

Complete Novel by Marion Z. Bradley
SEVEN FROM THE STARS

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MARCH

SUBTERFUGE

by Bob Silverberg

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COMPLETE NOVEL

SEVEN FROM THE STARS

By Marion Zimmer Bradley..... 48

SHORT STORIES

SUBTERFUGE

By Robert Silverberg..... 6

OLD FRIENDS ARE THE BEST

By Jack Sharkey..... 17

SUZY

By Watson Parker..... 26

THE MAN WHO MURDERED TOMORROW

By Robert Bloch..... 33

FEATURES

EDITORIAL..... 5

THE SPECTROSCOPE..... 42

...OR SO YOU SAY..... 44

COMING NEXT MONTH..... 25



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COMPLETE
BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

SEVEN FROM THE STARS

By
MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY

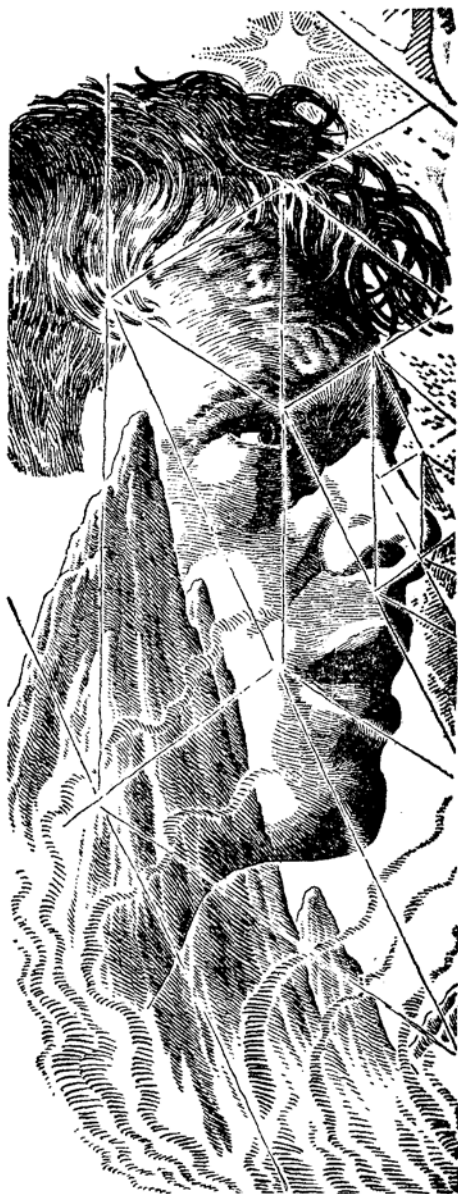
ILLUSTRATED by FINLAY

SPECIAL BULLETIN : *Released from
News Services of Galactic
Centre, received at Dvaneth.*

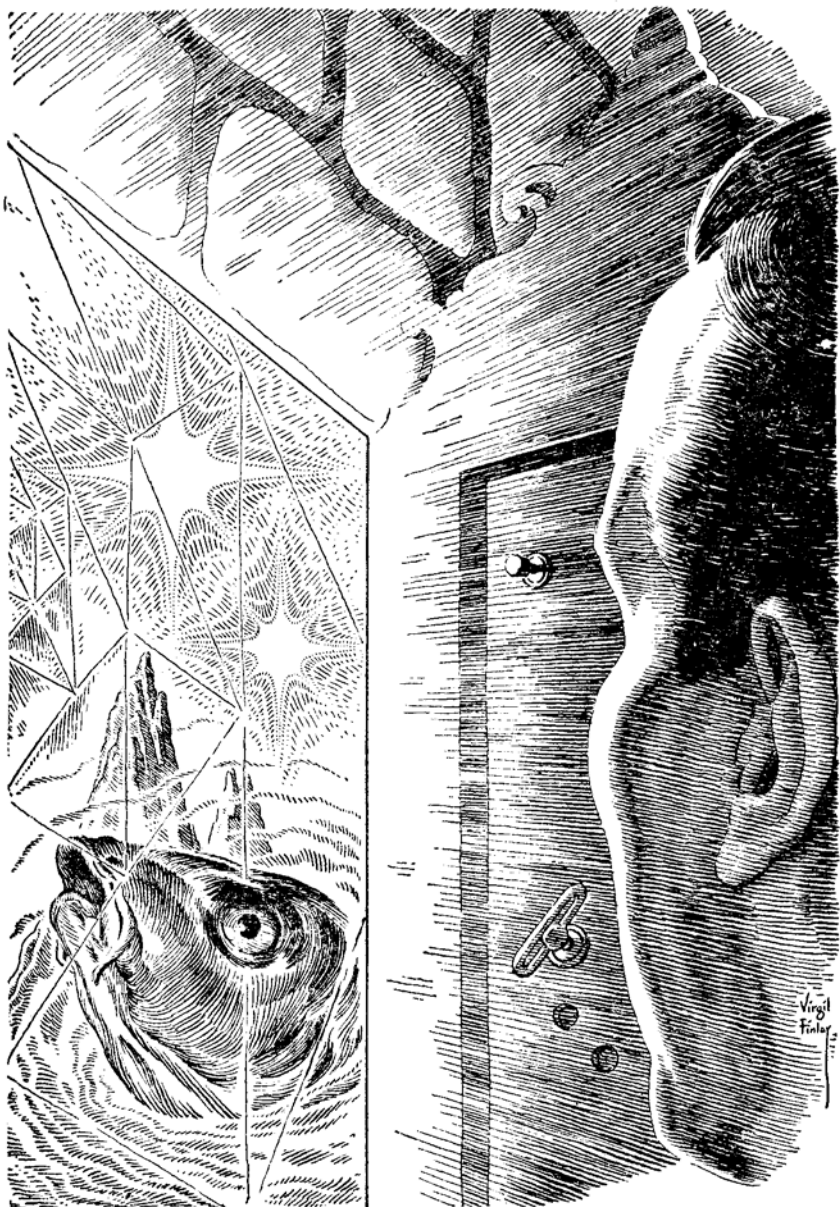
*The starship NORTHWIND,
carrying colonists to an iso-
lated sun in the Spiral Arm,
has imploded.*

*The Master Panel which
carries sensitive studs corre-
sponding to the self-destroy-
ing implosion units in-
stalled, for obvious reasons,
in all space-craft, confirmed
today that the implosion
device of the NORTHWIND
has gone dead.*

*Cause of the disaster is
unknown. The NORTHWIND
may have deviated consider-*



There was an anguished
Landon as the



scream, and a violent shock coursed through augmentator shattered into countless pieces.

ably from her computed course, and possibly have strayed into the Closed Planets. It is surmised that the ship may have been threatened with capture by Rhu'inn-dominated ships, and that the crew may have destroyed the NORTHWIND to prevent passengers from falling into the dread Rhu'inn hands.

The escape of any survivors is unlikely. Lifeships are not released prior to implosion unless a planet is detected within lifeship range—the swift death of implosion being more merciful for possible survivors than a lingering death drifting in interstellar space. There are relatively few stars in that section of the Spiral Arm, and of these, only a fraction are possessed of habitable planets. The probability that the NORTHWIND may have released lifeships in the vicinity of any of these planets is astronomically small.

The crew and passengers of the NORTHWIND must for all practical purposes be considered legally dead.

. . . BUT there were seven survivors . . .

CHAPTER I

GET clear, get clear!" Reidel shouted, "the units are set to go off almost at once after

we surface! Grab the kits and run, but get clear!"

Still dazed with the long agony of deceleration from interstellar space, the handful of survivors stumbled from the lifeship—which, like the mother ship, carried a self-destructing mechanism, set to implode on surfacing.

They got their first look at one another in that moment when they emerged into glaring yellow sunlight and dusty, wind-swept space. They didn't waste time looking. They fled, scattering like seeds blown by intangible disaster, across sandy wasteland that seemed to heave and sway under their groping feet.

Behind Reidel one of the women caught her foot, twisted her ankle and fell heavily to the ground. Reidel picked her up, not unkindly but with desperate haste, and shoved her along.

"This is far enough," he shouted, "Lie flat! Get down!" Glancing back over his shoulder, Reidel saw the little ship for the first and last time, still glowing crimson from their brief, searing trip through atmosphere.

The old man collapsed rather than fell, and Reidel bent over him, thrusting a hand into the neck of his shirt, a pulse, thin and dicrotic, quivered crazily under his touch, and Reidel's hand came away reddened. The tall women—he hadn't looked at her—dropped to her knees beside them.

"Is he—dead?"

"Not quite."

The others had thrown themselves flat into the sand, and Reidel heard one of them still crying in convulsive spasms. The tall woman was still standing like a frozen statue, staring at the pulsing red of the ship. Reidel, straightening from the inert form of the old man with the smashed chest, stared too, at the glowing, pulsing shimmer in the sunlight.

Then the crimson frame buckled and erupted skyward. Shouting, Reidel threw himself forward, dragging the woman down. Then the blast of sound and thundering inrush of tormented air rocked the desert while the units vibrated—fragmentized—vaporized—atomized. A crimson glow lingered where the ship had been; drifted, wavered and was gone.

On the sand of the alien world nothing remained but a little heavy, dark-reddish dust, unstirred by the wind.

"Well," said Reidel in a curious flat voice, "that is most emphatically *that*."

Letting the woman fall, tumbled and passive, from his arms, he rose and looked around.

A flat and sandy wasteland stretched to a horizon of low hills, speckled with a blackish mottling of small shrubs. In the sand a dry and bunchy grass grew sparsely, in clumps. There were a few prickly bushes and low, leafless trees, stunted and twisted and blackened.

Reidel scowled at the scene.

At one edge of the sky a yellowish sun was either rising or setting—in the flurry of the automatic landing there hadn't been time to determine the period of the planet's rotation, or anything else about it—except that it was habitable. If the ship's automatic meters had not registered a range of temperature and atmosphere that could support human life, the meters themselves would have locked the Implosion Units. And then they would have died very quickly and mercifully and without knowing they were going to die.

It was cold, or it seemed cold to Reidel. He looked around again, automatically counting the survivors. Most of them were strangers; Reidel's work had kept him too busy for the social life of the passengers. But he knew, vaguely, who they were.

The old man with the smashed chest was Kester; he was some sort of minor official on the ship's staff, Reidel wasn't sure what. Reidel had found him lying senseless and bleeding in the lifeship bay, flung there by buckling metal through a gap in the corridor that had not been there seconds before.

The dark slender woman was stretched lankly on the sand. Reidel knew only her name; she was Cleta, one of the aristocratic caste of telepaths from Vialles, and even in the crowded society of the spaceship, the Viallan telepaths held themselves haughtily aloof from the

rest. Beside her a dark, sturdy boy, just edging out of adolescence, was blinking, half dazed, his head propped in his hands. He was Arran, one of the apprentice engineers in the Rim Room of the starship.

Crouched in a taut huddle, his face hidden, a misshapen dwarf knelt in the sand, oblivious to all but his own agony. He was Mathis, one of the ten telemaths who had been so carefully shielded from contact with the mental babble of the packed humans in the spaceship. Like all his kind he was physically a ruin, warped and hunchbacked, and although young in years, his dark coarse hair was already streaked with long dashes of white. At his feet a half-grown girl, albino pale, raised herself to her knees, shielding great bruised eyes from the sunlight. Then she struggled to her feet and glanced, just once, at the empty, charred patch where the lifeship had been.

The seventh and last of the survivors, a young woman heavy with child, had been flung helpless into the clumped grass, and still lay there, not moving. The albino child went slowly toward her, bent and raised the pregnant girl with gentle hands.

"Here, Linnit," she said in a soft and reedy voice, "have a look at our new home, won't you?"

Then she turned, looking up at Reidel with a child's appraising stare. She had a child's face,

and a child's body still immature under a childish smock; but the great eyes were not childish. They were far too wise, far too mature for her few years. She had the freak coloring that marked out the hypersensitive empath; and Reidel shrank before the intense wisdom and compassion in those wide eyes.

She said, "I know you, don't I? You're Reidel. You looked after the animals, didn't you?"

Reidel nodded. Then, aware that he must speak or die of the idiot laughter that bubbled up from nowhere in him—he had spent so much time and worry trying to transport those accursed animals across space in good condition! Reidel said, "Your name is Dionie, I think. Do you know all the others?"

Cleta said, without stirring, her face still pressed to the dust, "It's all gone. It's gone. What are we going to do?"

The pregnant one—Dionie had called her Linnit—was on her feet now, whimpering, trying with clumsy fingers to pick out the thorns from her hands. Dionie took the torn hands in hers, gently pulling out the pricklers.

"This is Linnit, and that's Cleta."

Cleta sat up and flung back her long dark hair, flinching when she moved her hand. Arran got up and turned toward Reidel. He said, "Do you know what happened?"

Reidel shook his head. "No. Don't you? I was off-shift and

sleeping, and the alarm bells went off, and the ceiling in my cabin hit the floor, and I decided it was time to get out of there. The next thing I knew we were all in the lifeship and it was kicking loose."

Arran shook his head slowly. "I don't know a thing. They'd been running double shifts in all the drive rooms, for some reason, but none of the engineers would tell me why."

"I don't suppose it makes a bit of difference," Reidel said at last. "We're here. I don't think any of the other lifeships got loose—none of them answered the signals. Do you know where we are, Arran?"

"Somewhere in the Closed Planets, I suppose."

"What, exactly, does *that* mean?" Cleta demanded.

Her arrogant tone annoyed Reidel. "Is this the time to stand around asking questions? If your brain is so empty it needs something to rattle around, you might come here and look after this man—" he indicated the limp Kester—"instead of asking questions about Galactic Politics!"

"I thought it might help to know where we are," Cleta said, "and what we are up against. And you seem to be taking charge."

"If you can do better, you're welcome to try," Reidel retorted. "That sun's lower than it was. If it keeps going down at that rate, it will be dark in a few minutes. We've got to make a

fire. There's no telling how cold it gets here, or—" he paused; there was no point in mentioning other dangers. "I wonder if these bushes will burn?"

"I should think so. They're dry enough." Arran studied their black, twisted limbs. "Ouch!" He shook his hand and sucked at it. "Careful—thorns!"

"Everything we've seen so far has thorns." Reidel hoped none of them were poisonous, and decided not to mention that either. Cleta was moving around stiffly, collecting the survival kits they had found in the lifeship. She knelt and started to unfasten one, but Reidel's heavy hand fell on her shoulder.

"Leave that for now. You're able-bodied, go and help them gathering wood. Fuel—fire's what we need most, now."

Cleta shook off his hand and obeyed. Reidel worked in tense haste, dragging the heavy dead trees into a little hollow where a ridge of banked sand gave some slight protection from the cutting wind. Dionie, too frail to lift the branches, raked the dry tumbleweeds together, ignoring their stinging pricklers.

The last rim of the sun vanished into a dull twilight. Reidel knelt, trying to make his pocket flare catch fire; choking on the rank smoke when the dry weeds smoldered for an instant and went out. He crouched, swearing, shielding the flame against the wind.

In the cold lee of the piled

brush, a tiny desolate moan sounded, and Cleta, biting her lips against the pain in her own injured hand—a manicure tool had been driven through the palm, in the first shock wave that had smashed half the passenger deck into scattered rubble—crept around the bushes. She found Linnit lying there, curled into a forlorn heap and wailing softly.

It was not in Cleta's nature to think much about anyone except herself; nor did she now. The weeping lacerated her already torn nerves, and she snapped, "Stop that, will you? What good does it do?"

Linnit wept, "I wish I were dead!"

"So do I," said Cleta brutally. The cold tone was better than sympathy; Linnit made some effort to control her tears, then twisted in sudden pain and cried out.

"What's the matter?" Cleta asked unsympathetically. "I didn't know you were hurt." Her own hand throbbed like searing fire, and she wrung it softly to ease the burning pain.

"I don't—oh, I don't know!" Linnit wailed. Cleta tried, without success, to disentangle herself from the strangling clutch of the thin arms, but Linnit gripped her in frantic terror and Cleta could not get away without hurting her.

The branches finally caught fire, and Reidel sighed with hoarse relief as a flame lurched

upward. He stretched cramped and stiffened legs. "Now if the women have those kits ready—" he began, then his eyes fell on Cleta where she knelt beside Linnit. "What's the matter with her?" he asked.

"I don't know, I don't know!"

"You wouldn't know, would you?" Mathis the telepath dragged himself from the shadows. "There's nothing much wrong with her." His tight smile held a relishing malice, as if he thoroughly enjoyed their ignorance of the situation. "The baby is coming. That's all."

Reidel swore wearily. "As if we hadn't enough trouble without that!"

He let himself drop to the sand. The unfamiliar darkness, the foul smoke and the strangers clustered around him made a noisy confusion in his mind. He didn't feel fit to do the thinking for all of them. He wished somebody else would speak up. But nobody did, so Reidel made his voice rude and intentionally harsh.

"Well, we can sit around and hold a wailing-ceremony, or we can decide what to do. Unless women are different from other female animals," he put it as roughly as he could, to shock the women quiet, "it will be some time before we have to worry about Linnit. Meanwhile—who's hurt, and how badly? And what's in these so-called survival kits? Maybe in the morning, we'll find we're safe on a Galactic Planet, and maybe

we won't. But tonight we're on our own, so let's start making up our minds whether we want to live or die?" It was the longest speech he had ever made in his life.

Dionie began to slit one of the kits with her fingernail. There was a whirring sound, and then a taped voice, speaking Standard:

"Attention; you are cautioned to destroy every item in these kits before making contact with populations outside the Dvaneth Federation unless they are identical with articles of local manufacture. Attention; you are cautioned to destroy..."

Dionie took her hand away and the voice stopped. Then she began to lift out small sealed packets. Rations; not much. Pliable sealed flasks labelled *Water*. From between the packets, thin folds of all-purpose synthetic fabric fell loose—it was warm and impervious without being bulky, and could be molded and sealed into any shape of garment without sewing—folds and folds of the stuff, tightly compressed to cushion the other articles. A vagrant ripple quirked the albino girl's mouth:

"Does that warning notice mean that if they wear other kinds of clothing here—or if they don't wear any, we have to go naked too?"

"It means exactly what it says."

The girl looked at the ground.

"I know. I just thought it was funny."

"I'm glad something's funny," Reidel said without anger.

"They wear clothes," Arran muttered, "It's cold!"

Dionie was still exploring the packets. "A knife, and—what's this thing, Reidel?"

The man turned the gadget over. "Water-detector." He poked in the folds of cloth. "Anything more?"

Arran lifted up the last item. "Shocker," he murmured. "That's in case we meet vicious beasts or—or other things they might have here."

Linnit exclaimed, "And that's all? And they call it—survival?"

"That's all," Reidel said, "just enough to permit us to survive for a little while. After this, we adapt, like it or not. It's a—" he fumbled for words, not articulate in abstract thinking, and Arran said it for him:

"A lifeline of Dvaneth culture would only retard our adaptation—serve as a cushion. We'll adapt whether we want to or not—it's part of the conditioning they give us. This is just to keep us alive until that subconscious reflex takes over and starts adapting us and—changing us to fit the planet. Being at the mercy of the new world—forces you to forget about possible help, and go ahead and adapt—"

"And if you're going to die, it doesn't prolong the agony," Mathis finished cruelly. Cleta

flinched and let Linnit slide from her lap.

"Reidel, is there any hope that this is a Federation Planet?"

"I'm afraid not. In the whole Spiral Arm, there are only seven or eight Dvaneth Federation planets. The most we can hope for is that it's a recorded planet, with a Watcher stationed here."

"And if there is a Watcher—how do we find him?"

It was very dark now and Reidel was glad she could not see his face. "That's another problem we'll solve later," he said.

Arran paced uneasily in the dark. "The lifeship must have made a track in atmosphere. Even primitive people have photon-conversion detectors, don't they?"

Mathis laughed sourly. Reidel said, "We'll hope so," and began to unwrap one of the ration packets. "We ought to eat something and then rest."

Mathis' thin laughter cut the silence. "Little rest any of us will have tonight—ha, Linnit?"

Reidel sighed. He wished Mathis would shut up. He wished they would all shut up.

Dionie and Arran were holding up well under the shock, but they were too young to be much help. Already he resented Clela, and Linnit's whimpering, sorry as he felt for the girl, rubbed his nerves raw. And Mathis—who should have helped—was making matters worse with his jeers. Perhaps he should have left everything to Mathis from the

beginning. But he wasn't used to telepaths.

Most of the races called human are telepathic to a greater or lesser degree. But ordinary telepaths receive and transmit only worded thoughts; hence telepathy between different language groups—or even those whose education and environment have given them widely varying sets of semantic value symbols—is almost impossible. A scattered few were like Dionie, empathes—endowed with the ability to pick up emotions and sensations of those around them.

The telepath, rarest of human sports, was capable of probing, not only the thoughts and sensations of all humans and some nonhumans, but of translating these alien concepts into the language and concepts of any other race. They had originally been bred for work among the nonhuman Rhu'inn. That was long before the Dvaneth Federation abandoned the possibility of peacefully resolving the Rhu'inn menace. The main characteristic of the telepath was adaptability; an adaptability that was fantastic.

Their powers were almost legendary; Reidel had never seen one before, for they lived in strict seclusion. He thought, *I can see why!* Mathis certainly wasn't the type who'd win any popularity contests.

Dionie and Arran were trying to make Kester comfortable on a length of the cloth.

"You can't help him," Mathis

said to Reidel in an undertone, "he's bleeding inside the skull, too. He's going to die."

Reidel rose and flung more of the piled wood on the fire. The pungent smoke stung his eyes and he covered them with his hands, trying to hold back a strangling cough. The loss of the ship that had been their city and their world, the long sustained suspense of escape had the numbing, unreal quality of a nightmare, and now it was as if he woke and found the nightmare was real.

Near the fire, Cleta was coaxing the reluctant Linnit to swallow a few mouthfuls. Her own face wore a look of patient exasperation that would have amused Reidel if anything could have amused him now. Of all the times for Linnit's baby to be born! Reidel, accustomed to being around animals, knew that such things didn't wait on anyone's convenience, but it was a complication. He wondered if either Cleta or Dionie had the faintest idea what to do for Linnit.

He supposed these things came naturally to women; they'd have to manage the best they could.

The process of adaptation had not yet begun; Reidel was still very much a man of Dvaneth. He had been an animal handler, breeder and trainer for a dozen years, but it never crossed his mind to question the custom of his own planet—which forbade

the study of human childbirth to men, relegating all such things to the province of women.

Looking up, his mouth full, he met Mathis' inscrutable eyes and wondered if the telepath read his thoughts and if so, why he didn't say something helpful.

He rose to his feet and surveyed the dark wasteland. As far as the eye could see, nothing; nothing except blackness and blankness, shadowy trees, queer rustles and chirps in the unfamiliar night. A few stars sprinkled the dark sky in strange patterns. A dull, misty-white streak, the Galactic Arm, proclaimed their distance from Dvaneth; their home planet was in the very center of the Arm, and the Dvaneth night was almost brighter than day. The faint faraway twinkle of the distant lights filled Reidel with a terrible sense of isolation.

"Reidel—?"

The man turned, realizing he had come some distance from the fire. "I'm here, Arran," he said. But he couldn't go back just yet, to listen to Linnit's whining and Mathis' jeers and think of ways to turn aside Cleta's barbed contempt. He needed a minute to himself.

"We shouldn't both leave the women at once."

"Mathis will look after them, better than I could. Let me come with you, Reidel."

Reidel suddenly knew what was in Arran's mind and was outraged that it should have occurred to either of them. Anger

chilled his voice. "I'm not going to desert. I want to climb one of those knolls and see if I can make out anything on the horizon that looks like a light, a city, a beacon, any place where humans might live."

Arran went back toward the fire. Reidel walked on, accustoming his muscles to the feel of the firm soil under his feet, the pull of a planet's gravity again. Once he put a foot on some small live thing that scurried away into the grass and once he scratched his hand on a thorn. Abruptly his stride was broken, and he recoiled, the breath knocked out of him; he had blundered against something in the dark.

Recovering his balance, he extended a cautious hand. A wire, about as thick as the seam in his clothing, was stretched taut, breast-high, in front of him.

Now, faced with the evidence of intelligent life—for wires did not stretch themselves across barren fields—he wished for Arran's refused light. A more impulsive man would have shouted to his companions, but Reidel decided to explore before he raised or shattered their hopes.

He followed the wire by touch. It was barbed and without electrical charge, and was nailed into a rough-surfaced post. On a hunch he ran his hands down the post. It was a fence of four wires, and they were spaced just far enough

apart that Reidel could wriggle through if he wanted to. He hesitated, not sure that he did want to.

The planet was obviously inhabited. The fact of a fence postulated intelligence, and something to be kept in or kept out. He wished he were the kind of a thinker who could deduce the level of a civilization from a single artifact. With sudden decision he bent and stuck one leg through the fence, hauling his body after it.

A low ditch, waterless, bordered the fence. He crossed it and came up on a flat, hard surface. Amazed at the change of texture under his feet, he bent and felt it. Some hard, non-metallic substance, too smooth for natural rock—a road? He was about to scramble back and yell to Arran for a light, when a pair of distant lights struck across his eyes.

Yellow, spaced about the span of his two arms from one another, they swung up noisily over the dark horizon, throwing a beam of light almost to Reidel's feet, and roared toward him at incredible speed. Reidel sprang back and threw himself flat in the ditch, hoping to be unobserved by the monster machine. In the fan of light he made out a metal hull, four humming wheels; then the lights flashed past and through glass panes Reidel saw two unmistakably human heads.

He lay flat until the last red glimmer was hidden by a rise in

the road; then, spent with emotion, picked himself up. It was a human world, then. And the thing was neither a monster nor a robot, simply a surface vehicle of some kind.

Someone screamed his name and Reidel clambered hastily through the fence and hurried back toward the fire. "It's all right," he called, "I'm here."

Dionie flung herself wildly on him. "Oh, we heard it roaring—we saw the lights—" Her thin arms gripped him with terrified force, and Reidel let her cling to him.

"There, there, it was only a car of some kind, there were men inside."

"Oh—" she pulled away, suddenly aware and shy again. As Reidel stepped into the narrow circle of firelight, Cleta and Arran flung hasty, expectant questions at him.

"They didn't see me. I hid in the ditch."

"Why didn't you signal them?" Cleta demanded, "they might have been able to help us!"

