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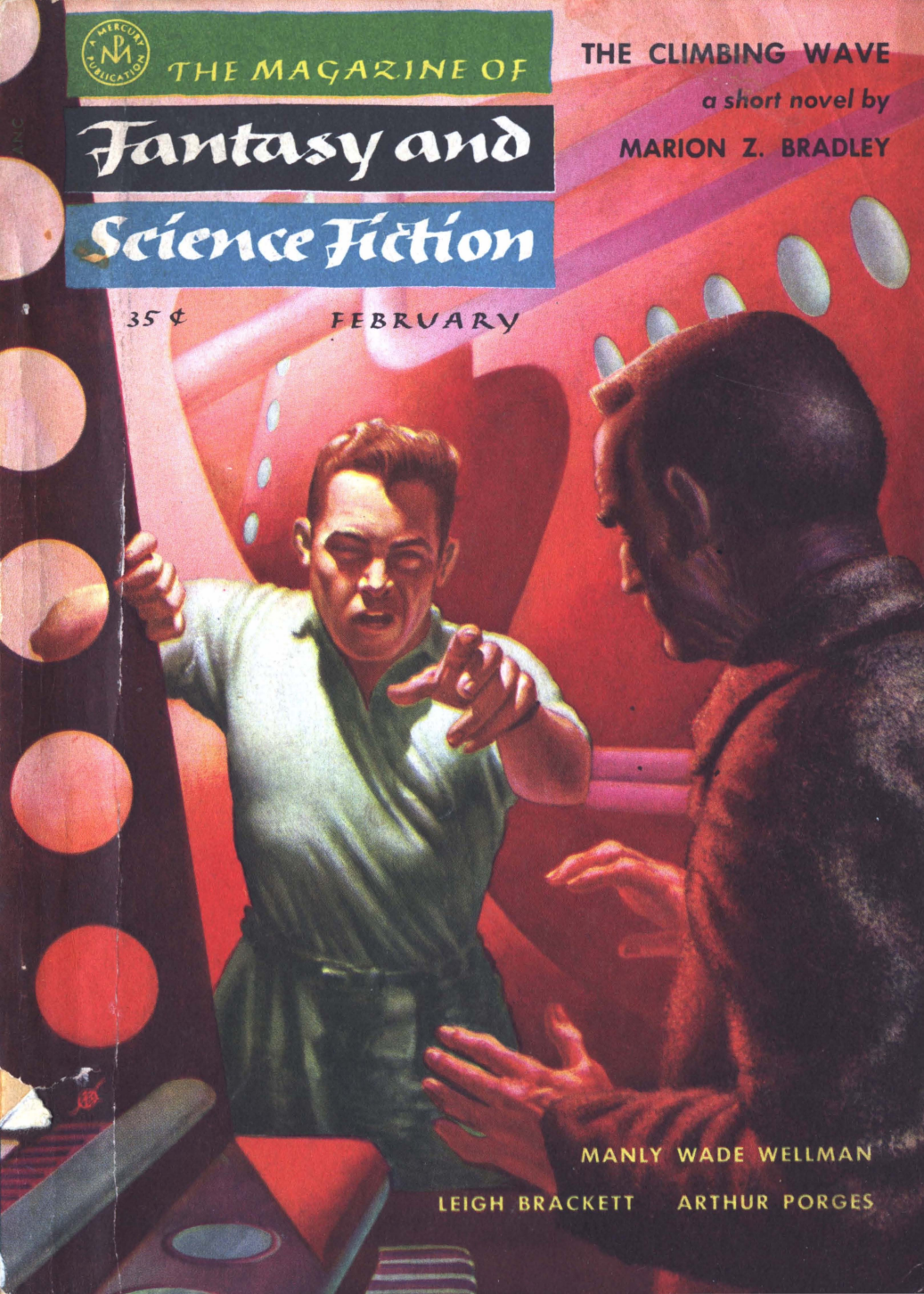
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FEBRUARY

THE CLIMBING WAVE

a short novel by

MARION Z. BRADLEY



MANLY WADE WELLMAN

LEIGH BRACKETT ARTHUR PORGES



Marion Zimmer Bradley is a relatively new professional writer, only recently graduated from the ranks of fans; yet, to judge from your reactions, one of the most successful stories F&SF published in 1954 was her powerfully conceived and movingly executed novelet, Centaurus Changeling. It's gratifying, to writers and editors alike, to know that readers are willing to judge a story on its own merits rather than on the Name of the author; and I'll prophesy that Mrs. Bradley will, as a result, soon be a Name of considerable importance herself. This new short novel, like her previous story, demonstrates her ability to write pure modern science fiction, combining striking concepts, thought out in full detail, with a story of human problems and character. I don't think you'll soon forget the crew of the starship Homeward, who returned from man's first thrust at the stars to discover an Earth they never made and could not understand. . . .

The Climbing Wave

by MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY

BRIAN KEARNS KNEW TO THE SECOND, by his ship-time chronometer and by the faint, almost imperceptible humming of a monitor screen, when the limit of gravity tolerance was reached. Giving himself a round ten seconds for safety margin — Brian was a practical and methodical young man, and had spent twelve years training for this work and four and a half years doing it — he unfastened the straps on his skyhook, the free-swinging, nest-like lounge cradle where he had been lying with ears and eyes fastened on the complex controls. He inched patiently, fly-like, down the wall,

braced himself to a handhold, and threw a certain switch to the farthest position leftward.

The barely perceptible humming stopped.

Brian Kearns had just put himself out of a job.

He picked up the stylus chained to the logbook, held a floating page down with his right hand, and wrote swiftly and expertly with his left:

"1676th day of voyage; have just thrown switch which cut the interstellar drives. Our calculations were correct and there appear to have been no visible shock effects as the IS units went out of function. We

are now standing fourteen hundred miles off Mars. Relinquished control of ship at —" he glanced at the chronometer again, and wrote "—0814 hours. Position . . ." He added a series of complicated numerals, scribbled his initials beneath the entry, then picked up the hook of the intercabin communicator and waggled it.

A dim rasping voice said from the other end of the starship, almost half a mile away, "That you, Kearns?"

"Right, Caldwell."

"We're standing by with atomics back here, Brian. Were the figures right?"

"All calculations appear to have been correct," Brian answered stiffly. "The drives have been cut according to the schedule previously worked out."

"Yippe!" the voice shouted from the loudspeaker, and Brian frowned and coughed reprovingly. The far-away voice appeared to be stifling an expletive, but inquired correctly: "Standing by for orders, Captain Kearns?"

"All right, Captain Caldwell," Brian said; "she's your ship, as of—" he stopped, glanced at the chronometer again, and after a few seconds said "now!"

He put down the hook, and looked around the main control room, in which he had spent the best part of the *Homeward's* long voyage. The tremendous interstellar drives were silent now, their dim

hum stilled, and the metal surfaces faced him with a blank, metallic unresponsiveness. Brian had a curious feeling of anticlimax while he recapped the stylus, slid a moving panel over the logbook, and clung there to the handhold, wondering with the back part of his mind if he had left anything undone, while knowing, with the sureness of long habit, that he had not.

It is impossible to shrug one's shoulders in free fall; the motion sends you flying across the cabin, and Brian was too well-trained to make waste motions of that sort. But his eyebrow lifted a little, and a sort of elated grin spread across his face; for a minute, unobserved, he looked almost as young as he was. Then, re-schooling his expression to the gravity he always wore in the presence of his crew, he inched back across the wall, methodically unstrapped his rubber sandals from their place in the skyhook, worked his feet into them with the skill of long practice, and, pulling himself swiftly across the remaining section of wall, wriggled the forward part of his body through the sphincter lock which led to the forward part of the great starship.

There he paused, his middle clasped firmly by the expanding diaphragm, looking down the narrow, cylindrical corridor. He could feel, now, the faint vibration all around him, as far away in the nose of the *Homeward* the atomic rockets began firing. He allowed himself to

grin again, this time with the secret contempt of a hyperdrive technician for rockets, however necessary, and slowly hauled the rest of his long, narrow body through the sphincter; then, pushing his feet hard against the diaphragm which had snapped tight behind him, he arrowed down, in a straight line, his body rocketing weightless down the corridor. He braked himself with strong hands at the far end, then paused; there was a musical mewing behind him, and the ship's cat, Einstein — actually a Centaurian mammal more nearly resembling a dwarf kangaroo — somersaulted dizzily through the air toward him.

"Brian — catch him!" a girl's voice called, and Brian turned, hooking one rubber sandal through a strap, and made a wide sweeping grab for the creature. He caught it by one spindly leg; it squalled and thrashed to get away, and the girl called anxiously "Hang on, I'm coming." She propelled herself down the corridor, and hurriedly snatched the little animal, who immediately quieted and snuggled under her chin.

"He went crazy when the rockets started," she murmured apologetically. "It must be the vibration or something."

Brian grinned down at the girl, who was small and slight, her curly fair hair standing weirdly around her head and her prim brief overall floating out in odd billows. They had all lived at free fall conditions

for so long that he barely noticed this, but he did see the disquiet in her brown eyes — Elinor Wade was a food culturist, and knew rather less about the drives than the Centaurian cat.

"It's all right, Ellie; maybe Einstein's a hyperdrive technician. I just cut the IS units and turned the ship over to Caldwell.

She whispered, "Then we're almost there! Oh, Brian!" and her eyes were a double star, first magnitude. He nodded. "It's Caldwell's command now, so I don't know what he'll do," Brian added, "but you'd better keep your ears lapped over for instructions. We'll have to strap in, in a few minutes, for deceleration, if he's going to brake in at Mars."

"Brian, I'm scared. . . ." Ellie whispered, and let the Centaurian cat float free, fumbling around for his hand. "It would be — hideously ironical, if this old ship travelled to Centaurus and back, and then cracked up in atmosphere —"

"Relax," Brian advised her genially. "He may decide to go on to Earth, anyway — Caldwell knows his business, Ellie. And I know the *Homeward*."

"You certainly do." The girl attempted a smile, which somehow missed its purpose. "You're in love with this old wreck!"

Brian grinned disarmingly. "I won't deny it," he answered. "But it's just a kind of substitute passion till I can get you down to earth!"

The girl blushed and turned her face away from him. The twelve members of the *Homeward's* crew were all young, and the confined quarters aboard generated strong attachments; but men and women were carefully segregated aboard ship, for an excellent and practical reason which had nothing to do with morality. The trip from Centaurus, even at hyperspeeds, took the best part of five years. And no one has yet discovered any method for delivering a baby in free fall.

Brian unhooked his rubber shoe. "Going into the lounge?"

"No. . . ." She hung back. "I've got to feed Einstein, after — Paula's still in the Food Culture unit, and there's no public address system in there — I'd better go and tell her we may have to strap in. Go on ahead, and I'll tell Paula —"

"I'll come with you. I'm hungry and I want to snatch a bite before we go out, anyhow —"

"No!" The sharpness of her voice amazed him. "Go on out in the lounge, I'll bring you something."

He stared at her. "What —"

"Go on. Paula's — Paula's —" Ellie fumbled and finished "— she's dressing in there."

"What the devil —" Brian, suddenly suspicious, shoved hard against the handhold, and barreled across the corridor to the open lock of the Food Culture unit. Ellie gave a wordless cry of warning as Brian fell through the doorway, and in the aftermath of that cry, beneath

Brian's intrusive stare, two fused figures jerked convulsively and thrust apart. Paula Sandoval flung her arms over her face and grabbed at a floating garment, while Tom Mellen jackknifed upright and glared belligerently at Brian.

"Get the hell out of here!" he roared, simultaneous with Brian's needle-voiced "What's going on in here?"

There was blue vitriol in Paula Sandoval's taut voice. "I think you can *see* what goes on, Captain!" and her black eyes snapped fire at him.

"Brian —" Ellie implored, her hand on his wrist with a gentle, repressive force. He threw it off with a violence that flung her halfway across the cabin.

He said, with icy command, "You'd better get up front, Paula. Caldwell will need his figures checked. As for you, Mellen, regulations —"

"Regulations go jump in a hot jet, and you too!" Tom Mellen stormed. He was a loose-limbed young fellow, well over six feet tall and looking longer. "What the hell do you think you're doing anyway, pushing your weight around?"

"Look," Brian said tersely, and jerked around to the girls, "Paula, get up front — *that's an order!* Tom, this part of the ship is off limits for men except at regular meal periods. This is the fifth time —"

"The sixth to be exact, Captain's Log-book, and four times you didn't catch me. So what? What the hell are *you*, a blasted —"

"We'll leave my personal habits out of the matter, Mister Mellen. *Sandovall*" he flung at Paula. "I gave you an order!"

Ellie had her arms around Paula, who was sobbing harshly, but the small dark girl pulled away from Ellie, her eyes ablaze. "Give him another one for me, Tom," she said bitterly, and scooted out of the cabin. Brian added, more quietly, "You go too, Ellie. I'll settle this with Mellen right now."

But Ellie did not move. "Brian," she said quietly, "this is a pretty stupid time to be enforcing that regulation."

"As long as the *Homeward* is in space," Brian said tightly, "that particular regulation — and all others based on principles of necessity — will be enforced."

"You listen here —" Mellen began furiously, then abruptly, his face suffusing with violent color, he flung himself upward at Brian, before Kearns realized what was coming. "The atomics are on," he grated. "Which means Caldwell's captain! And for three years I've been waiting for this —"

Brian dodged in a queer, jerky gesture, and Mellen hurtled over his head, thrown on by the momentum of his own blow. "*Brian! Tom!*" Ellie begged, diving toward them and thrusting her rubber-sandaled feet between the men, but Mellen shoved her aside.

"I'm warning you, Ellie, get out of the way —" he panted. Brian

started "Look here —" then, as Mellen plunged at him again, put out both hands and shoved hard.

Momentum met momentum. Brian and Mellen spun apart with such violence that heads cracked at opposite ends of the food culture unit, and Brian, half-stunned, dragged himself groggily upright.

Mellen's laughter, wry and ironical, filled the cabin.

"Okay, damn it," he said bitterly. "I suppose there's no use having it out here and now. But just wait till I get you down to earth —"

Brian rubbed his head and blinked dizzily, but his voice was precise, giving no hint of the shooting stars that were chasing themselves before his eyes. "By that time," he answered coldly, "there will no longer be occasion for fighting, since my command will have terminated."

Mellen tightened his mouth, and Ellie interceded anxiously: "Tom, Brian is perfectly right, theoretically — don't stir up hard feelings now, when we're almost home —"

"Yeah, that's right. . . ." Tom Mellen suddenly grinned, and his face was good-natured. "Hey, Brian, how about it? No hard feelings, huh?"

Brian turned away. He said frigidly, "Why should there be hard feelings? It's my duty to enforce regulations until the *Homeward* is down."

