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**SUPER SCIENCE** STORIES 

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# THE BLOOD STAR

*When it came again—the ship from the Outside, carrying the masters who had reduced Terra to one dying fighter and a pack of mindless savages—Earth would be ready to build a last flaming coffin—for whom?*

By CHAD OLIVER and GARVIN BERRY

ERIC PARKER sat alone under the whispering pines and stared at the fence. He could hear the death humming through the wires, cutting his people off from the world that had once belonged to them. He alone, of all the thousands of men, women, and children on the Island, had managed to get past that fence—and come back.

The long shadows of twilight crept across the forest floor, draining the flowers of color and putting the chill of autumn into the north wind. Eric Parker shivered a little. Suddenly, he got to his feet and faded silently into the shadows.

Footsteps.

It might be a Watcher. They seldom ventured inside the fence, but it wouldn't do to be found alone. That would be suspicious. He waited, listening. The footsteps were rapid and clumsy, as though someone were in a hurry.

"Eric? Where are you, Eric?"

It wasn't a Watcher.

"Over here. Who is it?"

"Me—Bill."

A nervous figure approached from the direction of the settlement and emerged into the fading light. It was Bill Weston, big and lumbering with dull, unthinking eyes.

Eric Parker shook his head sadly. Bill was carrying something with him. It looked like an axe.

"Gee, Eric, we all been wonderin' where you were. I been lookin' for you for a long time. It's almost dark now—the trees scare me at night."

"What do you want? Anything wrong?"

"It's my axe, Eric. The cutting part keeps falling off."

Eric Parker took the axe and glanced at it. The metal head had slipped off the wood stock and had been clumsily jammed back on the handle in an effort to make it stick.

"Can you fix it, Eric? We need some wood for the fires and every time I try to—"

"I think I can take care of it."

He saw the blinding landing lights of the huge ship. . . .

Eric Parker took his knife and whittled a stick into a passable wedge which he drove in between the axe head and the handle with a rock.

"There—that ought to hold it until tomorrow."

"Thanks, Eric. I don't know how you know how to do these things. You can fix *anything*."

"It's a gift."

"You comin' back now? Helen don't know where you are."

"Don't tell her, Bill. I'll be along in a little while."

"If you say so, Eric. I'm gonna get back before dark. Ain't you scared of the dark?"

"I'm a very brave man, Bill."

"I guess so. Well, thanks."

"Forget it."

Bill Weston hurried off through the deepening darkness, looking fearfully around him as he went. Eric Parker sighed. He didn't mean to make fun of his people. It wasn't their fault that they couldn't think. He kicked savagely at the ground. Not their fault.

Helen. He shouldn't worry her, he knew. She had tried to be a good wife to him. But she didn't understand, *couldn't* understand. There were times when he just had to get away, by himself, where he could think things out.

He walked slowly along the humming fence, feeling the night close in around him. He liked the night, soft and still, with the sweet-smelling pines dark above his head. The world seemed cleaner at night.

It had taken him a long time, ever since his early boyhood. He had discovered that he was different from his fellows—he could *think*. He was beginning to figure things out now. About the fence and the Outside People and what had happened to the world. He didn't know it all yet, of course. But he was learning.

There were some questions which

seemed to have no answers. The toughest of them was short: why? *Why?* What had it gained them? Why had they done it?

And the ship from the stars. . . .

He walked on through the dark forest until he came to the stream. He went along the path, listening to the water chuckle over the rocks, until he came to the pool. He knelt on its grassy bank and drank the clean, cold water. He sat there for a long time, until the moon turned the pool to silver. The loneliness came again.

Eric Parker got to his feet and started back for the settlement. The wind whispered through the pines and the sad, old moon of Earth watched him go.

THE next day started out like all the other days for Eric Parker. He was up early and swam alone in the cold pool before the others were awake. Then he went back to the settlement for firstmeal with Helen.

They had synthetics from the stockpile as usual. There wasn't enough game to support all the people, and real food was a rare delicacy. But the synthetics were nourishing enough, despite their flat taste.