"I didn't know who—or what—they were."

She said in chilly sarcasm, "How very cautious of you," and turned away. Reidel, noticing some constraint in her movement, reached out and caught her hand; she tried to pull away, but he drew her into the firelight and with strong fingers, turned her wrist over and unclosed her hand. The

palm was clotted with dried blood.

"Why didn't you show me this before?"

Cleta was trembling with rage. "You were too busy ordering us around!"

Reidel frowned. "How did you do it?"

"A—a manicure knife went through my hand when—when the alarm sounded—it's nothing, I'll look after it—"

Reidel paid no attention, motioning Arran to hold a light close. "Don't be foolish. If any of the tendons are cut, you'll have trouble." He probed and examined it with meticulous care. It was beneath Cleta's dignity to struggle; she curled up her lip and said, "You seem to know a great deal. Just who do you think you are?"

"Does that hurt?" He bent one of her fingers. "I've had four hundred animals under my care since we left Dvaneth, and if we'd reached the colony, I'd have stood in for the medical man when he was busy." He was annoyed at himself because he bothered to explain. Cleta shrugged and suffered his attentions with detachment, and when Reidel had done everything he could, which wasn't much, remarked scornfully, "I hope there are no alien bacteria or fungus here! These important survival kits didn't include medical supplies!"

"Short sighted of them, wasn't it," said Reidel wearily.

"No, far-sighted," Mathis

murmured, "survival of the strong. Anyone who isn't, is supposed to die in a hurry and be off the others' hands."

Reidel swung round and said through clenched teeth, "If you have any more disgusting ideas, keep them to yourself, will you?"

Linnit made a stifled sound, and Cleta turned to rejoin her. Reidel held her for an additional minute. "Can you manage?"

Cleta's thin shoulders went up and down. "I'll have to, unless—you say the planet's inhabited by men. Kester's dying, and Linnit—needs help. If humans live here—"

"There's nothing we can do in the dark."

"But what are we going to do?" Cleta sounded desperate. "We can't just—just stay here and wait, can we?"

"Until daylight," Reidel said, trying to summon calm and authority, "that is just exactly what we are going to do."

Arran's voice cracked. "But we don't even know how long the nights are! If we wait for that sun to come up again, we may sit here till we die! Anything's better than just—waiting—"

Suddenly, they were all raging at Reidel. Cleta shrieked, "We'll die here, you want us to die here—!"

Reidel took one step toward the girl, his hand lifted; he caught himself just before the blow landed, and only grabbed

her arm with heavy fingers, roaring, "Hold your noise! If you have hysterics, I'll choke you!"

Linnit began to cry again, noisy childish sobs, and Cleta struggled wildly, clawing at Reidel's set face. Her nails raked down his cheek. Arran came and flung restraining arms around Reidel, and Reidel, his wrath diverted, whirled and caught the boy a heavy blow across the cheek. Arran sprang aside, and swung open-handed, his slap sending Reidel reeling. Reidel clenched his fists and squared away. If they were going to fight, he'd settle it now.

Suddenly Dionie cried out and dropped to her knees beside Mathis. "Oh, what is it, what's the matter?" she begged, "Look what you've done, you fools!"

The telempath was sprawled sidewise on the sand, eyes closed. "You brutal idiots," Dionie wept, "why do you think telempaths are kept in isolation? You've thrown him into shock with your fighting and shouting, maybe you've killed him! Get me some water, you fool!"

Shaken into soberness, Reidel did as she asked.

The dwarf's collapse had cooled Reidel's anger like a flood of ice. Cleta, her tall tense body trembling, went silently toward Linnit. Reidel started to follow, but the woman spun to face him in passionate defiance.

"Have enough decency to stay away!"

"I didn't realize—" Reidel

averted his eyes from Linnit. "Can I do anything at all?"

"You men had better go around to the other side of the fire," Cleta directed. Reidel lingered, though Arran had already lifted the half-conscious Mathis and was carrying him to a sheltered place. "Cleta—"

"Will you go?" she flung at him shrilly, and Reidel went.

The night grew chill. The men waited, shivering, on the far side of the fire. After a time Linnit's whimpers deepened to steady moaning. Later Dionie, whiter than when the ship blew, came around the fire and dropped there in a shaking heap. To Reidel's concerned question she said, "I'm a—a no-good, freakish coward—and Cleta knows—she knew it was—" she couldn't finish. She muffled her face in her hands, crying silently and miserably. Arran lifted his eyebrows and Reidel said tersely, "Empath. She was feeling everything Linnit was."

Arran shut his eyes with a whistle of dismay.

The night dragged by.

After a long time Linnit screamed and Reidel found himself on his feet and, without really planning it, around the fire. Cleta motioned him back, outraged. Reidel, angry though he was at her obtuseness, tried to speak kindly.

"Let me try to help, Cleta. I probably know more—"

"About animals," she flung at him in stinging scorn.

"A woman's an animal, basically," Reidel pointed out, keeping his temper on leash. "Cleta, ordinary customs don't apply, this is an emergency."

"The standards of decency—"

"—decency!" Reidel's phrase was straight from the gutter. It shocked Cleta into silence. She moved aside and let Reidel take her place.

The fire smoldered to coals. Linnit whimpered now and then, but there was no more screaming; only Reidel's voice at long intervals, low and reassuring. Mathis crouched apart, his eyes squeezed shut in frantic rejection, trying to shut away the whole interplay of naked emotions from which he had been sheltered all his life.

After a long time there was a queer sharp small sound and Dionie came awake with a gasp and a cry, starting upright, then, with a long sigh, went limp and quiet and fell instantly asleep again.

On the other side of the fire, Reidel covered Linnit and smoothed down her hair—the sort of absent-minded, habitual gesture that he would give any suffering small animal, then looked up at Cleta. She was wrapping up the baby, awkwardly like a woman who has never handled one. She tucked it in beside Linnit, who was already sleeping in exhaustion, then rose to her feet.

"I don't know what to say, Reidel. I behaved like a fool."

"It's all right. I don't think

any of us knew what we were doing."

Then Reidel made what he knew afterward was the worst mistake of his life. Cleta seemed suddenly so lovely and gentle, that he could not resist the impulse to put his arms around her and draw her against him. She swayed, caught off balance, in surprise and momentary yielding, but as his face touched hers, she gasped, bringing up her hands quickly to prevent him.

He let her go at once, but the momentum of outrage carried her on, and she struck him, hard, across the mouth. "You must be mad," she said, trembling, "Get away from me!"

Before her blazing eyes, Reidel knew that if he said anything—above all any word of apology—it would double and triple his offense. He went like a whipped slave, tasting blood from his broken lip; but his pulse pounded savagely and it was several minutes before he could calm his breathing.

He mended the fire. Kester's body was a long, stark darkness, and Reidel bent over him, not surprised to find that the old man's fluttering breaths had finally ceased.

One dead and one born. They were still seven . . .

He flung himself down, near enough the fire that he would know if it died, and closed his eyes.

Sleep did not come for quite a long while, but finally his mind gave way to exhaustion.

Flying Saucer, says Branzell!

Search Called Off For Wreckage of Plane

Levelland, Texas: Texas Rangers today called off a search for the wreckage of a plane which reportedly crashed over the million acre Branzell ranch late yesterday. The unsuccessful search was called off in the early hours of this morning when the Rangers were formally notified that no commercial, military or private plane had been reported late or missing in this entire area.

The flaming plunge of fire was reported last evening to the Hockley County police by Edward Marcus, 26, of Dallas, currently employed on the Branzell ranch. Rangers reported that they had found no sign of wreckage or distress flares. The Air Force Base at Lubbock gave an official opinion that the unidentified object must have been an exceptionally large meteor. They offered no other comment at the moment.

Steve Branzell, local rancher, better known as publisher and writer for various magazines, who supposedly witnessed the descent of the fiery object, was quoted as saying, "I think they saw a flying saucer."

CHAPTER 2

THE light preceded the red-dish sun. First the stars went out, and the sky lightened from black to dull blue; then an arc of pale sunlight crimsoned the clouds, and Reidel, who had been lying awake for some time, rose and went to look at the sleeping Linnit.

The young mother slept heavily, her curly hair tangled around the pretty, sullen face. The baby was only a red and wrinkled scrap between muffling folds. Arran asked softly, as Reidel covered them again and returned, "Which?"

"Girl, and I think they're both all right. Lucky."

"Is it?" Mathis asked, without moving.

Before long, Reidel thought, I'm going to smash that sneer down his throat. He turned his back on the telempath. "Cleta, wake Linnit up. We've got to talk, make plans."

"Let her sleep, at least," Cleta protested. "She's not able—she can't—"

"We'll all have to get used to doing things we can't," Reidel's voice was grim, but his hands were gentle as he lifted up the sick girl. "Someone may find us here when it's daylight, and we've got to be ready for whatever happens."

Linnit stared around wildly for her baby, then relaxed, leaning trustfully against Reidel's shoulder, and the others gathered close.

Reidel said concisely, "I don't like speechmaking. Has anyone any practical suggestions about what we should do?"

Cleta began, "The car you saw last night. Doesn't that mean we can't be far from civilization? It might even be a Federation planet."

"It's a bare possibility, I suppose. In that case, of course, they'll have tracked the lifeship and there'll be search parties out looking for us already. Only don't get your hopes up," Reidel pleaded, "It's a very small chance!"

"On the other hand," Mathis said, "if the place is inhabited, it's certainly a charted planet, with a Watcher stationed here."

"Why, then, it's very simple," said Cleta with a triumphant glare at Reidel, "we find some center of civilization and ask for the Federation Ambassador."

"And if there isn't one?"

"Then, naturally, we explain who we are and what has happened, and ask for their assistance and hospitality."

"It's not quite that simple," Reidel said. His jaw ridged in sudden anger. "There are a few things you don't understand. We are outside the Dvaneth Federation, and probably on a Closed Planet. And some—in fact, most of the Closed Planets are under domination or surveillance by *Rhu'inn*."

He paused, reluctant to continue, for Cleta had gone stark white, and even Arran looked strained and fearful.

"It means that any Galactics on this planet wouldn't dare draw attention to themselves. If there is a Watcher here, he'll be well camouflaged. It may take us a long time to find him, and meanwhile we're on our own."

"But what do we *do*?" Cleta demanded.

"We've got to live somehow," Reidel said. "We'll have to accept what we find here. We'll adapt—we can't help it, we're conditioned to it. We won't have trouble with language, Dvanethy never do, but otherwise we're literally starting from nowhere. In one sense, Linnit's baby is the luckiest of us."

"Lucky!" Linnit burst into wild laughter, and Reidel stared, wondering if the night's suffering had unhinged her mind. He ignored her; it was the only thing he could do.

"Yes, we were all lucky. The lifeship could have fallen into an ocean. We could all have frozen to death in the night."

"I wish I had," Linnit blurted. "Why didn't you let me die?" She flung herself away from Reidel, shaking with incipient hysteria. The man felt sick with pity, but he saw Mathis' face beginning to twitch, and knew that at any cost he must not let Linnit upset them all again. With a movement so harsh and sudden that Dionie gasped, he pulled out the razor-sharp knife he carried and passed it to Linnit.

"Go ahead," he said roughly, "cut your throat. One less help-

less creature I have to worry about. We'll bury the baby with you, it wouldn't live long anyway with you dead—well, Linnit, what are you waiting for? Ah, there, there—" as Linnit collapsed in helpless sobs, he drew her against him and let her lie, weeping, against his shoulder. "I'm sorry I had to do that. It's all right, now. It's all right."

Spent and quiet at last, she nestled in the curve of his arm. Cleta's eyes were wide with horror, but Mathis nodded in approval, and Reidel knew he had passed the only real challenge to his leadership. He wondered why he bothered.

The sun was up now, and already it was fiercely hot. He said quietly, "We were all accepted as colonists, which means we were chosen and trained for adaptability. There's always a place, on any world, for the adaptable person."

"What do we do first?" Arran wanted to know. "Do we sit here and wait for them to find us?"

"Until we know for sure what kind of planet we're on, we don't dare attract any attention. Here's my plan. Mathis and I will go and see if that road leads anywhere. Arran will stay and look after the women. Mathis isn't physically able to go alone, but I don't know the language and I'd be at too much disadvantage. We'll come back and report what we find—"

"I don't think we ought to

separate," Linnit faltered. "Suppose you can't get back?"

Cleta said, "If there are any telepaths on this world, can't you reach them, Mathis?"

The telepath shook his head. "Not just—out of the air like that. If I touched them, or even saw them—I might. Surrounded by a crowd of people from this planet, I could pick out the telepaths. But—not at this distance, not without special apparatus."

Reidel, who was not a telepath and knew almost nothing about telepaths, lost track of the discussion. He walked away toward the place where the life-ship had landed and imploded. It seemed impossible that there should be nothing left. Nothing, nothing but this little charred patch of burnt black grass, and the little heap of red dust.

"Reidel!" Dionie shrilled, and he hurried back. The others had drawn close together, as if for protection; outside the fence Reidel had seen last night, a long low automobile had drawn to a stop and a man was walking across the fields toward them.

Reidel said, low-voiced, "You handle this, Mathis," and thrust the telepath forward.

Only Mathis understood the words the stranger called:

"Hello, there; are you folks in trouble?"

Probing, instantaneously, at the stranger's mind for emotional concepts. Translating them instantly into word-symbols...

and after a moment, Mathis answered the stranger, in his own language. The others listened, unable to understand.

The stranger was a man about Reidel's age; a husky, tall young man, dressed in woven brown clothes that looked peculiar to the Dvanethy. His face, sunburnt and peeling a little, was ridged up in an expression mingling skepticism and surprise, as he listened to Mathis.

When Mathis had finished speaking to the stranger in his own language, he said in undertoned Dvanethy dialect, "He doesn't believe me. But he's going to take us—just Reidel and me—to a city near here. Wait here for us."

Reidel looked inquiringly at the strange man. "What did you tell him, Mathis?"

"I told him we'd go. You'll have to trust me, Reidel, or I won't be responsible!" Mathis' words held a trace of menace. The telepath touched Reidel's wrist, and Reidel heard, like a voice inside his brain, the clear-cut unspoken command: *Get one of the shockers. Keep it out of sight. Find some way to slip it to me.*

Reidel managed to do as Mathis commanded. The stranger had turned, a little impatiently, toward his car, and they followed. The man jerked the door open for them. Mathis clambered awkwardly in, and Reidel, unwilling, but not quite ready to risk disobeying the one

man of his own race who could find his way around this strange world, hoisted himself in beside Mathis.

The telepath touched his wrist again. *He thinks—I can't quite make it out—that for some complicated reason, we are pretending all this . . .*

Reidel glanced back for a glimpse of the others, but they were already out of sight, sliding down the roadway at surprising speed.

Reidel had no idea what Mathis was planning. He didn't much care. He was desperately tired, and he had held up where each of the others had, to some extent, broken. He felt an almost overwhelming desire to sleep, but he jerked himself upright, knowing he must manage to stay alert for whatever Mathis was intending to do.

Mathis muttered, "Here."

The strange driver turned questioning eyes on them, that widened into fear—for Mathis had the shocker in his hand, and it was trained unwaveringly on his temple.

The brakes squealed as the car came to a wavering halt. The driver twisted in his seat, but Mathis pressed the control of the weapon and the man slumped helpless over the wheel. Reidel looked at Mathis as if the dwarf had suddenly turned into a deadly reptile.

"What have you done?"

"You damnable fool," Mathis said in disgust, then, "sorry, I

keep forgetting—you head-blind nontelepaths are the devil when there's fast action needed. He didn't believe what I told him, it had something to do with our clothes—"

"Yet you made us come with him!"

"If I'd used the shocker on him there, someone might have come along and seen the car. It had to be here, because around this bend—he was thinking of it—the road turns off on a main highway and there would have been heavy traffic. It would have been dangerous, we'd never have stunned him and escaped."

"You didn't kill him?"

"Hell, no. Shut up, will you?"

He bent over the stranger, then straightened, his face white with strain. "I deep-probed him," he said faintly, and drew a long breath. "The shocker will leave amnesia for a little while, but even if he talks about us, no one will believe him. On this planet, as nearly as I can make it out from him, belief in space travel is considered a form of insanity."

So there it was. There was no hope of rescue. Oddly enough, the knowledge didn't hurt. Hope was what had hurt, and the effort to keep it down to a reasonable level. Now they could forget hopes and make realistic plans.

"It's our clothing," Mathis muttered, "nonconformity is dangerous here . . ."

That seemed strange to Reidel, used to a hundred planetary cultures. He demurred when, after

a moment's concentration, Mathis clambered into the back seat and hauled out a suitcase, flinging it at Reidel.

"There are spare clothes in this."

"We're not thieves!"

"We're safer if he thinks we only meant to rob him."

"You're positive you didn't kill him?"

"No, no, no! This shocker doesn't even have a lethal calibration! Reidel, I'll argue ethics with you all night, after we're safe! Right now we've got to *survive*, even if it means killing him, and if we hang around until he wakes up, we may have to do just that. Get into some of those clothes, you idiot! If someone comes before we get away, what will happen to the others?"

Convinced but still unwilling, Reidel scrambled into a spare trousers and shirt he found in the suitcase. They were only a little too big. Mathis was a grotesque figure in the other suit, immensely too large. The dwarf thrust his fingers into the unconscious man's pockets and drew out several small items, but Reidel struck them from his hand.

"At that I draw the line!"

Without stopping to argue, Mathis picked up a rubbed-leather folder. He said grimly, "*Survival*. They use negotiable paper here, not metal credits." He selected, with calm determination, a number of the bills—not all—without looking at their denominations. He put the wal-

let back. "Look at him. He looks well fed. He either owns or has the use of this car. He has spare clothes. We're not depriving him of much. Reidel, I said I'd argue ethics later. Let's get away from here."

Reidel sent a guilty glance backward to the car.

"How long will he be unconscious?"

"Not half long enough!" Mathis fretted. "By the time the amnesia wears off, and he remembers where he found us—well, we'd better be somewhere else."

They trudged back along the road for a long time, between plowed fields, planted in long rows of brownish shrubs from which hung fluffy white balls of fiber. Reidel felt heartened. "If the people here practice agriculture, we won't be completely lost," he said. The desert stretch where they landed had frightened him more than he knew.

Once he grinned in undisguised pleasure, and Mathis, hobbling with his head down, raised bloodshot eyes blinking dust and sweat. "What are you so happy about?"

"I saw a cow." Mathis scowled scornfully, but Reidel was pleased; where there were cows there were other animals, and where there were animals he could fit in.

So far, however, they had seen nothing that could have been a human dwelling place. Reidel was beginning to wonder

if they might not have been wiser to take their chances in a city or town with the stranger, when Mathis froze as a rattling roar sounded behind them, and a big truck pulled to a stop. Inside the truck, someone hailed them.

The telepath listened, intently, probing; then, in that eerie way that made Reidel's flesh crawl, he answered in an alien language. After a second he said, "We can safely go with these people."

Not understanding, but trusting Mathis, Reidel swung himself over the racks into the back of the truck.

He found himself surrounded by people and miscellaneous possessions that were, as yet, just stacked junk to Reidel. There were several children, a tall girl, an old man. In the truck cab, a man and woman, not young, shared the seat with two very small children. Without quite realizing why, Reidel felt better.

They were all dark-haired and dark-eyed, and their skin was, like Reidel's own, a color between bronze and brown. They wore loose coarse clothing; boys and girls alike were dressed in faded blue trousers. They all stared shyly as the truck rattled into motion again. The old man addressed Mathis politely, and Mathis replied in a good imitation of his accent. Reidel, out of the conversation, listened and felt helpless.

Quite suddenly they were there; Mathis banged on the roof of the cab and the truck jolted to a stop. They got down and to Reidel's surprise the man and woman inside the cab got down too.

Linnit was still lying in the inadequate shade. Reidel saw Arran furtively seize a weapon. Dionie ran toward them, crying out, "Oh, you were gone so long, I hardly knew you in those clothes, what—"

Reidel shushed her imperatively. At such close distance, and in the presence, not only of Mathis but the telepathic Cleta, all of the Dvanethy except Linnit—who was too weak and exhausted to raise her head, let alone listen—could clearly follow what Mathis was saying and the man from the truck answering. "So your car burned, I see?"

Mathis, reading the other man's mental picture, translating concepts into language, answered quietly, "*Si. Ayer por la noche.*"

"*Sua família?*"

The concept of a family was alien to Mathis, but he had been conditioned to almost superhuman adaptability, and answered quickly in the affirmative as the man expected.

He knew what the man thought; that they were his own kind, Mexican migrant workers, who had crossed the border without legal permission to work in the Texas cotton fields. The Mexican had a clear mental

picture of Mathis' imagined predicament. And so adaptable were the telepaths that Mathis described it back to him, graphically; the crash that had stranded himself and his large family here with a wrecked car which had burned, a sick wife, a newborn baby.

It did not really matter to Mathis or to his listeners that he was picking the very words he used, like an invisible recording device, from his listeners' composite minds. He convinced them. By the time he finished, he almost believed it himself. Also—since at this short distance he could maintain complete rapport with Cleta and Dionie and some slight contact with Reidel and Arran, by the time he finished he was speaking Spanish almost identical in accent with the truck-driver's, and both Cleta and Dionie could have expressed themselves simply in the new language.

The man from the truck offered, "They always need extra workers where we are going, and there is room for your family with us. Come with us—if the police find you here, they will send you back across the border." He added what Mathis already knew; "My name is Vicente Arriagos."

His wife—they knew she was his wife—came to Linnit, stooping to look into the tiny face folded into the sheet. "*Pobrecita*," she whispered, and picked up the baby in capable, motherly arms.

Cleta began to protest, but Dionie laid a restraining hand on her arm. She knew—a deep knowledge born of the empath's talent for shared emotion—that they were safe now.

In an incredibly short time, Linnit had been lifted into the truck and a mattress pulled down from the stacked household goods for her to lie on. Room was made for all of them, somehow, and the truck sputtered away. Only Reidel looked back as they headed farther and farther from the place where the Dvanethy lifeship had crashed in the barren grasslands of the high Plains of Texas.

SPACE BANDIT SEARCH

WILD GOOSE CHASE

Levelland, Texas; A search by Texas Rangers for two "space bandits" armed with what their victim described as "some sort of raygun" has ended in failure.

Edward Marcus, 28, employed on the huge Branzell Ranch, told an incoherent story of having been held up by two men dressed in "floating white robes like Arabs wear," after being accosted by a group of "maybe eight or ten" similarly dressed men and women, who spoke halting English and claimed to have landed in a crashed "spaceship." They attacked

him with an unfamiliar weapon which rendered him helpless and incapable of motion or speech—"Some kind of shiny red gun with an orange flame." He told of listening, helpless, while the two men, whom he described as dark-skinned and roughly resembling Mexicans or Arabs, conversed in an unknown tongue and searched his car. They stole only some spare clothes from a suitcase and about eighty dollars in cash.

Jerry Willett, Deputy Sheriff of Whiteface, Texas, discovered young Marcus unconscious in his automobile, parked at one side of a private road leading into the million acre Branzell Ranch. Willett drove him to a hospital in Lubbock, where he was treated for shock.

Sheriff Willett reported that the Marcus car bore no signs of a struggle, but that a suitcase containing ordinary clothing had been ransacked. Marcus' wallet contained over a hundred dollars in cash which had not been touched. Routine investigation of sites along the road revealed only one or two campsites possibly used by migrant workers.

Hospital personnel say they know of no weapon which could produce Marcus' symptoms of shock, partial paralysis and mild

aphasia and amnesia. When asked if he were in a state of intoxication, hospital personnel declined to comment.

CHAPTER 3

CLINT Landon put down his paper, scowling, and spoke one word;

"Dvaneth!"

Elizabeth Curran, at her desk across the room, raised her head. "What did you say, Mr. Landon?"

"Liz, did you read the paper—that space bandit story down in Texas?"

Liz chuckled. "They sell strong hooch down there!"

"No, seriously. What did you think of it?"

Liz Curran's eyes grew grave. She was a tall young woman, not glamorous but remarkably pleasant-looking, with dark smooth hair and smiling eyes. "The ordinary flying saucer yarn with a new twist. Didn't you clip out some fellow who saw a saucer down there, just yesterday? One saucer story leads to another. I'd bet the guy was drunk."

"You might lose," Landon said, frowning, not to the girl. Liz swung her chair around.

"Tell me something, will you, Mr. Landon? I've worked for you four years, and I think I'm entitled to a couple of nosey questions."

Landon laughed. "Fire away. I may not answer, but you can always ask."

She looked at her employer for a minute before framing her question. There was nothing about the man who called himself Clint Landon to mark him off as different from any other businessman in the office building, in the street, in the city; although feature by feature his face was rather striking, with strong proud bones and indefinable dignity. He was a big man, just edging past middle age, with dark hair just beginning to fade at the temples, and he looked like what he was. A competent professional man, who had probably done hard manual work at some time, but had enough success by now to take leisure when he wanted it, and to enjoy a few mild eccentricities. She asked him, anyhow:

"What kick do you get out of chasing down these weird, Fortean, flying-saucer yarns? You're a perfectly respectable production-methods consultant, and yet I'll bet—I'll bet a week's pay—that tomorrow you take off for Texas to check up on this flying saucer!"

"You lose," Landon said. "Not tomorrow. *Tonight*. This afternoon, if you can get me a flight reservation." Then his face grew graver, and he said, choosing his words:

"Liz, you've heard the story of the man who cried Wolf. There have been so many silly-season stories and false alarms about flying saucers or whatever, that no one pays attention any more. If there should be a true

story mixed in with the hoaxes and the hallucinations, it could easily get overlooked. Let's say—if it does, I want to know."

"I see." Liz racked her brain for a random memory. "Branzell—Branzell—I've heard that name somewhere."

"It's one of the biggest ranches in Texas. But you probably know Steve Branzell as the publisher of *Seance Circle*, and *The World Saucerian*."

Liz' eyes widened again. "That Branzell? But Mr. Landon, everybody knows he's a crackpot! The story's bound to be phony—and the Appersen Electronics contract is still hanging fire! You're not going to chase off to Texas before that's settled, are you?"

Landon said indecisively, "The Appersen contract is important, yes. And Branzell's been tied up with some unsavory stunts before this. I've investigated them. Still—" he tapped his fingers on the desk and finally said, "Put through a long-distance call to Branzell. I'll talk to him before I go all the way out there."