"God damn —" Mellen muttered under his breath at Brian's rigid back, and even Ellie looked trou-

bled. Then Mellen made a useless movement and started toward the front of the ship.

"Come on. I expect Caldwell will be wanting us," he said tightly, and propelled himself in quick, wrathful jerks toward the forward lounge.

II

The technique of braking into atmosphere had been perfected a hundred years before the old *Starward* rose from Earth to aim at Centaurus. However, it was new to the *Homeward's* crew, and the tediousness of the process set nerves to jittering. Only Brian, strapped into one of the skyhooks in the lounge, was really calm, and Ellie, in the cradle next to his, absorbed a little of his calm confidence; Brian Kearns had been trained aboard the *Homeward* for twelve years before the trip began.

It had taken four generations for the stranded crew of the original ship, the *Starward*, to repair the hyperdrives smashed in landing, and to wrest from the soil of θ Centauri fourth planet — Terra Two, they called it — enough cerberum to take a pilot crew back to earth with news of their success. A hundred and thirty years, subjective time. Taking account of the time-lags engendered by their hyper-speeds, it was entirely possible that four or five hundred years had elapsed, objectively, on the planet their ancestors had left. Ellie, looking across at Brian's calm face, at

his mouth that persisted in grinning with some personal, individual elation when he thought himself unwatched, wondered if he felt no regrets at all. Ellie struggled with a moment of blinding homesickness, remembering their last view of the little dark planet spinning around the red star. They had left a growing colony of 400 souls, a world to which they could never return, for, after five years of subjective time in hyperspeeds, it was entirely possible that everyone they had known on Terra Two had already lived out a full lifetime.

But Brian's thoughts were moving forward, not backward, and he could not keep them to himself.

"I suppose by now they've discovered a better method for braking into atmosphere," he mused. "If anybody's watching us, down there, we probably look like living fossils — and I suppose we are. In their world, we'll be so obsolete that we'll feel like stone-age man!"

"Oh, I don't know," Ellie protested. "People don't change —"

"But civilizations do," Brian insisted. "There was less than a hundred years between the first rocket to Luna and the launching of the *Starward*. That's how fast a scientific civilization can move."

"But how can you be sure they've moved along those lines?" Ellie wanted to know.

"Have you ever heard of time-binding?" he asked derisively. "When each generation accumulates

the knowledge of the one before it, progress is a perfectly cumulative, straightforward thing. When the *Starward* left —”

“Brian —” she began, but he rushed on: “I grant you that man progressed at random for thousands of years, but when he acquired the scientific method, it was less than a hundred years from jet plane to rocketship. A race which had interstellar travel could progress in only one direction. If we wanted to take the time, we could sit down with an electronic calculator and add it all up, and predict exactly what we’d find down there.”

“It seems,” Ellie said slowly, “That you’re leaving out the human element. The crew of the *Starward* were all scientists, hand-picked for compatibility, and the Terra Two colony is probably the nearest thing to a homogeneous society that ever existed. You can’t make that kind of predictions for a normally populated planet.”

“The human element —”

“Will you two quit it?” shouted Langdon Forbes angrily from his skyhook. “I’m trying not to get spacesick, but Kearns sounding off about progress is about all I can take! Does he have to pick a time when we’re strapped in, and can’t get away?”

Brian grumbled something unintelligible and lapsed into morose silence. Ellie reached dragging fingers, newly clumsy, toward him, but he pushed the hand away.

A dismal wailing came from beneath Ellie’s skyhook; Einstein was getting reacquainted with gravity, and didn’t like it. Ellie scooped up the miserable little animal and held it cuddled tight against her straps. It was silent in the lounge; the steady, low vibration of the atomic drives was a sound already so deeply embedded in their consciousness that they did not think of it as sound at all. There was still no feeling of motion, but there was an unpleasant, dragging sensation as the enormous starship made its wide braking circles, first grazing the atmosphere for a second or two, as it swung elliptically, like a crazy comet; then entering atmosphere for a few seconds, then a full minute, then a few minutes — coming “down” in slow, careful spirals.

“I hope they’ve found some way to put artificial gravity in spaceships,” Judy Keretsky moaned, half-laughing, from the skyhook where she swung, upside down, from what was now the ceiling of the lounge. Her long, curly hair fell down over her head in a thick curtain; she alone of starship’s crew did not keep her hair clipped functionally short. She batted futilely at the waving curls as she wailed, “Oh, my poor head, I’m getting di-i-izzy up here!”

“You’re getting dizzy! What about this poor cat!” Ellie jibed.

“Say, whose idea was it to bring that animal along, anyhow?” someone demanded.

"Very valuable contribution to science," Judy burlesqued. "Why didn't you bring a pair of them, Ellie!"

"Brian wouldn't let her," Marcia van Schreeven jeered, with an undertone of bitterness.

Ellie patted Einstein's darkish fur defensively, reminding Marcia in her peaceful voice: "Einstein is one of the third gender. When conditions are right, he'll reproduce in the first and second."

"Lucky animal," Brian said half-seriously, and Ellie glanced at him with unusual shyness as she murmured, "Well, Einstein will be unique on Earth, anyhow!"

"You'll see things much weirder than Einstein," Brian said offhandedly. "We've only been on one planet, and by now, Earth has probably colonized all the nearer stars. The people of Earth will be cosmopolitan in the largest sense —"

"Speaking of Earth," Langdon forcibly headed him off before he could hold forth again, "where on the planet are we going to set this thing down?"

"We won't know that till we contact the surface," Judy said irritably, batting her hair back. "We have the map the Firsts gave us, but it's unthinkable that the old spaceport at Denver would still be in use, and if it is, it would probably be so changed that we wouldn't know how to land — and too crowded for an IS ship this size."

"You've been listening to Brian,"

Langdon grinned. "According to him, it's a wonder we haven't already bumped into the local rocket for the second galaxy!"

Brian ignored the confusion of technical terms and answered seriously "That's why I suggested landing on Mars. There are enough desert areas, on Mars where we could have landed without any danger of damaging urbanized sections. I doubt if the population there is quite so centralized —"

"Well, why *didn't* we?" Marcia queried sharply, and Langdon, frowning, twisted his head to her. "We tried to radio them from space," he answered, "but they evidently didn't pick up our signals. So Caldwell and Mellen decided to bring us in to Earth instead of wasting time braking in at Mars and maybe having to pick up again. We haven't enough fuel for more than one landing and pick-up."

"We could certainly have refueled at Mars —" Brian began, but was interrupted by an apologetic cough from the loudspeaker in the centre of the lounge.

"Hey, Kearns," it said in a puzzled rasp. "Brian Kearns, come on up forward, will you? Kearns, please come up to the front control room, if you can."

Brian scowled, and started painfully unbuckling the straps on his skyhook. "Now what does Mellen want —" he wondered aloud.

"What's the matter?" Judy squeaked, "Are we in trouble?"

"Oh, hush!" Ellie commanded. "If we are, we'll be told!" She watched, with vague disquiet, as Brian crawled over the side of his skyhook and abruptly tumbled two feet, not very hard, to the floor. "Weight's on the axis now," he announced wryly to no one in particular. "Good thing I wasn't up where Judy is, or I'd have broken my neck! Somebody will have to lift her down —"

Judy squeaked again, but Ellie snapped at her: "Just stay where you are until we find out what's going on!" and watched, disturbed, as Brian crawled clumsily on hands and knees across the wall which lay along the central axis of the starship and was therefore "down." He pushed at the refractory sphincter lock — it worked perfectly only in free fall — and forced his head and shoulders through into the forward control room.

Tom Mellen, his short hair bristling upright around his head, twisted around as Brian wriggled his shoulders through. "We've tried to raise them by FM, AM and wavicle," he said, scowling, "but they don't answer. Not a sign of a signal. What do you think of that, Brian?"

Brian looked deliberately around the cabin. Paula Sandoval, strapped in before the navigation instruments, hunched her bare, tanned shoulders and refused to meet his eyes; Caldwell, the gray-haired veteran who had repaired the atomic

rockets, grinned truculently. Mellen's face was puzzled and defensive.

"I said it off Mars," Brian told them, "and I say it again; we're just wasting time trying to raise them with any communication devices aboard. By now, they're probably using something so far beyond radio or wavicles that they can't pick us up. Their equipment would be too fine for our clumsy primitive devices to —"

"Clumsy primitive —" Caldwell broke off, visibly summoning patience, and Mellen interrupted fiercely. "Look, Kearns, there are just so many ways of transmitting electric impulses."

"The first spacemen said that all fuels had to be chemical or atomic, didn't they?" Brian snapped. "And we came on cerberum. The world didn't end when the *Starward* left! You've got to realize that we've been stranded in what amounts to a time-warp for five hundred years or so, and we're hopelessly obsolete!"

"Maybe so . . ." Mellen said slowly, and waggled the switch again. Brian irritably flipped it shut.

"Why keep fussing with it, Tom? If they'd picked up our signals, they'd have answered by now. Have you seen any rockets entering or leaving?"

"Nothing larger than twelve centimeters since we entered the orbit," Mellen told him.

Brian frowned. "Where are we, Paula?"

The girl gave him a venomous

look, but she glanced at her instruments and replied, "Orbiting at forty miles, velocity five point six m.p.s."

Kearns glanced at Caldwell. "You're the captain —"

"In a limited sense," Caldwell said slowly, and returned his steady gaze. "That's why I wanted you up here. There are two things we can do. We can go down under the cloud layer — and maybe risk getting shot at — to find a place to set down, or else go on a permanent orbit, and send somebody down in the pickup."

"The pickup," Brian decided immediately. "Can you imagine trying to land a ship this size without instructions from outside? For all we know, there may be laws about landing spaceships. The pickup can set down in a few square yards. Whoever goes down can locate a spaceport big enough to handle the *Homeward* and see about getting the necessary permissions."

"You're overlooking one thing," Mellen forced the words out. "Suppose they haven't any spaceports!"

"They'd have to have spaceports, Tom," Caldwell protested, "even for interplanetary ships." And Brian added, "It's impossible that we'd have been the only interstellar ship —"

"That isn't what I mean," Mellen protested. "Surely one of the planets, Mars or Earth, would have picked up our signals. Someone must use radio for something, even if it's

purely local. That is, if there's anyone down there at all!"

Brian snorted laughter. "You mean some kind of end-of-the-world disaster?" he asked, elaborately sarcastic, but Mellen took him seriously. "Something like that."

"There's one way we can find out," Caldwell interrupted, "Do you want to take the pickup down, Brian? We won't be using the IS drives again — there's nothing more you can do aboard."

"I'll go," Brian said shortly, but he could barely conceal his eagerness, and even forgot his animosity toward Mellen for a minute. "Shall I take Tom to handle the radio?"

Caldwell frowned, and answered half practically and half tactfully, "I'll need Tom, and Paula too, to bring the ship down when we're ready. Langdon can handle the radio in the pickup. And take a couple of others too; Mellen may or may not be right, but I don't think any crew members ought to go down alone until we know exactly what we'll find down there."

Caldwell's seriousness made little impression on Brian, but he realized that he would need someone to pilot the pickup in any case; his own training had fitted him only to handle the complex interstellar drives. And Langdon should, they decided, keep the radio at his fingertips, to report instantly to the *Homeward* in case of any unforeseen events.

So it was Ellinor Wade who took the controls of the small jet-driven

stratoplane which had been designed for ship-to-surface shuttling, and used during the final stages of repair on the *Homeward*. She let the small plane sink through the thick clouds, and asked, "Where do we want to set down?"

Langdon bent over the carefully copied map. "Judy's scribbled all over this thing," he complained. "But try North America, midwest. That's where the first rocket ranges were built, and we all speak English, after a fashion."

"Unless the language has changed too much," Brian murmured. Ellie frowned as she brought the swift little jet down, arcing across an unfamiliar land-mass; Brian and Langdon squeezed their hands to their eyes as the clouds thinned, for the sudden blaze of yellow light was like a stab in the eyeballs. Lighting aboard ship, of course, was keyed to the familiar crimson noon of Terra Two, under which the crew had lived all their lives. Ellie squinted over the instrument panel, using an unladylike word under her breath.

The ship dived over rolling hills, and Brian let out his breath slowly as the serried regular skyline of massive buildings cleaved the horizon, and said in an edgy voice, "I was beginning to wonder if Mellen had been right about those atomic deserts!"

Ellie warned, "From what the Firsts have told us, I don't care to get tangled up in a city airport! Let's find an open space and set

down there." She headed northward from the city, and asked, "Have either of you seen anything that looks like transportation? Planes, rockets, anything on the ground?"

"Nothing at all with the naked eye," Langdon frowned, "and nothing moving that beeps the radar. And I've been watching pretty close."

"Funny . . ." Ellie murmured.

From this height everything was clear, and as they swerved groundward, details became sharply incised in miniature: wide plowed fields, scattered, toy-like houses, clusters of small buildings. There seemed to be animals in the fields. Langdon smiled. "Just like home," he said happily, meaning Terra Two. "Regular rural community, except that everything looks *green!*"

"That's this ridiculous yellow light!" Ellie said, absently, and Brian scoffed, "Just like home! Better get set for a shock, Langdon!"

"It might be you that gets the shock," Langdon answered unexpectedly, and peered over Ellie's shoulder at the controls. "The ground's level here, Ellie."

The pickup bumped ground and rolled gently; Langdon's fingers moved delicately on the radio panel, and he made a brief report in staccato speech while Brian unsealed the door. Strange smells wafted into the cabin, and the three crowded together in the entrance, eyes squinted against the stabbing

light, strangely reluctant, at the last, to set foot on the unfamiliar soil.

"It's cold. . . ." Ellie shivered in her thin garment.

Langdon looked down, dismayed. "You've set down in somebody's grainfield!" he reproached. Food was still conserved carefully on Terra Two, more from habit than from serious privation; Man's conquest of the new planet was uncertain, and the colony took no chances. The three felt a twinging guilt as they looked down at the blackened spears of grain, and Ellie clutched at Brian's arm. "Someone's coming—" she faltered.

Across the evenly plowed ridges, between rows of ripening wheat, a boy of thirteen walked, steadily and unhurried. He was not very tall, but looked sturdy; his face was deeply tanned under square-cut dark hair, and he was wearing a loose shirt and breeches tucked into low boots, all the same rich deep-brown color. Even Brian was silent as the boy advanced to the very foot of the pickup plane, paused and looked up at it, then glanced up indifferently at the three in the doorway, and began to move around to the tail, toward the smoking jets.

Brian quickly dropped Ellie's hand and scrambled to the ground. "Hey there!" he called, forgetting the prepared speech on his lips. "Better not go around there, it's dangerous — *hot!*"

The boy desisted at once, turning

to gaze at him, and after a moment he said in slurred but perfectly understandable English, "I saw the streak, and hoped that a meteor had fallen." He laughed, turned and began to walk away from them.