It was difficult for Eric Parker to keep the conversation going with his wife. It was not that she was unwilling to talk, but simply that she could think of nothing to say. She was an attractive woman, Eric Parker thought. She would have been beautiful had it not been for her eyes. They were shallow and dull, like those of all the other people in the settlement. He wondered, sometimes, what a woman would be like who could understand, who could think and talk and laugh. He didn't know. He had never seen one.

"Got to go," he said finally. "The others are up."

"All right, Eric. Be careful."

He kissed her and left the clapboard shack. He was alert and looked around

him when he got into the open. The dreary wooden shacks of the settlement were strewn like forgotten boxes on the ground and a few people moved slowly from one place to another.

Helen was by far the best looking woman in the settlement and there were others who wanted her. Half of the people worshipped Eric Parker and the other half were afraid of him. But he had been ambushed more than once, and a man's luck was apt to prove a pretty shaky bodyguard.

There were the usual problems. The door was stuck on the Johnson's place—how did you fix it? A can of synthetic food wouldn't open properly—what did you do about it? Young Walt Warren had bruised his arm falling out of a tree—how did you make it stop hurting? The fire wouldn't burn—where was Eric Parker?

He kept busy and stayed away from the fence. In the naked light of day, when they could see him and watch what he did, the Watchers made him nervous. He knew that whenever they suspected a man of having better than average intelligence they sent for him. That was what had happened to David Toney, who had long ago been kind to the young Eric Parker. They had taken Dave out of the settlement one day and he had never been seen again.

If they ever guessed that Eric Parker had been outside the fence, to the glowing land. . . .

He shook his head. They must not find out until he was ready. He had to know more—a lot more. He attended to the problems at hand with only half of his mind. The other half was working, turning information and conjecture over, looking at it from other angles, digesting it. It was difficult to play dumb when the Watchers were around. Someday, he knew, they would find him out.

He had to be ready when that happened.

That night, Eric Parker tossed rest-

lessly in his sleep and dreamed a strange dream. It was really three dreams, but they blended together into one pattern. Eric Parker seldom dreamed and it disturbed him. He knew that he was dreaming and he tried to force himself awake. It was no use. The dreams came on—inexorably.

*Got to wake up. . . .*

He was walking through chaos. Twisted black nightmare trees crawled over a blasted landscape that burned and glowed in the night. There was no life and the mad laughter of the dead hung in the still air.

*The Outer World, beyond the fence. Wake up. . . .*

A young man with old eyes had been hurt in a war. Both of his arms had been cut off just below the shoulders. He accepted the loss of one arm philosophically, but the destruction of both of his arms saddened him.

*Madness.*

The new arms were good ones, made of smooth, hard synthetics. But they couldn't feel anything. It puzzled the man because he could not feel. He had work to do and he looked around him and wondered whether or not he could do it. He didn't know. Great sobs tore through his body when he looked at his work.

The man had to get away, had to go somewhere. Anywhere. He walked down a long dusty road in the sunlight until he came to a tree with a low overhanging limb. He stopped and caught the limb with his artificial hands. He tried to pull himself up into the tree.

The synthetic arms wrenched out of their sockets and clattered to the ground. They lay there, glistening in the sun. He watched them helplessly, the dead stumps of his shoulders twitching in the air.

*Only the ignorant and the superstitious believed in dreams. They had no meaning, had no meaning. Wake up. . . .*

He was himself again. The Watchers

had found him out. There had been reports, stories about the strange man who knew how to fix things, the man who liked to be alone. Someone had talked, betrayed him to the Outside People.

They were coming for him now, taking him to the examination. And he wasn't ready, wasn't ready!

*Wake up. He had to wake up!*

"Eric. Eric!"

A hand pulled at his arm. He opened his eyes and blinked in the sunlight. His body was drenched with cold sweat. The dream was over—he was awake. Helen was calling to him, alarm in her voice.

*"Eric!"*

"Yes, I'm awake. What is it?"

"The Watchers, Eric. They've sent for you!"

Eric Parker sat up slowly. Fear clutched at him with icy fingers.

**E**RIC PARKER answered the summons from the Watchers. There was nothing else for him to do. He knew that any hesitation on his part would bring the Watchers in after him, and that could only make the situation worse. He would have to play along and find out how much the Outside People knew—and go on from there.