Liz nodded and picked up her phone.

This was not a new occurrence. Landon was a methods analyst, employed free-lance for tasks ranging from efficiency studies to factory-design layouts. He had a high reputation, commanded considerable fees, and between assignments, he turned out a number of techni-

cal articles for scientific publications.

However, there was a Jekyll-and-Hyde side to Landon the writer, as opposed to Landon the businessman; he sometimes wrote lurid, highly sensational fiction, under pen names, for a clique of small magazines concerned with pseudo-science and the occult, and seemed to take special delight in tracing down and debunking so-called "Flying Saucer" stories.

Liz got Branzell on the phone. "Hullo, Steve? This is Clint Landon. Remember me? I debunked the Canajoharie saucer for you—those kids who built the thing out of scrap metal? Ring a bell?"

"I remember. Saved me about a thousand dollars in checking it, not to mention publishing retractions and eating crow. Can I return the favor, Landon?"

"Maybe. You've got yourself in the papers again, I see."

The pleasant voice was not so pleasant now. "Clint, that sighting—it was straight. The Air Force people tracked it on radar, but they called it a meteor. I saw it, and they didn't, and if there ever was such a thing as a flying saucer—"

"I don't mean that," Landon finally managed to head him off, "I mean that space bandit thing."

Branzell swore so horribly Liz was afraid they would cut him off the circuits. "The kid saw *something*, Clint. He's in the

hospital—got a couple of funny burns—"

Landon's face changed as if someone had hit him in the pit of the stomach. "Burns? You say—burns? They couldn't be powder burns?"

"No," Branzell told him, "Not powder burns. The people at the hospital didn't pay much attention, but they looked like magnesium or sulphur burns. Damn-ed queer."

Landon said grimly, "Steve, I'm coming out to Texas and investigate. If you're pulling a fast one, tip me off and I won't mess up your game. But if you tell me this is on the level, and I find out that you're giving me a line of bunk, then I swear I'll tear up an issue of your damn fool magazine, and cram it down your gullet page by page!"

"If it's bunk, I'm getting bunked too, and I'd give my prize Hereford to know about it. We'll do it your way, Landon. Come and investigate, and if you prove there's anything phony about it, I'll pay your expenses both ways—"

"My secretary's on the extension," Landon cut in tersely. "That constitutes a verbal contract."

"Fine. I'll pay hers, too, if she wants to come."

"I'm taking you up on that," Landon said, and hung up. Liz replaced her own extension and stared at Landon in dismay. "And what about the Appersen contract?"

Landon looked troubled. Final-

ly he said, "Liz, it can't be helped. I'll grant that Branzell's a nut. But there's that one chance—"

Liz Curran put her hands on her hips. Her dark eyes were spitting sparks.

"It would be worth it," she finally blurted at him, "if you could put that crackpot out of business once and for all! I hope you debunk him high, wide and handsome!"

"Believe me," Landon said, "if he's faking, it will be the last time he'll ever cry wolf!"

After leaving his office, Landon walked a short distance through the streets and climbed two flights of stairs to his apartment.

He locked the door, and as an extra precaution, put on a heavy night chain. An antique clock swung out on a pivot, revealing a thin sheet that looked like a mirror but which reflected nothing but a complex crystalline interior. Including Mathis the telepath, riding in a jolting rattletrap across North Texas, exactly five people on the planet would have recognized the apparatus for what it was.

Landon stood in front of it, in an attitude of fierce concentration, until a tiny pin-point of light appeared in the glass, and grew.

The man who received the message had not seen Landon in thirty years, and would never see him again. Translated, their conversation would have sound-

ed something like this—if it had been in spoken words.

—Vialmir here.

—Clannon / Landon talking. Some friends from home (he weighted the words with all the telepathic symbolism they would carry) may have landed here. I've just heard an account of what sounds like an attack with a small shocker.

—No ships within reported distance, nothing.

—Remember the meteor last night? I've got one spike on the photon-conversion tape. Just a tremor, a jiggle, but there's no normal photon-conversion on this planet. It could have been an implosion.

—Which would mean, an illegal landing. This planet is Closed.

—Yes, or it could be a crashed lifeship. In either case I'd have to investigate. Stand by—and wish me luck.

—You'll need it, Clannon.

Landon—or Clannon—grinned bitterly. He swung the clock face shut, and began packing.

Liz had been lucky about reservations, and the next afternoon found Landon in Lubbock, Texas at the offices of Branzell Publications.

A secretary showed Clint into a cluttered inner office, and a tall, immensely thin man, his high suntanned forehead shaded by a shock of unruly blonde hair, rose from behind a desk piled high with manuscripts and papers and opened envelopes.

"Landon? Glad to meet you. I've wanted to know you ever since that Canajolarie business."

Landon took his hand. "I thought you'd hate my guts for that—I spoiled a feature for you."

Branzell flung back his head and laughed. "I don't like eating crow. If my yarns can be proved fakes, I like to know it before I print them. Sit down, Clint. Now, what can I do for you?"

"This saucer, or meteor or whatever. Did you see it land?"

"In a general sort of way. The Marcus kid thought it was a meteor. He did go out and hunt, but what the hell, I've got a million acres and then some, all covered with mesquite and jack-pine."

"And this Marcus kid started the space bandit business?"

Branzell nodded. If his bewilderment was not simulated, he was an expert actor. "Landon, *something* happened to that kid. The police said he was drunk, but he's been working for me all summer and never drank more than a can of beer."

"Working on the staff of the *Saucerian*?"

"No. Somebody got the notion there might be uranium deposits in this county, and I didn't feel like having a geological study made, so I hired this kid—he's just out of engineering school—to go over the ground, look over the soil formations or whatever, with a Geiger counter. Promised him a fat bonus if he found any-

thing. He made himself useful around the ranch, too—driving to town and so forth."

"Was he badly hurt?"

Branzell shook his head. "Dazed, mostly. He hardly seemed to know me when I came to the hospital to see what it was all about."

That checked with Landon's knowledge of the shockers. He said, "Is Marcus still in the hospital? I'd like to see him." He wanted to check on those mysterious burns, which would prove or disprove his theory at a glance. Branzell told him that Marcus had been discharged from the hospital, and that he'd gone back to the ranch. He added, persuasively, "We'll go out to the ranch, Landon. I'll lend you a car, and you can do all your investigating from out there."

When they were on the road, Landon said, "Steve, I hate to ask this, but do you trust the Marcus kid, or would he pull a hoax on you? This business you're in might seem—funny—to a youngster."

Branzell kept his eyes on the road, answering slowly "Off-hand, I'd trust him. You can't tell, but his sister Sylvia's been staying at the ranch all summer—don't get the wrong idea, the girl's the best natural medium I know of and we've used some of her seance records in the magazine. He's fond of his sister and I doubt if he'd make fun of the work she's doing."

A medium! Landon's initial

distrust swung back, full blast; the thing *had* to be a fake! At the entrance to the private road, Branzell stopped the car:

"Here's where the sheriff found Marcus in the car."

"Was this where he met the—er, spacemen?"

"No, he told me he drove them five or six miles before they pulled their 'raygun' on him." Once again, Landon found himself swinging between belief and distrust.

They drove in silence for some time until Branzell stopped the car again. "This is the spot where he says he picked them up. The sheriff looked it over—says somebody camped here. I put up No Trespassing Signs all over, but they still—" suddenly, Branzell cranked down the window of the car; flung it open and got out.

"What's going on in yonder? I wonder if the police are still checking? Hey, you in there," he yelled, "can't you see this place is posted?"

There was a rustle in the blackened brushwood. Then a young man came out of the thicket of burned mesquite. He was wearing levis and paratrooper boots and a boxlike apparatus was strapped around his waist. Branzell's thick, shaggy fair eyebrows went up when he saw it, and Landon tensed in apprehension, for the thing was an expensive radiation counter.

Branzell said, "It's Ned Marcus," and said to the youngster,

"Good grief, Ned, you didn't have to get back to work so soon, I told you to take it easy for a day or two."

The young man didn't answer. He took a reeling step and then another, and suddenly Landon twisted the handle on his own side of the door, and in one jump he ducked under the fence and reached the kid.

"He's sick, something is wrong!" he said with harsh urgency. Branzell vaulted the fence and ran toward them.

"What's ailin' you, anyway?" he demanded.

The youngster put his hands on the fence, leaning heavily across it. His face was a sick, dirty white. He gulped, swallowed hard, and managed to get the words out, "Steve, I reckon you—better get the sheriff back out here. There's a dead man back there in all that brushwood!"

CHAPTER 4

LATE the afternoon of the next day, Landon met Liz Curran at the airport. On the way back to the ranch he filled her in on the events leading to the discovery of the man's body and the circumstances that followed.

Branzell had gone for the sheriff, leaving Landon and Marcus to stare suspiciously at one another for a long half-hour until Branzell came back with the police. After a time, the Rangers, arriving, had allowed them to ap-

proach and see the dead man, and Landon had gotten the shock of his lifetime.

One look, and his last doubts had gone.

He hadn't recognized the dead man himself, of course. But the pronounced cast of feature, not unlike his own; the faintly shimmering cloth in which he had been shrouded; the manner in which the dead face had been bound—this was no one born on Earth.

He had stood by, shaken and stiff, while the police turned the dead body over. "Mexican, I guess. Look, his chest's caved in." The officer's careless eyes slid over the translucent shorts the old man was wearing.

"What will happen now?" Landon asked.

"The coroner will have to hold an inquest," the sheriff said calmly. "Not a chance we'll ever identify him, though. Just one of those wetbacks. He'll wind up as John Doe, dead on arrival, and the county will get stuck for another funeral."

Landon had looked down into the face of the old man—and protested. "Bury him decently. I'll pay the expenses."

Branzell and Marcus had stared as if Landon were out of his mind. And then the police officer had scowled, too, and stared, and set his mouth.

He said, "I've chased out here three times in the last three days, and I damn near didn't come, this time, because I thought it was some more—" he

used an unrepeatable word. "Look here, this is no ordinary hit-and-run. Somebody stripped him to the skin, rolled him up in a bedsheet—and a damned good quality one—and hid him very carefully in this brushwood. Now just as a matter of form, which one of you ran over him? And why did you bother with that crazy yarn about space bandits? This is manslaughter and I'm going to get to the bottom of it."

As he drove through the clear sunlight, Liz' expectant profile tilted toward him, Landon wished he could confide in her. She seemed the only sane person he'd seen since landing in Texas. He said, "Of course I didn't have any trouble proving when I arrived in Texas. Unfortunately Branzell couldn't account for everything, and he has—how shall I say—an unfortunate reputation, even around here."

"A-men!" said Liz heartily.

"I rather like him. The trouble is, he's got the reputation of a crackpot, and money enough to do as he pleases, regardless of what people think. I got the impression that the local people have been waiting for a chance to catch him off base."

"And you don't think he's hoaxing this time?"

"Liz, I know damn well he's not!"

"Then what Marcus saw were the murderers?"

"I don't think there was any murder at all."

"I don't get it," Liz complain-

ed. Landon did not know what to say.

He felt overwhelmingly ill-equipped for his job. All the time he had been stationed on Earth, his duties had been almost nominal, his only duty to observe and make infrequent reports—the menace of the Rhu'inn was too acute, in this part of the Galaxy, to draw attention to any one planet by over-use of communications. Thousand-to-one contingencies like this one were not provided for in his instructions. He was empowered to act at discretion, provided that doing so did not infringe on his primary reason for being there.

It wasn't time to confide in Liz. He said, "Your first job will be to buy a copy of every newspaper published in Texas. City papers, small-town dailies, rural weeklies. I want you to comb through them and cut out any news event that's unusual. Anything out of the way."

"Flying saucers?"

"Or anything else."

"And what are you going to be doing while I do that?"

"I'd be only too glad to tell you, if I knew, Liz." Landon lapsed into grim silence again.

He knew one shattering fact. A lifeship from some part of the Dvaneth Federation had landed here and imploded. There had been survivors and at least one casualty. But where had they gone? Where could they go?

There was only one thing they could do; they could submerge themselves in the planet—as he

himself had done—and the ripples close noiselessly over their heads. The longer he delayed finding them, the less probable it grew that he ever would do so. The more difficult it would be to distinguish them from Earthmen.

But just at first they might make some mistake, and he might find them by it. Would Liz recognize it? He'd have to assume that she would. Because he'd have other things to do.

He left Liz and drove to a large electrical-supply house; then thought better of it, drove on and visited a large mail-order house, where he bought a small, almost pocket-size Geiger-Muller "snooper" model radiation counter. It wasn't a particularly sensitive instrument, but it would register what he was looking for, if it was there to be registered.

Then he drove out, alone, along the road toward the Branzell ranch.

He parked the car, slipped through the fence and located the hollow and the marks of the fire. Yes, someone had camped here. He examined the ground almost inch by inch, and before long his search was rewarded by a small torn scrap of something, too thick to be paper, too thin to be plastic. Landon flexed it between his fingers; there was a whirring sound, and a voice spoke several Dvaneth syllables. Obviously this bit of the recording wrapper had escaped the

careful destruction imposed by Dvaneth law for all artifacts on non-Federation planets. Landon put it in his pocket to be burnt, glad that the sheriff had not picked it up.

He searched, but found nothing further.

The Geiger was clucking softly to itself at background level. Radiation wasn't what Landon wanted to detect, but the residual radiation would still guide him to the site where the implosion had taken place. What he really needed, was a high-grade scintillation counter, but that was nothing anyone could carry in a pocket.

A noise in the underbrush made him stop short, and thrust the Geiger into his pocket. Out of the mesquite walked Ned Marcus.

"This is a surprise," Marcus said. He didn't sound precisely pleased.

"Hunting up your space bandits?"

"The police let me go when the hospital verified my story. I came back to see what I could find here—they've got Steve Branzell in jail. Or didn't you know?"

"I know. I think we're looking for the same thing," Landon said rather grimly.

He had just realized that he could not read Ned Marcus' mind.

Landon was not a good natural telepath; but like all Dvanethy he had had good basic

training, and with some effort, he could usually read an unwary mind. But Ned Marcus—like many men on this overpopulated, city-plugged planet—had developed excellent defenses against unconscious brainpicking by passersby. People who did not officially recognize the existence of telepathy often had the best natural defenses against it, Landon had found. And rare individuals like Marcus had an almost perfect natural mental barrier.

Landon called it shuttlethinking; shifting the mind quickly back and forth among several related topics so that an ordinary telepath, probing without special equipment, could not follow any single concept without revealing himself.

Landon abandoned the effort. Ned Marcus had his scintillation counter slung over his shoulder; an expensive one equipped with delicate external probes and a special subsurface probing device. It was exactly the kind of instrument Landon had wanted and hadn't wanted to identify himself by buying or renting; equipment houses usually kept close track even of the sale of such expensive machinery.

Marcus demanded belligerently, "You don't believe in flying saucers, do you?"

"I believe what I see," Landon said evasively. "Is the Branzell ranch as big as they say it is?"

"Man, I bet there's a million acres of it."

"And you know it fairly well?"

"I been over a lot of it, this summer."

"Let's quit kidding around," Landon said. "I came out here for the same reason you did—to see what I could find to back up your space bandit story, or figure out if you ran into an ordinary gang of murderers, or what. So let's try to find it together."

"I'll buy that, for the moment," Marcus said. "My car's parked up there, and I've got some beer in a cooler. Let's walk back and have some."

On the way to the car Landon was very conscious of the muffled clicking of his small Geiger counter. Even silenced by the folds of his coat, it sounded like a rather noisy cricket. But Marcus did not seem to notice.

When they got to the car, Marcus reached into the seat to lift out a portable cooler.

Click. Click. Click-click-click—

The sudden swiftening of the hidden gadget sounded like a kettledrum to Landon, but Marcus still did not seem to hear. He rummaged in the dashboard, found a can opener and punched a hole in the beer can. He handed it, dripping white foam, to Landon, and punched another for himself.

"Thanks." Landon lifted the can and drank. Marcus tipped his head, listening.

CLICK - CLICK - CLICK - CLICKETY * .CLICKETY * CLICKETY - CLICK—

"What the hell—" Landon staggered away from the sudden impact as the beer can was knocked from his hand. One violent jerk and Marcus thrust a hand into his coat pocket, yanking out the small-sized Geiger.

"I thought so!" He dashed the thing to the ground, where it lay chuckling to itself. "Wise guy!"

"I can explain—"

"You're good at explaining!" Marcus glared at him. "The trouble is, believing it. What are you—from one of the big mining or processing companies? That's the only thing that makes sense—you're trying to buy up mineral rights before Steve Branzell finds out what a lease is worth, and you rigged this saucer business to scare off the sound investors!"

Landon laughed. He wished he could have thought that one up; it made more sense than his own rather flimsy story. "If you'll look at that thing, you'll see I couldn't be doing any serious prospecting with it. It's just a toy." He bent to retrieve his property, but Marcus, with a vicious thrust of his leg, kicked it out of reach. It stopped muttering.

Landon looked warily at the youngster, wondering if he were going to have to fight. "It sounds as if you think you've made a find and that I'd try to cash in on it. Let's get things straight. You're working for Branzell, I'm not. You'd get paid if anything turned up here, not

me. But there's not a gram of uranium around here."

Marcus only glowered. There was something very, very strange, Landon decided, about the kid's manner. He was reacting a lot too strongly. Marcus muttered, "You'd like me to believe that, wouldn't you? I'm wondering if the FBI wouldn't be interested."

Landon thought faster than he had ever thought in all his years on Earth. He *had* to prevent a scientific survey of this land. A college kid with a radiation detector was one thing; a team of professionals combing the area was another. He said, watching Marcus guardedly, "I'm wondering if *you* rigged the whole thing. Planted something radioactive here, to get your bonus and disappear before Branzell knew he'd been took—told that space bandit story because you knew he'd believe it. He's got that reputation."

Marcus advanced on Landon angrily. "I don't know what you're up to, but I sure as hell don't like it. Flying saucers—holy jumping Moses! You're nuttier than Branzell, if you think he needs debunking—he thrives on it! As for fooling *him* with a flying saucer yarn, hell—first I'd need proof that he believes all that bunk himself!"

Landon began to feel he'd underestimated the kid. Physically he wasn't a match for Marcus, and he couldn't risk trouble. His whole carefully-built identity of Clint Landon had been based on

the assumption that as long as a man minds his own business, pays his taxes and avoids the company of criminals and the vicinity of crime, he can get away with almost any secret aims and pursuits. But his background would not stand investigation. The slightest glimmer of publicity would be disastrous, especially now.

The dead man wasn't conclusive proof that the survivors were harmless marooned Dvanethy. Rhu'inn could have made this use of an unlucky captive or victim—they used their human victims ruthlessly—to throw a Watcher off the trail.

No; whatever the cost, he had to keep his freedom of movement. And that meant taking the most desperate chance of all.

"I know what you found," he said. "That blackish patch over there."

Marcus half-turned his head, looking at Landon with sullen distrust. "I saw it."

"Did you try a subsurface probe? You know my little tick-tock won't pick up anything like that. I can tell you exactly what you'll find."

"You've been here before."

"Never. I haven't been in Texas since before they invented Geiger counters—and I can prove it." Marcus hesitated, and Landon pressed his advantage.

"You'll find a small circular patch of charred grass ringed with radioactive carbon. Inside that patch you'll find a few

ounces of reddish, heavy dust. It will make the scintillator go wild. You can handle it with fair safety for about three minutes; then it will start to blister your fingers. It won't scatter in the wind; it's superheavy. And if you took it to experts—" he paused; thirty years of silence are not easily violated, "you'd be told it didn't exist—and this whole part of Texas would be put under military guard."

"I don't understand—"

"And I won't explain now, because you wouldn't believe me. Find it. My counter won't work—you saw to that. By the way, you owe me thirty bucks."

"How do you know what I'll find—if you didn't plant it?"

Landon said wearily "Because I know what made it."

He was weighing his chances. If this failed he might have to kill Marcus and disappear. Weighing one life against the millions who would suffer if the Rhu'inn got loose on a planet this size, Marcus didn't matter and neither did he, Landon. But he didn't want to kill anyone, damn it, he'd already seen one dead man too many.

He said "Find it. Then I'll explain."

Marcus looked down at him, and Landon would have given ten years of his life to get past that shuttlethinking outer guard. Finally Marcus swung the scintillator over his shoulder.

"You win. I'll look. But when I find it—if I find it—you'd better have a story I can believe, or

I'll have the FBI here inside an hour."

CHAPTER 5

THE sun blinded. Reidel moved slowly down the row, heavy cottonsack dragging, stripping each plant with automatic motions.

He was darker, burned by the unfamiliar sun. The work, though arduous and monotonous, did not bother him. The process of adaptation had done its best work on Reidel. He was intelligent, but almost without imagination. He reserved problems of tomorrow for tomorrow's settlement, and welcomed the physical rigor of the work, which left him no time for thoughts better forgotten.

There were nearly forty pickers working along the brownish rows. Reidel had learned a great deal about the Foster Cotton Company in a few days. It was against the laws of both Texas and Mexico to bring laborers into the country except under strictly regulated contracts. Many ranchers, however, tempted by the cheaper labor of the "wetbacks"—called so because sometimes they actually swam the Rio Grande to get into the country—dared the heavy penalties of the law and hired them anyway. The system was cruel and illegal, but it was hard to convince a man like Vicente Arriagos that Foster was exploiting them. Foster's wages were low, but they were higher than he could earn in Mexico.

The sun was nearly down. One by one the pickers came up the rows and Reidel went to help Mathis weigh the heavy sacks. At first he had been upset when Foster—who hadn't given them more than the barest glance when they turned up with Vicente—singled out Mathis as weigher and checker. But it made sense; a task physically lighter, yet requiring trustworthiness and intelligence, and Reidel knew that Mathis, with his insinuating telempathic abilities, was building up that impression of his own trustworthiness. Under this onslaught it was natural that Foster should offer him the post, and it would certainly have made Mathis conspicuous to refuse it.

Dionie came toward the truck, and Reidel frowned, worried. Her face looked flushed again. She had been very sick after her first day in the fields, with fever, and her skin was still peeling off in flakes; Reidel, of course had never seen sunburn, and did not know what it was.

Cleta, last in the long line of pickers, gave up a sack much too heavy for her; but she stood there with as much dignity as if she were at a planetary council ball.

Reidel said "Cleta, you're overdoing. Tomorrow you had better stay and look after Linnit."

Her dark grave eyes stared past him. "Linnit doesn't need me, and I don't need pampering. Mind your own business."

He could have choked her. He

spun around and walked away. If she had shirked or complained, he could have borne it. . . .

Foster drove away, the cotton trailer bumping and swaying, and the pickers who lived in the barracks at the cotton gin climbed into Vicente's rattletrap truck. They returned to the squalor of the two bare barracks rooms allotted them; the rickety beds covered with faded worn blankets, the battered ancient furniture from the junk shop. A single bare bulb hung from the ceiling. Linnit's baby, in a dirty diaper, lay gurgling to herself in a splintery basket lined with a soft blanket—the only new thing in the place. Linnit, her dark stringy braids accentuating the pallor of her bony face, smiled as she put chipped dishes on the table. There was a warm and intriguing smell of hot food.

Reidel, sleeves rolled back, went directly to the faucet to wash.

He fumbled, dripping, for a towel Cleta had taken; he turned and saw her standing there, as remote as if she were on another planet. She had taken off the faded sacklike dress and stood there in a clean cotton petticoat and nothing else, completely and coldly unaware of his presence.

Reidel had grown used to the lack of privacy here. But now he snarled "Get some clothes on, you—" and he flung a word at Cleta from the gutters of Rigel. The girl could have understood

nothing but its foulness, but no one with a scrap of telepathy could have mistaken his meaning. She went white; then, as if seeing Reidel for the first time, stood frozen, her head thrown back, something coming alive in her eyes that had never stirred there before.

Then, convulsed into galvanic action, she clutched the damp towel, hugging it convulsively to her bare breasts and fled into the other room.

Reidel went, scowling and silent, into the main room and sat down.

He could not help wondering; was this only an echo of the conditioning which none of them would ever remember? This urge, this biological awareness out of all sensible context of time and place? He disliked Cleta; he didn't think he had ever disliked any girl so much. The emotion she roused in him, for no good reason, drove him to baffled rage. Urge for survival or no urge for survival, it was a damned nuisance. Oh, yes, Cleta was a pretty woman. She was a desirable one. But he wasn't going to be shoved around by some damned conditioned reflex or other!

"Where's Arran?"

Cleta twisted her pretty lip and said, "You think you have to watch us all, every minute, don't you?"

Reidel's chair slammed backward. A shrill wail came from the basket and Linnit reached for

her child. "She was just going to sleep," she said plaintively.

Reidel set the chair on its feet with exaggerated quiet, but the door banged on protesting hinges behind him.

It was quite dark now, but Reidel made out the familiar outline of a young man's back silhouetted in light from a half-opened door, merging into another silhouette; full cotton skirts and long curls that slipped away and melted into darkness as Reidel's foot scrunched the gravel. The crack of light slid shut. "Arran?"

The boy whirled, his words choking with rage, "Why are you spying on me? Just stay out of my life, will you?"

"Arran, be reasonable. You're apt to get more deeply involved than you realize, meddling with their women," Reidel warned. "Mathis told us about the social taboos here!"

Arran's mouth was tight and ugly. "You grudge me the slightest—but you and Cleta—"

"Cleta? Arran, you fool—you're insane! I hate the damned girl!"

When they got back, the others had finished their meal. The food was cold now, a stiffening mess; Reidel ate without tasting. He began thinking of the pattern of relationships that had grown up between the group. Family feelings, as such, were alien to the Dvanethy.

Cleta put the baby in Linnit's lap and gathered up the dirty dishes, Arran rising to help. He

said, with a sour smile, "We're certainly getting—adapted!"

Cleta almost dropped a plate at his tone. He went on, a minor explosion, "Slavery and filth! What a planet we picked!"

"We didn't have too much choice."

These bitter exclamations were interrupted by a knock on the door. Reidel opened it to see Nick Foster standing there. He said, through his surprise, "Won't you come in?"

Foster's face stiffened; Reidel saw it and was annoyed in turn. "No," Foster said curtly, "thanks. Is there a girl here called Cleta?"

"What do you want with her?"