Brian looked blankly up at Ellie and Langdon. The man jumped down and gave Ellie a hand as she called after the boy "Please — wait a minute —"

He looked around, politely, and before his indifferent courtesy Brian felt the words melting from his lips. It was Langdon who finally said, in an empty voice, "Where can we — We have a message for the — the Government. Where can we get — transportation — to the City?"

"The City?" The boy stared. "What for? Where did you come from? The — the *City*?"

Brian quietly assumed command of the situation again. "We are from the first Centaurian expedition, the *Starward*," he said. "We, or rather our ship, left this planet hundreds of years ago."

"Oh?" The boy smiled in a friendly way. "Well, I suppose you are glad to be back. Over that hill," he pointed, "you will find a road which goes toward the City." He turned again, this time with a definite air of finality, and started to walk away.

The three travelers stared at one another in blank indignation. Brian finally took a step forward and shouted: "Hey, come back here!"

With an irritated jerk of his head,

the boy turned. "Now what do you want?" he demanded.

Ellie said conciliatingly, "This is only the pickup of our ship. We have to — to find someone who can tell us where to bring the spaceship down. As you can see," she gestured toward the ruined wheat, "our jets have destroyed a part of the crop here. Our spaceship is much larger, and we don't want to do any more damage. Perhaps your father —"

The boy's face, puzzled at first, had cleared while she was talking. "My father is not in our village now," he informed them, "but if you will come with me, I will take you to my grandfather."

"If you could tell us where the nearest spaceport is —" Brian suggested.

The boy frowned. "Spaceport?" he repeated. "Well, maybe my grandfather can help you."

He turned again, and led the way across the field. Langdon and Ellie followed at once; Brian hung back, looking uneasily at the pickup. The boy glanced over his shoulder. "You need not be anxious about your plane," he called, laughing. "It's too large to be stolen!"

Brian stiffened; the boy's attitude was just derisive enough to put him on the defensive. Then, realizing the futility of anger, he broke into a run to catch up with the others. When he came near them, the boy was saying, a little sulkily, "I thought that I would be fortunate enough to find a fallen meteor! I

have never seen a meteorite." Then, making a tardy attempt to remember his manners, he added politely, "Of course, I have never seen a spaceship either —" but it was evident that a spaceship was a very poor substitute.

Ellie's thinly shod feet stumbled on the uneven ground, and all three were glad when they came out on a smoothed road which wound between low flowering trees. There seemed to be no vehicles of any kind for the road was just wide enough to permit the four to walk abreast. The boy's walk was rapid, and he kept moving, almost unconsciously, ahead of them, then looking back and deliberately slowing his steps. Once when he had forged ahead, Langdon murmured, "Evidently vehicular traffic has been completely diverted from rural neighborhoods!" and Brian whispered, "This is incredible! Either that boy's half-witted, or else even the children here are so blasé that the first star-expedition doesn't mean anything to them!"

"I wouldn't be too sure," Ellie said slowly. "There's something that we don't understand. Let's not try to figure things out ahead, Brian. Let's just take them as they come."

III

Muscles virtually unused for nearly five years were aching by the time the narrow road wound into a village of low clustered houses,

built of what seemed to be grayish field stone. A profuse display of flowers bloomed in elaborate geometrical patterns around nearly every doorstep, and little groups of children, dressed in smocks of dark yellow or pale reddish-gray, were chasing one another haphazardly on the lawns, shouting something rhythmic and untuneful. Most of the houses had low trellised porches, and women in short light dresses sat in little groups on the porches. The street was not paved, and the women did not appear busy; their low-pitched conversation was a musical hum, and all down the street the three strangers could hear a sound of singing. A man's voice, singing in a low, monotonous rise and fall of notes. It was toward this sound of singing that the boy led them, up the steps of a porch which was not trellised but roofed, and through an open door.

They stepped into a wide, light room. Two walls seemed to open in slatted shutters, giving a view of an evenly patterned garden; on another wall was a large fireplace, where embers flickered quietly, and there was a gleaming kettle of some light, brilliant metal swung on a crane over the embers. It reminded Brian of a picture in one of his oldest history books, and he blinked at the anachronism. The other furniture in the room was unfamiliar, low cushioned seats built against the walls, and a few closed doors on the fourth wall. From an inner room,

the singing filled the house: a baritone voice, rich and resonant, rising and falling in slow, unfamiliar harmonic patterns.

The boy called: "Grandpa!"

The singer finished one of the odd phrases; then the song ceased, and the three strangers heard slow, deliberate steps behind the closed door. It swung back, and a tall old man came out into the main room.

He looked like the boy. His hair was clipped short, but grew down along his cheeks, although his chin was shaven clean; he wore a shirt and breeches of the same rich brown, but his feet were thrust into slippers of stitched leather. He looked strong and vigorous; his hands, tanned and knotty, were extremely well-kept, though somewhat stained, and he stood very erect, surveying them with great composure, while his deep-set dark eyes studied them from their clipped and tended hair to their rubber-sandaled feet. The composure gradually gave way to a quizzical smile, and he came forward a few steps. His voice was a singer's voice, full and very strong.

"Be welcome, friends. You are at home. Destrý, who are our guests?"

The boy said calmly "They came down in a spaceship, grandpa, or rather, part of one. That streak wasn't a meteor at all. They said they wanted to go to the City. So I brought them along to you instead."

The man's face did not change by a fraction. Brian had been looking for surprise, or some more tangible

emotion, but the man only surveyed them equably.

"Please be seated," he invited graciously. "I am Hard Frobisher, friends, and this is my grandson Destry."

The three sank on one of the cushioned seats, feeling a little like children in their first learning-period before the Firsts. Only Brian had presence of mind enough to murmur their names.

"Brian Kearns — Ellinor Wade — Langdon Forbes —"

The old man repeated the names, bowing courteously to Ellie, at which the girl could barely conceal her amazement. He inquired, smiling, "Can I be of assistance to you?"

Brian stood up. "The boy didn't tell you, sir, but we're from the first Centaurus expedition — the *Starward*."

"Oh?" A faint flicker of interest crossed Hard Frobisher's face. "That was a good long time ago, I am told. Did the Barbarians have some means, then, of prolonging life beyond its appointed limits?"

Brian's patience had already gone a long way beyond its appointed limits, and now, abruptly, it deserted him.

"Look, sir. We're from the first expedition into interstellar space. The *first*. None of us left Earth on the *Starward*. We weren't born. Our hyperspeeds, if you know what they are — which I'm beginning to doubt — threw us into a time-lag. There's

no need to call us Barbarians, either. The ship's drives were smashed when they landed, and we've been four generations, *four generations*, getting it in operable condition to come back to Earth. None of us has ever been on Earth before. We're strangers here, understand? We have to ask our way around. We asked a civil question. Now if we could kindly have a civil answer —"

Hard Frobisher raised a placating hand. "I am sorry," he said calmly. "I didn't understand. Just what do you want me to do about it?"

Brian made a visible attempt to keep his temper. "Well, first, we want to get in touch with the authorities. Then I want to find a place where we can bring out spaceship down —"

Frobisher was frowning, and Brian fell silent.

"Frankly," the old man said, "I don't know whom you'd contact about a thing like that. There is plenty of open land to the south, nearer the city, where you might land your ship —"

"Now look —" Brian started, but Langdon touched his arm. So Brian only asked, "If you could tell us how to get in touch with the Government . . . ?"

"Well," the old man said neutrally, "there are three governors in our village, but they only regulate the school hours, and make rules about locking houses. I wouldn't want to bother them about something foolish like this. I don't think

they'd have much to say about your . . . oh yes, spaceship."

That silenced Brian and Langdon completely. Ellie, feeling as if they were being tangled into a giant spiderweb, asked desperately, "Could we go to some other, perhaps some larger place?"

Frobisher looked at her, frankly puzzled.

"It's half a day's walk to Camey," he said, "and when you got there, they would tell you the same thing. You are perfectly welcome to put your spaceship down on our barrens, if you want to."

Brian stiffened belligerently. "Now let's get this straight. There's a city over there. There must be some one there in authority!"

"Oh, the City!" Frobisher's voice held dismissal, "Nobody's lived in any of the cities for years! Why would you want to go there?"

Langdon said, baffled, "Look, Mr. Frobisher. We've come all the way from Centaurus, to bring Earth the news about our expedition. We'd expected to be surprised at what we found — after all, it has been a long time since the *Starward* left. But are we supposed to understand from this run-around you're giving us that there's nobody to listen, that the first of the interstellar expeditions doesn't mean anything to anyone?"

"Should it?" asked Frobisher, and his face was even more baffled than Brian's. "I can understand your personal predicament somewhat — after

all, you've come a long way, but why? Didn't you like it where you were? There is only one reason why people move from one place to another — and it seems to me that you have overdone it."

The room was silent. Hard Frobisher stood up, looking indecisively at his guests, and Brian half expected him to repeat Destry's move and walk away, uninterested; but he merely went to the fireplace and peered into the kettle.

"Food is prepared," he remarked. "Can I invite you to join us? Good food is ill-seasoned by dissension, and there is no wisdom in an empty belly."

Brian and Langdon just sat and looked dumbly at Frobisher. It was Ellie who said firmly, "Thank you, Mr. Frobisher," and dug an elbow into Brian's ribs, whispering savagely, "Behave yourself!"

The boy Destry came and helped his grandfather bring food from the fireplace and from an inner room; he conducted the strangers to seats around a sort of table. The food was unfamiliar and not altogether pleasant to the strangers, accustomed to the elaborate synthetics of the ship; Brian, altogether out of humor, made almost no effort to conceal his distaste, and Langdon ate listlessly; Hard and Destry ate with the unfeigned appetite of men who spend much time in the open air, and neither spoke much during the meal except to urge food upon their

guests. Ellie, finding the curious liquids and semi-solids fascinating, if strange, tasted them with an interested professional curiosity, wondering how they were prepared.

It was not very long before Hard Frobisher nodded to Destry, and the boy rose and began taking dishes from the table. Frobisher pushed back his chair and turned to Brian. "We can now discuss your problem, if you wish," he said pleasantly. "Full stomachs make wise decisions." He glanced at Ellie, smiling. "I regret that there is no woman in my house to entertain you while we talk, young lady," he said regretfully, and Ellie dropped her eyes. On the *Homeward* — as on Terra Two — men and women were equals and neither deferred to the other. Hard's polite deference was new, and his bland assumption that she could have no part in their talk was a somewhat distasteful surprise. Langdon clenched his fists, while Brian seemed about to explode. Ellie summed up the situation at a glance, and swiftly intervened by rising and glancing shyly at Destry. "Can I help you?" she offered diffidently, the boy grinned.

"Sure, come ahead," he told her. "You carry the dishes and I'll bring the kettle."

Frobisher settled back, taking a leather pouch from his pocket and meticulously stuffing a pipe of carved amber which swiftly revised Langdon's ideas of the present level of civilization. Smoking was a habit

on Terra Two as well; only the smell of the tobacco was unfamiliar. Both young men stifled coughs and refused his offer of the sack, taking out their own grayish cigarettes and inhaling the sweetish-sour smoke avidly to shut out the rank stench of the pipe. Somewhere, behind closed doors, they heard a splashing of water and the uncertain falsetto of the boy's voice, mingled with Ellie's merry soprano laughter. Brian scowled and leaned forward, his arms on his knees.

"See here, Mr. Frobisher," he said truculently. "I know you are trying to be hospitable, but if you don't mind, let's talk business. We have to bring the ship down, and after that —" He stopped and stared at the floor, wondering suddenly if he were on some kind of reservation for half-wits. No: the room was tastefully, if simply, furnished; everything was plain, but nothing crude. The wood of the furniture was beautifully stained and polished, and the hand-woven rug on the floor matched the thick draperies at the slatted windows. The house showed comfort, even a moderated luxury, and Frobisher's accents were those of a cultured man. Nor was he merely an eccentric, judging from what Brian had briefly seen of the other houses and the glimpsed people. Destry hadn't seemed surprised at the plane — he'd known what it was, and yet it hadn't impressed him. No, it wasn't savagery. But it was radically different from what

he had expected, and the change bewildered him. He looked up at one of the many pictures which hung about the room, and there, for the first time, sensed a note of eccentricity; they were mostly sketches of birds, very precisely drawn, but the colors were combined in a fashion which only a madman could endure. . . . Then Brian realized that it was this bright, unfamiliar light which made the colors bizarre to him, and simultaneously he became conscious that his eyes were stinging and watering, and that he had a violent headache. He rested his forehead on his clenched hands, closing his eyes.

"It isn't that you aren't welcome here," Frobisher said thoughtfully, pulling at his pipe. "We realize that there is only one reason why you would leave your home planet, and that would, of course, be because you were unhappy there. And so we understand —"

"Of all the stupid, unjustified assumptions—" Brian began furiously, then checked himself. What was happening to his caution? He and Langdon were effectively cut off from the rest of the crew; they couldn't afford to get into trouble. He rubbed his aching eyes.

"Sorry, Mr. Frobisher," he said tiredly. "I didn't mean to be offensive."

"No offense taken," Frobisher assured him. "And certainly none was intended by me. Am I mistaken —"

"We came here for one reason,"

Langdon informed him. "To advance man's knowledge of the world outside the solar system. In other words, to finish what the Firsts started."

"And, judging by appearances—" Brian's voice was bitter "— we've wasted our time!"

"Yes, I'm afraid you have." Something new in Frobisher's voice made both young men look up. "Whether you realize it or not, I am quite aware of your problems, Mr. Kearns. I have read a good deal about the Bar — excuse me, about the past." He tapped his pipe meditatively on a projecting corner of the fireplace. "I suppose it would be impossible for you to return to Centaurus in your lifetimes?"

Brian bit his lip. "In our lifetimes — no, not impossible," he answered, "but in the lifetimes of anyone we had known, assuming that we could *get* back. Our fuel reserves are not great —" He looked questioningly at Frobisher.

"Then I don't quite know what to do with you," the old man said, and there was a genuine personal concern in his voice. And that friendly concern was the last thing needed to bring Brian to critical mass. Ignoring the warning pressure of Langdon's hand on his knee, he stood up.

"Look, Frobisher," he said tensely, "just who in hell gave you the authority to make this decision, anyhow?"

Frobisher's face did not change by

a fraction. "Why, you landed in our field and my grandson brought you here."

"So you're just taking responsibility for the whole matter? Do you rule Earth?"