His unreasoning fear, which had partly been the result of his unsettling dream, had passed. He was still afraid, of course, and admitted the fact to himself without any evasions. But he had himself under control and was prepared to face the issue squarely, with such resources as he possessed.

He said good-by to his wife and walked through the shacks of the settlement. The people watched him go with anxious eyes but only a few were hardy enough to venture a handshake or a whispered word of farewell. Bill Weston approached him and haltingly offered to go along, but Eric Parker shook his head. A man never knew where his friends were coming from

when things got tough—or even if they were coming at all. Only a short while before he had dismissed Bill Weston with a silent contempt for the man's stupidity!

Eric Parker went through the forest, down the trail under the pines, and wondered whether he would ever see the settlement again. He presented himself at the Gate. The two guards of the Outer People were there as usual. He approached them steadily.

"I'm Eric Parker," he said. "I was told that you had sent for me."

The two guards eyed him with some interest. They were rather average looking men on the surface, and indistinguishable from the people of the settlement except for their gray uniforms and the cold light of intelligence in their eyes. Despite their familiar appearances, however, Eric Parker had the distinct impression that they were—different.

"Okay," one of them said. "Let him out."

The other drew his gun and unlocked the Gate. Eric Parker walked through and the Gate swung shut behind him. He was in the land of the Outer People—and not for the first time, although the guards couldn't know that. Or could they?

"This way," the guard said without preamble.

He led Eric Parker down a road, the gun ready in his hand. The terrain was not very different from that inside the fence, although the trees were fewer and the road was superior. The large house where the Outer People lived was, he knew, hidden in the forest on an easily-defended hill nearby.

They rounded a corner and turned in at a small wooden building. The guard led him down a short corridor and stopped outside a plank door. The guard knocked.

"Yes?"

"It's the man from inside, sir. Parker."

"Send him in."

The guard opened the door and Eric

Parker stepped into a plain room which was empty except for two men seated at a desk. Both of them carried weapons and were obviously of a higher rank than the guard.

"That's all, Gibson. You can return to your post."

"Yes, sir."

The guard left them and closed the door. He was alone with the two men. They looked at him without much curiosity. They had been through all this many times before, Eric Parker surmised.

"Sit down, Parker."

Eric Parker sat down opposite them and watched their faces carefully. They didn't seem to be expecting anything out of the ordinary, but he had to remember that he was not dealing with people of the settlement now. If he were capable of trickery, then so were his opponents. They were not fools by the looks of them. He would have to watch his step.

"Now don't be afraid, Parker. We know that you must have heard stories about us, but we aren't going to hurt you. We just want to ask you a few questions."

The same man had done all the talking so far. He was slightly heavier than his companion, who was tall and silent and kept his hand on his gun. The quiet one was, Eric Parker judged, the more dangerous of the two.

"You are Eric Parker?"

"That is my name."

"How old are you?"

"Thirty."

"Would you like to get out of the settlement?"

"I don't know."

Eric Parker fought to keep his face expressionless. He looked blankly at the top of the desk, but his brain was seething. The questioners must not find out that he was in any way different from his fellows. If they already knew, it wouldn't matter what he said. If they didn't, they must

not be made to suspect it. He did not know what the outcome would be in either case, but there were rumors. . . .

"Let's put it this way, Parker. Have you ever felt that you were—well, a little superior to the other people?"

"I don't understand. What are you going to do to me?"

"We're your friends, Parker. Just relax."

"I don't understand."

"We have heard that you are something of a leader on the inside. Is that true?"

Eric Parker calculated rapidly. They must already know that, so there was no point in denying it.

"Yes."

"What makes you a leader, Parker?"

"I don't know."

"You have no special talents? Now, think carefully, Parker. Don't try to hide anything from us. If you are a man of superior accomplishments we want to know about it for *your* benefit. We are on your side, understand? You may be one of us."

"I fish good."

The two men exchanged looks.

"I'll try once more. You must know that we have ways of knowing when you are telling the truth and when you are not."

He looked at Eric Parker with hard, dangerous eyes. Did they know? Eric Parker looked back at him without expression.

"Do you understand what I am saying? We can tell when you are telling the truth."

