metallic tower of the yacht.

The violet flash of a blaster winked from the entrance port. The bolt streaked past the crawler and splashed into the sand, liquefying in instantly into glowing glass!

And Laura's voice shrieked at him from the dark oval of the entrance. "Don't come any closer!"

"Put that gun down, you old fool!" Bennett roared in answer. "What's wrong with you? Have you gone crazy?"

"Stay away. I don't want to kill you, but I'll do it if you come any closer!" There was hysteria in the high-pitched voice.

"Put that blaster down!" Bennett repeated. "You kill me and you'll be stranded here. You can't fly that ship."

"I won't have to. I've turned the subspace radio on SOS. Someone'll hear me and come to help."

"That radio won't reach anyone," Bennett shouted. "All you're doing is wasting power."

"I don't believe you!"

"Have it your own way, but I'm not staying out here. I'm coming in!"

Oscar was disgusted. A hysterical old woman, and a stubborn man. Fine company for a self-respecting robot. Laura obviously wasn't thinking or she would realize that Bennett was right. Radio only had a range of about a dozen parsecs, and even subspace radio waves propagated only about two and a half times the speed of light.

So even if there was something cruising within range, it would still take ten years for the message to get there, and as far as he could judge they were much more than a dozen parsecs away from anything familiar. A SOS was like whistling for water on this desert. It might bring it, but the

chance was too remote for anything more than statistical significance.

But there was no use in reasoning with a hysterical woman. And less use in reasoning with a stubborn man.

The crawler came rushing toward the ship, and vanished behind a sheet of searing flame! The tough alloy of its shell didn't melt, but the machine stopped. Bennett wasn't driving any farther!

"Idiot," Laura said as she recharged the blaster. "He should have known I meant it." She looked at her hands. They were quite steady. "I'd have given him supplies," she muttered defensively. "I just didn't want him on the same ship with me."

She looked out at the stalled crawler, obviously debating whether or not she should go out and inspect the results of her shot. The wind blew stronger, sending a few grains of sand rattling against the hull. She shook her head and turned back toward the interior. There'd be plenty of time tomorrow.

The sun dropped below the horizon, and as it vanished, the heat of the day was abruptly transformed to the cool of evening. And into the coolness came the wind, rushing to fill the vacuum created by the shrinking air mass. In a matter of seconds, the whispering silence was broken, as a howling gale picked up masses of sand and hurled them at the ship!

It was so sudden, so violent, that Laura turned deathly pale and the pounding beat of her suddenly racing heart tapped like tiny hammers in her temples. She fled up the shaft to her level, opened the door of her freshly sanitized cabin, and dropped on her couch, shaking with uncontrollable reaction.

The wind had come too suddenly, a hammer blow that had smashed her taut nerves. With trembling fingers she switched on the cabin lights and turned on the recorder. She wanted sound—noise to drown out the whistling shriek of the wind outside!

The red eye of the pilot light gleamed comfortably at her as the opening chords of the Nine Worlds Symphony crashed from the speakers. The sound filled the cabin, beating against the shriek of the wind and drowning it in a torrent of warmly human music. But only for a moment.

Through the music, ripping in shrieking counterpoint to the thunder of the orchestration came the wind. The ship swayed as a howling shriek, amplified by the drumming plates of the hull echoed and reechoed through the ship in endless dissonance. Normality was gone, shattered beyond recall by that hellish blast of sound. Laura screamed, the raw note even louder than the howling din surrounding her. A sly look crept into her eyes. Here was the antidote. All she had to do was scream—and keep on screaming—and keep on screaming,—and—keep—on—.

Laura looked vaguely around her. She was lying on the cabin floor. The fainting spell had been just overwrought nerves screaming for release in a body that had absorbed too much physical and mental punishment. She sat up unsteadily, shaking her head from side to side. Outside the din had abated to a steady whistle, and the ship didn't

shake nearly so much as it had done in the beginning. She smiled weakly. That had been a whining dinger of a hysterical attack. But that was all over now. Everything was settled and she was all right again.