The man's mouth dropped open. "*Do I rule . . .* Ha, ha, ha!" Frobisher leaned back in his chair, holding his sides and rocking suddenly with uncontrollable laughter. "*Do I rule . . .*" He collapsed into chuckles again, his mirth literally shaking the floor, and the large expansive laughter was so infectious that Langdon finally glanced up with a faint, puzzled grin, and even the worst of Brian's fury began to drain away a little. "I'm sorry," Frobisher said weakly at last, and there were tears in his eyes. "But that — that is the funniest thing I've heard since spring sowing! *Do I . . .* ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! *Wait* until I tell my son — I'm sorry, Mr. Kearns, I can't help it. *Do I rule Earth!*" he chuckled again, "Heavens forbid! I have enough trouble ruling my grandson!" He laughed again, irrepressibly. Brian couldn't see what was so funny and said so.

With an effort, Frobisher controlled his laughter and his eyes sobered — but not much — as he looked at Brian. "You did come to me," he pointed out, "and that makes it my responsibility. I'm not a man to evade responsibility or refuse you hospitality, but frankly, I wish you had found somebody else!" A tiny snort of laughter

escaped him again, "I can see you'll make trouble here! But if you don't listen to me, you'll only have to find somebody else, and I'm afraid that whoever you found would tell you just about the same thing!" He smiled, and the anxious friendliness in his face took the edge from Brian's anger, although annoyed puzzlement remained.

Frobisher added quietly, "There is no reason that Norten village shouldn't have this problem, as well as any other." He stood up. "I expect the remainder of your ship's crew will be anxious about you. Do I assume correctly that you have a communication device?" At Langdon's exasperated nod, Frobisher twitched a loose coat from a peg. "Then why not report to them? We can talk further on the way — you don't mind if I come, do you?"

"No, not at all," Brian said weakly. "Not at all."

IV

Mindful of Caldwell's words about not getting separated, Brian insisted that Ellie should accompany them back to the pickup. Destry, apparently uninterested, at first refused his grandfather's invitation to join them, then changed his mind. He ran to fetch a warm jacket, but, surprisingly, instead of donning it, he laid it about Ellie's shoulders. "She's cold," he explained briefly to his grandfather, and without waiting for thanks, strode ahead of them, along the road.

The sun was dropping westward, and the light was almost unbearable; Brian's eyes were squinted tight, and Langdon's forehead furrowed in deep-plowed lines; Ellie held one hand across her forehead, and Brian put his arm around her.

"Headache, darling?" he asked tenderly.

She grimaced. "Will we get used to this light, do you think, or are we going to have to put up with this all along?"

Langdon said wryly, "I suppose the Firsts felt like this under Theta Centauri!"

Ellie smiled faintly. "No one spread out a welcome for them."

Frobisher walked ahead of them, with long, swinging steps, and Brian said in a savage undertone, "I still think this whole thing is an elaborate bluff of some sort. Or else we're on a primitive reservation. The whole world *can't* be like this!"

"Oh, don't be silly, Ellie said wearily, rubbing her aching eyes. "How could anyone have known that we'd choose to land here?"

Some of the women on the porches called familiarly to Frobisher, and he waved gaily to them in return, but no one paid any attention to the strangers, except for one plump woman, her hair in curly sausages all over her head, who waddled from her steps and toward the road. "I see you have guests, Hard," she called cheerfully. "If your house is too full, mine is empty!"

Frobisher faced around, smiling.

"Your hospitality may be required," he said. "There are others, and they have come a long way."

The woman looked at Ellie with a sharp female glance, noting her fair cropped hair, the smooth spun-synthetic coverall beneath the boy's jacket, the molded sandals and bare legs. Then she put out a fat warm hand. "Are you planning to settle in our village, my dear?" she asked.

"They haven't decided," Frobisher answered noncommittally, but Ellie said with a shy, impulsive friendliness, "I do hope so!" and squeezed the offered hand.

"Well, I hope so too, dear. It isn't often we have young neighbors," the plump woman replied. "You and your husband" (Ellie blushed at the forthright archaism) "be sure and call on us, now, if you need anything before you get settled." She smiled and waddled back to her doorway.

Langdon said, low-voiced, "It's like being on Terra Two, except that everything — everything —"

Brian said, "There must have been some inconceivable disaster! Culturally, they're a thousand years behind the world when the *Starward* left. Why, even Terra Two is more civilized than they seem to be! Cooking with fire — and these little villages — and the cities empty —"

"Oh, I don't know," Ellie murmured surprisingly. "How do you measure culture? Isn't it possible that they've progressed in ways we don't know anything about? The

difference might be in viewpoint.”

Brian shook his head stubbornly.

“It’s regression,” he protested, but Ellie had no time to answer, for they had come within sight of the pickup, and Frobisher dropped back to walk with them.

“There is your plane,” he said. “Do you intend to communicate from here, or will you rejoin your spaceship?”

Brian and Langdon looked at one another. “We haven’t thought about it,” Langdon said at last, “but — Brian — without a spaceport or at least a radio beaming device, how are they going to land?”

Brian frowned. “I don’t know much about rockets,” he said at last; “the hyperdrives are my job. How much landing room do they need?”

Langdon said, troubled, “Paula and Caldwell, between them, could land the *Homeward* in great-grandfather Kearns’s biochemistry lab, if they had to, without breaking a test tube. But they’d have to have a fix. If they land blind, they’re apt to set down right on the village.” He paused, and clarified, “That is, if they just aim at our general direction from what we transmit here.”

“In that case,” Brian suggested, “we’d better take up the pickup and rejoin the ship — and hunt up a good big desert to land blind.”

“Rejoining the ship would be quite a problem in this light,” Ellie said, troubled. “It’s going to be dark in less than an hour, I’d say — and I

have a feeling that we’re going to find ourselves completely night-blind.”

Frobisher had considerably withdrawn while they were talking, and Brian snapped, “What’s the matter with your brain, Ellie? You can go around to sunward, and match velocities with the *Homeward* there!”

“But then we might not find this place again,” Langdon said surprisingly, and Ellie added, “If we go hurtling all around the planet, who knows if we’d find this again?”

“For the love of — who cares?”

“I do,” said Langdon firmly. “According to Frobisher, conditions are pretty much the same everywhere, and — I kind of like that old guy, Brian. I like it here. I’d like to land here. Maybe settle down here.”

Brian stared. “Are you crazy?”

Langdon said, “Not at all. If we want to look around after the *Homeward* is down, fine — we have the pickup, we can do all the exploring we want to. We’ve plenty of fuel for the pickup. We’re down, let’s stay down.”

Brian’s face lost a little of its self-confidence; it was the first time that any of the crew had ever questioned his judgment, although many had resented his methods. He shrugged in a sudden futile misery. “I’m outvoted! And anyhow I resigned command when the atomics went on! Settle it with Caldwell by radio!” He lurched away from them and around toward the other side of the pickup. He heard the staccato bark

of the radio inside, but paid no attention until he suddenly became conscious of Ellie, close beside him.

She raised her face, with an affectionate smile. Brian, even distracted by a thousand irritated thoughts, found time to wonder at the new mystery of her fair hair in the golden sun: the red was dimmed out, here, and the short curls seemed a pure, delicate silver; she was very white and fragile in this new light, and Brian reached impulsively to pull her close. She responded eagerly, her arms going around him and her face lifted with a simplicity that he had not quite expected.

"Journey's end," she said gently. "We've waited a long time for this, Brian, even if that electronic calculator was off-beam about what we'd find down here. Kiss me, you idiot."

The strength in his arms was astonishing, and she gave a little cry. "Hey, I'm not used to weighing so much, take it easy—" she protested, laughing, and the laughter trailed away as he bent his head down to hers. She was conscious of the sun in her eyes, of the physical fatigue from unaccustomed exercise, and the dragging feel of too much gravity—Terra Two was a small, light world. There was a crushing urgency in Brian's arms, and he strained her desperately close for a frantic minute, then abruptly pushed her away, his voice roughened.

"Where did Frobisher go? Damn it, Ellie, I need a clear head right now! The way it looks, we'll have

the rest of our lives for that kind of thing!"

Hurt, but sensing the plea for help that begged her from behind the facade of his taut control, Ellie swallowed the pain of the personal rejection, and forced herself to think beyond the immediate moment. "He and Destry went to see how much of the grain had been ruined—"

"Hell, we can pay for the grain. There they come now—" Brian kicked out at a stalk of wheat, a curiously futile movement, and said in an odd, quenched voice, looking at his foot, "It's going to take months for us to get back in shape, after so long in free fall. We're coordinated all wrong for so much gravity. Notice the way Frobisher walks? Like he owned the world—" Resentment and envy mingled in his voice, and he stopped, then finished in a surprised tone, "—or as much of it as he wants!"

He said abruptly as the grandfather and grandson joined them, "Mr. Frobisher, we'll be glad to pay for what wheat we ruined."

"I would not have mentioned it," Frobisher said, and for the first time there was something like respect in his voice, "but it shows a good spirit that *you* have mentioned it. I have abundance, and you will have much to do after your crew lands. But if you insist upon payment, you can contribute task-work next season, after you are settled."

Brian was puzzled, but decided not to press the point. Langdon re-

joined them, and he asked, "What did Caldwell say?"

"He'll try it, if we'll fix up some kind of radio beam," Langdon responded. "Where do you want us to land, Mr. Frobisher?"

Hard Frobisher began to draw a sketch-map with a long stick in the dirt. "Over that rise —"

"We'll move the pickup over there," Ellie decided, then abruptly proffered the invitation, "Ride over there with us?"

Hard Frobisher looked speculatively at the plane, then toward the horizon. "Oh, it isn't a long walk," he said, but Destry said eagerly, "I believe I'd like it, grandpa."

The old man smiled deprecatingly. "The young are enthusiastic, Miss Wade," he said, almost in apology, "but — very well."

Brian logged another point of bewilderment. Could any educated humans be so trusting? Even on Terra Two, a well-united colony, there was a certain individual wariness, and strangers — how did Frobisher and Destry know they wouldn't be kidnaped?

It was an incredible relief to get back inside the pickup and switch on the familiar crimson light. Destry expressed mild surprise at the lighting, but Frobisher asked no questions and did not seem impressed when the pickup rose straight upward and circled before relanding at the edge of the large barren tract where they were to bring the *Homeward* down. At only one point in the

whole maneuver did Frobisher show the slightest surprise, and that was when Ellie took the controls; he glanced at Brian, then at Langdon, and then, in frank amazement, at the small slim girl at the controls; but he made no comment.

They landed, and Langdon touched the radio. Brian took it from his hand. "Hello? Hello the *Homeward*? Kearns talking. That you, Tom?"

Tom Mellen's husky voice, very far away, asked thinly, "Was I right about no spaceports?"

"You were." Brian did not elaborate.

"We've got the direction of your beam. But Paula says if we follow it in, we'll land straight on the pickup. And if we don't, how are we going to hit the spot you've picked out for us?" Tom sounded puzzled. "In the last few seconds of braking, this hulk isn't very easy to steer."

"Hell!" Brian swore. "Hold on a minute!" He explained the situation briefly to Langdon. "I told you so!"

Langdon said grimly, "There's only one way to handle it. Take the fuel out of the pickup — impact would blow it up — move it out where we want them to land, and let them land on it. The pickup's expendable. The crew isn't. They'd land hard, but the crew will be in skyhooks, and Caldwell in a crash cockpit. Nobody'll be hurt."

"We're going to need the pickup later," Brian argued stubbornly.

"Well, have you a better idea?"

Langdon asked. "If they follow the beam in part way, and try to swerve in the last few seconds, they're apt to miscalculate by a degree or two, and burn up the village."

"I still think we ought to hunt up a good-sized desert," Brian insisted.

Destry interrupted suddenly, in a tone of disgust, "Say, when you want a kingfisher to dive, you throw a hunk of bread where you want him to dive — you don't stand and hold it! If your radio — what is it — beam comes from that," he gestured at the transmitter, "why not just rip that thing out of the plane, fix it to send out a steady signal, and take it out where you want your spaceship to land? It won't hurt the spaceship to land on anything that small, will it?"

Brian stared at the boy in amazement for a minute, and Langdon's mouth dropped open.

"Destry," Ellie said after a brief silence, "*you* have the makings of a scientist."

"Look, the boy said uncomfortably. "The idea may not be much good, but why insult me?"

"It *is* good," Langdon interrupted. "I don't know why I didn't think of it myself, except that I'm half-witted in this light! Brian, that's *it*. Ellie, while I send word to Mellen — before I rip this out — get under the seat and find the radio kit; I may have to resolder a few wires. Looks like we'll be in the dark by the time we finish, too; bet-

ter get out the small lamps. Come on, get busy —" He flipped the switch open. "*Homeward?* Forbes speaking. Tom? Listen, in about twenty minutes we'll have a fix set up —"

Brian and Ellie were struggling to lift the heavy seat; the unaccustomed gravity made it almost impossible to budge. Destry caught one end and heaved it up easily, and Ellie and Brian bent over the equipment stored there. The girl murmured in Brian's ear, "There goes your theory about regression! That kid knew what he was talking about."

Brian snorted. "And used an analogy from natural history! It was obvious enough, knowing the purpose of the radio. If either Langdon or I had been thinking, we'd have hit on it."

Ellie did not answer; there seemed no use in making Brian angry again. She went and stood watching Langdon working swiftly and expertly to dismantle and readjust the radio set to emit a self-contained, steady signal. He had to switch on the lights in the pickup before he finished, and before the impromptu homing device was completed, the sun had gone down. As they stood in the doorway of the pickup, Langdon scowled.

"I can't see my hand before my eyes!" he protested, and took one of the small red handlamps Ellie handed him. He looked at it disgustedly. "I can set the signal up with this, yes — but I don't know

the lay of the land!" He gestured to the vast empty tract of barren land, and added, "I'll get lost out there, or set it up on a side hill!"

Destry volunteered: "I know this place like my own hand — I'll come along and find you a flat space."

"Need any help?" Brian offered, but Langdon shook his head. "No thanks. No sense in both of us getting tangled up in this murk." He picked up the homing device and, with Destry, moved away across the field which, to Brian and Ellie, was inky-dark, although in actuality it was bathed in clear moonlight. They stood in the door of the pick-up, straining their eyes for the reddish, bobbing glimmer of Langdon's light, and Ellie shuddered in the rough warmth of Destry's coat. Brian's arm stole round her in the darkness.

She said tremulously "What would have happened if we'd gone in at Mars!"

Frobisher, behind them, drew a harsh breath. "You're certainly lucky you didn't!" he said thankfully. "You couldn't have lived there three days, unless you stayed with your ship — I assume the ship is self-contained?"

"Oh, yes," Brian told him. "But — Mars was a sizable colony when the *Starward* left!"

Frobisher shrugged. "Everybody came in from Mars before the spacers stopped running. There's no water there at all, now."

Brian murmured, ". . . and by

now you should have had all the planets colonized, and reached most of the nearer stars!"

The older man's voice lost its pleasant inflection. "You say some very surprising things, Mr. Kearns," he said dryly. "You don't say that we *could* have colonized the planets — which, of course, is true — but that we *should* have. Do you mind telling me why? The planets are not exactly suited for human habitation, except this one — and I would hate to have to live on any other."