"Then you know that I speak truth."

"Hmmm. You insist that you have no special qualifications of any sort, nothing that sets you apart?"

"I fish good."

The two men exchanged looks again.

"I'm afraid, Parker, that your statements are not in accord with the information which we have concerning you. We'll

have to hold you for a more detailed examination."

"I have told you the truth."

The silent man drew his gun.

"We'll see about that," he said.

**E**RIC PARKER sat quite still. Alarm chilled his body but he kept his face expressionless. This wouldn't do. He didn't know exactly what this new development might entail, but it wasn't hard to see that the change would not be to his advantage.

He could not afford to wait. The situation was hardly made to order, but he would have to make the best of it. It was a question of acting at once or not at all. The two questioners were armed, but they were probably not expecting trouble. That would work to his advantage. But he had to take one of them alive in order to carry out his plan—that complicated matters.

"Come on, Parker," the first one said. "Let's go."

"I don't understand."

"You don't have to—just move!"

"If you say so."

Eric Parker got to his feet slowly, his face blank. Only one of the men had his gun out and ready—he would have to take care of him first. Now that the time for action had come, he found himself ready. His fear had vanished.

In one swift, fluid motion, Eric Parker suddenly ducked his head and hurled himself at the feet of the man with the gun in a flying tackle. His arms closed viciously around the man's legs and he twisted the man's body over hard. His head hit the floor with a smack. Eric Parker snatched the gun out of his hand and rolled. There was a sharp crack and a slug chewed into the floor next to him.

He aimed and fired almost simultaneously and the other questioner crumpled down with a round blue hole in his forehead. The days and nights of watching and practicing had finally paid off in the

clutch—he knew how to handle a gun.

Eric Parker stood up and examined the man he had knocked out. He was still alive; that part was all right. He looked around him. The door of the little room was closed and so was the window. Had the shots been heard? There should be no guards close by, but he could not know for sure. The sound of the shots would have been muffled by the walls, but they would carry. They might have been heard. Would anyone investigate? There had been no trouble for generations—the complacent patterns that had been gradually built up in the Outside People might well be the difference between life and death to him now.

There was nothing to do now except to go ahead with it, of course. If the guards were coming, they would come regardless of what he did. He would have to put his plan into operation and hope for the best. The first thing to be done was to revive the unconscious questioner.

He brought the man around by the simple expedient of throwing the cold water from a pitcher into his face. He moaned and sat up, shaking his head. Eric Parker let the man's senses return to him fully. He waited until he became aware of the dead body of his companion and of the gun that was levelled at his chest.

"You killed him," the man whispered. "You blind fool—"

"We'll see who the fool is."

"Are you going to kill me?"

"That depends," Eric Parker said coldly. "First of all, what's your name?"

"Henderson."

"Well, Henderson, I don't have any time to waste in a long conversation. The situation is simple. I want you to help me. If you do, you live—if you don't, you die. I think that's clear enough. I mean business, and if you doubt it just give me some trouble."

"But you don't understand, Parker. You—"



"Never mind what I understand. Let's have an answer."

"What do you want me to do?"

Eric Parker clicked the hammer back on the revolver.

"Yes or no?"

"I don't even know what I'd be agreeing to—"

"You'll be dead for a long time, you can bet on that."

"All right, Parker. I don't want to die."

Eric Parker nodded. He had waited a long time for this. The months and the years of waiting and planning were over. The time for action had come at last, and Eric Parker was glad.

The next hour went off smoothly. They concealed the body of the dead questioner and walked down the road to a small building that served as an arsenal. It was, of course, sheer idiocy to stockpile even a portion of the guards' available weapons in such a readily accessible place, but it was convenient and the lethargy of generations of inactivity had rendered the Outside People virtually incapable of even imagining an attack, to say nothing of preparing for one.

Eric Parker watched and listened while Henderson explained to him the working of various weapons. Eric Parker knew enough about most of them so that he could tell whether or not Henderson was telling the truth, and for the few with which he was totally unfamiliar—there were risks to be run in any plan.