Foster, no fool, heard the suspicion in Arran's tone. "Nothing. My wife asked me to find a girl to help in the house. She looks clean and handy. We'll pay her more than she'd make in the fields."

Reidel wished he were a telepath. A beautiful girl is a saleable commodity on any planet, and he didn't suppose this one was an exception. He hesitated until Cleta came out, wiping soapsuds away with a towel. "Let her go, Reidel, if she wants to," Mathis said shortly.

When Foster was out of earshot, Reidel turned on Mathis. The telepath said with contempt "Foster is not a good man, but he does not care much for women, even his own. Cleta will have to work hard, but she will not be in the hot sun all day. And we might as well see some-

thing of the way others live on this world."

"I only thought we should stay together," Reidel demurred.

"I didn't ask you!" Cleta pushed past him and began to rattle dishes violently.

Grim rage welled up in Reidel and once more the door slammed behind him.

CHAPTER 6

BUT what the devil is it?" Ned Marcus sat back on his heels, skepticism gone downwind as he touched, with a cautious fingertip, the strange dark-red dust.

"We call the process implosion, which is a layman's term and not too accurate," Landon said slowly. "Actually it's a form of molecular disintegration. Matter itself can't be destroyed, of course, but the implosion process destroys the atomic orientation of the particles. The space lattice collapses, and each element breaks down into free hydrogen, free neutrons and radiocarbon. All, that is, except this red dust, which is an allotropic precipitate of the radioactive bromine compounds used in the fuel."

"Fuel for what? Branzell's flying saucers?"

"No," Landon said. "Scoop up that dust in a bottle or something, before someone else gets smart with a Geiger. And then I might as well explain to all of you at once. There's no sense going over it again and again."

As they turned into the drive

of the Branzell ranch house, the radiobromine residue scooped for the moment inside a beer can, Ned pointed to the station wagon with the intertwined BR on the doors, and said "Branzell's back. Going to tell him all this, too?"

"I might as well. Find a fruit jar or something—glass or enamel—and stow that bromine residue, will you? It's not safe in metal."

They found Steve Branzell in the big shaded living room, with Liz, who stood up quickly as they came in.

"I found what I was looking for." Landon faced Branzell, a little wearily. "I apologize for accusing you of concocting a hoax, Steve."

Branzell's sharp blue eyes looked guarded and not too well pleased. "If I were fixing up a hoax, I'd hardly arrange to get myself booked on suspicion of manslaughter," he said dryly. "That seems like carrying a hoax too far. My lawyer got me out and it seems they didn't even have enough to book me."

Landon saw that there was another woman in the room; a fair-haired girl in her twenties. Marcus introduced her briefly.

"My sister Sylvia, Mr. Landon." He gave the fair girl a hard-eyed stare. "No, Sis, cut it out!"

Branzell said, "I mentioned Sylvia to you in town. She is one of the few natural clairvoyants whose talent will stand the most rigid scientific investigation. "When you have time, perhaps

you'd care to test her powers? Sit down, Landon, shall I have the staff get some drinks?"

Landon declined. He was convinced that Sylvia Marcus was a fake, but she was staring at him, with a peculiar fixed stare; he said irritably "If Miss Marcus can tell me what I am thinking right now, I'll gladly dispense with any further tests."

It was rash. It was criminally foolish, he thought, for the next moment he felt the tentative touch of concentration—Sylvia was a telepath and an extremely strong one. Then the brief rapport broke and the girl stared at him, stark white, and ran a small pink tongue over her lips. "My parents should have named me Cassandra," she said weakly, "Who'd believe it?" She almost ran from the room.

Liz said flippantly, "She does not seem to have liked what you were thinking, Mr. Landon."

Landon sat staring numbly at the door through which the girl had vanished, wondering what he had given away. He was more baffled than ever. How could a telepath of Sylvia's sensitivity live in the same family with a shuttlethinker like Marcus, and stay sane?

Marcus himself broke in with a belligerent "You'd better get started on that explanation," and set the radiobromine on the table before Landon. Landon sighed, and said "I'd better start from the beginning. It's a long story."

An hour later, he faced them

and finished "That's really all there is to tell. After that, I just—drifted—to where I am now. I worked in a machine shop for a while, went to engineering school, got into Methods Analysis. The writing—" he looked tentatively at Branzell, "began as an exercise in the language. It let me investigate all sorts of queer things without attracting too much attention."

He fell quiet, facing their silent faces. Sylvia had slipped back into the room and was regarding him with interest; she was probably the only one who had not even a fleeting doubt. Branzell was frowning, his chin on his hand. He said finally "Clint, I've had a lot of crackpots here and in my office, and I heard a lot of fantastic yarns. I'll say one thing—this tops them all. If anyone else told me this story, I'd throw him out on his pratt."

"There's no doubt about it," Sylvia said sombrely; she had her hand on Branzell's shoulder, and Landon was aware of the rapport between them and of the exact moment when Branzell's last doubts began to crumble. And now he understood the glint in Branzell's eyes. It wasn't anger, but fear.

Doubtless, once Branzell had been telepath himself, more sensitive by far than Landon had ever been. And derided for it; meeting endless charlatans and phonies in his search to understand his own strange power,

who simulated it by clever conjuring tricks. Branzell had finally developed the perfect defense; a cynical belief that his own telepathic sensitivity was a pleasant hallucination, a form of wishful thinking. To keep his own sanity, it was necessary for him to believe that everyone who claimed clairvoyance, including himself, was a deliberate fraud. Beyond a doubt, he encouraged the frauds and discouraged the genuine ones around him.

Sylvia looked up into Landon's eyes and saw brief condemnation in them. She said quietly, "Clan-non, this world of ours is cruel to the—different ones. There is no understanding—only fear."

"It explains everything about you," Liz said. Landon was uneasy under her dark eyes, knowing she was reevaluating him as a person. "But you're—really human?"

On that point he could be immediately reassuring. "Good lord, yes! Did you think I was a monster crawled inside a human skin?"

Marcus asked dryly, "How would we know the difference?"

That question sent a shiver through Landon. He was human, yes. All the way through. But there was one race in the Galaxy that could do precisely that; the Rhu'inn, the protean, tenuous terror of a million worlds. He had told them everything else, but of this final horror he dared not speak—the horror that could crawl inside a man and use him against his own kind. He pre-

tended to misunderstand the question.

"The sub-race I belong to would fit in a little better in Peru or Mexico. I picked North America because I liked their opportunities for technical education."

"That's flattering," said Branzell dryly.

Liz put a pertinent question; "What are the flying saucers really?"

Landon shook his head. "I have not the faintest idea what the 'saucers' are, or where they come from, but the persistent reports of 'em are one reason I'm stationed here to start with."

Marcus got back to the immediate problem. "And you suspect that a ship from outside has landed?"

"I don't suspect it, I know it. There is nothing in the universe which remotely resembles the implosion residue of radiobromine fuel. It's the only element which can't be destroyed by an implosion field."

"But why do you want to risk discovery yourself, by trying to hunt up these people?" Marcus demanded.

Liz stared at Marcus in disapproving surprise. "Why, he has to find them! How frightened and—and lost they must feel!"

Marcus muttered "They did not seem very frightened, or very lost, to me!"

Landon wished he could get a glimpse inside that shuttle-thinking. He said crisply "I'm empowered to make your losses

good. I ought to explain that while we respect property rights absolutely in the Dvaneth Federation, the condition known as 'desperate need involving the alternative of loss of life or starvation' creates a primary right even in law. You noted, perhaps, that they didn't take all your money, or all your clothes."

"Sounds hair-splitting," Branzell murmured, "and a trifle Utopian."

Landon continued. "But you must understand why I have to find them. They'll adapt, yes, but they'll never be quite safe, especially here where it's important to have proper identifications and background. It was not easy for me, and that was in the days when a man could still get along without a birth certificate and draft card."

"What happens when you find them?" Branzell wanted to know. "Can you signal your home world that you've picked up some strays?"

Landon explained. Dvanethy stranded on Closed Planets had to be abandoned; rescue work anywhere was difficult and expensive, and on Closed Planets, an impossible risk.

"What I want to know is this," Marcus broke in rudely, "how did they happen to speak English?"

"There must have been a trained telempath with them." Landon was struck by a sudden incongruity. If they had read Marcus' mind, how was it that

he, Landon, could not read it now? Was it possible that Marcus could turn that shuttle-thinking on and off at will? That would mean he was aware of it, and in Landon's experience, it was almost always an unconscious thing. It could be learned—Landon could do it himself if he had to, but only for a very short time.

Liz asked "How was it that the space bandit story sent you off in such a rush?"

"The newspapers described the effects of a weapon very common on Dvaneth but unknown here. When Branzell mentioned burns—"

"If I'd known what I was getting into, I might have kept my big mouth shut," Branzell muttered.

Landon stood up. "Marcus, I want the best description you can give me of them. I want Liz to keep combing the newspapers for some unusual event that might mean one of them had gotten careless."

"And when you do find them?"

"It will depend on the circumstances." Landon hoped Sylvia would not try to read his mind. Try as he would, he could not keep the ominous thought of the Rhu'inn from sneaking into the far corners of his brain.

Probably they were harmless survivors of a crashed trading or colonizing starship. There was an off chance that it was an illegal entry, but the chance was small. Anyone daring the extreme penalty of Federation law

by landing on a Closed Planet would have known how to set or dismantle the Implosion device and prevent their ship from destroying itself. Fugitives hiding from Dvanethy justice on a world where they knew no one from outside could ever follow, who were clever enough to burn their bridges, would know enough to scatter, take away and hide the radiobromine residue which would be sure to give them away to the Watcher on every Closed Planet.

Branzell got up and began to pace the floor. "What absolutely rotten luck," he said vehemently. "I've been hunting something like this for forty years. They land right on my own ranch. And then they vanish into thin air again. Where could they have gone?"

Landon watched him; a little amused, a little troubled. Branzell finally swung around and said "Damm it, Clint, where *could* they go? There's no one around except my ranch hands and a few Mexican workers on the cotton farms out in the Brazos valley—"

He stopped, point-blank. Liz and Sylvia stared at Landon, open-mouthed. "And you look like a Mexican, Landon. That didn't take any mind reading."

Landon slumped. "But how many labor camps are there for Mexicans? Hundreds. Besides, would anyone take them on? Don't they have to be vouched for by the Mexican government

or something before they can cross the border?"

The rancher nodded. "That's one reason I don't bother with cotton. Nylon's put the cotton growers almost out of business, and then you have to monkey around and get a contract and a work card for every man, woman and kid on the place."

"But some of them cross the border illegally and get work anyhow," Sylvia said eagerly. "It's against the law, but some ranchers do it, Mr. Branzell." Branzell became excited and spoke as if he were giving orders to his own editorial staff. "We can start there, maybe. I know a lot of ranchers, even though I leave running my own place to a string of managers and spend most of my time with the magazines. Maybe I can find out which of the men around here have been in trouble, before this, for hiring workers without proper immigration permits. Landon, you're welcome to use the ranch, or the offices of Branzell Publications, for your base of operations. They could help your secretary with that clippings business—they hunt the newspapers for queer events anyhow—"

Landon instantly vetoed that; the fewer who knew about this, the better.

Branzell yielded the point, but he sighed. "Lordy, how I'd like to put my whole staff to work on this thing. I feel as if my favorite daydream was walking out of the pages!"

"Clint, all I ask is this. If you ever *do* make it public, give me the first chance at an interview. And whether I can print it or not—when we find them, I want a chance to talk with them!"

That much Landon could promise with a clear conscience.

CHAPTER 7

NOT far from the barracks, near the railroad siding where cotton was loaded and shipped, there were stock pens, and the evening freight train often stopped to load and unload cattle, calves and sheep.

Reidel had taken to leaving the barracks each evening, and strolling across to watch the animals and the skill, or lack of it, with which they were handled. The railroad agent soon grew accustomed to seeing the sun-burnt young man still hanging around the pens; the second or third evening, when there had been no stock loaded or unloaded, and he saw Reidel turn away, he called him back to ask "Are you expecting something to come in by this train?"

Reidel, less of a linguist than Cleta, hesitated and the agent repeated the question in rough-hewn Spanish.

"No," said Reidel, "I just like animals." The agent laughed and paid no further attention to him.

One evening Cleta detained him with a quiet "Reidel, wait—"

He made no answer except an ungracious noise. He had avoided

Cleta since the last time he walked out on her.

Now he became aware of an astonishing change, she seemed more feminine than ever.

"Where do you go every night, Reidel?"

"Out to watch the stock pens at the railroad."

She said with a shaky laugh, "We haven't made it too easy for you. You and I seem to spend most of our time fighting and then apologizing to one another, don't we?"

"I can think of worse ways to spend my time." Reidel felt absurdly light-hearted. "Let's fight some more." Cleta giggled, and he added, "Or—why not come with me and watch?"

She hesitated just along for the bitterness to surge up again. "Or don't you care to be seen with a roughneck like me?" he added sourly.

"Of course I'll come," she said warmly. "I'd meant to tell you—Mrs. Foster said today that Foster had a prize bull of some kind coming in on the train, you're interested in things like that, aren't you?"

He was touched that Cleta would remember and mention this. Arran had disappeared on some private errand; Linnit, the baby in her lap, was sitting on the rickety step with a neighbor woman nursing an infant. Dionie had gone with Viola Arriagos to do their shopping.

Cleta called to Linnit, and walked on beside Reidel. "Linnit seems contented here."

"She's very fortunate," Reidel said, smiling.

Cleta flushed. "Working at the Foster house—seeing how some people live here—it made me realize, we've done just what Arran said, we've slid down too far. It makes me want to—fight. Dionie's getting to look like these grubby children, runs about barefoot—Linnit sits there with those cows of women, and the baby kicking in the dirt, perfectly happy—that's what's so dreadful, Reidel, they're happy—"

Reidel put his hands on Cleta's shoulders. "Do you really hate to see anyone happy?"

"Do I sound as hateful as that? It's only—oh, Reidel, they're turning into animals, it's getting at me too, it's like—like an invisible tide sucking me under—"

"Cleta, girl!" His hands tightened and she let herself fall against him, sobbing desolately.

"Cleta, Cleta, Cleta!" He kept saying her name over and over, helplessly. He waited till she had quieted a little. "You'll have to be patient. Why do you think I come here? The same reason that you watch Foster's wife and daughter—and it's already changed you."

He looked across the siding to the railroad yard. A little knot of men was clustered by the fence, smoking and talking.

"They must be the men come to unload the bull, but the train won't be here for some time. Cleta—" Reidel drew her back

into the shadows, so that they were shielded from sight by a corner of the heavy fence. He hardly knew, until he spoke her name, what he meant to say; and then he didn't say it. He only pulled her close again and kissed her with hungry, helpless violence.

She was startled and passive for a moment, then her arms went up around him. Only for a moment; the she pushed him away. "That won't solve anything," she said, but her voice was softer than he had ever heard it.

His words came unsteady and breathless.

"Cleta. You know the customs here?"

"Some of them," she said, trying to speak flippantly.

"I'd like to—have it on our own terms, my dearest. In our own words and under our own laws. But we can't, not here. Cleta—will you marry me, under the customs of this world?"

She looked up, eyes wide and her face stained hot scarlet.

"Reidel—not the way they do it here—"

Reidel said, with an intensity of emotion that blurred rational judgment from his voice, "Cleta, I'm frightened for you, I want to take care of you, I—don't even know what it is I want. It's not just the mating privilege we'd give or grant on Dvaneth, I want the right to—" he fumbled with unfamiliar words, even unfamiliar thoughts, "to—to keep

you from working too hard. To make you—a little less unhappy."

She laced her fingers through his. She said with her eyes lowered stubbornly, "I couldn't—not the way it would have to be, here—one man and one woman and a permanent commitment that might last all our lives. I simply haven't adapted that far. And suppose we had children? I'd be like Linnit—always frightened for them, but not caring about anything else—"

"But Linnit's happy," Reidel reminded her very softly.

She tried to smile, but she looked trapped. "Not yet. Give me a little more time, Reidel."

A sudden blaze of electric light illuminated the stock pens, and Reidel, blinking in the glare, saw that Cleta's face was wet.

"The train must be coming—yes, there's the whistle now. And there's Mathis—what are you doing here?" he demanded. "Is anything wrong?"

"Everything's fine. I only wanted to see what was the mysterious fascination of this place, to lure away not only you but Cleta!"

They paid no attention; Reidel because he had trained himself to ignore Mathis, and Cleta because she knew there was no real malice behind him. They made room for the dwarf as the train shuffled to a halt.

Foster and two of his foremen were edging around carefully, trying to get into the special car in which the prize bull had been shipped. While

Cleta and Mathis watched and chuckled at the antics of a carload of frisky yearling calves, Reidel moved along the fence to where he could watch the unloading without getting in the way.

The bull snorted and heaved up his head, pawing at the straw. Reidel studied it with an expert's eye. Good breeding stock, he judged; but vicious. If he'd been in charge, he'd have had it gelded as a calf.

They were all wary of approaching it, and Reidel's contempt for Foster increased as he saw the ineffectual way the man was bossing the unloading. If he had followed his inclination, Reidel would have shoved them all aside and said, "Here, you idiots, let me do that."

Cleta said, in low-voiced wonder, "Why, they're really *cows*!"

"They're smaller than those on Dvaneth, that's all."

Mathis frowned and muttered, "Foster's getting angry—doesn't he know the bull will smell it on him?"

"It will charge him"—Reidel gripped the fence. And then it happened; the bull lunged, crashed through the wooden rails nailed across the boxcar door, and hurled a ton of power straight at Foster. The men leaped up on the fence. The bull crashed into the fence rails and the impact hurled Foster to the ground—inside the pen.

Reidel flung over the fence in one leap. He ran only a few steps, but they seemed endless. On

Dvaneth he had been the winner of a green banner for this sport—*skills deteriorate if you don't use them*, he thought frantically, *can I still do it?* And then he was hurtling at the bull's body and in another instant had stopped its charge and vaulted clear. The bull, stopped in mid-lunge, but only briefly, by the impact of Reidel's body, saw a new tormentor. It turned from Foster and the foreman dragged the dazed man safely outside the fence while Reidel clung to the bull's horn-stumps. Then, getting one arm around the bull's neck, he braced his foot in the flank and clung there, swaying with the bull's maddened plunges, sending a wordless scream at Mathis. The bull tossed his head and stamped, trying to throw off the maddening weight, to fling this leech into the dirt and stamp on him—

Then the bull stopped, planting his feet, and Reidel let himself slide trembling to the ground. Mathis hobbled close and patted the heaving neck. Reidel, breathing hard, leaned against the animal's sweating sides. Mathis had certainly saved his life. It was easy enough to grab a bull if you knew the trick of it, but if Mathis hadn't thrown his force into the empathic rapport, Reidel would have been thrown off sooner or later, and trampled. Only a telepath could quiet a really maddened animal and Reidel had never seen a meaner one.

Foster hurried toward him,

limping slightly on an ankle twisted in his fall. Reidel patted the quieted bull, and Foster stared. "Hey, that bull's gentle as a calf! Man, you ought to be in the rodeo—I sure thought I'd had it!" He recognized Mathis and Reidel with a start. "Don't you two live in my barracks? What are you, a bullfighter?"

Reidel shook his head, still panting with effort. "I've been trained to handle animals. After Mathis hypnotized him—he's all right, you won't have any trouble with him for a few hours, but you really need an empath around to handle a mean one like this!"

"Hypnotized!" Foster gave a snort of laughter. "I guess he did at that. He seems all right now. I hardly know what to say—" Foster's hand went to his pocket, but Reidel made a gesture of proud rejection.

"Keep your money! I did what you'd have done, I hope!"

Foster saw the blaze of anger in the dark eyes, and returned the wallet to his pocket. "No offense meant," he said swiftly, "but a man who can handle a bull like that is wasted pulling cotton."

"Hey, Nick, if you're all right—" someone yelled. Foster shouted back "Just a minute! Reidel, come to the office tomorrow—maybe I can find you something better to do."

"Well, now you've really done it," Mathis' voice was acid, searing Reidel's tired brain. Reidel

said wearily "What else could I have done? What else—what kind of inhuman brute would I be, to let a man be trampled and savaged before my eyes?"

"Did you have to babble all that about hypnotism and empaths?" Mathis snarled.

It was dark, and Reidel could not see Cleta's face, but her clasp on his arm was very gentle. "Of course you had to do what you did," she said. "But now there's no help for it. We'll have to go away."

Reidel walked a few steps without answering. He was weary and shaking with exertion, but he felt more like his old self than ever.

"All right," he said at last, "We'll go. But wait till I see Foster tomorrow. Perhaps I can arrange it so we can go without any trouble."

**Prominent Rancher Escapes Death
From Savage Champion Bull:
Bracero Plays Toreador!**

Clearwater, Texas: Nicholas Foster, cotton rancher and owner of one of North Texas' finest herds of dairy cattle, narrowly escaped mauling yesterday under the hoofs of Westwoods Champion IV, prize Guernsey bull reportedly valued at \$30,000. The bull was being unloaded at the Clearwater siding by Foster and an employee when he broke out of the box car and charged. Tragedy was averted when

two Mexican ranch workers employed by Foster jumped into the pen and diverted the bull's attention.

The men were identified as Ray Reydel, 29, and Mathis Reydel, Mexican Nationals employed by the large Foster Cotton Company. The younger man seized the bull's short horns and bulldogged him, rodeo style, while the older man supposedly subdued the bull by gazing into his eyes and hypnotizing him.

CHAPTER 8

CLINT, I wish you'd look at this," Liz Curran handed him the clipping. "Didn't Marcus say that one of his—I hate to keep calling them space bandits—called the other Reidel, or something like it?"

Clint read, frowned and read it through again. He said, "That bull-hypnotizing trick doesn't sound like ordinary rodeo. I wouldn't spell the Dvaneth Reidel as Reydel, but a person used to Spanish names might—"

"We might find out if this Foster is the kind to hire unidentified Mexicans."

"It's a place to start, and heaven knows we need them. I've been out of town as long as I can manage. Not that I particularly need the money, but I have a business reputation of sorts. I can't afford mysterious disappearances."

"And if word gets around that

you're in Texas helping Branzell chase flying saucers—"

Landon laughed soundlessly. "I've been spared that."

Landon knew how difficult it was for Branzell to keep from publicizing the whole business, but so far he'd kept his word.

"We might as well have a talk with this fellow Foster, Ned Marcus knows that part of the country," Liz said. "I wish you hadn't confided in Marcus, though. I'm not sure I like him."

"Liz, I had no choice. If he'd found the radiobromine, and had it analyzed, the lid would have been off. You might as well pack—if this is another wild goose chase, I'll fly back to New York and try to work out a new approach. If we don't find them in another week or so, we never will."

"Well, do we take Marcus along, or don't we? Clearwater is on the map, isn't it?"

Clint stood with his hands clasped behind his back. "Yes, but suppose Marcus decided to do some hunting on his own? I'm nervous."

"Some special reason? Or are you mind-reading again?"

Landon laughed sourly. He'd give a lot to read Marcus' mind. "I have hunches sometimes, and it's wise to trust them. Right now one hunch is telling me to get rid of Marcus, fast, and another hunch is riding me, telling me to keep an eye on him. Between the two, he's less trouble where I can watch him." He smiled at the girl and said,

"Sometimes I think you're the only sane person around. I could not live without you!"

Her answering smile was crooked. "You pay me well."

He turned, his voice a little hoarse. "Liz, don't! I'm—even after thirty years here I'm not wholly free. I don't know how to explain—I'm a sort of soldier—"

"And regulations include—no fraternizing with the natives?"

"Liz, that's not fair!"

"I noticed you don't say it isn't true." She removed his hands, firmly and almost forcibly, from her arms. "And since we're not going to get rid of Marcus, let's go pick him up."

Clearwater was nearly three hundred miles from the Branzell ranch along smooth, straight and almost hypnotic highways. Marcus drowsed in the back seat; Liz was silent, her sleek head turned out the window, and for two hundred miles Landon respected her silence.

"Boiling hot day," he said at last. "Want to stop in the next town for a drink?"

"No, thank you." She closed her eyes as if half asleep, but he persisted, "I mean ice water or root beer, of course. Texas is a thirsty state—but it's a dry one!"

"The heat doesn't bother me."

Landon reflected that her manner would quick-freeze a side of beef. He lapsed into silence, crowding the speed limit, until Liz broke into vehement speech.

"Why do you talk like a tour-

ist? Why try to act—as if you were really interested in anything here? Can't you be natural for once? You aren't human and I know it, so why pretend? Or were you trying to go native?"

Landon's hands jerked on the wheel. "Pretend? I don't understand you!" And all at once he did understand. Tardily, Liz was getting the full implications of what he had told her. It hadn't really hit her until now.

"Liz, there's no pretense. I don't know what to say to you. I came here by my own choice, and I've been here thirty years. I couldn't live anywhere else, and I wouldn't want to."

A sleepy sound from the back seat recalled the presence of a third party. Landon, who had forgotten not only Ned's presence but his very existence, swore to himself.

Marcus sat up, yawning. "Have you figured out what you're going to tell this Foster?"

"It will depend on what sort of person he turns out to be," Landon said.

Liz was looking out the window at the cotton fields. Pickers were dragging the heavy sacks along each row, and she said after a time, "I should think someone would invent a mechanical cotton picker for such awful drudgery!"

"There is one," Marcus chuckled, "only it's expensive, and farmers won't use it. Cheaper to hire wetbacks."

"It shouldn't be cheaper,"

Landon said with a vehemence that even surprised himself, "Human labor is always worth more than machinery!"

"You wouldn't talk that way if you knew anything about them," Marcus retorted. "Take a good look at them, sometime. They're not human, they're not much more than work animals."

Landon could not drop it there. "Would you do the work they do for the pay they get?"

"That's different," Ned Marcus protested. "I have skills that are worth more."

Landon started to say, maybe they would too, if they'd been trained, but he only said, "Still they work harder than you do—actual, physical effort—don't they?"

"It's all they're good for, I tell you. More than half the people in the world are morons. Any world," Marcus insisted. "All they can do is the work that machines could do better. In a halfway decent world, they'd be allowed to die out. But idealists like you won't let them starve, so they have to have a chance to earn a living, and you'd take even that away by giving their work to machines!"