Brian asked almost savagely "You mean there is *no* space travel?"

"Why, no," Frobisher said slowly. "No one cares to go to the planets."

"But . . . the planets had already been reached, conquered, when the *Starward* left!"

Frobisher shrugged. "The Barbarians did a great many things which we regard as stupid," he said. "But why should it be called conquest, to encourage men to go out to worlds for which they are not biologically adapted? I have read much about the Barbarians, their insatiable egotism, their idle, childish curiosity, their continual escapism and refusal to face their problems, but — forgive me for saying this, no personal offense is intended — I had never believed it until today!"

Ellie took Brian's arm before he could answer. "Look there, Langdon's signaling — they must have the transmitter set up," she said, and moved her lamp in a wide circle. Before long, Langdon and

Destry emerged from the bath of inky darkness, and sank down on the ground, in the little flood of reddish light from the pickup's windows. "That did it," Langdon said. "Now we sit and wait while Paula pinpoints the beam, and Caldwell will put her down right where we want."

"I hope somebody remembers to look after Einstein," Ellie worried. "I'd hate to have him break his neck in the last few seconds of the trip!"

"Judy will take care of him," Langdon reassured, and they waited in the red-cast darkness. Brian was mustering all the arguments he had heard from the Firsts about the necessity that had backed developing space travel.

"What about overpopulation? What about diminishing food supplies and natural resources?"

Frobisher's laugh was loud in the darkness. "Certainly not even the Barbarians expected to find natural food supplies on Mars or Venus!" he chuckled. "Interstellar travel might have solved it, but at prohibitive cost. Still, once man decided to stop squandering natural resources on vast theoretical projects, and throwing them irrecoverably out into space, that problem was easily solved."

"But what forced the decision?" Brian asked almost timidly.

"I wouldn't know," Frobisher said thoughtfully, "but when a decision is really necessary, as a rule, some one makes it. Probably the overpopulation reached such ex-

trêmes — the solar system as a whole, of course, since Earth had to feed Mars and Venus too — that for one or two whole generations, every able-bodied man and woman had to put all his efforts into food-making instead of theoretical astronomy or whatever they called it. And by the time they had that problem solved, people were thinking of science in terms of human benefits, and probably realized that their resources could be handled more efficiently here on Earth. That — I mean thinking in terms of cost and human benefits — did away with war, too. It doesn't take long for attitudes to grow up. Then, too, during the overpopulated generations, the population was almost entirely neurotic. The scientists of that day simply made it possible, I imagine, for women to avoid having the children they didn't want anyway, so that no one had children except the healthy-minded women whose primary interest was in children. The neurotic death-wish in the others effectively reduced the population in only two or three generations. You might say that the neurotics committed race suicide. Is that your ship, or another of Destry's meteors?"

They scrambled down, stumbling in the darkness, as the incredible rocket-roar sounded, and, on a collapsing telescope of fire, the *Homeward* screamed down to its resting-place. Brian, standing between Destry and Ellie, wondered — but was

too weary and too overexcited to ask — if Destry still regretted his failure to find a meteor.

v

Explanations, introductions and much rapid-fire conversation made the landing a babble of noise.

"Hey, we're here!"

"Who thought up that homing device?"

"Hey, I'm blind! No light on this planet? Couldn't we have landed to sunward?"

"What, in China?"

"Damned gravity, I can't walk!"

"Ellie!" (More imperatively than the other voices.) "Come here and get this devil-ridden cat of yours!"

Ellie dashed to Judy, who was carrying the squirming Einstein as she stumbled, clumsy-footed, down the ladder. "Here, take this animal!" she said crossly. "He's pulling my hair out by the roots!" She shoved the thick curls back over her shoulder, and fretted, "Hair's a worse nuisance in gravity than out of it!"

Ellie gently unwound her pet's suckers from Judy's ringlets, and the animal clung to her shoulder, squirming in crazy anticipation, struggling to get to the ground. She climbed the ladder painfully, wondering if she would ever adjust to the heavy gravity again, and, shoving into the lounge, ripped a strip of cloth from her skyhook to make a leash for the little animal. It was docile, but the prospect of running freely might tempt it to wildness.

As she came down again, she heard Frobisher's rich voice. "I offer the hospitality of our village and my home, for as long as you wish —"

Stumbling on the final rung, Ellie almost fell against Mellen and Paula, standing silently in each other's arms at its foot. Their faces glowed dimly in the reddish shimmer from the open door of the ship, and a pang of envy stabbed through Ellie. They had only one emotion about the landing. They didn't care what they found — they were here, and together. She turned swiftly, not wanting to violate their moment, but Tom looked up at her and smiled with a joyfulness that made his gaunt good-natured face almost handsome. Paula reached out and hugged Ellie, cat and all. "It's all over!" she whispered jubilantly. "We're here!" But her dark eyes were a little sad, too, as she added, "I only wish there was some way we could let — our mothers and fathers — know that we came safely."

"They would be sure of that," Ellie comforted softly.

Tom Mellen scowled. "What's Kearns sounding off about now? Shush, girls —"

Brian was protesting, "Look, we can't all go. Some of us ought to stay aboard the *Homeward*. I suggest that we sleep aboard, and visit the village in the morning —"

"You stay if you like," Caldwell said mutinously. "I've seen enough of the *Homeward* for a lifetime!"

Then open rebellion burst out.

Little Judy set off the reaction by proclaiming violently, "If I ever go aboard the *Homeward* again, they'll have to carry me and tie me!" and Mellen shouted, "The trip's over and we're private citizens again, Kearns, so stop pulling your rank on us!" In the storm of voices, the Centaurian cat went wild and clawed its way from Ellie's shoulder, tumbling with a queer, staggering gait across the rough dark grass. Ellie screamed "Catch him, catch him!" and Paula made a grab for the creature, but missed, to trip and fall in the darkness. She lay there, laughing hysterically, watching the cat as it dived into the ring of lights. It stumbled and weaved on its spindly legs, thrusting pouch and tail weirdly to balance against the unfamiliar gravity; it sniffed the grass, with a musical caterwauling, then rolled over and over in the dark grass of the barrens, like a crazy asteroid tumbling in a wildly erratic orbit.

Brian didn't have a chance after that. The *Homeward's* crew, barely more than adolescents, and semi-hysterical anyway with release from strain and the euphoria of journey's end, lay on the grass and rolled and stretched like children, paying less than no attention to Brian's harangue. By the time Ellie had managed to recapture the staggering Einstein, and the laughter-drunk youngsters had calmed a little, Brian had only one desire: to restore some semblance of dignity to himself and his crew. Livid and all but speech-

less, he tersely requested Caldwell, the calmest of the group, to accept Frobisher's hospitality on behalf of all, and watched, leaning somberly against the ladder, as they trooped away, guided by Destry with a lantern, still laughing wildly at nothing, and hanging on to each other's hands in the darkness to keep from falling.

Hard Frobisher walked steadily toward him, and on an impulse Brian asked him, "Would you like to come aboard?"

Hard answered unexpectedly "Yes, I believe I'd be interested to see the inside of your ship," and followed Brian up the ladder, navigating the rungs with more ease than Brian himself, and into the lounge.

He looked curiously at the sky-hooks and the complicated recreation devices, inspected the cabins without much comment, gave an interested hum in the Food Culture department. Finally Brian led him upward, into the enormous cabin where he himself had spent most of the voyage, handling the incredibly complex IS drives.

And here, before the tremendous machinery, Frobisher seemed at last impressed. He broke his silence with a wondering, "And you — you know all about this — this gimcrackery?"

Since the IS drives weighed upwards of a hundred tons, Brian laughed tolerantly at this understatement. "Yes, I'm a drive technician. I spent some time training."

"It must take a lifetime to learn all this!"

Brian condescended, "No, only about twelve years."

"Twelve years!" Frobisher repeated. "Twelve years, and how many — four? — on the way here, wasted on a room full of machines!" And now Brian uncomfortably recognized the emotion in his voice. It was pity. "You poor boy," Frobisher said, and repeated "Poor boy! To waste sixteen years on these metal levers and things! No wonder you are —" He broke off, perhaps aware of the tightness of Brian's clenched jaw.

Brian said in a low and deadly voice, "Oh, don't stop there! No wonder I am — what?"

"Neurotic," Frobisher said quietly. "Of course you must give yourself some reason why you have not wasted your life." And sadly he shook his head. "Fortunately you are still young —"

"This ship," Brian said stiffly, "is the greatest accomplishment of the human race! If I live to be twice your age, I shall never —" Abruptly he rose and flicked a switch. The great dome cleared, and the immense magnifiers brought down the newly blossoming stars so that the man and boy stood under a vast, blazing galaxy of fire. "Damn it," Brian said huskily and his voice caught. "Man, we brought this little ship across nine light-years of nothing, nothing, *nothing!* We stepped on worlds where no human being had

ever been before! You can't make out that that's nothing! It's the biggest thing humanity ever did — and I had the privilege to be part of it —" He was stammering, and, aware of it, he stopped.

Frobisher looked sad and embarrassed. "Poor lad, and what for? What did you, personally, get from it? What good did it do — not you alone — any single human being?"

Brian shouted suddenly, "You senile, half-witted old imbecile, I don't suppose you ever heard of abstract knowledge!"

"It isn't wholly unknown to me," Frobisher said coldly, but added, again with the same anxious friendliness, "Well, my boy, I suppose you believe as you've been taught — but can you show me one single human, now *or* in the past, who was benefited by the trip of the *Starward*, except in his personal vanity? I think, if you carefully examined the matter, you'd find that the building, launching and cost of the *Starward* defrauded quite a large number of people."

Brian said almost desperately, "Individuals don't matter. Knowledge — any knowledge — is for the good of the race as a whole — to lift humanity out of the mud of the sea bottom — toward the stars —"

"I can't breathe such thin air," Frobisher said lightly. "The mud is much more comfortable."

"And where would you be," Brian almost shouted, "if your remote ancestor had never crawled

down a tree trunk because he was *comfortable* where he was?"

"Why," Frobisher returned, looking up at the stars that were brilliant in the dome, "I should be very happily scratching myself and swinging by my tail. Do you think the great apes have any ambition to be human? Unfortunately, I've come too far to be happy in a treetop or a cave. But it seems to me that it's important, for any individual human, to find the absolute minimum with which he can recover that state of effortless happiness he lost when he left the treetops. Do you know what this ship reminds me of?"

"No!" Brian snapped.

"A brontosaurus." Frobisher did not elaborate, and in surly silence Brian snapped a switch. The stars went out.

"Come on," he muttered, "let's get out of here."

Brian slept little that night. At daybreak he stole into the room where the six women of the crew were sleeping, and quietly woke them; one by one, wrapping themselves sleepily in blankets, they tiptoed into the men's bedroom, where the crew gathered close, listening to Brian's soft, savage whispers.

"Kids, we've got to do something — anything to get away from this madhouse!"

"Go easy, Brian," Mellen interrupted. "That's strong language, and I don't like it. These people aren't crazy, from what we saw and

heard last night. They think we're a little off course, though."

Caldwell muttered, "They're probably right. They used to say that being too long in space drove men crazy."

Brian said bitterly, "You all seem insane!"

"I don't blame them," Ellie said unexpectedly. "What *is* the good of going shooting all over the galaxy? It was fine, back in the days when it made people happy, but these people are happy without it."

"Brian's right, of course," said Don Isaacs, a quiet boy who had never grown too friendly with any of the crew except Marcia, and who never had much to say. "But there's this. Let's be practical. We're here. We can't go back to Terra Two. And we can't start reforming them. So let's just make the best of it."

Mellen said shortly, "Good for you, Don. And one more thing: if Kearns keeps shooting off his big mouth, we're apt to land in the local equivalent of the lock-up, for disturbing the peace or something. The peace seems to be valued pretty highly around here."

"But what are we going to do?" Brian wanted to know. "We can't just *live* here, can we?"

"And why not?" Paula's voice was defiant, and Judy murmured, "There aren't as many gadgets and things as there are on Terra Two, but it's certainly a better place than the Ship!"

Mellen pulled Paula's small shad-

owy form upright beside him. "I don't know why you came on the trip, Brian," he said. "But I came for one reason: because the Firsts trained me for it, and because if I'd begged off, somebody else would have had to. This isn't home, but it's as close to it as we're apt to find. I like it. Paula and I are going to settle down, and build a house or something."

Langdon added, "It's no secret that Judy and I — and Don and Marcia, —" he paused, "and Brian and Ellie too — have been waiting a lot longer than we wanted to wait. There are a couple of hundred people in this village. Nice people, too, I'll bet. I like that old fellow. He reminds me of great-grandpa Wade. Anyhow, that's almost as many as they have on Terra Two. And I'll bet they don't all spend their time knocking themselves out, synthesizing food and exploring and cataloging the whole planet, either!"

"They certainly don't!" Ellie slid her arm through Brian's. "They are, now, where Terra Two is, without the struggle. They've conquered the planet. They can quit trying."

But Mellen murmured derisively, "Kearns is heartbroken! He wanted to find mechanical computers telling everybody when to spit, and robots doing all the housework!"

"Yes. . . ." Brian said thickly. "I guess I did. . . ."

He turned his back on them and slammed out.

Ellie thrust her way through the

others and ran out into the new day. She plunged her way through the gradually thinning darkness after his retreating shadow, and found him, huddled at the foot of the pickup. She knelt close to him and put her warm hands over his cold ones.

"Brian — oh, my dearest —"

"Ellie, Ellie!" He flung his arms around her, hiding his head against her thin dress. The girl held him tight, without speaking. How young he was, she thought, how very young. He'd started training for this work before he could read. Twelve years, training for the biggest job in the world he knew. And now it all collapsed under him.

Brian said bitterly, "It's the waste, Ellie. Why — we might as well have stayed on Terra Two!"

"That's exactly what Frobisher said," Ellie told him gently. She glanced at the reddening clouds in the east, and such a wave of homesickness wrenched at her that she nearly sobbed.

"Ellie—why?" he insisted. "Why? What makes a culture just stop, go dead, stagnant? They were right on the borders of conquering the whole universe! *What made them stop?*" The agonized earnestness of the question made Ellie's voice very tender.

"Maybe they didn't stop, Brian. Maybe they just progressed in another direction. Space travel was right for the culture we knew — or maybe it wasn't. Remember what

the Firsts told us, about the Russo-Venusian War, and the Mars Raids? These people—maybe they've achieved what all cultures were looking for, and never found."

"Utopia!" Brian sneered, and pushed her away.

"No," said Ellie very low, and put her arms about him again. "Arcadia."

"You're just the same, anyway. . . . Ellie, whatever happens, don't you leave me too—" he begged.

"I won't," she promised. "Never. Look, Brian, the sun's coming up. We should go back."