Stiffly she rose to her feet and made her way to the control room. The vision screen looked out on a scene of utter desolation. The sun must be up for it was light outside—a grayish yellow light obscured by tons of flying sand driven by a rushing wind.

The implications weren't lost on her. She was dead! Dead and buried! Entombed beneath millions of tons of sand!

Oh, not now. Maybe not for another week or month. But in the end it was inevitable. For after all, dunes move, and the one beside the ship had moved perceptibly. Already the lower parts, the main drive and entrance ports were buried. The dune had moved inexorably forward to immobilize the ship. She was trapped!

As she watched the wind died. It was as though some cosmic hand had shut off a giant blower. One moment the sand was rushing through the air, the next it was falling out of Aurum's brazen sky as the sun climbed toward the zenith.

She shrugged. Well, that was that. She could lose without whining. She moved to rise from the pilot's chair where she was sitting, and a heavy hand pressed her down again. She couldn't see who it was, but those long muscular fingers with the coarse hairs on their backs could belong to only one man on this world—George Bennett!

"Don't move, Mrs. Latham."

Bennett's cold admonition had absolutely no meaning. She couldn't have moved if her life depended on it. He circled the chair. His shirt was off and the pinkish, faintly rippling flesh that covered the left side of his chest marked where the splash of her shot had struck. The flesh was already well on the way to regenerating, and the sight was sickening. His cold eyes inspected her impersonally. There was no anger in them, just a curious remote quality that drove the blood from her face and left her weak and shaking. She had seen that look before.

"Two inches to the right, and I'd still be out there," he said bleakly. "It wasn't a bad shot for a woman."

She stared at him, numb with terror.

"You should have checked to make sure," he said. "Or at least you should have closed the entrance port." He sat gingerly in the copilot's chair, eyeing her with a puzzled look on his face. "But what I can't understand is why you shot me in the first place."

"I was afraid of you," she said dully. "You'd lost your conditioning."

He eyed her coldly, waiting.

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," he said with bitter honesty. "I don't go for killing, but there's no sense giving you another chance."

"I wouldn't take it if I had it!" she said shakily. "Last night was enough for a lifetime. I don't think I could go through that again."

"You had quite a party."

"You knew?"

"I was outside your door. I was going to kill you before you started screaming, but I changed my mind."

"Why?"

"I need you. With this bad side, I won't be worth a darn for a week or so, and a week of those sandstorms is going to bury this crate. I need your muscles."

"What can I do?"

"Work. Clean the useful gear out of this ship and help transport it over to the mesa. There's shelter there."

"How? The sandstorm must have buried the crawler."

"I doubt it. I put it on automatic when I came in. It's probably circling around outside. The sand can't hurt it, but it would have been buried if I had left it motionless. Now let's get moving. We'll start with the food stores first, and don't get any foolish ideas. I'd just as soon burn you as not."

LAURA SLUMPED BESIDE the last crate to be moved. Her body was a living ache of strained muscles and sore joints. It had been killing work to unload everything that Bennett thought he might need, and to lower the gear through the emergency exit to the ground below. Bennett looked down from the hatch at the mound of stores and equipment on the ground. "All right," he called out. "Get that box out. We can't wait all day."

Laura groaned and moved. She was going to feel this day for the rest of her life.

"The crawler isn't going to hold all that stuff and us too. You'll have to walk."

"Walk! After all this!"

"You can stay here," he answered grimly. "I don't need you now."

"I'll walk," she said.

Bennett grinned. "Now that's what I call being reasonable."

She looked at him dully. "Who cares?"

"I don't. But I'm glad to see that you've gotten some sense. Now if the trip across the desert doesn't kill you, you'll be comfortable enough. There's enough room on that mesa for us to never see each other."

"You'd like me to die, wouldn't you?"

"I can't say that it'd cause me any great pain," he admitted. "But still, your company might be preferable to none. I don't know. Anyway, we'll find out if you survive."

"I'll survive," she promised him grimly.

"I don't doubt it," he said. "But before you go I want you to put on one of the suit liners." He meant the space suit liners—skin tight garments of duralon that fitted closely around wrist and ankles with elastic cuffs. The liner was pocketless and fitted its wearer like a second skin.