"Hold on, I never said that—"

"You sentimental Utopians just want them to go on cluttering up the world with more morons like themselves!"

This time Landon did not answer. He was thinking; that was a very ancient point of view, and the nonhuman Rhu'inn would have approved. Only they drew

no distinction between intelligent human and moron human, lumping the entire human race into the category of living cattle without rights or dignities, created for the convenience of the Galaxy's one truly intelligent race (by their lights) the Rhu'inn.

It was just a matter of where you placed yourself. Anyone could accept tyranny if he was placed among the tyrants rather than the victims. Marcus, one of the superior class in his limited world, needed no scruples about the inferior.

But Landon, educated to knowledge of the Rhu'inn, lumped himself with all humanity among the species considered inferior. It made a great difference in the point of view.

Clearwater was a town of a single street, crammed untidily with grocery stores, a dingy pharmacy, secondhand stores spilling anonymous junk. The inevitable water tower straddled the town, head and shoulders above the roofs. They found the Foster Cotton Company without difficulty and paused outside the gates.

Landon, already ruffled from his brush with Marcus, disliked Foster on sight, from the chilly eyes to the knife-pressed khakis. He told qualified truth; "I read in the papers about your bull. I thought it would make a good feature story—good publicity for your herd, too."

Foster's eyes were not friend-

ly, though he was civil enough. "Thanks, but I'd rather not have that kind of publicity. Once the words gets round that a stud animal is vicious, his value drops. The less talk, the better."

"What about the fellow who stopped the bull? Was he one of your regular cowmen?"

"No, just a wetback. Only been here two, three weeks." Landon kept his face non-committal, but the time element was right.

"I never gave him a second look till the other evening. He's not quite all there, I'd say. After it happened, he claimed the other fellow, his brother, hypnotized the bull. We get some awfully dumb ones."

"You don't suppose he really did hypnotize it?"

To Landon's surprise, Foster hesitated. "You never can tell. That brother of his was a queer one. Hunchback." (Landon made himself calm; Marcus had described the second as a hunchback). "He wouldn't have been much good picking, so I put him to work as a checker, and come to think of it, that's peculiar. I usually give that job to someone I know real well. It's too easy to cheat—the checker can put down extra weight for his own family. But he gave me the impression he was plumb honest." He looked up, almost but not quite laughing. "You don't reckon he hypnotized *me*, do you?"

Foster added, "About the bull business, I can't tell you much. I was flat on my face in the dust when it happened, expecting that

blasted bull to stomp me. Everybody says it was some stunt, though."

Landon tried to make his next question offhanded. "I noticed the article especially because I used to know some Reydel's, and one of them worked with a rodeo. Where could I find young Reydel?"

He told himself sternly that this Reydel might turn out to be a young Mexican with a talent for amateur rodeo work; but he was inwardly convinced that the long hunt was over.

"Well, now, I'm sorry," Foster said slowly, "I haven't the least idea. Reydel and his whole family cleared out last night."

For a moment, Landon's disappointment was so acute that he let his pose of disinterest slip.

"Why?"

"How would I know?" Foster sounded injured. "This morning they didn't come out with the other pickers. Vicente said they just packed up and left."

Now Landon was positive of the identity of the supposed Reydel's. It was exactly what the Dvanethy conditioning would prompt them to do. Just the same, Foster was hiding something; that was perfectly clear. Deliberately, to shock it out of him, Landon threw the lie in his face.

"I don't believe you! You were afraid, after that newspaper story, that it would come out that you hire wetbacks here!"

Foster stared up, indignant. "Listen, Mister—" he started. His words died in the middle, for a very curious glint had appeared in Landon's eyes. Foster sank weakly back in his chair. Landon was using every scrap of telepathic power he possessed, and under the powerful impact, Foster gasped.

"Did you kick them off the place?"

"No! No!" Foster choked. "I—sent them to a better job. I—gave him a letter to my brother Duane in San Angelo. He breeds saddle horses and sends them around with a rodeo."

So the hunt had to begin again.

"Your brother's name? Address? Write them down." He didn't believe they would go near Duane Foster, but he would have to check it.

Automatically Foster reached for a pencil and scribbled.

"How did they go? Bus, train—"

"They bought Vicente's old truck."

"The license number?"

Foster scribbled again, in a daze.

"Now. How many in Reydel's family?"

"I dunno." Foster mopped his forehead. "No, wait—I've got the names in the barracks list." He flipped through an ancient ledger, pointed with a still shaking pencil. "I never could spell Mexican names."

Landon read down the list. Not a single name that could not

be spoken in Dvaneth syllables; not a single Felipe, Francisco, Dolores. It wasn't proof, of course. Nothing would be proof until he saw them.

He returned to the car and sat there, despondent, for several minutes, until Liz, troubled by his silence, asked, "Weren't they the ones?"

"I don't know. I'll probably never know." He told the story in a few words, finishing, "We're sunk. I could chase them all over Texas for the next ten years."

"You have the truck's license number," Marcus suggested. "Have the highway patrol pick them up."

Landon refused emphatically. "To the police, they're just wet-backs, unless I explained everything. I can't do that, so they'd only be dumped over the border. Here in Texas I could hunt for them as a citizen, at least. I'd have no excuse to do detective work in Mexico!" He glanced at his watch. "If I drive like hell, I've just time to get an evening flight for New York."

"You're giving up?" Marcus asked.

Landon said slowly, "No. Liz, would you stay in Texas and hold down this end for a few days? There are a few things in New York I have to handle myself." Vialmir, he was thinking, would be waiting impatiently for a report.

"We have the names they're using now, and the truck's license number. You can check with Foster's brother in San

Angelo—though it's a long chance. The truck's a rattletrap, might turn up in a junk yard or service station."

"Are you counting me in?" Marcus asked.

Landon hesitated. He really had nothing against Marcus except some vaguely displeasing political ideas and that shuttle-thinking—which wouldn't bother Liz.

"It's up to Liz."

Liz searched Landon's face but found no hint there. "He'd recognize Mathis and Reydel, wouldn't he?" she said at last. "Yes, let him come."

"Give me the license number, then." Marcus scribbled the digits on an envelope. "Let's stop at that filling station. I've got to make a phone call."

Clint was airborne over Cleveland before he realized that Ned Marcus had not accounted to him for the radiobromine residue.

CHAPTER 9

REIDEL might have been impressed by the age of Cairo or Rome, the size of New York, or the teeming billions of Bombay; but a hundred years ago, San Angelo, Texas, had been raw grass prairie. His eyes, remembering the spacious bridges and pylons of Galactic planets, the hum and intensity of life on a dozen planets, saw little difference between Clearwater's one street and the more numerous but fundamentally similar streets of San Angelo.

For all his intelligence, Reidel was naive. At the lowest levels of a provincial outland, he had still secretly believed that the more settled portions of this world would resemble his own. Now he sighed with disillusion, steering Vicente's rattletrap truck to a corner. He turned to Cleta, who sat wedged between himself and Linnit:

"I don't know if we should cross into the city or not. On Foster's ranch no one paid any attention to us, we were expected to act like foreigners. Here, we simply don't know how to act."

A small grocery store yielded a haphazard lunch, and Cleta, noticing a number of citizens picnicking on an expanse of lawn along the river bank, guessed rightly that the place was a public park and that one more group would attract no attention. They finished the impromptu meal and Reidel said, "I'd better go alone to see Foster's brother. Where will you wait for me?"

Cleta and Arran looked up simultaneously to protest, and Reidel wondered what plan they had contrived between them.

"Go ahead."

"No, you tell him, Cleta."

Reidel felt annoyed, but in an attempt at fairness said, "I'll listen to anything reasonable. What is it?"

The girl looked down at her hands. "I think we should drop the Mexican pretense altogether. We've seen enough of this world

to fit in at another level. You and Arran have skills you can use. The longer we stay at our present level, the harder it will be to leave it."

Taking Reidel's silence for agreement, Arran continued outlining the plan. "We may never have a better chance to switch identities. Cleta and Mathis can already speak English without an accent; you could, if you'd try. I'm certain I could find work as a mechanic; these internal-combustion engines—" he waved a contemptuous hand at the truck, "I could rip one apart blindfolded, they're just one step above the invention of the wheel! That's typical of this culture!"

Reidel felt his jealousy blaze up again, but he fought to control it; was he a civilized man, or was he a damned barbarian? "Cleta, is this what you really want?"

Cleta twisted her slender hands. Reidel's eyes fell on the livid scar that marred the palm of one hand and Cleta hid it quickly in a fold of her skirt. "It's the most logical thing."

"The *only* logical thing," Arran corrected. "Don't you agree, Mathis?"

The telempath shrugged. "Leave it to Reidel."

"Reidel, Reidel!" Arran's words stabbed. "Maybe when we first landed Reidel had to take charge, but does he have to keep on making decisions for us all our lives?"

"He can go on making them for me," Linnit said quietly. "I don't understand culture levels and all that, but he's kept us safe so far."

Dionie looked up. With the empath's chameleon ability to absorb atmospheres, already she seemed alien to Reidel; belonging to this sky, this sun, this world; not their own. "Why not give Reidel a chance, Arran?" she asked, in her sweet reedy voice. "He may decide, after he's talked to Foster's brother, that he likes your plan best."

Reidel felt surging gratitude. Of course Dionie would understand; this would give him a chance to think it out, slowly as he needed to think everything through, away from the others. Arran shrugged.

"I won't go against you all. I can wait."

They found a tourist court on the fringes of town; a quiet place, shabby but clean. Shaved, dressed neatly in a new grey work shirt and jeans, Reidel felt somewhat less the roughneck and more like the respectable professional man he had been. He left the others.

After his departure time dragged. Cleta wandered about the rooms, too keyed up to rest. Arran had stacked their belongings into the tiny kitchenette and she was sorting them, restless, when Arran himself came from the other room.

"What are you doing, Cleta?"

She nodded at the cardboard boxes. "The worst makeshifts

can be destroyed, and the things from the lifeship have to be. It's a Dvaneth law. I thought you'd destroyed them already."

"Dvaneth law!" Arran made an expressive sound. "The Federation isn't wasting worry on us. We're dead, to them. What right have they to dictate to us now?"

"I wish you'd destroy the shockers, at least!"

"The shockers are just what I intend to keep." Arran slipped one into his pocket. "Not that I couldn't make one in an hour or two, given proper materials—simplest thing in the world."

Cleta was uneasily aware that he was meditating some plan whose details she preferred not to know. She closed her mind against him. "I wonder what Reidel will decide?"

"Does it matter? Cleta, if Reidel decides he wants to stay—barbarian—let him! You and I know what we want! I can give you the kind of life you really deserve, and it won't be long, either! Say you'll come with me!"

Cleta stared, half amused; then, as his strong young arms swung her around and prisoned her, she became aware that it was not a joke.

"Please, Arran—" she said, very low.

"Is that what you want, Cleta?" Reidel asked from the doorway. He looked weary and grim. Cleta struggled to say some word of excuse, but speech always deserts a telepath in the

flow of strong emotion, and she only sobbed, sick with shame, unable to push Arran away. Reidel ignored her.

"If you want to know," Reidel said, "I turned down Duane Foster's offer. It was a good one. He wanted me to go with a rodeo, that's an exhibition of horses, as a handler; maybe an assistant trainer, if I worked well. I would have, I know animals, I'd have been right in my element. Only thing was, I'd have had to travel, to be away from the rest of you. And I felt that our main aim was for all us to stay together, no matter what. It seems I was wrong."

Cleta found her voice, thickly. "Reidel, we know we have to stay together. I'm sorry, so sorry—"

"Nothing to be sorry about." Reidel sounded crushed by tiredness. He walked to the sink and drank a glass of water with thirsty haste, as if nothing else mattered. "You gave me my way, Arran. Now I'll have to give you yours."

"It's not *my way*," Arran said, exasperated. "It's what's best for all of us."

"No matter." Reidel sat down, his head bent. "You're in charge. I keep promises. What's the first move?"

Arran outlined his plan. "We'll sell the truck, first; it's too easy to trace. It isn't worth much, but still—we'll stay out of sight until we can all speak good English—that won't take more than a day or two, we're all good lin-

guists. Reidel and I will see about finding work, and somewhere decent to live. Camouflage, with Mathis among us, won't be any harder than in the barracks. Don't you agree?"

"You're telling this."

"Cleta, burn all but the most presentable clothing. Cut Lin-nit's hair short as the American women wear theirs, and Reidel and I will go and sell the truck."

Driving through the desultory noon traffic, Reidel was silent, his shoulders drawn taut, his mouth grim. He didn't speak to Arran.

The used-car lot was tucked under the approaches of the bridge, an asphalt floorway bordered with little fluttering pennons in red and yellow, that spelled out WE BUY AND SELL. Reidel drove through the gate, and the attendant came toward them. "Can I help you?"

Reidel said in precise unfamiliar English, "To sell this truck."

"Trade on a new model? Just to sell for cash?" The man looked them over for a minute. "Maybe we can do business. You have registration and title papers?"

Arran produced them; he had been careful to ask Vicente about the necessary transfers of property. The salesman rifled through the certificates. "Arran Reydel. You look a bit young, and I don't see a parent's counter-signature on these. Are you legally of age?"

Arran, not telepathic and not

entirely understanding, masked ignorance in annoyance. He said, "Of course," and hoped it were true; he hadn't the slightest notion what constituted legal age on this planet.

The man handed back the papers. "I'll want to see your driver's license, too. Before I can make an offer, I'll have to telephone. Wait here." He indicated a wooden bench and went inside, closing the door.

Reidel remained standing. "We're in trouble, Arran. You've no driver's license. Can't you see how little we really know, if a simple thing like this trips us up without Mathis to probe for us? A rudimentary instinct in Reidel was warning him to get away from there fast, but Arran, less sensitive than Reidel, did not understand that Reidel had received the full blast of the attendant's suspicions.

"We can bluff our way through anything."

"Mathis might. Don't fool yourself—we can't!"

The attendant returned and began to examine the rattletrap with great care, checking tires and door handles, poking the worn upholstery, lifting the hood. Reidel's unease grew.

"He's delaying us," he muttered, "he could have set a value on this old wreck in five minutes. Arran, tell him we've changed our minds and let's get away fast!"

It was already too late for that; a black car had driven up at the entrance, and two uni-

formed men were crossing the sidewalk. They glanced at Arran and Reidel, bent to look at the license plate. "That's it," one said. "We had a call tipping us to watch for this truck."

The attendant looked quite satisfied. "I thought you might have it on your lists somewhere, officer."

Arran said angrily, unasked, "It isn't stolen and I can prove that!"

The policemen exchanged the briefest of looks. "Who said it was?" He snapped out at Reidel. "*Como se llama? A donde vine? Donde ha usted trabajado?*"

Lying didn't come naturally to Reidel, and without Mathis at hand he blurted out the truth. "I worked for Nick Foster, near Clearwater."

The second policeman said, "That figures, we've picked up wetbacks from that Foster outfit before this." He said in Spanish, "Do me the favor of showing your work card."

Reidel stood mute. He knew they had none of the necessary credentials. The officer said, in tired exasperation, "I thought so. I'm sorry, you'll both have to come with me."

Arran glanced wildly around and his fists clenched. "Reidel! Are you going to let this—this—" words failed him. His hand slid into his pocket and came out clutching the shocker. Reidel, with a smothered cry, flung himself on Arran, fighting down the boy's arm. He rabbit-punched Arran's arm muscle, grabbing

the shocker from the suddenly limp hand, and with one swift movement, broke it open and crushed the essential part of the mechanism under his heel.

Then there was a restraining grip on them both. "What was that?" demanded Arran's captor, roughly and efficiently running his hand over the boy's body in search for other weapons. Reidel caught at a pretext.

"A—a toy—he thought he could scare you with it—"

The policeman glanced at the broken plastic tube. "Drop it, then. And you—no more of that—we can put you in handcuffs, if you want to get rough!"

In the police car Reidel sat silent, shoulders sagging. He knew Arran blamed and would always blame him for their failure to escape with the shocker, but Reidel was too frantic with worry to waste thoughts on Arran. What would happen to the women now? From talk on Foster's ranch, he knew they would be deported—but where and how far?

The sight of the jail shocked him to speechlessness. They were searched again, more thoroughly, and conducted to a cell. As the steel door closed, Arran said, speaking Dvanethy in his horror, "Reidel, we haven't committed any *crime*, have we?"

Reidel was fighting hysteria himself. "I was going to speak about the women—we'd be deported together, what are countries and boundaries to us here?"

But—but we can't have them brought to a place like this!" The stigma of a prison, on Dvaneth, was horrible.

"Maybe we're not in real trouble now!" Arran was searching for reassurance.

Reidel answered, trying to convince himself as well, "Mathis will look after the women. The less trouble we make, the less trouble we'll have. Why don't you try and get a little sleep?"

And finally Arran, being young, did sleep. But Reidel did not close his eyes that night.

CHAPTER 10

IN LANDON'S New York apartment the clock case was swung aside and Landon leaning forward before the thing that could have been a mirror and wasn't, might have been intently adjusting his tie.

—Clannon.

—Vialmir here. Make your report.

—I found the usual implosion residue. Apparently a Dvanethy lifeship.

—Not Rhu'inn dominated? Are you sure, Clannon?

—How can I be sure? But there was a dead man—in thought swifter than speech, the man who called himself Landon outlined his search.

—Clannon, if it was a Dvanethy lifeship, you must find the survivors. There might be a Rhu'inn-sensitive among them.

—Clannon, even using the augmentator like this is dangerous

if there are Rhu'inn on this planet. It could draw their attention to us.

Landon felt the stiff short hairs at the back of his neck bristling with atavistic horror.

The Rhu'inn, the enigma of the universe. They had nothing resembling normal senses. Most of their perceptions seemed to lie in some register of vibration outside the humanly perceptible wave-lengths. As regarded the material world, they were blind, deaf and invisible. They seemed to have no notion of sight or sound, touch or smell.

Their technology—if technology was the word for anything so unsubstantial—was largely extra-sensory; they had only one field of overlap with the human. They shared with mankind the two senses of telepathy and empathy. In those two fields, human met Rhu'inn on fairly equal terms, with one exception. Anything a human telepath could do with the Federation's carefully developed apparatus — augmentators, telepathic dampers — the Rhu'inn could do better without them.

—Could Rhu'inn live here without revealing themselves?

—I don't have to remind you that Rhu'inn can use human hosts!

—If there were a telepath among the survivors, is there any chance of finding him mentally without finding him first physically, Vialmir?"

—It's not impossible. (Landon saw, as if with his own eyes,

the high, almost inaccessible mountain crag in Tibet where Vialmir lived; he could not have survived more than a short time in the thick oxygen of sea level.) Some of the people here are good functional telepaths, after all they've been our contacts on Earth for centuries. They think the Rhu'inn are devils, and that's true enough. I could get them all into the augmentator for a search. It would be dangerous, but this is a Closed Planet and we're all expendable by definition."

"We would try it as a last resort, I suppose—"

Suddenly the sensitive mechanical-telepath shrieked soundlessly with pure horror.

—RHU'INN! HELP US!

The shock was so violent that Landon physically staggered, piercing agony in every nerve, like an electric needle poked into his brain. Then the mental picture fused and everything went dark and blank and vanished.

When sight came back Landon found himself sprawled on his face on the carpet, a picture burned into his brain. He could examine it only like this, in memory, for Vialmir had vanished, like a blink of light, and Landon's half-hearted effort could not reactivate the augmentator; for all he could tell, Vialmir might be dead, blasted mindless by that force.

In his mind was a clear picture; a large room somehow both

bare and crowded, with a blaze of something that could have been fire at the center but could also have been a brain building focus of mental force. There was nothing intangible about telepathy. It was a vibration as palpable as electric power. And some frequencies could be deadly, for they could vibrate their harmonics into the magnetic field of an entire planet.

Someone — a trained telepath or telempath, for no untrained mind could project such a force— had mentally shrieked for help, and that cry had shown up on the augmentator like a jet streaking across a radar screen. And as he evaluated this mental picture he realized that it had all been superimposed, like a double exposure, on the face of Ned Marcus.

Ten minutes later the augmentator had been stripped to component parts, scattered into boxes of loose radio and electronic parts, and Landon, with no luggage but his hat, was speeding toward the airport.

"You'll have to accept it," Mathis said at last, "they're not coming back."

The sun of the third morning was sending fierce light through the blinds of the tourist cabin. Even Dionie had deserted the pretense of optimism.

"What could have happened?"

Mathis said, "They might have broken some law, without knowing it. They might have been hurt." He cursed his own double

sensitivity; the emotions of the women were tearing him, and that agony made his words harsher than he intended. "Or they might simply have—gone."

Cleta's heart-shaped face was white with protest.

"They wouldn't!"

"Arran wanted to leave us, strike out on his own, the night we landed," Mathis said wearily. "Reidel talked him out of it—that time."

Cleta asked, "What's a telempath's extreme range?"

Mathis hesitated, unwilling to damp their last hope. "If they were telempaths, I could vaguely sense them anywhere on the planet. Since neither of them has more than rudimentary psi, the range is limited, but knowing them as well as I do—I can't be sure, there may be conditions on this world I don't know about, but as far as I know they're not within perceptive range at all now."

"I can't believe they'd leave us!" Cleta repeated.

"It's your fault!" Dionie pounced on Cleta like a small and gusty hurricane. "You were always belittling Reidel, fighting him! He hated you!" Dionie was hysterical now, and Cleta, dismayed beyond words, could only stare at her.

Mathis said, "No, wait. He did resent you at first, Cleta—" But Cleta was no longer listening. Breaking into frantic sobs, she fled to the farthest corner of the apartment.

When she became aware of her surroundings again, she was alone in the cabin with Linnit, who was lying on the shabby carpet playing with her baby. Linnit raised her pale, animated face as Cleta came wearily from the bedroom, saying gaily, "Cleta, she really laughed at me! They say babies this young can't even smile, but I can tell!"

"Where are Mathis and Dionie?"

"They went out. Mathis told me to tell you—don't worry." Alone among the survivors, Linnit was entirely without telepathic or empathic sensitivity, but what she saw in Cleta's miserable face made her anxious to comfort. She knew only one way to do it; she stood up and put her baby in Cleta's arms.

Mathis and Dionie came in as the sun was beginning to set. Dionie's white face was whiter than ever, but she looked calm, and she smiled apologetically at Cleta as she went to pull off her coat. Anxiety made Cleta's question sharp.

"Where have you been?"

"Out," said Mathis, and the word was a slap. He gave her stare for stare, his closed face conceding nothing—as deliberate an insult as one telepath can give another. Cleta was almost in tears again by the time he said "You resented it when Reidel tried to watch us all. Why should I tell you?"

A caustic retort was on her tongue; then Cleta saw it as Reidel had seen it. Personal

quarrels weren't important. Her voice had changed utterly when she spoke. "Can't you understand? I thought perhaps I might help."

Mathis' face altered too. "I'm sorry, Cleta. I thought none of us mattered to you. I've been checking the city street by street—trying to find another telepath. It was a slim chance, but I had to take it."

Cleta asked "But would it be safe—to give ourselves away like that?"

"Women are so stupid!" Mathis fretted. "This planet has a very low proportion of telepaths, but there *must* be some." He added, his deformed face very earnest, "They'd believe our story. No one else would. Not here."

Cleta could read the unspoken thought behind his words; if disaster, not desertion, had kept Reidel and Arran from returning there might be some danger they didn't know about.

"Have you found anything?"

"Nothing of value. I can't go into large crowds alone." He hazarded, "Perhaps—with you—I could. Dionie's an empath and she only re-inforced my own panic. You wouldn't do that, at least. How much telepathic training have you had?"

"Not much. But when I'm wide open, I receive thoughts at random even from nontelepaths. I'd certainly recognize another."

Mathis' dark eyes brooded. "I've found two sensitives al-

ready, but—" he shook his head at her questioning glance, "One wasn't—sane. The other was just learning to walk, and mentally defective. The percentage of telepaths on this planet must be astronomically low. All the more reason to suppose that the more intelligent ones will be banded together—possibly in some form of secret society. They may even have had some contact with the Federation, through the Watcher here. At least, they would certainly help me find him."

It sounded reasonable to Cleta. Mathis continued:

"There are plenty of empaths, but without special training, they can't receive worded thoughts." He looked straight at her. "Of course, that's Dionie's trouble. Let's go. Get a coat, it's cold."

The next hour was nightmarish, a random walk up and down streets, residential thoroughfares, slums, the business district. Cleta was so unaccustomed to keeping her mind open that within ten minutes she was a bundle of raw screaming nerves. Bits of irrelevant thought filtered randomly from everywhere, but never once did she contact the familiar flow-and-response of mutual telepathic contact. Once she touched the mind of a shuttlethinker, and the contact was so painful that she gasped; it was like touching a burned finger to sandpaper.

"Mathis! Something—"

"How close?"

"I don't know!" Cleta shrank

from that contact again. Mathis glanced uneasily at her. "You're worn out. Shall we give up and try again tomorrow?"

"Mathis, this random searching isn't accomplishing a thing. Can't we try to trace how they might have left the city? Bus stations, railroads and so forth? You could—probe and see if anyone there had seen Arran and Reidel—"

"Bus station." Mathis stared at Cleta with such intensity that she flinched. "You may have picked up some flick of thought—I keep getting that picture, too. Someone—something vaguely familiar, but I'm not sure what." He said at random, "I keep thinking of Kester, for no reason at all."

"Do you know where the bus station is?"

"Yes." He set off at a rapid walk, his small twisted body bobbing doggedly up and down. Cleta ventured a telepathic question:

—You don't suppose Reidel and Arran are *there*, do you?

Mathis sent back an unexpectedly savage, wordless command for silence.

The bus station was big and bleak, and Cleta stopped in the doorway, curiously unwilling to step aside. Mathis looked back impatiently, and she conquered her unease and went in after him.

There was a scattering of men and women inside, but almost immediately Cleta focussed on the center of her unease. Beside a

row of baggage lockers stood the young man who had first discovered them, in the open field, after the lifeship crashed.

There was a dark-haired woman beside him, but Cleta barely noticed her. The young man raised his head, and his eyes rested thoughtfully on Mathis; Cleta sensed the mental touch. Angry and surprised, Cleta flung out a telepathic slap—

And met perfect, locked defense. She gripped Mathis' arm, panicky. "Mathis, over there— isn't that the same man who— careful, he's a shuttlethinker! He's watching us!" She had whispered it aloud—a low voice was inaudible unless you were within hearing range, while telepathic contact was as open as a shout if another telepath happened to be within mental range.