"Yeah, big day ahead," he said, and his mouth was too young to twist into such bitter lines. Then it relaxed, and he smiled and pulled her close to him.

"Not just yet . . ."

VI

Paula and Ellie stood on a knoll, near the abandoned *Homeward*, and watched the skeletal houses going up almost visibly beneath them. "The entire village has turned out!" Paula marveled. "Our house will be finished before night!"

"I'm glad there was land near the village for us," Ellie murmured. "Don't you feel as if you'd always lived here? And in only four months!"

The dark girl's face was sad. "Ellie, can't you do anything to keep Brian from—from sounding off at Tom? One day Tom will up and paste him one, and then you know what will happen to us!"

Ellie sighed. "And I'd hate to have either of us turned out of the village! It isn't all Brian's fault, Paula—" But then she paused, smiled sadly, and finished "I'm afraid he usually starts it, though. I'll do what I can, of course —"

"Brian is crazy!" Paula said emphatically. "Ellie — is it really true, that you and Brian will go on living in the *Homeward*?" She glanced distastefully at the black mass of the starship, and went on, "Why do you stand for it?"

"I'd live with Brian in a worn-out hydroponics tank, Paula. You would too, if it were Tom," Ellie said wearily. "And Brian's right, some one should keep the ship from being dismantled. Any of you had the same choice."

Paula murmured "I like our house better, especially now—" and she put her head close to Ellie and whispered. Ellie hugged her delightedly, then asked, "Are you feeling all right, Paula?"

The girl hesitated before answering. "I tell myself it's all my imagination," she said at last. "This planet belonged to our ancestors, our race; my body should adapt to it easily. But after being born and growing up on Terra Two where I weighed half what I do here, and then so long in free fall—I know it's hard for all of us, this gravity, but since the baby . . . My body is one damned enormous ache, night and day!"

"You poor thing—" Ellie put an

arm around her friend. "And I think I have troubles because my eyes still hurt in this light!"

Judy, heavy-footed, puffed up the slope. She had wound her heavy hair into a coil on her neck, and would have been pretty, in her light synthetic ship's overall, had her eyes been less painfully screwed up against the brilliant sunlight. "Lazy things," she called gaily. "The men are hungry!"

"In a minute," Ellie answered, but did not move. She still found it more convenient to prepare food in the culture units of the *Homeward*, but disliked doing so now. However, on occasions such as today, when the villagers had turned out *en masse*, making a holiday of building the five new houses, it would make it easy to feed almost three hundred.

Langdon and Brian came up the hill, Hard Frobisher striding easily beside them. Langdon squinted at the woman and finally pretended to identify Judy. "You women are getting spoiled," he teased. "On Terra Two, you'd be working along with the men, Judy!"

Judy tossed her head. "I enjoy being spoiled," she said pertly, "and I'll have enough to do, learning what women do here!"

There was a derisive twist in Brian Kearns's smile. "I came off lucky," he commented sourly. "Ellie at least had training for this kind of life. What about you, Paula, are you sorry not to be playing nurse to your electronic calculator?"

Paula gave an eloquent shrug. "The women of the *Starward* chose to be scientists and were chosen *because* they were scientists! I learned navigation because my grandmother learned to fix a cyclotron before she had her babies on Terra Two! I'm shedding no tears."

"Well, suppose you two come and have a lesson in food culture," Ellie admonished, and the three women turned toward the ship. At the foot of the ladder, however, Ellie paused. "Paula, dear, you shouldn't climb these steps now. Go on back, we'll manage by ourselves," she offered gently, and Paula gratefully turned back to rejoin the men.

Meanwhile, Frobisher sat looking down at the rising houses. "Soon you will be part of our village," he commented. "I think you have all done well."

Brian nodded curtly in acknowledgment. He had not been prepared to find the village operating as a self-contained colony, very much like the one at Terra Two — the crew of the *Homeward* had expected to re-enter the complex financial structure of the world the *Starward* had left. But the system seemed simplicity itself. Every man owned as much land as he, alone, was able to work, and owned whatever else he made with his own hands. A man gave his work wherever it was needed, and in return was entitled to take what he needed; food from those who grew it, clothes from those who made them, and so forth. Whatever he

needed beyond the necessities of life must be earned by industry, good management and private arrangements. Brian found the system easy and congenial, even enjoying the job he did—a carpenter in Norten had given him work, and Brian, whose training had familiarized him with tools and machinery, had found no trouble in adapting his specialized skills to carpentry and building. There was always building going on somewhere in the village, it seemed. Brian made a good living.

And yet, for all its simplicity, the system seemed remarkably inefficient. Brian said, looking down at the sprawled houses, “I would think it would be easier if you had some kind of central distribution system.”

“It’s been tried, often,” the old man answered patiently. “Every few years, a group of villages will consolidate, to exchange services, or set up communication systems for private individuals, or distribute foods that can’t be grown locally, or luxury goods of one kind or another. But that means devising a means of exchange, and keeping account of credits, and so forth. As a rule, the disadvantages are so much greater than the advantages that the consolidation breaks down again within a year or two.”

“But there’s no law against it?” Brian asked.

“Oh, no!” Frobisher sounded shocked. “What would be the sense of that? The purpose of the whole

system is to leave each man as free as possible! Most places are just about like Norten—the maximum of comfort, and the minimum of trouble.”

Brian murmured, “I should think, then, that you’d want all kinds of labor-saving devices. You cook with fire—isn’t it easier to have food culture units, such as we have on the Ship?”

Frobisher gave the matter grave attention. “Well, a wood fire imparts a fine flavor to food,” he remarked. “Most people prefer it. And a cook must take pride in what she cooks, or why cook at all? And, although food culture units may be easier, if one is lazy, for those who use them, no one wants to take the time to manufacture them. One man can build a fireplace in a day, with a neighbor to help, and cook with it for the rest of his life. For a food culture unit, a man would have to spend years in learning to build it, and dozens of skilled and unskilled workers take months to build it; and, in order to make them cheaply enough for one man to buy, millions of them must be made, which means hundreds and thousands of people crowded together, just making them, having no time to grow or cook their own food, or live their own lives. The cost is too high. It’s more trouble than it’s worth.”

Langdon asked him suddenly, “Just what is the population now?”

Frobisher frowned. “You people certainly are full of questions! Who

knows? Collectively, people are nothing but statistics, which are no good to anyone. People are individuals. A few years ago, a philosopher in Camey — that's where Destry was born — worked out what he called the critical factor in population: the point where a village becomes too large to be efficient as a self-contained unit, and starts to break down. It's a nice problem, if you're interested in abstract mathematics — which I'm not."

"But I am," Paula said behind them, lowering herself carefully to the grass beside the men. "It sounds interesting."

Frobisher looked at her with fatherly friendliness. "You and Tom can come with me, next time I go to Camey," he invited. "I'll introduce you to Tuck — but all I know is, if a village gets too large, it's more trouble than convenience, and about half the population will go away and start a new one, or move to a smaller place."

"It doesn't sound very workable," Brian said with sour skepticism.

"It works," Frobisher answered equably. "That's the final test of any theory — hullo, here's Tom. We're not lying down on the job, Tom — just waiting for the women to bring dinner."

Mellen thrust a penciled scrap of paper into Langdon's hands. "Is Judy around? I can't read this — her writing is half Russian and half Arabic!"

"She's in the ship with Kearns's

wife," Frobisher answered, not noticing how Paula winced at the word which, on Terra Two, had acquired an ignominious connotation of servitude and sexual inferiority. The three men from the *Homeward* tried to ignore the vulgarity, and Langdon gave a self-conscious laugh. "I think I can translate for you."

"What have you got there?" Brian asked, interested against his will — Judy had been an electrician aboard the *Homeward*, responsible for all lighting circuits, and her work was capable and excellent. He squinted toward the paper. Langdon scowled. "I can't see a thing in this cussed sunlight! What's it supposed to be, Tom?"

"Wiring diagram. There are red bulbs in the *Homeward*, and Judy's going to put lighting in our house — and yours, too. Didn't she tell you?"

"I thought you'd both gone all-out on the primitive life," Brian muttered. Langdon snorted mockingly, and Mellen clenched his fists, then relaxed, with an easy grin.

"It's a free country," he said. Then suddenly he added, "Brian, it's none of my business, but are you and Ellie really going to stick to this damn foolishness? You'll be lonely up here. We could start on a house for you tomorrow."

"Somebody's got to keep the ship from being dismantled," Brian said stiffly. "And that reminds me, if Judy's going to do any wiring, she'd better use spare parts. No more trying to dismantle the drive units!"

Langdon laughed softly, but Mel-
len's face darkened in annoyance. He
said shortly, "You aren't captain
any more. The *Homeward* isn't your
personal property, Brian."

"I'm aware of that," Brian rasped.
"Neither does it belong to the crew
collectively. It's being held in trust.
And since nobody else has any sense
of responsibility, I'm acting as
caretaker."

Frobisher looked up as if he were
about to speak, but Paula forestalled
him, asking gently, "What for?
We've no fuel, we'll never take off
again."

The nightmare settled down on
Brian again. He was fighting — but
fighting an intangible, unresisting
opponent! If they had been malici-
ous, it would have been easier.
They weren't malicious, they were
only stupid — unable to understand
just why the *Homeward* must be
safeguarded as their only link with
civilized life. A year or two, he
thought grimly, and they'll realize
just what I'm doing, and why. Just
now, this primitivism is new, novel.
But they are basically intelligent,
sooner or later they will get tired
of this. They can't live from day
to day, like the villagers — but how
do the villagers live this way? Fro-
bisher's a cultured man. Destry's a
bright boy. How can they stand it,
living like nice clean animals?

"What deep imponderable are
you meditating?" Ellie mocked his
serious expression with a gay grin-
nace, and thrust a basket into his

hands, loaded with hot food. "Lang-
don, Paula, Mr. Frobisher — all
hands needed to carry food. Here,
Destry, you take a basket too," she
commanded, handing one to the
boy. "Bring this down to the vil-
lage, now. Dinner is ready. And
hurry up before it all gets cold."

Brian absent-mindedly picked up
a biscuit-like cake of protein and
munched at it as they descended the
hill, his mind still halfway circling
the continual problem. Ellie offered
her basket, in turn, to Destry and
Frobisher, and the old man politely
took a cake, but Destry shook his
head. "Thanks, I don't care for syn-
thetics, Ellie."

"Destry!" His grandfather said
with unnecessary sharpness, while
Ellie murmured, "I didn't know
you'd ever tasted them."

Destry stumbled over a rock in
the path and used a couple of un-
familiar expletives; by the time he
had picked himself up, retrieved the
luckily unhurt basket, and apologized
unnecessarily for the words he had
used — he might have saved the
trouble, for Ellie had never heard
them and did not know whether
they were sacred or profane — Ellie
had forgotten her question for an-
other.

"Have you ever been out of
Norten, Destry?"

"Once or twice. I went to Camey
with my father, when he went to
teach a man there how to weave
a rug. He weaves beautiful rugs —
much better ones than ours."

"I see," Ellie murmured.

"He wanted me to come with him this time, but one place is pretty much like another, and I had my gardens to look after, so I stayed with grandpa. Besides, I had to —" Destry abruptly stopped. They were nearing the site of the new houses, and he called loudly "Dinner!" and watched the villagers swarm off their scaffolds and beams. He took one of the baskets and scooted away to hand it around.

The food from the *Homeward's* culture units was distributed, and the villagers ate it with polite thanks, but without much enthusiasm; only the children seemed to enjoy the elaborate synthetics, and even the *Homeward's* crew seemed to have lost their taste for it. Brian, sitting on a half-finished wooden step and munching absent-mindedly, abruptly made a face and flung the cake into the grass. Ellie cooked better, he decided, without the food machines. She liked the primitive cooking, and he had to admit she did it well. Still he felt disquieted. The food culture units synthesized their food out of raw carbon, water, and almost infinitesimal amounts of raw chemicals; the whole process of *growing* food seemed, to Brian, wasteful and inefficient. It took so much time. Of course, he reflected, it was pleasant, outdoor work, and the people who did it seemed to enjoy it. It wasn't so confining as standing over the machines, and you didn't grow so deathly bored, month

after month, with nothing to do except push a lever now and then, and between the lever-pushings, scan films and play endlessly complicated mental games. Brian had been expert at a certain three-dimensional board game which had to be played with the aid of an electronic computation device; now he felt a curiously disloyal thought that his proficiency had been born of boredom. When you enjoyed your work, he thought, you didn't have to invent things to do in your spare time.

But I enjoyed my work, he told himself in confusion, I enjoyed working on the IS units.

Didn't I?

Furiously scattering the remaining synthetics on his disposable plate, he crumpled up the bit of plastic and flung it angrily away, grabbing up his tools — the new hammer, plane and level which the village smith had made in exchange for roofing a chicken-house and repairing his cellar steps — and shouted to Caldwell.

"Come on, let's get back at work, I want to get this floor laid by sundown!" He walked catlike across the empty beams, squatted where he had left off, and began sliding boards into place and nailing them with fierce, angrily precise blows.

VII

He was still tersely angry and short-worded when, a few weeks later, he walked down through the

village, a box in his hands. The houses were completed now, even to the steps, although still scantily furnished — Brian was still working; after each day's work, helping Caldwell build furniture.

He turned in at one still-raw, trampled muddy lawn, where brief spikes of summer grass were just beginning to peep through the wet earth, and knocked roughly.

Paula, a loose hand-woven smock wrapped about her body — she was beginning to grow clumsy and heavy now — opened the door, and her squinted, drawn face relaxed suddenly in a quick impulsive smile which made Brian feel ashamed and almost defensive.

"Brian — yes, Ellie's here, but —" She paused, hesitant, then invited shyly, "Won't you come in for a few minutes? We don't see much of you."

"I came down to see Tom —" Brian said uneasily, and followed Paula into the large reddish-lighted room. Before the fireplace he saw, to his intense dismay, that not only Ellie was there with Tom Mellen, but Langdon and Judy, Marcia and Don Isaacs, Destry, and — Hard Frobisher. Frobisher! It seemed that Hard Frobisher was continually underfoot, as if the crew of the *Homeward* needed his continual surveillance, assistance, advice! Brian frowned in annoyance; Frobisher acted like a self-appointed guardian to the newcomers. Yet it was impossible not to like the old fellow, even

when he inquired genially, "And what have you in that big, interesting box, Mr. Kearns?"

"Just more of our top-heavy science," Brian said rudely, and, undoing the box, took from it several pairs of red-lensed glasses in bent-plastic frames. He handed one pair to Mellen and donned one himself. "Turn out these lights, and see if these help any in the sun, will you?"

Tom looked at the glasses, puzzled, for a moment, then hooked the frames behind his ears and switched out the red lights, stepping to the west door and looking into the setting sun. Then he turned, grinning.