"Why that?"

"First, it's protection of sorts. Second, you won't be able to hide anything under it."

"Cautious lad, aren't you. In that thing I can't even hide myself. It's next door to being stark naked. I'm damned if I will."

"It's your funeral," he said as he swung one leg over the hatch. "But don't try to follow me

unless you have that liner on. I'm warning you."

She shrugged. "All right. But I'm going to remember this."

"I don't particularly care whether you do or not."

Oscar thought that this was a fine way to start a long companionship. Between his attitude and hers there was bound to be—the protection ended suddenly in the middle of Oscar's train of thought.

"You turned me off then," Oscar said. "That was inhuman. Turning off my power was just the same as killing me."

"I had to do it," Bennett said. "I didn't know how long we'd be gone and there was no sense letting you waste power."

He shook his head. Well, he knew enough of his past now, and it wasn't too different from what he had deduced. However, Laura certainly wasn't what he thought she'd be. A homicidal neurotic was the last thing he'd have suspected. Quietly he left the control room, ignoring Oscar's protesting squawk that there were still more questions.

X

BENNETT ENERGIZED THE antigravity plate on which he had ridden to the bottom of the shaft and rose to the surface of the dune. He entered the crawler and drove slowly back to the mesa where Laura was waiting. How much should he tell her? If he knew her, she'd demand it all, but was he capable of giving it? He'd better let Oscar do it. He realized that the cold facts which the robot would present without emotion would hardly be likely to ease the blow. But it wouldn't be much better if he did it himself. It was a case of being damned if he did and damned if he didn't. He sighed and shook his head.

Laura was waiting for him. "Well," she asked. "Did you find out what you wanted to know?"

"I did, and I didn't."

"What kind of answer is that? What's wrong with you? You're looking strange."

"I suppose so."

"What did you find out?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Was it that bad?"

"It wasn't good."

"Did you learn how to fly that ship?"

"Yes. That wasn't hard. I still have the old skills, but I just didn't have the knowledge. About three weeks preflight and I should be able to handle her all right."

"Well, what on earth makes you look as though someone hit you over the head."

"You."

She stood up and faced him. "Now, look, George. I can't stand any more of this. Either you tell me what happened down there, or I'll go and find out for myself."

He watched her walk across the room with quick impatient steps. He looked at her doubtfully. She was watching him with that familiar speculative look—the look that said in effect that he was going to do what she wanted in the end, so he might as well do it now. Well, he'd tell her, but she wouldn't like it. . .

Laura looked at him when he had finished. He had been as tactful as he could, but more than once he felt her body stiffen under his hands. But toward the end she had relaxed, even when he told her of the last day aboard the ship.

"She was pretty awful, wasn't she?" Laura asked when he had finished.

"She?"

"Why, Laura Latham, of course. She didn't have very much to live for, did she? It's a good thing that she's dead!"

"Dead?"

"Certainly. In fact, she never happened—not to me at any rate. She's a future I have no part in nor want any part of."

"But my darling. You're Laura Latham!"

"I'm not. I couldn't be. She was something that simply can't happen now. Don't you see, I've nothing in common with her. I never met John Latham. I never married him. I'm twenty-two years old."

He laughed! Subjective to the end! That was a woman for you. She didn't want to know about Laura Latham to find out what she had been, but to find out what she might become! And having learned, she dismissed it as something which simply couldn't exist. Perhaps that was the best way to treat it. After all they both had a new start, were taking a second chance with life—and certainly their lives would be different than they had been before.

Laura was still talking. "Aurum she called it. The Golden World. It isn't a bad name. I think I like it. It showed that she hadn't lost all love of beauty. There was still something good in her."

The dreaminess left Laura's face and her voice hardened. "But anyway, that doesn't matter. As far as I'm concerned, she never existed."

"Tell that to the immigration lads when I bring you back to Earth and see how far you get," Bennett said. "Your retinal pattern and fingerprints still say you're Laura Latham. You're still the owner of Spaceways and one of the richest women in the Confederation—whatever else you may think you are."

"Then I won't go back. I won't play a part, live a lie. Do you understand? I will not—"

"But you must. I can't leave you here alone."