Mathis looked up, startled. He murmured, "Ned Marcus—" then abruptly, harshly, "It's not the same man! It's *not*! He's not even—"

And then—

And then Cleta became aware of a sudden tremendous tension like a glare of light, a frightening grip, a sort of mental smell. Fear spurted inside her ribs.

Rhu'inn!

Rhu'inn! The word vibrated madly in her brain, with a sudden surge of words in a terrifyingly familiar language:

—Where are you? Where are you? We can't do anything to help unless we know where you are . . .

All this. Battering inside her

mind, impossibly amplified, not in their own Dvanethy dialect but in the Standard which every Federation citizen learned in infancy. She kept herself upright and motionless, with an effort that made her heart pound and pound, but horror was a maelstrom inside her mind, flooding round and round with confused pictures. A snow-covered crag, a skyline of tall buildings, the young woman who had stared from across the bus station, the flat surface of an augmentator found only in the possession of trained telepaths . . .

Horror surged away like a wave at low tide and rolled back, leaving Cleta shocked and conscious again. How long she had stood unseeing, she would never know. The girl, and the young man Mathis had called Ned Marcus, were gone. Mathis himself had slumped on a bench, breathing painfully. His eyes fluttered open, and with an effort that made sweat start from his face, he muttered, "Close down—you're wide open—only thing saved us, they don't dare attract attention either—"

Outside in the street the high scream of a siren went wailing away, and Mathis jerked, galvanized. "See what happened!"

Cleta was sick with fear at the thought of opening her mind to that—horror—again, but as she probed briefly for contact with someone, the blessed normality folded around her like a soft blanket. A man in uniform,

head pillowed on a rucksack, slept on one of the benches; a woman shushed a crying child and an old lady in long-sleeved black stared with purse-mouthed disapproval at Cleta's bare head. Cleta was too relieved at the normality of the thought to resent it.

"A woman fainted on the sidewalk. They're taking her to a— a hospital."

Mathis relaxed. "I'm not surprised. If there was a sensitive within a mile of *that*—" His face still looked like death. She sat down beside him on the hard bench, shielding the dwarf with her body and her mind. "Mathis, what happened?"

"I'm not sure; I got it for just a fraction of a second." She measured his distress by the fact that he spoke Dvanethy. "All hell's going to break loose on this planet, Cleta. Someone tried to kill us both—someone who knows Rhu'inn tricks. And someone tried to get through to us with an augmentator."

Cleta caught her breath. "That means there *is* a Watcher here!"

"Yes," said Mathis, and his tormented eyes fell shut, "Yes. But *where*?"

Looking down at him, Cleta gave way to despair. She no longer saw the telempath's almost superhuman powers; only his agonizing weakness.

Mathis said in an urgent undertone, "We've got to find the Watcher now, Cleta. It's no

longer a matter of safety, or personal convenience, it's more important than that."

His words struck terror all through Cleta.

—Drop your shield she begged without words, —don't shut me out of this—

He took an uneven step and grasped her elbows. "Don't!" he commanded in a tense whisper, "don't dare do that again! Can't you realize, *there are Rhu'inn on this planet!*"

The compulsive memory made Cleta feel sick again.

She huddled into her thin coat, her eyes widening with delayed shock. "Mathis, what good will it be if we *do* find the Watcher now? There's no defense against the Rhu'inn. It's only a matter of time until this world—"

"What a fool you are, Cleta! Do you think I'd be putting myself through this—this hell, if it were as hopeless as that? Gods of the Galaxy, why do you think they sent ten telepaths in one starship? They gambled we'd reach the new colony—remember, right at the rim of the Forbidden Stars.

"Have you ever heard of the nullifier field, Cleta?"

"Never."

"How much do you know about Rhu'inn?"

"Almost nothing. Only—no one knows why they attack a starship, or a world, but when they do, it's—doomed."

"That was true once," Mathis

said. "To a limited extent it's still true. We're just barely beginning to understand Rhu'inn. The Rhu'inn don't believe, I think, that humans have any mind worth understanding. Just as—well, some insects have sight, for instance, better than ours, but we don't take a bug's brain into consideration because of that. Telepathically the Rhu'inn are as far beyond a human—even a telepath—as the telepath is beyond the ape. We've theorized that they sometimes find humans useful because our senses extend into dimensions over which the Rhu'inn have no direct control. Fortunately they don't often bother."

He paused, wondering how to make it clear. "They can—take over whole populations, when they want to, physically and mentally. They don't seem to understand why humans should mind that."

He was silent again, while Cleta shivered in dread. Finally he added, "However—this is top secret even on Dvaneth—there is a protection; the nullifier field. I couldn't explain it to you even if I understood it myself—which I don't. But basically, if it can be set up on a planet—it *has* been set up on most Federation planets—within that world's magnetic field, it—forces the Rhu'inn back into their own dimension." A mirthless laughter rattled in Mathis' throat. "As far as we know it's not even fatal to them—just chases them out of our particular segment of the

spacetime universe. Like electric fencing to keep robbers out of a stock pen."

"And you know the nullifier field?" Cleta asked in wonder.

"By intense simplification—yes. I couldn't set one up myself. I know the specifications but I don't understand a thing about them—for my own protection. If I found the Watcher, he'd understand them and know, perhaps, how to get access to the materials to make them—maybe. Watchers are supposed to know such things. It sounds hopeless, doesn't it? Especially when you stop to think that the null-field is something really new, and if the Watcher on this particular Closed Planet was sent here very long ago, he may never have heard of the field. But it's a chance we have to take."

"But how do we find him?" Cleta demanded, and Mathis said with a helpless shrug, "Exactly. That's exactly the problem."

CHAPTER 11

IT'S A LUCKY thing she was carrying my address in her purse," Steve Branzell said. Landon, facing him in the bleak hospital corridor, demanded, "But what happened to her?"

"I don't know any more than you do. I got a call in Lubbock, yesterday, saying that a Miss Curran had had an accident and was in the hospital here, and they couldn't locate anyone else who knew her. I tried to telephone you in New York, but

your apartment didn't answer, so I drove down here myself. Then this morning, when I called to check, Sylvia told me you'd flown to San Angelo last night and I only had to call your hotel. Are you psychic?"

Landon shrugged that aside, for a nurse appeared and beckoned. "You can go in now, but don't stay too long."

Liz Curran's self-sufficient face looked oddly young against the white hospital gown; Landon took her hand as if afraid to break it. "My dear, what happened?"

"I don't—know." Liz looked frightened. "I can't seem to remember. The doctor told me I fainted in the street and a bystander called the ambulance." Her dark brows drew together as if in pain.

"I'll never forgive myself for leaving you," Landon almost added, with Marcus, but held the accusation back; it might have been Marcus who sent that screamed mental SOS.

"Where was Ned Marcus when this happened, Liz?"

She fought to hold drooping lashes open. "I don't know. There's—something wrong with my head." She gave up the fight and dropped asleep again. A nurse, apparently believing he was Liz Curran's father, relieved his anxiety in a few words:

"A mild concussion, and a terrific bruise on her neck. But no fracture. She'll be all right tomorrow."

"No burns?" Landon asked,

and the nurse stared as if he were a dangerous lunatic and said, "No, no. No burns."

Outside Branzell took charge, taking his arm. "Come on. We're going out for some food. You look like the devil after a night out."

Landon nodded gratefully. Branzell located an excellent restaurant and while they waited for food, Landon asked the major question in his mind.

"Where was Ned Marcus while this was going on?"

"I'm damned if I know!" Branzell sounded annoyed. "He hasn't even reported to me."

Landon let his attention lapse trying to recapture every detail of that remembered call for help. It was filed in his mind like a photograph, and he took it out now and examined it from every side, trying to extract every perception from it.

Item; an unknown telepath had broken in on his contact with Vialmir. A telepath, under stress, could break in on even a tight augmentation-beam; he and Vialmir, on a "head-blind" planet, used the loosest possible hookup.

Item; Liz turned up with concussion and amnesia. Meanwhile Marcus—Landon paused, rephrased the inquiry; meanwhile where was Marcus?

Item; Marcus had disappeared. But his face had surrounded the picture, at the moment when the unknown telepath was actually sensing the presence of a Rhu'inn. (Could Marcus himself

be the unknown telepath behind his shuttlethinking, be playing a complicated mental game?)

Anyhow that telepath had sensed the presence of a Rhu'inn—which did not mean Rhu'inn had been physically present. The term *physically present* was almost meaningless anyway, with Rhu'inn; their perceptions of space weren't human, at least within a planet's gravitational field they weren't.

With that unsettling ability to follow the progress of a train of thought, Steve Branzell demanded, "Landon, you referred to our world as a Closed Planet. What exactly does that mean?"

"That it's permanently barred from the Federation. That no one can leave, that anyone who comes here has to accept permanent exile."

"But why?" Branzell wanted to know, "because of our wars, or something?"

Landon said moodily, "I wish it were that simple."

Earth—until now, at least—was not a Forbidden Star, where Rhu'inn were known to exist. It was a Closed Planet because, once, it *had* been touched by Rhu'inn.

No one knew why. No one knew what obscure motivations drew Rhu'inn out of their unknown trans-material universe and into the normal 3-dimensional world. No one knew whether they absorbed civilizations from sheer lust of conquest, or whether they were like the nat-

uralist who studies the habits of the wolf by putting on a wolfskin and joining the pack.

But when they came they were irresistible.

That was why starships destroyed themselves rather than fall into Rhu'inn hands, though of course Rhu'inn had no hands. That was why once-invaded planets were Closed for good and all. If you met the Rhu'inn on purely physical terms—for instance, encysted in a human host—as long as you knew the host, you were safe. If you met them on mental terms, the only thing to do was commit suicide or force them to kill you—promptly—so they couldn't use you against your own kind.

Landon swore, half aloud. He was stationed here as Watcher—and that was all he could do. He could *watch*. To the Federation—which meant, to the wishful-thinking bureaucrats on Dvaneth—he and Vialmir were there to take note of any possible Rhu'inn invasion. But one man, or two, couldn't actually do a thing, in the event of such an invasion, without a convenient miracle or two. That had honestly never occurred to him before.

As long as he and Vialmir were alive, all was assumed to be well. If they failed to report on schedule, they were presumed dead. If their replacements disappeared too frequently, Earth would be moved from the lists of Closed Planets to that of Forbidden stars. How complacently he had

accepted his post as a weather balloon!

He swore again gloomily and said to Branzell, "I've lived here thirty years without realizing that I was nothing but a concession to Federation politics!"

He told Branzell as much as he could without mentioning the Rhu'inn—that revelation had to be saved for a desperate last resort. Once this world had been on stellar maps; but, too close to the rim of the Forbidden Stars, the people of Earth had seen disaster crowd on them and had released their whole incredible technology. A world had lain shattered in man-made floods and earthquakes which had wiped out all but a slim margin of survivors and reduced them to savagery. It had also, perhaps, drowned out the first Rhu'inn invasion; but Landon left that point unmentioned.

And Earth had dwindled, after that, to a name on a bureaucrat's list of Closed Planets; a place for volunteers only, who would be willing to accept permanent exile. A blacklisted, quarantined, forgotten world.

Branzell had let his excellent steak get cold while he listened, his eyes rapt. "Good Lord!" he murmured, when Landon was finished, "It explains all the legends—" he broke off. "Landon, we've got to find them. I don't know where Ned Marcus is—he may have gone to run down some lead of his own." Landon groaned inwardly and hoped not.

"But I've got half a dozen new

approaches. As a last resort we could put a picture of—well, maybe one of your—what's that word, Dvanethy spaceships, on the cover of both Branzell publications, and hope they'd see it. And you say one of them is a telepath—"

"A telempath," Landon corrected.

"Whatever. Anyway, Sylvia is a clairvoyant, which is about the same, isn't it? I'll bring her down here, and let her try to get in touch with them clairvoyantly. I'll check every service station and used car lot myself, and every hotel, rooming house or camp where they might be hiding out." His eyes glowed at Landon and he vowed, "Landon, I'll find them if I have to tear San Angelo apart house by house!"

And Landon could see that he meant it.

Liz was released from the hospital next morning, and Landon took her to his hotel room; he didn't dare to let her out of his sight, now, until she was safely on a plane for home. He had decided, over a sleepless night, that he wouldn't drag her one step further on this chase. The party was getting too rough.

Another thought kept sneaking into the back attics of his brain; that Liz or Marcus or both, willing or unwilling, might be a Rhu'inn agent, tool or dupe. Anything could lie behind the safe fence of Marcus' shuttlethinking. And while Liz seemed transparent, Landon had learned in a

hard school to distrust his judgment where he was personally involved.

"And now, Liz, tell me everything that happened."

"I'm still not sure. Ned Marcus wanted to check all the railroad and bus terminals, to see if they'd come into San Angelo, or left, that way. We were in the bus station, and I saw a girl—and a hunchback—"

The word *bus station* rang an invisible alarm bell in Landon's mind. "Go on," he said grimly.

"I don't know why, but it occurred to me that the hunchback answered the description of Mathis, and he was looking at Marcus as if he recognized him. I started to ask Marcus about him. Then—" her eyes dimmed again, "I don't remember another thing until I woke up in the hospital."

He was silent for so long that Liz stared. Finally he said "Liz, did you call the Highway Patrol and give them the number of the Arriagos truck?"

"Why, no. We decided not to, remember?"

"Well," he said a little grimly, "Some one did. I suppose it could have been Foster, but still—Branzell and I checked four used-car lots, last night, and we found the truck in one of them. This was lying on the running board." He tossed the plastic tube to her.

She slid her hands over the broken calibrator. "It looks like a Buck Rogers toy of some sort."

"It isn't," he said, and took it back. "The attendant at the car

lot didn't want to talk about it, but Branzell got him to admit that whoever was driving the truck had been picked up by the police. Branzell's checking with the city police now to make sure whether they've been deported. But I think this is the end of the line."

He sank into a chair, his hands clasped on his knees.

"I give up, Liz. I'm sunk, I've got to get back to New York and salvage my position, or what's left of it. Branzell's on the ragged edge of giving away the whole show by some big grab for publicity. Ned Marcus has gone, and he's got the radiobromine residue. If the FBI get hold of it—and they might—the first thing they'll do is to search my New York apartment, and I've got parts of a telepathic damper and an augmentator and half-a-dozen other things I can't have found." Also, though he didn't say so, he had to check and see if Vialmir was still alive. If not—and he couldn't find the unknown telempath, to get the message from Earth that Rhu'inn were here again—well, he didn't even want to think about that.

"Clint, you can't abandon them now!"

Landon reached for her, obeying an impulse as irresistible as the moment itself. But before the embrace could complete itself, a surge of isolation of icy rationality, washed over him. He schooled his overflowing emotion into manageable proportions and said, in a voice hoarse with all

he was repressing, "Liz, you're—you're a miracle. Bless you, girl. But—but I have to go back. Don't worry about them, too much. They'll adapt. I did."

"Did you?" He read condemnation in her dark eyes. She turned toward the door without looking at him again. "If you're serious, I'll go and make flight reservations."

She was gone long enough for Landon to begin worrying about her again; but just as he was about to go downstairs and start searching, she returned, with Steve Branzell in tow. Branzell looked jubilant, and Landon felt like pin-pricking his enthusiasm. He asked sourly, "Can we get a flight home?"

"We can. But I want you to wait for a phone call first," Branzell said. "And before you get sore at me for meddling—"

Landon got up. He advanced on Branzell, and his eyes were terrible, shocked out of caution by a stark fear that held no hint of cowardice. "What have you done?" he demanded, "I swear, if you've given me away—"

"Sit down!" Liz Curran's voice iced over. "And listen. I did what we should have done the first day, instead of sneaking around like an interplanetary Sherlock Holmes. I went on the assumption that you were Clint Landon, a respectable business man, not Space Ranger or the lord high muckety-muck of Mars, and that these people were re-

spectable cottonpickers instead of lurking fugitives from outer space!"

Landon was so shocked by her manner that he did sit down. "You mean you don't believe—"

"Of course we believe everything you've told us," Branzell said placatingly. "I'm talking about what we want the authorities to believe. I wouldn't have had any legitimate reason to do it, but as your secretary, she could do it."

"Do *what*?" Landon demanded.

"I went to the police," Liz began. "I gave them one of your business cards, and identified myself as your private secretary. I told them that you had found out that some distant relatives from Mexico had come into this country illegally, and that while you were trying to find them and relieve their hardships, you discovered that they had been picked up—I told them how—and maybe deported. Could we find out where and how? After hearing my sad but essentially true tale," Liz gave a tiny ironic grin, "the policeman made four telephone calls at the expense of the taxpayers. Then he informed me that one Arran Reydel and one Ray Reydel had been held in the county jail for two days, and at this moment were being flown back to Mexico with a group of other illegal entrants. He suggested that you wire the airport at the border, and have them held there. Then you could talk to them by telephone, and if they turned out to be your

long-lost grandsons or cousins or nephews or whatever, you could meet them at the border and bring them legally into the country."

Landon felt stunned at the marvelous simplicity of it all. "Do you think we should do that?"

"*Should* do it, hell!" Steve Branzell said, "I *did* it already. They'll be telephoning you at this hotel as soon as the plane lands down there. You'd better be thinking up what you'll say in case this Reydel turns out to be a perfectly ordinary young Mexican with a talent for bullfighting."

CHAPTER 12

LAREDO lay hot, dry and solitary in the noonday sun, and Arran looked around, suspiciously. "You don't suppose it could be a trap?"

Reidel was irritated at himself for sharing Arran's unease. "No, I talked to him myself, yesterday. He spoke to me in Dvanethy. There may have been delays—" he never finished the sentence. The waiting-room door opened and a man and a tall young woman came toward them. For a heartstopping moment, Reidel thought the woman was Cleta; then he saw her unfamiliar face and stopped, sick with disappointment.

At last he found his voice and his nerve.

"You're—" he started to say Clannon; said, "Landon?"

"Reidel? Or Arran?" Even a stranger less sensitive than Reidel would have sensed the warmth in his voice. "It's good to see you. You've led me some chase."

"How did you find us, Watcher?" Arran asked in Dvanethy.

"It's a long story, and if you don't mind, we'll speak English or Spanish. Also, it would be wise to get the formalities over as quickly as possible. 'I'm sure we'll have no trouble at the border.'"

They didn't. Landon was not even required to sign a guarantee; they were issued tourist cards and told to register their addresses if they stayed in the country six months. Then, since neither Reidel nor Arran could produce evidence of recent vaccination, they were turned over summarily to a local doctor for the process, to which Reidel submitted with amused curiosity, and Arran with a glowering resentment. If they had been alone, Reidel would cheerfully have hit him.

At last they were aboard the Northbound plane, and in the semi-isolation of rear seats Landon could tell them, step by step, how he located them. With tension gone and the disgrace of imprisonment behind him, Reidel's thoughts reverted to their original pattern and once again he became concerned for the others.

"It hasn't occurred to me to ask where we're going, Clan—" he caught and corrected himself,

"Landon. But shouldn't we try to find the others?"

"I'm sorry." Landon said it with reluctance, foreseeing the misery that would settle over his face when he said it. "I have friends there who are trying to locate them, and they'll do their best, but at present—" he explained, without elaborating, why he must get back to New York as soon as possible.

"As soon as it's safe, every resource I have will be at your service to find them."

"By which time," Arran muttered, they'll be so well hidden that a telempath with a planetary scanner couldn't find them!"

Landon frowned at the interpolated Dvaneth words, but for once let them pass. Reidel said shrewdly, "You're not really asking us. It's an order, isn't it?"

Landon felt uncomfortable. "I wouldn't put it that way. I'm older than you, and have more experience—"

"—and resources," Arran muttered.

"Precisely," Landon kept his voice cheerful.

"Of course you know best, sir, but they're women, and young. I can't help worrying."

"Reidel, there's no use arguing," Arran said. "We're at his mercy."

Landon did not try to answer, knowing nothing could placate Arran's sullen determination to resent everything he said and did. Reidel, too, was inwardly re-

bellious, but at least Reidel was trying to be agreeable.

New York, when they landed, roused even Arran to reluctant interest. Reidel fretted, "It's almost too big! I hadn't the least idea anything here was so large, or so complex!"

Landon reassured, "Don't worry. In some ways it will be easier to find them than on a less complex world. There are better methods of communication and travel."

At Landon's apartment Reidel walked to the window, looking down at the streets of a city which compared with any on any world. As on that first night, without his knowledge, Reidel's adaptability was working again.

A moment later Landon took them into the guest room and then went into the living room to catch up on the stacked mail.

Presently Reidel and Arran joined him, washed and brushed and freshly clothed, and Landon gestured. "Just looking over the work that piled up while I was away."

"What do you do? When you're not hunting strays, that is?"

Landon chuckled. "I don't have to do much of that. I'm a Methods analyst—I help manufacturers set up assembly lines and factory layouts and so forth." He explained in more detail; Arran listened, fascinated, and Landon remembered that this youngster was an apprentice engineer who had already reached the Rim Room of a starship. He sug-

gested, "Perhaps you can go to engineering school here. It would give you background, technical vocabulary."

"Engineering school here?" Arran flung the Dvanethy words like an obscenity. "If there's anything resembling engineering here, I learned it before I could feed myself with a spoon! Why, they use internal-combustion engines! Go to school to *them*?"

Reidel started to speak, but Landon gestured him to silence. This was the time to force a showdown. "You can do as you please about that. However, I must ask one thing—or insist on it, as your superior under Dvaneth law."

Arran's face twisted in derision. "We're a good long way outside the jurisdiction."

"Call it a personal favor, then. I'd appreciate it if you'd speak English—Spanish if you prefer—at *all times*, and avoid references to our common past except when I consider it safe. This is the only thing I do ask of you, and it's for my own protection."

His tone silenced Arran completely.

Landon started rummaging around the apartment, collecting the scattered boxes of loose parts. "Make yourselves at home, I've a report to make." Briefly he told them about his interrupted call to Vialmir.

He spread his work out on the table. Arran came and watched, his face schooled to indifference—he had had enough of

Landon's rebukes for one day. Landon, aware of his interest, said, "I dismantle the augmentator whenever I leave town."

"Do you have—" Arran stopped; said defiantly, "I don't *know* the English words!"

Landon said, ready to take advantage of his momentary accessibility, "If you're interested, I'll tell you the names."

"I could put them together while you do. I've done this any number of times. For my apprentice examination, I had to take apart and rebuild a matrix damper blindfolded."

"Carry on, then." Landon watched the skilled young hands articulating the components, unerringly separating the red-her-ring junk from the augmentator parts. Arran would have no trouble making a place for himself here, once he'd picked up the rudiments of a technical vocabulary and discarded his arrogant assumption of superiority. Landon, who had the technology of two planets at his fingertips, had a solid respect for that of Earth.

They finished, and he activated the augmentator.

The call went unanswered.

Landon scowled, opened the mechanism and painstakingly checked every item of Arran's articulation. It proved to be perfect. Once again, he laboriously calibrated the mechanism and once again the call went unanswered.

He waited, his courage dropping to the breaking point. At

last he let himself slide heavily into a chair.

It might mean nothing. Vialmir's augmentator might be out of commission, or Vialmir otherwise occupied, or atmospheric conditions unsatisfactory. But the answer he feared most seemed most likely; Vialmir had been killed or shocked out of functioning ability by that blazing attack.

That made it imperative. At the risk of secrecy, at the risk of reputation, at the risk of all their lives, Mathis had to be found. The frail cripple might be this world's only bulwark against unimaginable danger.

Telepath and empath, trained to detect the nonhuman Rhu'inn, Mathis was the only person on the planet now who might help.

And no one knew where Mathis was.

CHAPTER 13

HE WAS debating whether to make a second telephone call to Steve Branzell, emphasizing the terrifying urgency of finding Mathis without delay, when there were steps in the hallway, and a knock. He gestured to Reidel to open the door, and, looking past him, saw two men in the corridor.

Both were dressed in grey business suits, both unsmiling, though one was tall and thin-faced and the other chubby and slightly bald. The chubby one took a leather folder from his pocket and opened it; at his look

of consternation, Landon came and motioned him aside.

"I own this apartment, gentlemen. May I see those credentials, please?"

"Special Investigator Platt, and this is Jorgenson," the chubby man said. Landon glanced at the credentials and handed them back. With unruffled politeness, he conducted them into the apartment.

"You know why we're here, Landon?"

"I haven't the least idea."

It was chubby-faced Platt who did the talking. "We're informed that you recently made a trip to Texas, more particularly to the vicinity of the rocket bases there."

"If I was within a hundred miles of any rocket base, I didn't know it." Landon's puzzlement was perfectly genuine. He hadn't the slightest interest in rocket bases. Present-day rockets were too ineffective to interest him.

Platt consulted a notebook. "You stayed in Texas a month, neglecting some very good business offers. Can you explain?"

Landon leaned against the mantelpiece. "I don't understand this. Do I have to explain? Frankly, I didn't know it was against the law to neglect my business."

The trace of a smile flickered on Pratt's mouth. "We don't care if your business goes broke. But just what *were* you doing in Texas?"

"I found some Mexican rel-

atives of mine were having a hard time. I located them, and brought a couple of young cousins back with me."

"I see." Platt snapped his notebook shut and asked, with jarring abruptness, "And what about radioactive bromine?"

There was a full stop.

Landon's brain was circling wildly, but his manner betrayed nothing. "I beg your pardon?"

"You'd better not kid around, Landon. In the first place—" Platt crossed the room to the augmentator, "What is *this* gadget? We checked this apartment on a call from the FBI in Austin and found it full of loose electronic gadgets—"

"Gentlemen," Landon murmured, "electronics is my business!"

"Yes. Then we recovered, from a car you've been driving, a jar of code-designated fuel residues—"

Ned Marcus. The name flashed like a red light as Platt continued, "We have some reason to wonder if you are not, perhaps, communicating with—let's say, illegal destinations. Do you mind if we search the apartment for a radio transmitter?"

Landon almost laughed, the thought was so absurd. "A transmitter of that power? In an apartment this size? Sure, search away! Are you hiding an atomic furnace in your pocket?" The gaunt Jorgenson snickered, subdued under Platt's frown.