"They work, all right! What did you do, Brian? Just red glass wouldn't work — remember, we tried it?"

Brian shrugged. "There's a polarized layer inside. I couldn't find selenium, so I used an oxide of gold for the red color. It's a thin quartz filter . . . oh, never mind. I'd have had them before, but it took a damned long time to grind them."

Langdon took a pair from the box. "That's right," he said slowly. "I remember, Miguel Kearns made lenses for some of the old *Starward* instruments, when they broke, and when we were duplicating instruments for the trip. Did you help him?"

"Some," Brian returned. He met Frobisher's eyes, and said truculently, "So you have no use for science. Well, as you pointed out yourself, it's a free country, and my crew have been going around with sore eyes — and I don't like it!"

Paula's strained face relaxed as she slipped the filter glasses over her eyes, and she smiled. "This is wonderful, Brian," she said, and Ellie's face glowed with pride. Langdon mocked in a friendly voice, "The old fellow's human after all!" and flung a companionable arm around Brian's shoulders. "When are you and Ellie going to come down off your lofty peak and live with the rest of the pack?"

Brian stiffened, but the tone of approbation warmed him, and he came back, half-unwilling, to the fireplace, and listened to Frobisher, who said, laughing faintly, "It isn't science itself we don't like. It's the use of science as an end in itself, rather than a means. I mentioned a brontosaurus. I assume you know what that is?"

"We had them, alive, on Terra Two — or something like them. They're big, but not dangerous — they're too dumb." Brian told him.

"Exactly," Frobisher said. "But they're not much good to themselves, are they?" He smiled; then his face sobered. "The brontosaurus, with his titanic body-mass, had outgrown the logical use of a development which had, originally, been good and useful. Science," he proceeded, "was developed to make life easier for man. The individual man. The light body-armor of the Barbarian soldier was developed to guard him against the simple weapons of his enemies. But it spurred on the development of more for-

midable weapons, and finally the armor had to be so cumbersome that the armored man must be lifted on his horse with a derrick. And if he fell down — well, there he was. It helped along the army, as a unit — but it certainly made life a mess, for the individual. And science gave so much time and thought to units — the Nation, the Race, Humanity-as-a-Whole — that it laid terrific burdens on humanity as individuals. To benefit the monster of Humanity-as-a-Whole, they even fought wars — which killed off humanity, individually, at a fearful rate. Eventually — well, the knight fell down inside his armor, and couldn't get up again. I think the collapse started even before the *Starward* left. The brontosaurus died along with his protective nuisances, but nature was a little kinder to men — individually. Humanity-as-a-Whole died out pretty thoroughly, even as a concept. The individuals who were left knew enough not to start the whole dreary process all over again. Science took its rightful place with the other arts and crafts — instead of using it to serve a hypothetical whole, we use each art, or science, to enrich the personal, private life of each individual." He gestured around the room. "The sawmill and pottery. Tom's red lighting in here. And — your red-lensed glasses, Brian. I think the time has come when I can tell you why —"

But Brian had already risen, and flung away from him.

"I didn't come down here to be lectured!" he shouted at Frobisher, and strode to the door. "There are the glasses, Tom. You hand them out. Tell everybody not to break them; they take forever to grind."

The door slammed behind him.

Now that he had defied Frobisher, he felt a little better, but as the days came and went, he felt tormented by the uselessness of his life. He spent more and more time in vicious, expert hammering and sawing — in solitude, now — at furniture, finding a sort of satisfaction in substituting physical activity for insoluble mental problems; Ellie never dared to broach the subject of moving away from the *Homeward* again, until one night when Brian was sitting hunched over in the former lounge, listlessly watching Einstein clamber around the axis beams. The Centaurian cat's suckers were not strong enough to support his weight, in this gravity; he had developed a queer shambling gait on his hind feet, amusing to watch, but clumsy and painful, and Ellie picked up her pet and patted him as she passed through the lounge.

"Poor Einstein doesn't know what to make of this," she observed. "Gravity, in here where there ought to be no gravity at all. He'd be happier in a regular house."

"I suppose so," Brian said sourly. "I suppose you would, too. But look, Ellie; the crew would dismantle the ship inside a year or two."

"Well, why not let them?" Ellie asked, matter-of-factly.

Brian shrugged, helplessly. "I suppose, sooner or later — but still, some day Terra Two will go out into space again, too — *they* haven't reverted to savagery!"

Ellie only smiled. "It won't happen in our lifetime."

"You're worse than the others!" Brian shouted in sudden furious anger. She only murmured uncritically, "Come in and have dinner."

Brian morosely rose and followed her. He had to edge by a machine, suddenly stumbled over Einstein, and exploded violently, "It's too damn cramped in here!"

Ellie did not answer, and Brian finally said, "I suppose — it won't happen in our lifetime, no."

"What are you going to do then, pass this great secret on to your sons?" Ellie inquired, and Brian started to answer before apprehending the dry irony in her voice. It had taken him twelve years to learn even the basics of interstellar operation.

He applied himself grimly to his food; but his mood softened as he ate, and he finally looked up and said, "Frobisher can like it or not, but I'll make a scientist out of Destry yet. The kid's always underfoot. Ever since you taught me to fly the pickup — I took him up one day, and let him take the controls for a few minutes; they aren't very complicated." He spoke with a sort of satisfaction; it was a point of

self-respect in his continual struggle to maintain himself in Frobisher's presence. "The boy's nuts on airplanes. He must have read a lot in old books."

Ellie asked suddenly, "I wonder what Destry's father is like?"

Brian scoffed, "He makes rugs!"

Ellie looked unconvinced. "Maybe he makes rugs the way Frobisher paints those birds he has all over the house. Look what I found in Frobisher's bookcase. Destry loaned it to me when I asked him." She handed him a book, nicely hand-bound in red cloth. Brian opened it curiously, skipping over the name — John D. Frobisher — penned neatly on the cover. He had seen few books in Norten village, and those were mostly blank-books filled with recipes, musical notations, or diaries — diary-keeping was a favorite pastime among young people here. But this was printed, and filled with elaborate, exquisitely reproduced diagrams which reminded Brian of Judy's scrawls when she was working out a wiring diagram. He tried to read a page or two, but, although the language was only loosely technical, Brian's education had been so rigidly specialized that the vocabulary was beyond him. He shut it up, and asked, "Did you show this to Judy?"

"Yes. It's a text, she says, on radio and radar, and not an elementary one either."

"Funny . . ." Brian mused.

"Here's something funnier," El-

lie said. "Have you seen Caldwell lately? Or Marcia and Don Isaacs?"

"Come to think of it, I haven't. I never saw much of Don, though —"

"They went away, that night you and Frobisher had a fight. Marcia told me they were going so that Don could work in another village. That's what they always say — like Destry's father. People seem to come and go, here, all the time! Almost every day, somebody picks up a clean shirt and a pair of stockings, and walks off down the road. And nobody sees him again for three or four months — then he walks in again, as casually as I do when I go down to Paula's and back!"

"And the standard of living . . ." Brian mused "comfortable enough — but primitive —"

Ellie laughed. "Oh, Brian! We were happy enough on Terra Two, without quite so much. The ship is super-mechanized. We're spoiled — we've developed a lot of artificial wants —"

"Frobisher converting you, too?" he asked glumly.

Her laugh was gay. "Maybe."

Brian was silent, staring at the book. He felt trapped. It was an insidious poison, the temptation to relax, rest, dream and die in this — Ellie had called it Arcadia, but a fragment of poetry from an old book in the ship's library teased his brain; not Arcadia, he thought drearily, but the isle of the lotus eaters, who tasted the poison flower

and forgot all that they had been before. . . .

The words of the ancient poet sang insidiously in his brain. He rose and fetched the book from behind a panel in the lounge, and sat with it on his knees, the words of defeat staring him in the face.

Hateful is the dark-blue sky,
Vaulted o'er the dark-blue sea;
Death is the end of life; ah, why
Should life all labor be?
Let us alone; Time driveth on-
ward fast. . . .

How could a man who had mastered space live like this, in animal content, year after year? He wondered if among the lotus eaters there had been anyone who had refused the poison — and finally eaten it from starvation, or because he could not endure the loneliness of being the only sane man among a crew abandoned to their dreams?

Let us alone . . . what pleasure
can we have
To war with evil? Is there any
peace
In ever climbing up the climb-
ing wave?
Give us long rest or death, dark
death or dreamful ease. . . .

Brian scowled and let the book fall to the floor. There was nothing easy about life in Norten! In the last few days, weeks, months, he had worked harder than ever in his life. His hands, once sensitive and smooth, alert to the quiver of a

lever, were hard and calloused and brown. And yet there was something satisfying about it. He no longer found himself inventing elaborate leisure-time pursuits, no longer felt impelled by continual anxiety about his crew, lest some minor infringement of a rule should lead to catastrophe. And Ellie — he had Ellie, and that, if nothing else, was something to hold him here.

And yet — after he had crossed space — his body thrived, but his brain was starving. Or was it, he asked himself. He'd gotten almost as much satisfaction — the guilty thought came — out of seeing his crew's eyes get well again, with the special glasses he'd made, as he had had in piloting the *Homeward* safely through a dangerous cloud of radioactive gas. Maybe — again the guilt — maybe more.

The glasses. But they couldn't go around wearing red goggles for the rest of their lives. There ought to be some way of gradually altering the filters, maybe at monthly intervals, so that they became gradually accustomed to the light. He pulled a stylus toward him, vainly rummaged for a loose sheet of paper, then irritably climbed into his old control room, search, and at last slid open the moving panel over the log book. His hands hesitated at the vandalism, then he shrugged and swore — the voyage was finished, the log book closed out! He ripped a blank sheet from the back, sat down then and there on the edge of

the skyhook, and began to sketch out, roughly, a plan for glasses with changeable filters.

The yellow dawn was a glare in the sky when he finally came down; Ellie was sleeping in the cabin, her curly hair scattered over her face, and he quietly tiptoed past her and down the ladder. The air was cold and clear, and he stretched and yawned, suddenly realizing that he was very sleepy.

Against the brightening sky, a man's form was silhouetted as he gradually came over the knoll, and Tom Mellen called to him, "Is that you, Brian?" and came toward him with swinging strides. He had long ago discarded the shorts and sandals of the ship in favor of boots and long dyed breeches, and he wore one of his uniform shirts tucked into them. The ship's synthetics were not long-wearing or practical, although they were simply produced, but a few of the younger women in Norten had liked the thin pretty stuff, and exchanged lengths of it for the sturdier and more practical handmade variety.

As he came near, Brian asked him, "Where are you going so early?"

"I'm going to work awhile in another town," Tom told him casually. "I've a letter to a friend of Frobisher's. I came up to ask a favor. I don't suppose Ellie's up yet? Well, don't bother her, but —" He paused, then added, "I meant for Paula to come along with me. But

she's not very well, and she doesn't want to be with strangers. She'd particularly miss Ellie. But I hate to have her alone —"

Brian said abruptly, "Tom, we're going to move down into the village. I've —" He glanced around at the *Homeward* and all his pent-up resentment suddenly spilled over and he shouted, "I'm tired of caretaking the damned old — brontosaurus! I'm through!"

Tom whistled. "What's gotten into you? I thought you were dedicated to maintaining a nice snug little island of culture." Then at Brian's expression, the sarcasm left his voice, and he said eagerly, "Brian, if you mean that, why don't you and Ellie move down with Paula while I'm gone? I'll be back before the baby comes, and we can get started on a house for you two."

Brian stood thinking it over for a minute, and finally nodded. "All right. I'm sure Ellie will want to; she worries about Paula."

Tom stood looking at the ground. "Well, I'll shove along and tell Paula to expect you, and then I'll get on my way." He paused, then said, low-voiced, "Brian — I thought, on the ship, you were just throwing your rank, about — well, about the girls. But now —" He stopped again, and said finally, embarrassed, "You know the baby was — started — before we landed?"

"I guessed that," Brian said coldly.

"I thought it was all right because

we'd be landing within a month or two. But now — and the change in gravity, I'm afraid — if Paula and I had had the sense to wait — Judy's pregnant, you know, and she's not having any trouble at all, while Paula —" He stopped, and finally got out, "I guess I owe you an apology, Brian."

"You might better apologize to Paula," Brian said, but he had appreciated the spirit in which Tom spoke. So Tom finally realized that Brian had a good reason for what he'd done!

Tom added quietly, "I owe an apology for something else, too, Brian. It's my fault they've been leaving you out of things around here. I had the idea you were still trying to rehabilitate the natives."

"Don't bother apologizing," Brian said frigidly. So Tom had missed the point after all! "I'm not particularly interested in 'things around here,' and sooner or later I expect the natives will need rehabilitating, as you put it. When that day comes, I'll be here."

Mellen's mouth hardened. "I guess Frobisher's right about you!" he said tightly. "So long, then." He put out his hand, rather unwillingly, and Brian shook it, without enthusiasm. He watched as Tom descended the hill, wondering where he was going and why. Was it just part of the local irresponsibility? Tom was irresponsible anyhow — the way he'd behaved toward Paula was shameful. And who, here, was

going to look after her? The local witch-doctor? He scowled, and went in to tell Ellie about their impending move.

VIII

Paula was almost pathetically grateful for Ellie's company, and even Einstein settled down near the new fireplace as cozily as any of the ordinary Norton cats with whom he had a continual feud. Brian located a site for the house he intended to build and, aided by Destry, began a rough workshop of fieldstone. In return for the boy's help, Brian took him, nightly, into the dome of the *Homeward* and taught him the names and positions of the fixed stars. The boy was filling a blank-book with astronomical data; Brian offered to present him with one of the astronomy texts duplicated in the ship, but Destry politely refused the gift. "I like to make my own. That way I'm sure of what's in it," he explained.

Brian himself was painstakingly perfecting his lens-grinding equipment. The workshop had gradually become his refuge, and, now that he knew he was working on something which was worth doing, he slowly began to come out of the closed shell he had originally thrown about himself, forbidding intimacy with the life of the village. He relaxed from the painstaking lens-grinding by beginning something he had not done since his early teens: glass-

blowing. He made a set of fancy bottles for Ellie, and when Judy admired them, made one for her as well. Both Ellie and Judy had many friends in the village, and within a few weeks Brian found that so many men and women were asking him to make them that he could switch his full-time work from carpentry to glass-making. There was a potter in the village, who made extremely fine crockery, but at present the local glass-maker was — again the omnipresent phrase — “working in another village.” Brian found the work congenial, and felt that he had approval.

However, privately, anxiety piled on anxiety. He actually saw very little of Paula, for there was still a certain stiffness between them; however, he felt disturbed at her obvious weakness. Ellie, too, was expecting a child by now, although as yet she had told no one but him, and Paula’s condition filled him with panic for Ellie.