Eric Parker was calm now. The timing of the action had not been his, but he was ready to carry it out. His fate and the fate of his people, caged like animals for uncounted years, hung in the balance. He knew that a failure now might well mean failure for all time. The Outside People would be on the alert, and his friends were incapable of planning a successful action even if they should desire to do so. And they were afraid, held in check by

the unreasoning terror that had been built up in them by the mysterious Watchers, who played like gods with the lives and loves of an imprisoned people.

If a guard found the body of the questioner, or came in upon them now, it would be all over. And by far the worst was yet to come. If he had figured incorrectly about the Outside People, about the War, about the coming of the Ship. . . .

Eric Parker listened carefully to what Henderson told him, and he watched the man's eyes. A man's eyes, he had found, were the best possible index to what went on in his mind. The correct reading of those eyes had more than once saved the life of Eric Parker in that strange world within the fence.

Henderson's eyes had changed even as he talked. At first he had been terrified and unthinking, his only thought to save himself. But he was not a coward—it is not cowardice to want to live. Gradually his eyes had altered as an awareness of what he was doing had penetrated. He was putting weapons into the hands of this madman from inside the fence with which he might well murder every one of his companions and friends. That was too much to have on any conscience, even if the man kept his word and permitted him to live—which was doubtful. And he could not quite erase his inborn contempt for anyone from inside the fence. He determined to make a break for it, and his eyes telegraphed his intentions a split second before he acted.

That split second was enough. Even as he twisted and dived for a rifle leaning against the wall, Eric Parker fired twice. That was all there was to it, and Eric Parker began to appreciate the enormity of the task he had set for himself. Now, again, he must worry about whether or not the shots had been heard. He must live constantly in dread of an expected alarm. He must act at once, and keep acting, without a moment for rest or

thought. He must finish the job or die trying.

There were some forty guards in all. Forty men assigned to watch the people on the inside of the fence, forty Watchers. Eric Parker knew that he would never be safe as long as a single one of them was left alive.

And, momentarily, he expected the coming of the Ship.

**I**T IS demonstrably true that in any given battle the stronger side will win.

But strength is not a synonym for numbers—and appearances are never so misleading as they are in armed conflict. Consider two opposing forces lined up on a level plain. On one side there are thousands, ready to go. On the other, a comparative few—perhaps fifty men. Looking hurriedly at the situation, almost anyone would without a moment's hesitation pick the horde of thousands as certain victors. But suppose the fifty men have machine guns and the thousands bows and arrows, what happens to the predictions then?

Eric Parker knew that on the surface his position looked hopeless. But he knew, too, that in reality it was anything but hopeless. His ace in the hole was childishly simple: he was ready and his enemies weren't. Eric Parker was a brave man, perhaps, but he was no fanatic without any regard for his own welfare. He knew that with years of planning behind him he had a good chance to win. He expected to win.

Of course, no plan could allow for every contingency, and the unexpected was the one sure factor bound to occur in any battle.

It was now early afternoon, and Eric Parker knew that the chances were against the discovery of the bodies before evening, when the guard was changed. There were about twenty men stationed along the fence, and twenty more in the large house on the hill. The men at the

fence would be the toughest, and they would have to be handled first.

He didn't hesitate. He took what equipment he needed and started out. He concealed four powerful bombs in the trees, slung two ammunition belts over his shoulder, and went to work. He had one pistol in a holster for emergency use, a knife, and an automatic rifle with a silencer.

It was easy. There was no reason why it wouldn't be, barring an accident. His plan was simple and workable and he carried it out with cool precision. He knew that he was dealing with alien beings who had never shown the slightest mercy toward his people and deserved none in return. He kept an iron hand on his nerves and his mind clear.

It was an object lesson in overconfidence. The Outer People had been asleep for so long that they would have found it difficult to awaken now even had there been an alarm. And there was no alarm. The fence guards were deployed in four groups of two men each, stationed at the Gate and three widely separated posts. Between them, single guards patrolled. It was a big fence, encompassing an area of many square miles. The units of the guards had no contact with each other and were mainly employed in killing time until they could return to the main house.

Eric Parker kept to the trees, following paths he had long ago discovered in his nocturnal forays into the land of the Watchers. He had lived all his life in such country, and he moved silently and with his eyes open. He refused to allow himself to think in panic patterns and did his job with the detachment of hunting wild animals.