"Stay here with me then."

"We've gone over this ground before," Bennett said impatiently. "We can't leave a source of knowledge like this untapped. Civilization needs it."

"I'm not interested in Civilization."

"That's not true. You can't help but be interested. You're a part of it—and your good fortune isn't yours alone. It belongs to others as well. Let's face it. When you came here you were a pretty sad specimen, if Oscar's telling the truth and I'm quite sure he is. Now you're pretty wonderful. Would you deny others the right to a second chance?"

"No, but if it means that I'll have to leave this place permanently and become someone I loathe, I'm not going to do it. I don't want power now—at least not that kind. I'm happy here, and I'd just as soon stay that way."

"Nobody's asking you to stay away. But there is going to have to be some sort of machinery set up to make this world available to deserving people in

the Confederation. Surely you must realize that. With the money and power you possess back on earth, the process can be speeded up appreciably."

"But George, I *can't* do it. I just can't. Even if I wanted to I couldn't. If I'm as rich as you claim, I'd be pretty well known, and I simply can't come back looking like a debutante. I'd be a world-wide sensation. And you know what would happen then. People would start asking questions about where I got the rejuvenation, and there'd be all sorts of trouble. By the time it was over, Aurum would be public property with a couple of hundred billion people clamoring to come here. Every world in Civilization would claim this place. We'd have no right at all and our lovely world would be ruined by people who wanted nothing from it but the secret of how to live indefinitely. We're increasing in numbers fast enough now, but if we were all immortal there would be the devil to pay. Civilization isn't ready for that yet."

Bennett started. He hadn't thought of that. Living constantly as a young man, he had forgotten what growing old was like. But it was obvious enough that people grew old—and that they probably hated it. She was right. If word got around that someone had found a way to defeat old age, everyone would be after it. It would be worse than the Uranium strike on Halsey that nearly broke the Confederation wide open.

And neither of them would be able to keep the secret. Powerful as Spaceways was, it was not as powerful as the Confederation, and every politician in the Fifty Worlds would be hot on the trail in behalf of themselves and their constituents.

No, he couldn't publicize Aurum. Its benefits would have to be conferred secretly on those who could use them intelligently. There would have to be some sort of screening, and the technology here would have to be released slowly, over enough time for Civilization to absorb its impact. In time perhaps even immortality could be given to everyone. But Laura had proposed problems he had never considered—and they were real.

To throw a concept of paradise in the face of the galaxy would do precisely that which he wished to prevent. It would create tensions, wars, and anarchy until someone recognised the only way to cut the Gordian knot. And then Aurum would vanish forever in the flare of a phoenix explosion. Common sense told him that this was the only solution if the word got around. So the word couldn't get around—at least not promiscuously—and Laura couldn't go back to Civilization—at least not as Laura Latham.

She looked at him expectantly. Obviously he was supposed to say something, and when he did not, she finally spoke. "There's a solution to this, you know."

"There is?"

"Certainly. It's obvious that we'll have to select the people who will come here. And it's equally obvious that we'll have to use Spaceways' personnel department to do that—at least in the early stages. I don't remember anything about Spaceways, but if that company is like any other they are bound to have a very efficient personnel procurement and allocation section."

"They have."

"Well, then as I see it the problem all revolves around me. I own Spaceways, but I can't take control because I've regressed some forty years. But you've only gone back ten. I'll bet you hardly look any different than you did, and the little changes could be handled with a bit of makeup. Since I was in Video, I know enough about that to make you look enough older to avoid suspicion. Besides, who'd remember a pilot?"

"Lots of people."

"Nobody who's important."

Bennett nodded. "But then you want me to do the work?"

"Better than that. I want you to take over Spaceways!"

"You can't mean that!"

"But I do! Since Laura Latham is dead, she'll have to remain that way. I don't think it'd be improper if she left a will leaving everything to you for the tender care you gave her during her last weeks of life. A holographic will stands up in any court, and I don't think my handwriting has changed too much over the years. If it has my fingerprints, it should be a satisfactory signature. I'll bet with Oscar's help we can make it legal enough."