"If you find anything resembling a radio, I'll eat it. As for

the augmentator—well, get a radio expert to look it over, if you want to.”

“No need,” Jorgenson said grimly, “I was a radio expert in the last war.” He approached the augmentator gingerly. “What did you call this mockup?”

“A telepathic augmentator.”

“A telewhich?”

Landon spelled it, deadpan.

“Huh,” said Jorgenson, without inflection. “I won’t electrocute myself on it, will I? Looks like a radio man’s nightmare.”

“No cords, no batteries.” Landon released the catch, exposing the mechanisms. The detective knelt, examining the coils and tubes with meticulous competence.

“Inspector Platt, what else am I supposed to have done?”

“I’m not exactly at liberty—” Platt reflected a minute. “I can say this. A month ago, Civil Defense tracked something on radar which might have been a large meteor or small aircraft. You made an unexplained trip to that vicinity. There was an unexplained murder, too, and the victim—we did some checking, too—wasn’t a Mexican migrant, whatever the local police said. Analysis of stomach contents proved he hadn’t bought his last meal in *this* country. Then we find you salvaging coded fuel residue.”

Landon stared. Platt had come so close to the truth that it was a temptation to tell the whole truth. He said, with desperate earnestness, “Tell me one thing.

Is anyone on earth actually using allotropic bromine for fuel? A practical rocket fuel, that is?”

Platt said laconically, “Now they are. If you know so much—what happened to the wreckage?”

“There wasn’t any wreckage,” Landon said wearily. “The mechanism was set to destroy the craft after surfacing. It imploded to free neutrons, hydrogen and radioactive carbon, and if you can tell me there’s any nation on Earth that’s mastered *that* process, you’re a fool or a liar.”

Platt didn’t answer that. “Jorgenson, what about the radio?”

“Radio!” Jorgenson used an unprintable phrase and brushed dust from his knees. “It wouldn’t send a radio wave to Flatbush. It’s just dummy tubes—glass and crystal—a fancy fake. Of course,” he added slowly, “I couldn’t tell whether it really does anything, offhand I’d say not, but I wouldn’t stake my year’s salary on it. I can only say it isn’t a radio.”

“That’s all we wanted to know.” Platt turned to go. “You’ll hear from us, Landon. Stay where we can find you.”

“So you’ll run back to headquarters,” Landon said bitterly. “And when the scientists get through analyzing the crystal-line structure of the radiobromine, and all the red tape has been cut, you’ll decide it really wasn’t made on Earth. And then you’ll go through some more red

tape," his voice was savage now, "and finally you'll ask me what I know, and call a session of psychiatrists to decide whether to believe me. And by then it will be too late."

Platt looked embarrassed, even distressed. "Look, Landon. We know you're mixed up with that Branzell nut and his saucers. We've checked Branzell all the way back to his crib. If we could do the same for you, we wouldn't have bothered you at all. The Bill of Rights gives the man a right to make a damned fool of himself any way he wants to. But there was the chance you were using him to cover for something else. Let me give you some advice, Landon—you and all the other saucer nuts. The next time you stumble on something like this, call the FBI and *keep out of it.*"

When they had gone, Landon sank in a chair and buried his head in his hands. "And there," he said, "goes the reputation of Clint Landon, Methods analyst. That about finishes it."

Reidel looked unhappy. "I hate to think we've gotten you into this trouble."

"It's not your fault. I'd have had to locate the radiobromine even if you'd all died in the crash. But do you realize what it means, if Earth is using radiobromine?"

"Well," Arran wanted to know, "what else is there to use?"

"That's exactly the point. There's been no space travel here because they've been working on

the wrong lines for fuel. But if they've discovered the allotropic bromine, that means they're within a year or two of interplanetary — even interstellar — travel. They might flounder around awhile, but they'll get it eventually."

Now he had to contact Vialmir, if only to insure that the message got through—this particular Closed Planet was no longer safely isolated by inability to climb past its own atmosphere. He started to explain this, but before he had made much progress, there was another knock.

"What now?" Landon demanded. He was tempted not to answer it at all. Then, expecting that it might be Liz Curran, he went and opened the door.

Ned Marcus was standing in the hallway.

"This," said Landon, "is the last straw." He started to slam the door, but Marcus caught and held it. "Hold on! I know I owe you an apology—"

"An explanation, maybe."

"I—had to save my own neck. The FBI picked me up for questioning about that killing again, and they found that radioactive gook in the back of the car. So I—told them it was something of yours. What else could I do? They were talking about crashed Russian planes and fuel stolen from Cape Canaveral. But as soon as I could, I came to see this thing through."

"You mean, to be in at the kill!" Landon glared. Abruptly

he realized they were still standing in the doorway. "Come inside, then, I'm not going to stand in the hall and argue."

Marcus came in. He saw Reidel and looked at him with mutual recognition. He said to Landon, "Why get sore at me? You found them anyhow, I see."

"Didn't you let Mathis slip through your fingers in the bus station in San Angelo?"

There was a curious glint in Ned Marcus' eyes, but it subsided. "Never saw or heard of him."

Landon said, "I'll believe you if you let me make a full telepathic examination."

"Whatever that is."

Landon's thoughts recoiled again, flatly, from the shuttle-thinking surface.

He was sure it was deliberate. The ordinary nontelepath is vulnerable to any telepath who knows his language and can prod the right mental trigger. But Marcus was oblivious to the roughest force Landon could use, short of murder. It was like deafness. An ordinary deaf man can't hear you talking, but if you shout he can hear something, and if you get a transistor hearing aid with bone conduction, he hears fairly well.

But Marcus was like a man in whom the aural nerve has atrophied before birth, who has no idea of the nature of sound. No, Landon thought. Not even like that. Marcus was a shuttle-thinker, for which there was no analogy at all.

Marcus seemed totally oblivious. He was talking to Arran and Reidel about the search, casually. Then he asked Landon, "Can't you prove the whole thing to the FBI by giving them the formula for that fuel?"

Landon stared, finally laughed. "I'm an administrator, not a professional spaceman. I probably know less about rocket fuels than you do! But I couldn't give anyone the formula even if I knew it, I'm not allowed to interfere in the internal affairs of earth. Giving any one nation technological advances over the others would constitute interference."

"Even when that one nation is maintaining world peace?"

"Go wave your flag somewhere else!"

Arran broke in, "But I do know the fuel formulas, Clannon. If you need them, to keep out of trouble—"

Landon swung away from Marcus, deadly menace in his eyes. "No, Arran. I forbid that—even to save my life or yours! Dvaneth law forbids any Closed Planet from having such things without authorization."

"They'll get it anyway from that residue," Arran blurted out, "and according to that detective, they're discovering it themselves."

Landon looked troubled, for Arran was perfectly right. "If I could contact Vialmir and get authorization—"

"Can't you do anything under your own initiative?" Arran

asked with a shadow of contempt.

Landon said a flat, final, "No."

Meanwhile Marcus was looking speculatively at Reidel. "If nothing else," he said, "I could help these two get acquainted with the city." He sent a shrewd glance at Arran and said the one thing calculated to stop Landon's possible objections at their source;

"Or don't you trust them out without you?"

When he put it that way, there was nothing Landon could say. For the time being, Marcus had to be accepted at his face value. His two guests were old enough to take care of themselves, theoretically anyway.

In some ways it was a relief to see the three young men go.

CHAPTER 14

THE college lecture room was deserted at this hour, a bleak grey room with tables chipped and marred by absent-minded pencils. It was made to seat two hundred men, and the slightest step or whisper echoed endlessly against the plastered walls.

Ned Marcus, scribbling hasty figures, glanced at Arran, and the boy took the pencil and turned the paper to sketch a quick diagram. "I don't know your terminology, but—coiled wire here—you coat them with the special damping compound, or the reaction gets back to your hand and paralyzes it. You

figure the grounding potential—"

Reidel scowled and hit the desk with his fist.

"I don't like this, Arran!"

"What else can we do? Clannon's fumbling around like a blind worm. He simply doesn't realize there's no time for his methods. Aren't we trying to help him?"

"I don't understand what you are doing."

"Marcus is putting lab facilities at my disposal—" Arran gestured, "and I can redesign and rebuild the broken shocker. His government won't call us cranks if we have something to demonstrate."

"The internal affairs of this planet—"

"Once and for all," Arran grated, "we are outside Dvaneth law! Landon means well, but he's been conditioned to hopeless inefficiency. It's time someone new took over!"

Reidel subsided. He didn't know what else he could do. Marcus was explaining, "Not everybody can get lab privileges, but a college friend of mine is on the faculty here. He trusts me not to blow the place up."

"Not with this, anyhow!" Arran chuckled.

"This is a chemistry lab, not electronics, but I thought it would be best because of that atomic-weights chart there." He indicated the wall-chart and Arran went and examined it.

"The symbols are different, and the drawing, of course," he

said, "but yes, it's the same old periodic table of elements." He came back to check the equipment piled on the demonstration table. "Heat equipment, clamps and tongs, wire—copper wire won't work if we're going to step this up to a lethal charge. We could fudge up a demonstration model with copper, but we should have—" he stepped back to the chart of elements, ran his finger down the atomic-weights of metals. Marcus translated where his finger pointed. "Iridium, tungsten, silver—there might be silver wire in the medical building, they use it in surgery. What else?"

"Silicone powder or silicon paper, quartz crystals and equipment for cleaving them—"

Reidel was so lost in trying to decide what to do that he lost track of the conversation. When he picked it up, Marcus was saying in an urgent undertone, "It doesn't matter! Pretty soon this nation will be the only one—" he broke off abruptly, looking at Reidel. "You still there? We're going to try and get hold of some silver wire. We'll be back."

Reidel pretended to be sleepier than he was. He laid his arms on the table, dropping his head into them, and said through a yawn, "Let me know when you're finished."

He heard their footfalls die away before he raised his head and looked around. Smashing or interfering with their equipment wouldn't delay them much; anyhow, it didn't belong to Marcus

and Reidel guessed the laws against vandalism didn't change much from world to world. Arran's diagram of the shocker lay on the bench. Reidel turned it over in his hands. He couldn't make head or tail of it. He crumpled it into his pocket and went out of the lab and down the stairs. If he had them figured right, they'd pay no more attention to his absence than they had to his presence. Sometimes it was a good thing to be underestimated.

He walked in on Landon like a black thundercloud, forcing the diagram into his hands. Landon untangled the paper and let out a long, low whistle of dismay.

"And a lethal calibration figured—the damned idiots!" Grimmouthed, he flung it down. "We've got to stop them! Where are they?"

Reidel told him, and Landon crossed the room, pulled open a drawer and took out a murderous looking pistol. "You'd better know," he said, as he broke and loaded it, "that I'm prepared to kill them both before I let this happen." He paused, scribbled a few lines on a card, and said, "If I'm killed or arrested—take this to Steve Branzell." He wrote down the address. "It explains how to use the augmentator. Find Marcus if you can; if not, let Branzell decide what to do."

He started to leave. "I'm coming, too," Reidel said grimly, "Arran's *my* responsibility."

"All right, but hurry. We haven't much time."

The lecture room was locked now, no light penetrating the door. Landon asked, "You're sure it's the right room?"

"Positive."

"All right." Landon bent, just touching the lock with one finger. After a minute Reidel heard the mechanism snap back and the door swung open. Landon was breathing more heavily than usual. "I didn't know I could still do that. But they've gone, all right. You didn't hear their plans?"

"No," Reidel swore. "I should have stayed and made sure."

"No. They wouldn't have discussed anything definite in front of you, once you'd definitely formed your opinion. Marcus is probably still clairvoyant behind that shuttlethinking — " He broke off and swore again. "That shuttlethinking. Why didn't I think of that? But let's get out of here before the night watchman has us in jail for breaking and entering!"

They cut, in silence, across the deserted city block that was the college campus. "I should have probed Arran's mind when he first started arguing with me. As for Marcus—if I'd gotten him under the augmentator—but no, I couldn't take a chance, it was too big a risk—"

"Clint—" Reidel began.

"If you have any questions, Reidel, save them! I have enough unanswered ones, right now. But

if you have any bright ideas, for heaven's sake let's see them."

"Just where, exactly, are we heading?"

Landon stopped short. Exactly nothing would be gained by wandering around Brooklyn with a loaded gun in his pocket.

"There's an automat down the street. Let's talk things over first. I'd suggest a drink, but we need real, not alcoholic courage."

To Reidel, the automat was the first really familiar thing on this planet. They took coffee and anonymous hunks of pie, and carried their trays to a table. Reidel looked doubtful.

"Can we talk here?"

"When you have private business to talk, take it to a public place—the more crowded, the better," said Landon, stating Rule One in a life of successful camouflage.

"You know best." Reidel put a fork in his pie, while Landon finally forced himself to think seriously about the possibility he had refused to face; that Liz or Marcus or both were working with Rhu'inn. He tried to explain it to Reidel and got nowhere.

"I thought the Rhu'inn weren't human!"

"I mean—carrying one as a parasite."

"But why? People *don't* just join up with nonhumans against humanity?"

Landon stared at the tabletop, turning that over in his mind. What possible motive could

prompt a man to ally himself with mankind's oldest enemy? He saw that Reidel was gripping his fork until the knuckles popped white. "Do you—are you thinking Arran may be—one of them, too?"

Landon said an instant, unequivocal, "Hell, no. Your friend Mathis couldn't possibly have lived under the same roof for weeks without one of them suspecting and killing the other!"

Reidel felt better, but his voice was a strained parody of itself. "But *why*—"

"The Rhu'inn are incomprehensible from a purely human standpoint. Marcus—if it's Marcus—is probably convinced that his motives are purely altruistic. Marcus is intensely patriotic in a distorted way; violent in hatred of other racial and national groups. Maybe all his life he's secretly believed the world would be better if taken over by an intelligent ruling caste. And his education's been lopsided, technical without any compensating balance in the humanities." Suddenly he did not want to talk about it any more. "Come on, let's get moving."

Reidel kept back his questions, but was not surprised when they rang a doorbell and Liz Curran came into the vestibule of the tiny apartment, her face turning white as she saw them.

"Good Lord, Mr. Landon, it's midnight! Come in, but be quiet; the old biddies here would love to spread the story that I en-

certain men at this hour. What's happened, are the police after you?"

"Not yet." Landon let Liz close the door after them. A dark tailored robe was wrapped high around her throat, and her face, innocent of lipstick, looked pale and strained. "Let me get dressed, Clint, and make some coffee. I need it, if you don't. What's gone wrong?"

Landon said, "I've got to do something I should have done when this first started. I want both of you to let me make a full telepathic examination. Reidel, you first."

He had a good reason for that. Reidel was used to such procedures on Dvaneth, his matter-of-factness might make it seem less bizarre for Liz.

"Any time," Reidel said, trying not to show his disturbance. He didn't like it . . . his fists knotted, gripping the arm of the chair.

Landon said aloud, "Relax. It's normal to think of everything you'd like to hide, everybody does. But I'm not interested in your private life." After a moment the ringing pressure lightened. "You're clear, of course. Liz?"

This, of course, was what he had been dreading. The probe of Reidel had been waste motion for her benefit. But now it had narrowed down shockingly to Liz or Marcus, and it wasn't fair, or safe, to assume that it *had* to be Marcus.

Liz Curran's face was completely drained of color. "I'm not going to do it," she said in a whisper. "I'm not—some alien monstrosity—but if you can't believe—" she turned and fled into the other room, a sob hanging in the air behind her. The men stared at one another, Reidel mute with distress, Landon in an agony of suspicion and misery. He found himself gripping the pistol in his pocket. Then a shaken, red-eyed Liz reappeared and said in a low voice, "All right, Clint. Then get the hell out of my apartment and out of my life."

"Liz, I hate to do this—"

"That's easy to say, isn't it?" Her shoulders shook with the violence of her sobs, and her lovely dark eyes were rimmed with pale crimson. Reidel was shivering with the backlash of transferred emotion before Landon lifted a haggard, drained face.

"You're clear, Liz. I'm sorry about all this."

The woman's lips barely moved. "I—hope—you're satisfied!"

"Liz—my dear, my dear—"

She struck his arm down. "I'm not your dear," she said, her cheeks flaming, and now her rigidity began to be shaken by violent trembling.

"You — can't do this to me too!"

Landon's arms were around her, now. He said huskily, "I'd never—have had the nerve to say it—I'm not . . ." His voice

trailed into incoherence. She sobbed wildly for a moment, then dug her face into his shirt front.

Reidel got up, helplessly. He said in a mutter, "I'm going out in the kitchen and see about that coffee . . ."

By three in the morning they were all quieted. Liz was very subdued now, snuggled into the curve of Landon's arm. The Watcher's face wore a slightly foolish expression, but Reidel envied him anyhow.

"The time's past for concealment. We'll have to take our chances on the truth. If we win, any means will be justified," Landon said, "and if we don't nothing will make any difference any more."

The phone rang. Liz reached for it. "Hello?" She listened, said another startled, "Hello?" and then said, "good grief, do you know what time it is? Well, as a matter of fact, he's here." She covered the mouthpiece with her hand and said, bewildered, "It's Steve Branzell. He says he's been calling your apartment every hour all night, and called me as a last resort. He's found them—found Mathis . and the others, and they're about to board the plane for New York."

Landon caught the phone from her hand.

"Steve? You found—yes, but listen, there's no time for that now. Is Sylvia Marcus with you?" Reidel heard confused noises from the phone, and Landon swore. "Yes, yes, but I don't

give a damn if you *do* have to hold up the plane—no, don't give me that—Steve, this is no time to be funny! Life or death? I wish it was half as simple as life or death! You get Sylvia to this phone and get her here fast!"

Liz stared, appalled, for Clint Landon was shouting, his face white and distorted. After a long time he spoke into the receiver, this time more gently.

"Sylvia? Think carefully, child. Have you ever been able to read your brother's mind?"

Silence. Reidel and Liz exchanged baffled glances.

"Until recently?" Landon's voice caught, so that he actually had to breathe twice between the two words. "Sylvia, listen, this is more important than you can possibly guess. Can you remember exactly *when* — " he paused, "yes, I know, we call it shuttlethinking, but when did he first start it?"

Slowly, a look of horror stole over his face. His voice was a drained shred of itself. "That day *I* came to the house with him? Yes. I remember, he said, *No Sis, cut it out.*" He had to stop and breathe again. "Sylvia, I can't explain now, go and board the plane. I'll meet you at the airport. But whatever you do—if your brother Ned meets you, stay away from him on any excuse whatever. Tell Steve—no don't tell him anything, I'll explain when you get here. Just trust me." He hung up and Rei-

del said, "He's found them? Found Cleta?"

"And all of them," Landon said in a heavy tone that made Reidel shrink with dread, "and I'm beginning to wish he hadn't."

The taxi seemed to crawl through the jammed streets. Landon held Liz Curran's hand, sharing the short time before the arrival of the others forced duty on Landon again. And watching him, Reidel understood himself as well.

To Landon, the other five were strangers. Landon would do his duty by them, he was even prepared to like them; but they were strangers. Where Reidel, through an acceptance of the duty thrust on him—equally reluctant at first—had formed an indissoluble tie.

Now and for always Cleta *was* his wife, and the physical mating, whenever it happened, would only confirm an existing pattern, not create a new one. Dionie and Linnit had a claim on him only slightly less than the claim of paternity. And Arran, although so few years his junior, could as well have been his son. These things were facts. They didn't need explaining; they just *were*.

The airport was crowded, an orderly confusion that reminded Reidel, with nostalgic force, of Dvaneth. Uniformed men fussed with rolling steps, and Reidel saw women in furs, men in business suits. Then he saw Cleta at the top of the steps and his excitement caught fire. He wanted to shout frantically. Linnit look-

ed tired and cold, the baby a sleeping bundle in her arms. Dionie's odd intent eyes sought and found Reidel immediately through the crowd. A man Reidel did not know had his hand on Mathis' shoulder as they came together down the steps. Reidel started toward them when a sudden shrill scream, cut through the noises of the crowd, touching off a rustle of panic. Dionie threw herself, still screaming, at Mathis. She wrapped her thin arms around the dwarf's neck and hurled him to the ground. Reidel fought through the crowd, elbowing, cursing. Somehow he forced his way through to them as Ned Marcus appeared from behind the baggage tractor. His hand came up, holding a crimson tube from which blossomed a flower of orange flame. The flame missed Mathis as he fell in a heap of Dionie's arms and legs, and Steve Branzell, with a hoarse cry of pain, staggered and fell, crashing down full length at the foot of the steps. It seemed to happen slowly, but within seconds Marcus was bracing the tube again. Reidel vaulted Branzell's fallen body and leaped; then a sturdy dark-haired boy behind Ned Marcus struck up the barrel of the shocker and the orange flame flared harmlessly in the air. The three men collided and Reidel felt Arran's fist thud into his ribs as he grappled for the shocker. Someone grabbed him and hauled him bodily off them. Then Marcus was staring into

the blued muzzle of Clint Landon's pistol.

"Drop it! Drop that shocker!"

The crowd edged backward, noisy with a muddle of sounds. Then a new voice rose in deep-throated authority. "Ladies and gentlemen, please step back slowly, and no one will be hurt. Don't anybody move!"

A queer hush settled over the crowd as they tried to obey these contradictory orders. Reidel saw blue uniforms everywhere, and the voice of authority was that of the chubby FBI man, Inspector Platt. Two policemen stepped forward, one to snap handcuffs on Marcus; the other to bend, gingerly, for the fallen shocker. Arran, panting and a little dazed, allowed himself to be handcuffed to Ned Marcus.

"Landon, I'll trouble you for that pistol," Platt said, then shouted, whirling. "Grab him! Stop him!"

Marcus, still handcuffed, had made a break for freedom, dragging Arran with him. The crowd wavered, streamed back. Platt was dancing with rage. "Grab him! Get him! Shoot if you have to—"

"No! Don't kill him!" Mathis bellowed, hauling himself to his feet, "not in a crowd like this or we'll all have to die! Can't you see that's what he's trying to make you do?"

Platt shouted incoherent orders. The pistols vanished and Marcus went down in a welter of blue uniforms, dragging Ar-

ran down too. He fought blindly; it took a dozen men to subdue Marcus and, at a hastily-shouted plea from Mathis, whose very hysterical intensity won credence, to unchain Arran from his wrists. Arran gave them no more trouble, slumped between two policemen.

Ned Marcus, too, stood beaten at last, hanging almost unconscious between his captors. He had fought so savagely that they had been forced to be brutal, and his face was a mass of rapidly discoloring bruises and blood. Sylvia screamed when she saw him and even Landon was sickened by the beating the kid had taken. He had to remind himself, forcefully, that Marcus wasn't just a beaten-up youngster.

Marcus squinted through his good eye and mumbled, "Let me—speak to m'sister—"

Platt looked distressed. Marcus pointed Sylvia out, and the FBI man motioned her forward. Sylvia lifted her face, reluctantly, then a scream of terror ripped her frail throat apart. She flung herself on Landon in a frenzy. "Oh, take it away, take it away," she babbled, "It's not Ned, it isn't, it's not even human, don't let it get me, don't, don't—" the words broke into tearing sobs.

The police had cleared the field by now, and Platt put a hand on Landon's shoulder. "We've wasted enough time. You're all under arrest."

As if to confirm his statement, a policeman shepherded Liz

and Cleta, politely but firmly, toward another patrol car, while a sturdy police matron approached the hysterical Sylvia, and men jumped from a hastily summoned ambulance and ran to lift the unconscious form of Steve Branzell.

"All of us? On what grounds? You're not taking the women and children to jail too, are you?"

"Any grounds you please. Assault with a deadly weapon. Undesirable alien. Disturbing the peace, if I can't make anything else stick. And we're not taking any of you to jail," Platt told him. "All of you, Landon—or Clannon, if you prefer—are going upriver to Albany. And you're going in front of Civil Defense and demonstrate that space radio gadget. Then, if you want to tell your spaceship story again, we'll listen."

Landon blinked. "I don't understand—"

Platt turned toward a newspaper kiosk at the edge of the field and snatched up a paper. He pointed;

SAUCERS FLY AGAIN!

Businessman Claims To Be Planet's Guardian; FBI Confirms Story!

Branzell had picked the right moment, for once, to cry wolf. And it looked as if he'd been killed for it.

With no further reason to resist, Landon allowed himself to be taken along with the group.

CHAPTER 15

LATE the next day, Landon stood in a long glass-windowed room, staring into the augmentator. His hands were not quite steady as he adjusted the mechanism, and he wondered half seriously if he should give the damping device another turn to compensate for the seething anxieties and tensions that were almost an audible vibration in the room. The place was full of strange faces.

Technically, he was a prisoner. Against the low hills of the Helderbergs he could see the WAC barracks where the women had been quartered for the time being—mostly to keep them away from curious eyes.

So far there had been little leakage to the press. Even the riot at the airport had been killed to an inside page. The military had taken over and they wanted no fantastic rumors spreading, however true. Not even his most fanatic followers knew that Steve Branzell, partially paralyzed but alive, was recovering in the Base hospital. Ned Marcus, and for the present Arran too, were locked in maximum-security cells; Mathis, after a full probe, had pronounced Arran clear, but everybody wasn't convinced.

Mathis said, somewhere behind Landon, "You see, as long as Marcus is alive, then—as far as we know—he's the only person actually carrying one of them—of course, the word *one*

doesn't mean much with Rhu'inn—but their only physical extension into this dimension. And if we keep him alive and isolated, there's no possibility of transfer. But if Marcus should be killed before we get the nullifier established, then he might transfer to a host we'd never identify, and we never would get it set up."

"What I would like to know," said an army man, "is this; where did Marcus get his?"

"I think, from Kester," Mathis answered. "We found Kester unconscious in the lifeship bay, just before separation. The worst danger of interstellar travel is that the transition from warp to normal space takes place through what we call the Rhu'inn dimension."

"And Marcus found Kester's dead body," Landon said without turning.

"But why Marcus? Why not one of us?" Reidel asked. "We were actually there when Kester died!"

"I can only suggest theories," Mathis said, "but possibly my presence had something to do with it, even though I was sick and stunned and not functioning. I'm not sure—even if I had detected the presence of Rhu'inn, I might not have associated it with Kester. We'll never know."

Landon motioned for silence, for the sight frame of the augmentator was clearing and coming into focus. A face, weathered and bronzed by the fierce sun of the high plateaus, peered

from the screen; low-lidded eyes hidden by a peaked cap.