It was easier, actually, than hunting wild animals because he knew where the guards were. Animals were less reliable. He crept through the pines until he knew that he was close to a guard's position, and then crawled forward over the forest

floor. He took no chances, gave no warnings. He simply fixed the guards in his sights and squeezed the trigger.

An automatic rifle can kill two men almost as quickly as one if the marksman knows his business. Eric Parker knew his. It was a grim, a terrible, slaughter—and yet he felt no remorse. These were the people who had devastated the earth and turned his friends into dull automata. He felt only a cold joy in hitting back at last after a lifetime of evasion.

It was almost evening when the job was done, and the setting sun was throwing long shadows over the purple world. The forest was silent and at peace, uncaring and oblivious of the carnage that had taken place under its old, sweet-scented pines.

Eric Parker was tense and tired, but he could not rest. He hurried back to his cache, gathered up the bombs, and went through the forest toward the big house on the hill. The terrain, picked for defense, was equally good for offense—as long as the offense consisted of exactly one desperate man, slipping like a shadow between the trees and behind the rocks. He could hear the off-duty guards laughing and talking as he set the time-fuses on the bombs and placed them under the house. Then he made his way back the way he had come, his heart pounding with the strain of the past hours.

He waited silently, hardly daring to hope that his plan had been a complete success. When a man wants something badly enough, and dreams for it long enough, he always has a small corner of his mind that whispers to him that it can never come true. If it does, he can't believe it; when a dream becomes an accomplished fact, there is always an element of the prosaic about it that seems utterly incompatible with the shining vision which inspired it.

The tearing, wrenching explosion came, shuddering the ground and sending an

ugly mushroom of black smoke up into the evening sky. The thundering echoes of the blast rumbled to the distant hills and back and then were still.

The job was over, the battle won. Eric Parker sank down in sudden nervous exhaustion, the strain telling at last. The first part of the plan had gone off perfectly, and now he had only to await the coming of the Ship. The Watchers were no more, and Earth had come back to its own.

Almost.

A sharp crack split the evening air and something smacked into his chest. Eric Parker looked with amazement at the red blood which stained his shirt and stared weakly at the mad, twisted face of a blood-smeared guard staggering toward him, a smoking revolver in his hand.

In one crushing, intolerable instant, Eric Parker knew that he had failed in his moment of victory.

He swam down into a deep pool of inky blackness. As he lost consciousness, his fingers clutched spasmodically at the soft earth.

**T**HE great ship sailed majestically through the black sea of space, her braking rockets flaring out crimson feelers ahead of her. She was coming home at last, back to the Earth which had spawned her. The search was over, and she had failed.

"Last landing," Lieutenant Edwards said quietly, watching the blue globe of Earth float toward them in the visiplat.

"Too bad that it couldn't have turned out some other way," Lieutenant Cripps said, brushing an imaginary speck from his polished boots.

"Well, we tried. We tried for generations, and I personally think we were fools to keep at it for so long. The Captain was an impractical idiot—he should have stayed with the Inner People."

"He built the Ship—"

"He was hardly alone, Cripps. Surely you are not questioning the wisdom of the Revolution?"

"Of course not. We can't spend eternity in searching space for a world we can live on, a world that doesn't exist. Earth is all that's left to us. But killing all those people, our own people in a way. . . ."

"They're not people anymore, Cripps—they're animals. You know that. The Great Separation weeded out every person left on Earth after the Atomic Wars who had a vestige of intelligence—and they are all on the Ship. We even set up a system so that if any intelligent human being was born to the Inner People he could be searched out and allowed to join us. It is unfortunate that the few people we have found have refused to join us—have elected to stay with their people and have thus had to be destroyed. But that merely shows that they were not, after all,

rational. They were fools, idiots like the Captain—ruled by emotions. Our race has always fought animals for the right to live on the Earth, and the Inner People are animals. It's all settled; why bring it up again?"

Lieutenant Cripps looked around at the shining control room, at the gleaming machinery and the exact movements of the crew. Outside, space whispered against the passage of the Ship.

"I can't help wondering sometimes," he said. "Is intelligence the only factor that we should take into account in our judgment of peoples?"