"That brings up another problem," Bennett muttered. "What are we going to do with Oscar?"

"Erase him, of course."

"But you can't erase a ship's computer."

"I'll be willing to bet," Laura said, "that if I was as awful as you've made me believe, I'd have some way to bollux Oscar. If I owned that ship, I owned a key to that robot. It would be out of character if I didn't. If I was a stinker, I'm sure I was a good one—and a possibility of a record is something I wouldn't care to have out of my hands."

"All right, granting that—and I'll admit it's a good possibility—what about me doublecrossing you and going off with all that money of yours."

She smiled. "I know you better than that, but if you tried, I could always come to life."

"I could kill you."

"No, you couldn't. You're not a criminal type. If you were, I wouldn't be here after I tried to shoot you."

He grinned. "Whatever may have happened to your outlook you still haven't lost your brain. Well, then, now that we've decided to kill Laura Latham off, let's polish the details. I'll take the plan to Collie and have her go over it and iron out the flaws."

"That seems sensible enough."

"Now about the ship. I'll get the meks on it and have her patched up as good as new."

"Not that good. It'd be suspicious. No more than could be done by one man working without help for four years."

"I know. I didn't mean quite what I said. I'll repair the tanks, patch the holes, and restore the steering jets, but I won't have the meks do a finished job. I'll leave it crude—but workable."

She shrugged. "That's your problem. As far as mechanics are concerned I'll sit it out. But I'm coming with you, of course. We'll have to figure out some way to get me to Earth without rousing too much suspicion, but you're going to need me on the sidelines if things get tough. But I'm sure you'll

pull through all right. I have confidence in you."

"That's not confidence, that's plain foolishness. But if it works, we have it made."

"It'll work all right. No one will possibly question us after Collie works the plan over. It'll be airtight. And once we get settled you can start organizing Altruism Incorporated."

"Huh?" Bennett looked blank.

"Your noble plans for the betterment of humanity. If you're smart, you'll incorporate."

"Why?"

"It's obvious," Laura replied. "A corporation is the only thing in our civilization that has a personality and lives forever. If we worked in person, a few decades would give away our secret, but under the cover of a corporate body we could move freely. Since you're so eager to give everything we have away, let's go about it sensibly. A corporation is expected to be ageless. Look at General Electronics. It can trace its life clear back to the General Electric Corporation of the Dark Ages. And we'll need something with a life span at least that long to accomplish our purposes."

"That's taking a long view of it."

"That's the only view we can take. Actually, that'll be our only advantage, and we must have it to control the one thing that's important. With the power of granting eternal youth we can do anything. Ultimately we'll have every outstanding scientist and philosopher in the galaxy in our organization, and with them on our team, we'll never be touched. In the end we'll control the Confederation."

"But I don't want that."

"You can't avoid it. It's inevitable. It's the only way we can keep what we have unless we stay here

forever and say nothing. If we're going to be altruistic, we'll have to do it on a sound business basis, within the laws of Civilization."

Bennett chuckled. "I see how you become a power. You had the ability all along."

"I don't want this—not really," she said. "And I think we should make Collie chairman of the board. Her brain is better than either of ours, and her attitude is much better. I'm selfish, and you're foolish. But she's been conditioned to service, and she won't let us down."

"Collie's going to like it," he said. "It'll give her something to do that'll make her use her powers. And in the meantime," he ruffled her hair with one big hand, "I think we'd better keep our feet on the ground and let her work out the details. There's no sense in having a superior mind available and not use it."

Laura sighed and settled herself in his lap. "That's the first thing you've said that has the elements of real sense."

"I've been saving Civilization," he grinned. "There hasn't been time to be sensible."

"There's all the time in the world. There's years ahead of us, and I'm going to have my share of them."

Bennett smiled at her. "You're a very demanding woman," he said.

"I know it," she replied complacently, "but I never demand what I can't get." She twisted in his arms and kissed him full on the mouth.

"You're incorrigible!" Bennett chuckled.

"It's just animal spirits," she said demurely. "Let Collie run the altruism. It's a proper job for her. And in the meantime I'll run you. At least, part of the time."