—Clannon. You are there?

Landon was too relieved to waste words. "Use vocal speech, will you, Vialmir? We have an audience." He touched an auxiliary control which would enhance the telepathic beam with sound transmission as well. Vialmir, in complete rapport with Landon—and with Mathis, for Landon had calibrated the augmentation beam to include him as well—had no trouble in expressing himself in any language they knew.

The men in the room were shifting nervously, and Landon turned to one of them, a middle-aged man with stars on his sleeve. "Would you care to talk to the Vialmir, General?"

Hesitant and suspicious, the General came into the augmentation field. "What do I do?"

"You don't have to speak aloud, but it's better if you do. Your actual words don't reach him, of course, but speaking will help you focus your thoughts. You're no telepath."

The General scowled. "No. I'm not. What happens if I say, *Mary had a Little Lamb*? Ventriloquism . . ."

Landon said hotly, "We can all leave the room under guard, if you'd prefer, and you and he can carry on any sort of conversation that will convince you!"

Vialmir interrupted from the augmentator screen, in clearly understandable English which oddly mimicked the General's

own pronounced Western accent, "Is it true that you have captured the tool of the Rhu'inn?"

The General looked shaken; he wasn't used to this sort of contact. Vialmir went on:

"Clannon tells me you intend to set up this new device, the nullifier."

"Whatever that is, yes."

"In that case you should know this," said Vialmir. "You have not been able to reach me, Clannon, since as soon as I touched the Rhu'inn through the augmentator I went into the telepathic trance for the total contact emergency signal to reach the Federation Centre. I have instructions for you, Clannon. There was one ship in this sector, the *Transformation* out of Vialles, and he was persuaded to come off course on the chance—"

Landon broke in with a quick, wordless command to Vialmir, well below the perceptive level of the others:

—No; don't tell them that. Definitely not.

What good would it do, to tell them that if the nullifier field could not be established, Earth would be moved into the ranks of Forbidden Stars—shunned, permanently guarded, even the Watcher no longer allowed to communicate with the Galaxy? What good would it do, to tell them that if Earth became a forbidden star, any future spaceships leaving Earth would be destroyed, sight unseen, not

allowed even to reach their own moon?

"—of course you know the *Transformation* couldn't land on a Closed Planet, under ordinary circumstances. He'd never be allowed to take off again. But if a nullifier field can be established in time, he has emergency permission to land and make preliminary contact. Would you care to talk to the Commander? I can re-channel his signals for you."

Landon felt a little stunned at this piece of luck—which of course wasn't really luck; this planet, though Closed, was on the regular trade routes and at one time had been a regular cross-roads of interstellar travel. All the more reason it must be prevented, if possible, from slipping back to the state of a Forbidden Star; if the whole system were Forbidden, it would mean costly re-computing of all the star-routes in this sector.

He explained all this to the men in the room. "The Commander of the *Transformation* probably won't be a telepath, and will be communicating by voice, not rapport, but it will be in a language you won't understand—Galactic Standard."

Reidel said huskily, "Vialles is Cleta's home planet, get her down here to translate!"

There were objections, but the General silenced them. "Go and get her, somebody."

Gradually the augmentator picture changed. The face of

Vialmir remained, a thin blurry frame; through and over it, like a double exposure, another picture took shape, a room or cabin filled with machinery which made the General lean forward and gasp. Vialmir was transmitting, by developed kinetic telepathy, a picture and a voice that were being received on his own considerably more complex interspatial receiver in the Himalayas.

The Rim Room of the starship was in sharp focus now, and the face of an elderly man with strong, sharply aquiline features.

"Commander Rivan, *Transformation*. Who's communicating?"

Cleta came in, escorted by a WAC sergeant. Landon motioned her forward and she came into the sight field, speaking quickly in her own language. "The ship was the Northwind, a colony ship—" she broke off. "Clannon, let me take your place in the augmentator." Landon, free of the necessity of remaining so deeply in rapport, translated the three-times-relayed conversation as it took place.

Commander Rivan said, "I congratulate you on your survival. There were others?"

Cleta named and identified the seven survivors. Rivan asked, "How soon can the nullifier be set up?"

Cleta conferred. "About three days of this planet's time," she said, and translated it into Standard units for Rivan. The

picture flickered in and out of focus for some minutes, and finally Rivan said, "The *Transformation* is already somewhat behind schedule. However, in view of the pending change in this Closed Planet's status, one way or the other—" another pause while the focus flickered, dim and bright—"If the nullifier field can be established within that time, we will come inside the field and land a small shuttle ship—" he talked for a moment with someone out of sight range; finally stipulating, "provided, of course, that the local authorities will provide suitably safeguarded landing space."

Cleta translated that and the General said hastily, "Yes, yes. Any safeguards they ask for!"

When that was relayed, Rivan said, "I'll try to get authority to leave one or two volunteers on Earth—I understand the place is a technical backwater—pending the arrival of an official contact crew. Meanwhile we can take off your survivors, if they're willing to be landed on Vialles."

Cleta's eyes widened and filled with tears. *To go home!* All the time she was relaying the details of landing arrangements, tears streamed down her face, and Reidel watched her, his heart drenched in a flood of ice. Cleta was going home and his own dreams meant nothing in the face of that. As for him—he'd see Dvaneth again, perhaps go into space again, and some day, when he was old, someone

would ask about the time he'd been spacewrecked on a Closed Planet and thought he'd have to stay forever. By that time it would be an adventure story and Cleta only a memory.

He did not wait to hear how the conference ended.

That night Landon and Mathis went into rapport for the purpose of translating the specifications for the nullifier into English and the English into a workable blueprint. They began with only the General present, but in a few hours the place resembled a branch office of General Electric, with diagrams, wiring circuits, rejected components, and half a dozen experts on communications, power, radar and electronics, trying to translate alien technology into earth equivalents.

Some components were identical and could be substituted—a vacuum tube is a vacuum tube and an electron stream is an electron stream, whatever the technology, and it doesn't matter how you measure or transmit it. Some few others could be improvised from existing equipment. Others were so strange that the consultants were baffled or worse, derisive. Even Landon balked at trying to explain the shielding device that damper out aurora resonance, or the transformer-type mechanism that excited the triple-heterodyned supersonics, kicking them upstairs into the sub-telepathic frequencies.

The General pointed at the augmentator. "I don't understand that whozit, but I saw it work. I don't understand this one either, Mr. Briney, but it's going to be built. And *you* are going to build it, Mister."

Fortunately Landon had an excellent technical education, on two planets; however, in the specifications which Mathis reeled off from the plan which was like a printed eidetic circuit in his brain, there were parts and adjustments of whose theory and function Landon was not quite sure.

The sun was bright outside the window when Mathis collapsed, and Landon—who knew that Marcus might be no safer in the security cells than in the room with them—knew a moment's frozen horror before he realized the dwarf had only fainted from exhaustion.

The General said hoarsely, "Unless we get a few hours sleep, none of us will be good for anything."

Briney took their requisition list—which looked like an electrical-supply catalogue in three volumes—and Landon stood on the steps with the General, watching him drive away. The General said, "This whole thing sounds preposterous. Will that starship commander really land on Earth?"

"If we get this set up within his time limit, he will."

"If it's as important as all that," the General said testily,

"why did he put a time limit on it?"

"Even a few days will alter planetary positions at his destination enough to waste a lot of fuel. A month's delay would alter the whole position of his route enough to create the danger of collision with a star or planet. His whole course would have to be re-computed, at a staggering loss of time and money. And he's not in the employ of the Federation, really; he's just a trader, a businessman. He could put in a claim for compensation, but the Federation is like any other bureaucracy, only bigger. There'd be a staggering amount of red tape before he collected it, *if* he collected it."

"God above!" The General mopped his forehead. "Bureaucracy. Red tape. Business trips between stars!"

Eventually he drew himself back to mundane matters. "Lawyers are battering the gates already with writs and so forth for the Marcus kid. We can't hold a civilian citizen incommunicado—and what in hades can we charge him with?"

Landon swore. "You could hold him if he had a contagious disease, couldn't you? Anyway, hang on to him — even if you have to give out a report that he's dead!" Landon reflected that was only anticipating the fact a little; a Rhu'inn host died when the Rhu'inn withdrew. Marcus' death sentence was in the nullifier, but then he had been under sentence of death all along.

Landon was too weary to sleep. In the Base Hospital Mathis was asleep under sedatives, and in another cubicle Landon found Steve Branzell sitting on the edge of his cot, half-dressed. Landon had no words for his relief. Sometimes if a lethally calibrated shocker missed a vital organ and failed to kill, it would paralyze permanently.

"How are you feeling now, Steve?"

"Fine, now." Then a frightened look washed over Branzell's face. "I say, it all really happened, didn't it? I'm not just crazy."

Landon chuckled. "It's true, all right."

Branzell was obviously bursting with questions, and Landon laughed again. "There'll be all the time in the world to explain everything. The lid's off, Steve. And you'll get explanations before anyone else."

He was amazed at what he saw in Branzell's face. The fanatic had disappeared—or rather, had been absorbed in a new kind of fanaticism; the healthy enthusiasm of a man with a dream. Branzell looked younger, as if plunged headlong into a new life, and Landon almost envied him for it.

"Steve, I'm too tired to turn in. I'm going over and talk to the others. Care to come along?"

"Does a pig care for a clover patch?" Branzell was obviously holding down his enthusiasm.

The women were finishing

breakfast in an orderly, over-neat room.

Cleta rose and came to them, inclining her head in recognition. "We've had no chance to thank you for what you've done for us, Clannon—" she began.

"Clint Landon," he corrected.

"I'm sorry about this isolation," he continued, "But, believe me, it's for your own protection."

Linnit giggled. "I know. Even these women soldiers stare at us and try not to ask a lot of questions!"

"I feel like doing the same," Branzell said, with his warm laugh. "Aren't they marvelous, Landon? Why, they're children, they're hardly more than babies, and they've crossed the Galaxy!"

Dionie asked, "Are Reidel and Arran going back with the ship?"

It had never occurred to Landon that they might not. Just as it had never occurred to him—as it now suddenly burst on him—that he, too, might now go home if he chose. No man who had touched a Closed World could return, possibly to infect a Galaxy forever watchful against Rhu'inn invasion. But if Earth was to be opened again, with the nullifier field sweeping the planet clean as on open Federation worlds, then he too could return from the exile he had accepted.

"Can we see Arran? And Reidel?" Linnit asked.

"I'm sorry. Not Arran at present. Reidel—"

"Reidel could come whenever he chose," Cleta interrupted disdainfully. "Evidently he has decided, now we're safe, that we're not his problem any more!"

Landon felt perplexed, remembering Reidel almost frantic with anxiety when Cleta was beyond his reach. He was suddenly overcome with fatigue. Liz saw it in his face, and came to him. "Go and get some sleep while you can, Clint," she pleaded. Landon drew her close and kissed her with hungry force.

"We'll soon be out of this, darling. One way or the other, it will all be over soon."

"I'm frightened, Clint. I get blurry when I think about it. I just have to—remember that I love you, and forget the rest!"

It was no time to suggest leaving Earth. He drew away, conscious that the group of women was no longer complete. "Where did Sylvia Marcus go?" he demanded. No one could answer, and he said roughly, "Make sure she's here, somebody! We're not playing games! We're guarding you girls for your own safety, and Sylvia's the most vulnerable! I hate to have to lock her—"

"It won't be necessary," Dionie said without moving. Cleta inclined her head slightly, pointing toward another room, and Landon could hear Sylvia now, crying miserably. Landon was aware of her suffering, but he could do nothing to help. She

had not had the training which made life endurable for such as Dionie, and the present situation would have been terrifying for any affectionate sister. For a hypersensitive empath, it was sheer hell.

When Landon left, Dionie followed him to the door and stood on the steps. She did not look like a child to Landon now. He supposed she was about fifteen by Earth reckoning; but all childishness had been stripped from her in the last few days. She asked, "Do I have to go back to Dvaneth?"

"Dionie, I've no authority to force you to do anything."

"There's no one who'd miss me on Dvaneth, and nothing I can't have here—oh," she begged in a rush, "you know, don't you?"

Landon did know, and felt sorry for the girl. An emotional triangle where two were telepath and empath was no fun for anyone. He wondered why Reidel didn't go to Aldebaran V where he could have them both, and quickly squelched the thought, grateful that Dionie was empath and not telepath.

"Dionie, will you do me a favor?"

"If I can."

"Sylvia hasn't had your training. Help her live through the next few days. Whichever way it turns out, they're going to be rough." He touched the white silky curls with his finger, then walked away, not waiting for an answer, seeing that the weight

of too-wise misery had already lightened in Dionie's great eyes.

CHAPTER 16

HE SLEPT and woke, dragged back to the conference building by the knowledge of the deadline; the nullifier must somehow be translated from a jumble of confused specifications into an apparatus which could protect a planet. It didn't have to be perfect this first try; it just had to get going and stay going a while—there would be specialists on the *Transformation* who could look it over and make sure it would keep functioning properly. But unless they got it working, Rivan couldn't even land.

Briney was there, and the General; Mathis was there, his eyes dark circled, and so was Reidel, though nobody quite knew why. The chairs had been carried out, and half the big room was a bare expanse of empty floor; the other half was an incredible jumble of boxes, crates, packing cartons and even a barrel or two.

Landon looked at the clutter and sighed.

"If we're going to build this thing," he said at last, "I suppose we'd better check and inventory all this junk." He picked up the list and started.

Evening came; midnight; morning. The stacked jumble had somehow resolved itself into orderly process units. Landon assembled each component; Bri-

ney tested it with voltages to make sure it would perform as desired—for they were combining makeshift units in unheard-of ways—and Mathis checked the result against his mental blueprint. There was all too many rejections; too many pauses to check an unobtainable item against four or five items of Earth manufacture which might possibly be substituted. Landon hoped that when this was over he would never see a cathode tube, a voltmeter or an oscilloscope again.

Once a hand dragging with fatigue brushed a bare wire, and flung him halfway across the room; he called a halt then, and made them all swallow food, coffee and benzedrine tablets, brought by GIs who weren't permitted to enter the room. Landon and Reidel stumbled into the open air and sat on the steps to drink their coffee. The sun was coming up, and there was frost on the ground.

"Do you think we'll do it, Landon?"

"I don't know." By now Landon wasn't betting on anything. His head sagged. "If Briney wasn't so—so supercilious. If I knew more about that inner resonator field. If they only had some kind of condensers that would take those damned slow-pulse vibrations!"

"And I'm not much help," Reidel said. "It's a shame—Arran worked in the Rim Room of the Northwind. He'd understand all this, if anyone could."

Landon re-entered the conference room as if it were purgatory. He hated the very smell of it by now. "How long did they give us?"

"Another 48 hours."

Briney turned from a study of two slightly varying condensers. "We're not going to do it. You're demanding impossible voltages, Landon. Nothing will take that kind of punishment unless you put a whole high-tension system in here."

"And we haven't even started on those sonic exciter things!" Landon straightened his shoulders and demanded, "I want Arran down here!"

"It isn't wise," the General demurred. "You can have all the men you want, all the materials, consultants, technicians—"

Landon swore. "I don't want them! Damn it, we've got too many now! Mathis has had *no* technical education, and mine all came before the nullifier was invented. Arran was trained in the Rim Room of a starship, and if he doesn't understand these things, nobody will and we might as well give up. We have no choice—we *need* him."

In the end an apprehensive GI led Reidel through a steel corridor and unlocked a grating. Arran, stretched on a metal bunk, looked up bitterly and asked, "Are they throwing you behind bars, too?"

"No. I came to get you out. Landon needs your help."

"He can go straight to—" Arran

broke off. "Oh, well. Anything to get out of here!"

"Do you know anything about the nullifier?"

Arran gasped as if all the breath had been knocked out of him. "What—?"

Reidel suddenly remembered that Arran knew nothing at all, even about Marcus' arrest. He had been told nothing, simply locked up and held in isolation. Reidel explained in their own language while the GI listened, eyes popping, and finally demanded, "Say! Are you guys the ones from Mars or somewhere?"

Reidel only shook his head. He supposed it was all over the Base by now. Arran was looking sick.

"A Rhu'inn renegade—what's Mars?"

"How would I know? Does it matter? Can you build the nullifier?"

"I don't know. They don't have nullifiers on starships. They only work within the magnetic field of a planet. They're a new thing you know. I've just barely heard of them—it's fortunate I didn't know! Being with Marcus so long—" His face was so white that Reidel thought he would fall over. He steadied the youngster with his arm, and Arran swallowed hard. "I'm all right. It was just—he's safely locked up?"

Reidel reassured him, and Arran relaxed slightly. "Of course, that's why only the telepaths are allowed to know all the specifications until they're actually in construction. But if they're

setting up a null-field here, if the planet's not Closed any more, it means that some day—" his voice caught with excitement.

"Sooner than you think, Arran. There's a ship in orbit now. If we get the field established, he'll land and take off survivors."

Arran said, with a little twist of his mouth, "That's what you'd call an incentive!"

Landon's hunch had been a good one. Arran knew nothing about the nullifier itself, but he was familiar with the special resonators which had baffled Landon, and other devices invented since Landon's time. It was still a heartbreaking job, racing against a growing conviction that it would not be finished.

Evening came again and night; Landon forcibly called a halt when Mathis dropped a delicate tube—the only one of its kind in that part of the state—and only by a miracle picked it up unbroken.

He went out on the steps again, letting the night wind hit him in the face. He forced down another benzedrine tablet and a cup of black coffee. Arran said, behind him, "Think we'll make the deadline?"

"Hell with the deadline." Landon would have liked to stretch out on the floor for a catnap, but he was afraid to shut his eyes; if he did, he'd sleep a week. "If Rivan won't wait it out, let him go on."

"No!" Arran's voice rose into violence, "If we can't make the

deadline, the hell with all this! What use is it, if the ship can't land?"

Landon swore at him. "There'll be other ships. If the planet's open, that is. If it stays Closed, you'll never go home."

Mathis' footsteps were so quiet neither of the men had heard him come out on the steps. "If the *Transformation* can't land, you'll have to live here, Arran, so don't be temperamental. The important thing is to get the field working before Marcus does something to stop us. Let's go back in. We'll wire all the parts together and hope for the best."

Back to work, then, in the graveyard shift; their vitality was sapped, burning low. Time seemed to have been chopped into tiny fragments, each one encompassing ages while they lived through it, yet when they looked up at the clock that grinned from the wall, the moon-faced devil hounding them down the hours, it would have swallowed down precious and irrecoverable time. Their reflexes were slowing; tasks that would normally have taken seconds consumed priceless finger-tangling minutes. The General came and raged at them about the deadline, and the five men, bleary-eyed and drunk with fatigue, stared at them without comprehension.

Morning brightened toward noon. Then, without any special feeling of achievement, Landon tightened a final screw and

stepped back. The incredible, makeshift tangle covered almost an entire wall of the room. He muttered, "I think that's finished it."

"Damnedest mess I ever saw." Briney was almost asleep where he stood. "Never take any prize for design, that's for sure!"

Looking at the insane correlation of wires, meters, dials, condensers and makeshift gadgets which had no names or comprehensible functions in Earth science, Landon was inclined to agree with him.

"And that's the famous nullifier," Arran said with a face-splitting yawn. "Will it work?"

Mathis groaned. "The power sources work, but I've got to make the final tests on the telepath bands."

"Don't you want to rest first?"

"Later. I couldn't relax now. Did we make the deadline?"

Landon looked at the clock. It had lost its power to torment him and was just a clock again. He rubbed his eyes to make sure they were not deceiving him and looked again. "With about sixteen hours to spare!"

They were too tired even to be exultant. "Go ahead and calibrate the thing, if you have to, Mathis. Then we can all go and sleep the clock around."

Mathis stood before the apparatus, abstracted and intent. "Throw each switch in turn, but don't turn on the field itself. Unless each circuit is adjusted

separately for compensating resonance on the 'path frequencies, the sonic exciters will blow the whole thing out, and we'll have it all to do over."

"Don't even say that," Reidel muttered.

It was really nerve-racking work now. Each sector hummed briefly with screaming vibration. Subsonics made them moan with undefined malaise. Landon made some careless blunder, and the telepath—now under doubled strain, physical exhaustion and tortuous telepathic work to be done—finally snapped.

"Damn it, get out! Get out!" His tormented face was white. "How can I tune this with all of you screaming at me? Leave me alone!"

"I haven't said a word," Briney protested unwisely, and Mathis turned on him, raging.

"You're a headblind imbecile who doesn't even know when he's broadcasting his own ignorance! Get out! Get out! I can't compensate for all your stupidities, get out, leave me alone!" Mathis was screaming now, his whole body twitching, and Briney backed off in horror. Landon turned, shoving the others along. In the hallway he said to Briney, "No, he's not crazy. You can't begin to imagine the strain he's been under."

"I guess I can, a little. Half the time, toward the end in there, I could hear all of you fellows *thinking*." Tired as he was, Briney was scientist enough to look at Landon in wonder and

surmise. Landon laid a hand on his shoulder.

"I've seen surgical crews use rudimentary telepathy without realizing it. All teamworkers do. You're a damn good latent telepath, youngster. If this goes through, you'll have a chance at proper training." He gave Briney a little shove. "Go crawl in the sack. We're through."

Arran stumbled and swore. "If anyone had ever told me I'd help build a null-field in three days, I'd have called him a congenital liar. Damned if I like leaving Mathis by himself. He's out on his feet, too. I'm going back and make sure—"

Reidel started out of a sleepwalking daze. "Let me go—"

"Of course, if you don't trust me—" Arran began resentfully. Landon knew this was the time to trust Arran or lose him forever. Just now he was one of them again.

"You go, Arran. Mathis would choke me. He's not sore at you, just now."

Arran walked back along the corridor, his mind blank with weariness. He could hear the humming and singing of tremendous power; Mathis had cut in the generator that powered the sonic excitors. The nullifier field itself would be soundless as the twinkle of a distant star; it operated at frequencies as far above the ordinary telepathic bands as the wave motion of telepathy was above a radio wave. Like the implosion device, it resonated inside the space

lattice, in the empty space between molecules. Implosion collapsed the elements upon themselves, destroying the orientation of their magnetic fields; but the nullifier had no such disintegrative effect. It vibrated within the magnetic field of the planet, between the interstices of matter, effectively barring the world of physical matter against the Rhu'inn.

He saw Mathis through the door, and hesitated. Mathis was all right, Mathis had thrown him out, why should he risk a rebuff? He almost turned away. Then—

No one ever knew how it happened. A guard was to be court-martialled and to babble of hypnotism, but even that did not explain how human flesh and blood escaped steel bars. Arran saw only the heavy Army pistol, raised toward the absorbed and unsuspecting back of the telempath. Drugged with fatigue, Arran did not even recognize Ned Marcus; he simply flung himself on the young man, dragging down his arm.

He knew nothing about guns. If he thought of the pistol at all, he thought it was a weapon like the shocker, and the roar and the blow that struck him low in the chest reeled him back only momentarily. There was no immediate pain, and he hung on grimly, his hands locked on Marcus' throat. Even at the edge of exhaustion there had been a final spurt of strength in Arran.

He felt the weight of Marcus sink away... the gun lay fallen and harmless on the floor. Arran did not hear Mathis shouting; did not hear the vibration die out and scream noiselessly upward into complete silence, nor feel the tiny sting as the nullifier field flickered permanently into the spaces between atoms, setting up resonances that would reverberate all through the earth and its atmosphere, the entire gravitational field of the planet. He only heard a ringing in his ears. He hit the floor and blacked out.

Landon had been the first to hear the shots, but by the time he had travelled the corridor, Mathis was already bending over the two young bodies sprawled close together, oddly alike; sprawled and flaccid. Marcus was still twitching a little. He opened pain-glazed, dying eyes. "Nullifier on..." he gasped, "fools... Earth's last chance... real glory... gone..." and his eyes rolled back and stared at something between the atoms of his world.

Now there were shouts everywhere, running feet, noises. A crowd was collecting fast, but it was a minute or two before they realized Arran was still alive. Landon shouted, "Get a doctor, somebody," and knelt beside the boy he would never send to engineering school.

Mathis said, with soft finality, "Too late, Clannon. Too close to the heart."

Arran was conscious, just

barely. He muttered something about too much noise on the Rim, then his eyes cleared and he said in a hoarse hurting voice, "Reidel—"

"I'm right here." Reidel slid his arm under the boy's neck. His face was grey with grief and guilt. "I should have come back with you. Arran—"

Arran's head rested on Reidel's knees and he said through bloody spit, "I was—about Cleta, she never gave a damn—"

"Don't try to talk. It's all right, son," Reidel muttered.

"Why did you call me—son?" Arran shut his eyes. Suddenly he was not breathing any more. He coughed, a great cough that seemed to tear his whole chest loose, drowning in his own blood, and died.

Reidel stumbled away from his side. His face was wet. Landon took him by the arm and guided him into a small private office. He shoved Reidel into a chair and Reidel leaned his face in his hands, torn by great straining sobs. Landon knew it was more than the loss of a friend, it was the breakdown that had been pending since the Northwind came apart in space and Reidel found himself alone with six strangers. Landon stood there and sweated it out, suffering with Reidel and not able to say anything. Then Cleta was there and she was crying softly in Reidel's arms and Landon tiptoed out and left them alone.

"He was the only one of us
(Continued on page 146)

SEVEN FROM THE STARS

(Continued from page 144)

who was going home," Cleta wept, "and now he'll never go—"

It was not for some time that Reidel would realize exactly what she had said; would realize that she had never meant to leave him. But they needed no words to know they would never again leave the world where they had found one another.

Perhaps Landon, more than anyone else, was most heavily burdened by the horrible death of the two boys. Of course no sacrifice was too great to stop the Rhu'inn. But that was little comfort at the moment.

He looked down at the two lifeless bodies. "If they only hadn't been—so damned young!" He said what Cleta had said. "Poor little devil, he wanted to go home. And now he'll never go."

Mathis turned, and his twisted face was gentle for once. "But we have the nullifier," he said, "and the planet's open. Arran hated this world, and he didn't like any of us. But he was the one who gave us that. Look, Watcher. Out the window."

Landon looked through the light, soft-falling flakes of the winter's first snow. For the first time in twenty thousand years, a great silver ship from the stars was circling and dropping gently to the surface of the Closed Planet—closed no more.

THE END