"What other factor is there?"

"Well—"

"I feel it my duty to warn you against such thoughts, Cripps. We are going to build a New Earth, founded on reason and organization. There will be no place in it for emotionalism. Watch yourself."

Lieutenant Edwards turned on his heel and left the control room. Cripps guardedly examined the officers and men who were guiding the Ship down for her last landing. Had they heard?

He shook his head. Edwards was right, of course. A man had to be logical above all things—that was all that set him off from the animals. The lack of reason had destroyed the Earth in a series of catastrophic wars—they must start over again upon a new foundation.

The simple facts were that the Earth was the only planet in the System that was even partially habitable for the human race and that there was not enough room on its largely radioactive surface to support both the Inner People and the Ship People. The Inner People were morons, simpletons, the products of an heredity blasted by the radiation waves of centuries of nuclear fission. The Ship People were the smart ones, the last of the old race.

They had tried—tried hard while the Captain had been alive, before he and his loyal followers had been murdered in their

sleep. They had not wanted to take this last, final step. But who was better fitted to rule the Earth? It was a simple question of survival.

The Solar System could not be inhabited by human beings, save for what was left of the Earth. They had made attempts—he shuddered. The Plague of Venus, the Vanished Colony of Mars—those were stories better forgotten, lost secrets of Man's hopeless fight against alien worlds.

Earth was all there was, and they were going back at last.

They were going to start over. Would they do better, would they succeed where all the others had failed? Lieutenant Cripps, deep in the inmost recesses of his mind, didn't think so. They would murder the Inner People, and what then? There had already been one Revolution on the Ship. Factions would develop, the old hatreds and greeds would return.

Yes, the Wars would come again. And next time. . . .

But Lieutenant Cripps was a rational man. He was concerned solely with Lieutenant Cripps. The Ship would land and take up the guards. Then it would gas the Inner People, wait until the air cleared, and land again to reclaim the Earth. There wouldn't even be a fight; how could there be? The Ship would win, and Lieutenant Cripps wanted to be on the winning side. The Inner People were nothing to him. Sticking with the Ship and its policies meant life for Lieutenant Cripps; disagreement with those policies meant death.

An easy choice to make for a rational man.

The great ship drove on, flaming through the void. She flashed toward the Earth, a slim arrow of polished steel. She was coming home to stay, and she carried with her a strange cargo of men and women and children—and quick, cold death.

THE thunder of the approaching ship washed down over the sleeping earth, rolling over the purple hills and across the blasted chaos where life had come briefly into an incredible existence and perished. It rumbled through the land of the Inner People and beyond the fence where death hung heavy in the night.

Eric Parker opened his burning eyes and saw the stars.

*The Ship, the coming of the Ship.*

He was still alive, then. Or was he? No matter. He could think, he could act, and that was enough. The blood had matted on his shirt and the pain was a dull throb in his chest. He could see the guard where he had fallen, the gun still clutched in his dead hand. The night winds whispered through the lonely pines, and it was soft and pleasant to be dead. Good to just lie back and forget. . . .

*The Ship.*

All his plans, all his work, all his dreams—nothing and worse than nothing if he didn't get up. The Ship was coming. He could hear its thunder in the night.

*He had to get up.*

He did it, somehow. He stumbled to his feet and stood swaying in the cool air and the darkness. His wound throbbed in his chest and he was too weak to walk. But he did walk, and more. The ironic story of Man had been written on the Earth for thousands upon thousands of years, and there was not a chapter, not a paragraph, not a line that was not impossible.

A part of his mind took control of his body. He was not Eric Parker any longer, not a man with a wife and a home and a dream. He was a robot extension of a plan. But he was a robot who knew pain and the bitter taste of imminent failure.

In a daze he changed clothes with the dead guard and fumbled his way back to the arsenal. He selected what he needed and went back again into the darkness.

He went down the path under the pines, sick and hurt, with the stars over his head and the cool winds of night at his back.

The Ship was closer now, the sound of it filling the heavens with thunder. It was coming out of the stars, back to the Earth it had once destroyed and enslaved. Eric Parker forced himself to walk faster. The things in that ship were inhuman. He knew that, no matter what they looked like.

Eric Parker had never been able to understand the War that his mind told him must have taken place, the conflict between the peoples of Earth and the Outside People. What had they wanted, what had they gained by their terrible carnage? It was hard to understand.

But it had happened.

He forced his exhausted and beaten body on and when he saw the blinding landing lights of the huge Ship turn the Field into high noon he did not hesitate. The Ship had hardly settled into the seared ground before Eric Parker stumbled out of the pines.

A mad, unreal figure, blood-stained and with a box in his arms. He kept on, unthinking, mindless. The airlock of the ship swung open and he heard a voice.

"What is it? What's the matter?"

"Danger!" he called back with what strength he possessed. "Stay in the Ship!"

His blood-smeared body clambered in through the airlock and faced the officers of the Ship. The guard's uniform was a good fit, and the crew of the Ship could hardly suspect that he was not what he seemed.

"I'm Lieutenant Edwards," a voice said. "Speak up, guard!"

"Close up the Ship—terrible danger. Talk then."

Lieutenant Edwards hesitated and then motioned the airlock shut. It clicked into place.

"Now then. What's the meaning of this—what's in that box?"

Eric Parker smiled icily, his lips thin and white. His nerveless hands reached into the box and pulled a switch. There was a sudden, explosive hiss of escaping gas. The stuff was fast beyond belief; it did not filter through the Ship but burst and expanded with astonishing rapidity and energy into every section, every corner, every crevice, every pair of startled lungs.

It was all over in seconds. Lieutenant Edwards and the men in the control room dropped to the floor, their bodies rigid and their eyes wide and uncomprehending as they breathed the sweet gas in and out, in and out.

"What have you done?" coughed Lieutenant Edwards. "That stuff is paragas—we'll all be dead in a few hours!"

Eric Parker felt the gas softly lulling his torn body to rest.

"I'm not a guard—there are no more guards. My name is Eric Parker and I'm one of the Inner People."

"But how, why—"

"You people from Outside destroyed the Earth; I set her free."

"You fool!" choked Lieutenant Edwards, his eyes glazing. "We're from Earth, too—you're intelligent, you're one of us—you've left the Earth to a bunch of morons—you've destroyed your own people, destroyed the Earth—"

His voice trailed off. Eric Parker looked at him. From Earth? Then had the Earth been destroyed by her own people? No, no. That was fantastic, mad.

"You, Parker. This gas—it will kill if we don't have the antidote. Have your people open the airlock; it's not fastened. Fresh air, disperse the gas. All they have to do is turn the handle and pull—you'll die too—"

"I am alone," Eric Parker said.

That was all. He could not talk any longer. He listened to the gasping of the men in the Ship and felt death drip through him like cold, black water. Had

he done the right thing—or had he made a colossal mistake? Destroyed the Earth.

He had only minutes left to him but he was strangely happy. No matter what the lieutenant had said to him, no matter where the Outside People had come from originally, he knew with final certainty that this was the race that had devastated the Earth, these were the men who had enslaved his people and robbed them of their minds.

There would be no clean, fresh air—ever. The Ship and what it had stood for were through. Eric Parker was dying, and his people would have to await another leader. It would be hard for them, perhaps impossible—but at least their destiny would be their own.

He lay quietly, waiting for death. His work was done and the dream was over.

**T**HAT night the Inner People crept like shadows through the deserted Gate and went in search of their leader. Bill Weston walked at the head of his people, trying not to show the fear that crawled like ice in his body.

They were uncertain and confused. What had happened? Where was Eric Parker? He would know—he could explain. . . .

They wandered through the silent night and came at last to the dark Ship crouching in the Field. No sound came from it. It was dead. Curiously, the people milled around its mighty shell, touching it, looking at it. One man found the airlock and tried to push it open. The catch baffled him, and he gave it up.

The slow minds of the people lost interest in the Ship finally. A woman named Helen cried out in the night. The people didn't understand the silence of the world, and moved away, looking for Eric Parker. He would know. . . .

They moved like shadows under the pines. The wind whispered down from the hills and the lonely moon of Earth

turned them into mottled silver. They wandered aimlessly through the night and then walked slowly back to the settlement to await the coming of the dawn.