There had not been a medical man on the *Homeward*: none of them had ever been ill. Marcia had nominally been responsible for their health, but even Marcia wasn’t here now. And judging from what little talk Brian had heard here in Norten, it was simply a matter of any woman’s helping out when asked. Ellie had vigorously defended the system when Brian attacked it, protesting that having children was a natural function, and that the medical and surgical atmosphere with

which the Terra Two colony surrounded it was enough to make any woman neurotic. Brian was unconvinced; that might be true when everything was normal, but Paula definitely needed care. He wondered how Ellie could be so unconcerned; Paula was her closest friend.

But even Brian was not prepared for the suddenness with which mere anxiety turned to disaster. At noon that day Paula was her usual self: pale and pathetically heavy of step, but gay and bright-eyed. In the evening she was quieter than usual, and went to bed early. And some time during the night Brian was roused by Ellie’s hand on his shoulder and her scared voice: “Brian — *wake up!*”

Brian drew himself upright, instantly alert, seeing Ellie’s tensely drawn face and hearing the near-hysteria in her voice. “It’s Paula — I’ve never seen anything like it — she was all right this evening — oh, Brian, please come!”

Brian pulled a robe about his shoulders, thinking, what could have happened so suddenly? He heard the low, incessant moans even before he stepped into the inner room and stopped, aghast at Paula’s face. It was altogether drained of color; even the lips were white and sunken, but a curious dark line marred their edges. She had always been excessively thin, but now her hands seemed suddenly shrunken into claws, and when Brian touched one, it was fire-hot. Brian cast his mind rapidly

over what little he had been taught about the relationship of gravity and pregnancy — just enough to know that in free fall, a dangerous condition could develop suddenly. He wished he had known more, but they had taught him just enough that he was thoroughly convinced of the wisdom of enforcing strict celibacy in spaceship personnel. His brain, strictly specialized for one limited aspect of science, retained only a few fragments of knowledge. They fluttered and teased at the edge of his mind: imperfect placental junction without the cohesive effect of gravity, hormone malfunction under the added strain of pregnancy, extensive damage to internal tissues — all this was at free fall conditions. But what about Paula, who was adapted to the light gravity of Terra Two, whose child had actually been conceived in free fall, and who was being brutally punished by the dragging gravity of Earth? Something in the delicate balance of cohesions had evidently kicked loose. Brian looked down at the unconscious girl and spoke violently.

"Damn Mellen for an insubordinate idiot!"

"Where's Tom?" Paula whispered rackingly. "I want Tom!" The feverish bony fingers clutched at Brian's, and she begged "I want Tom!" Her eyes opened, but she was looking past Brian into space. Brian felt the old cold anger knotting inside him. He bent over and promised quietly, "I'll get him."

Ellie whispered, "But — I don't know where he's gone, Brian. Paula might be —"

Brian straightened savagely. "I'll find him if I have to take my fists to Frobisher! Thank God we still have the pickup! And I'll find out where Don and Marcia were sent; yes, *sent!* All along I've had the feeling —"

"Brian —" Ellie caught at his hand, but he pushed her away. "Frobisher's going to listen to *me* for once! He can damn science all he wants to. But if Paula dies on our hands because nobody on this dark-ages planet knows what to do for her, then by the living God I'm going to personally raise such hell in this god-forsaken little Utopia of theirs that Frobisher and his pals will snap out of their daydream and start living like human beings again!" Without another word he strode out of the room, dressed hastily and went out of the house, his long-repressed anger boiling up and stiffening his back as he hurried toward the village. He went up Frobisher's steps and across his porch at a single bound, thrust the door open without knocking, and stormed inside.

"Frobisher!" he bellowed unceremoniously.

In the darkness there was a surprised noise, then steps, a door flung open and a light shining in Brian's eyes — and Hard Frobisher, half-dressed, came swiftly into the main room. Another opening door showed the half-naked Destry, sur-

prised and angry. Frobisher's face, dim in the firelight, was surprised, too, but there was no anger, and he asked calmly, "Is something wrong?"

And as always, his calm brought Brian's anger to the exploding point. "You're right there's something wrong," he raged, and advanced on Frobisher so violently that the old man retreated a step or two. "I've got a girl on my hands who looks as if she were going to die," Brian roared, "And I want to know where on this devil-ridden planet you packed Tom off to, and where Marcia's gone! And then I want to know if there's a decent medical man anywhere in this damned backward dark-ages Utopia of yours!"

Frobisher's face swiftly lost its calm.

"Tom's wife?"

"And there's no need to talk smut!" Brian shouted, "Paula!"

"Paula Sandoval, then, if you like it better. What's the trouble?"

"I doubt if you'd understand," Brian snapped, but Frobisher said steadily, "I suppose it's the gravity sickness. Tom mentioned it before he left. It's easy to get hold of him. Destry —" He turned to the boy in the doorway. "Quick, go down and get the Center on the wire. Tell them to fly Mellen back here, inside an hour if they can. And — where's your father, Destry? This sounds like something for him."

Destry had disappeared inside his room while his grandfather was

talking; almost instantly he came out again, stuffing his shirt into trousers. "He was in the Marilla Center last week, too," Destry said quickly, "but he's in Slayton now. And there's no regular transit plane there. Hey, Mr. Kearns —" He turned quickly to Brian. "You can fly the *Homeward's* plane now, can't you? Or shall we get Langdon? They'll fly Tom in from the Marilla Center, but we'll have to fly over and pick up my father."

"What the — what the *hell* —!" Brian started, but Destry was already hurrying down a flight of stairs. Hard Frobisher put a compulsive hand on Brian's shoulder and shoved him after the boy. Brian stumbled on the steps and blinked in the raw light of an electric arc-bulb. On a rough wood workbench, with Destry's notebooks and a few ordinary boy-type oddments, the stupefied Brian recognized what was unmistakably a radio transmitter. And not a simple one. Destry was already adjusting earphones and making a careful calibration of an instrument which looked handmade but incredibly delicate. He moved a key and said in a hurried voice, "Marilla Center, please, second-class priority, personal. Hello — Betty? You've got a man in the Center working on radio? Mellen? That's the man. This is Destry Frobisher talking from Norten. Fly him over here — as fast as you can make it. His wife's ill — yes, I know, but it's a special case. Thanks —" A long

pause. "Thanks again, but we'll manage. Look, Betty, I have to get Slayton. Clear the stations, will you?" Another pause, and he said, "My father. Why? Oh — thanks, Betty, thanks a lot. Tell them we'll bring a plane over there for him." He closed the key and ripped off the headphone, standing up, and Brian exploded again.

"Just what's going on?" he demanded. "*What kind of a bluff have you people been putting up on us?*"

"No bluff," Frobisher said calmly. "I've told you, all along, that we use science, in its proper place. I've tried to tell you, two or three times, but you always shouted at me and shut me up before I could explain. Tom Mellen has been working in one of the Centers for a month. Didn't you wonder why he wasn't worried about leaving Paula, in her state of health? He's known that if any serious complication developed, he'd be sent for right away." He turned and started toward the stairs. "Don't you realize this is the first time you've ever shown the slightest *personal* concern for anyone or anything? Before this, you've been concerned with scientific accomplishments for their own sake. Now look, you can stand here staring like a brainless fool, or you can come with me to the Center to fetch my son — Destry's father — who is one of the most skillful medical men in this section." As Brian stood stone-still, unable to move before the onslaught of ideas, Frobisher urgently took his arm. "Snap out of

it!" he commanded harshly. "*I can fly a plane, but I would hate to have to manage that jet of yours! And I'll have to come with you, because you don't know the way! Destry, you stay close to the radio, just in case,*" he added.

Brian, too dazed to speak, stumbled with him across the dark fields toward the pickup, but by the time they reached it, his reactions were in operable condition; he climbed in at the controls, advised Frobisher to fasten a safety strap, put the pickup in the air, and listened intelligently to Frobisher's instructions for reaching the place he called Slayton Center. Then he turned his head.

"Look," he said grimly, "I'm a little stunned. Just what has been going on?"

Frobisher looked equally puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"All this —"

"Oh, this!" Frobisher dismissed it with a shrug. "You had fire extinguishers on your spaceship, I remember. Did you keep them out on your dinner tables, or did you leave them out of sight until they were needed in a hurry?"

"I mean — you let me go on thinking that people here didn't know much about science —"

"Listen, Kearns," Frobisher said abruptly, "you've been jumping to conclusions all along. Now don't jump to another one, that we've been bluffing, and concealing our civilization from you. We live the way we like to live."

"But radio — planes — you have all those things, and yet —"

Frobisher said, with barely concealed disgust, "You have the Barbarian viewpoint, I see. Radio, for instance. We use it for emergency needs. The Barbarians used to listen to keep from doing things — I know, they even had radio with pictures, and used to sit and listen and look at other people doing things instead of doing them themselves. Of course, they had rather primitive lives —"

"Primitivel!" Brian interrupted. "You have airplanes, and yet people walk —"

Frobisher said irritably, "Why not? Where is there to go in such a hurry — as long as we have fast transport for those few times when it is really necessary?"

"But even when the *Starward* left, each man had his own private 'copter —"

"Private baby carriage!" Frobisher snorted. "When I go anywhere, I go on my feet like a man! Stupid, primitive Barbarians, living huddled in cities like big mechanical caves, never seeing the world they lived in, hidden away behind glass and steel and seeing their world on television screens and through airplane windows! And to make all those things they had to live huddled in their caves and do dirty smelly jobs with metal nuts and bolts, and never see what they were doing, never have any pride or skill — they lived like dirty animals! And

what for? Mass men for mass production — to produce things they didn't need, to have money to buy other things they didn't need! Top-heavy brontosaurus! Who wants to live that way, or do that kind of work? There are a few craftsmen who build airplanes, or design them, because that's what they would rather do, and they'd be unhappy if they couldn't. They're artisans. And we can always use a *few* planes. But there aren't many, so we keep the planes for necessary work. And most people like doing simpler things, things with personal satisfaction. We don't force them to mass-produce airplanes simply because it's possible!" He checked his vehemence with an almost apologetic cough. "I didn't mean to get angry — that's the Slayton Center down there. You can land inside that rectangle of lights."

Brian set the pickup down easily — it seemed to be rolling over a velvety carpet — and they got down and walked, in silence, across the darkly luxuriant grass, toward a low frame building of dark wood. Inside, by the warm glow of a fireplace, a man sat at a large table, lighted by an expertly rigged system of miniature spotlights, looking down at what appeared to be a large relief map. A headphone was on his ears; he glanced up as they came through the door, but motioned them into silence, listening intently, and after a moment groped blindly into a box fixed on the side of the desk and

came out with a large black pin which he stabbed accurately into the relief map. "Tornado reported between Camey and Marilla. All right, then, ring off and send Robinson up to put a bomb in the center of it before it hits the farms out that way." He replaced the headphone, and inquired courteously, "What can I do for you gentlemen?"

"Hello, Halleck," Hard Frobisher said, and, advancing to the desk, shook hands with the man, "This is Brian Kearns — came in from space."

"Oh, are they still coming in, down your way? The last one we had here was in my grandfather's time," the man Halleck observed casually. "No, come to think of it, down there in Marilla they have a man called Mellen, been working the weather station. Do you know him, Mr. Kearns? I'm glad to meet you."

Brian murmured something non-committal, and looked around, dazed. Halleck added, "I suppose you came to pick up Dr. Frobisher? He's on his way over. Won't you sit down?"

"Thanks." Frobisher sank down in a comfortable armchair, motioned Brian into another. The man at the desk hung up his headset and came to stand by Frobisher's chair. "Good to see you, Hard. When do you come up here again?"

"Not for a month or so. You'll be off by then?"

"I should say so! I've a couple of good cows calving, and I want to be home."

"Those blacks?" Frobisher asked. "Drive a few through Norton some day, and we'll see if we can't make a deal. I could use a good bull, and there are some new families with children, could use a milk cow."

Brian didn't try to follow the conversation after that; it seemed to be mostly about cows and the luck a mutual friend was having in breeding chickens which laid black-shelled eggs. Frobisher finally took pity on his blank face. "He's never been at a Center, before, Halleck," he told the stranger, who grinned. "Pretty dull, aren't they, Mr. Kearns? I'm always glad to come up here when it's time, but I'm always glad to get back to the farm."

Brian said, "I'm a little stunned at all this —" and added, "I'd understood your — your civilization wasn't scientific —"

"It isn't," Frobisher said sternly. "It definitely is not. We use science; it doesn't use us. Science, Mr. Kearns, is no longer the plaything of powerful warmongers, nor is it enslaved to an artificial standard of living, keyed to an unhealthy, neurotic population who want to be continually amused, rocked in a cradle of overstimulation! It is not a plaything for pressure groups, so-called educators, fanatics, adolescents, egocentric exhibitionists, or lazy women! Men are no longer under pressure to buy the products of commercialized science to create employment and keep the cities running. Anyone who's interested, and

who has talents and skills which go beyond day-to-day living, which is more than half of the population, spends a few months every year doing the things which need doing, not just in science. Halleck here knows more about weather conditions than anyone else in the South Plains. About four months out of the year, he sits over there, or works out in a weather plane, fighting tornados before they get started, working on reforestation, handling drought conditions. The rest of the year, he lives like anybody else. Everybody lives an easy, balanced life. Man's a small animal, and has to have a small horizon. There's a definite limit to his horizon, which is why a village breaks down and starts having internal trouble when it gets too big. But groups of people, as a whole, have to have some idea of the world over the horizon, if they're going to avoid the development of false ideas, superstitions and fears of strangers. So every man leads a secure, balanced life in the small horizon of his village, where he is responsible for himself, and responsible to every person he knows — and also, if he is capable, he lives a larger life *beyond* the village, working for others — but still and always for individuals, not for ideals." Brian opened his mouth to speak, but Frobisher quietly forestalled him. "And before he can work in the Centers, he has to prove himself as a responsible individual in the villages. There's a place waiting for

you, Brian. How would you like to teach a course in the mechanics of interstellar space?"

"*What?*" Brian spluttered. "You mean — space travel?"

Frobisher laughed heartily. He glanced at his watch and said inconsequentially, "My son will probably be here in a few minutes — but still, I've time to explain —"

He turned to Brian again. "For two or three months a year," he reminded him. "There is always a use for knowledge, whether we can use it immediately or not. Our present way of life won't endure forever. At best it's an interim device, a probationary period, a sort of resting stage while man returns to sanity before he starts climbing again. Some day, man will probably take to space again, even the stars, but this time, we-hope he'll do it with a sense of perspective, counting the cost and weighing it against individual advantages." He paused, and added quietly, "I think he will."

After a long silence, he added, "I'm a historian. Back in the First Renaissance, man was starting to outgrow his atavistic notion about survival of the strong and powerful instead of the best. Then, unluckily for Europe, and also unluckily for the Redmen, the so-called New World was discovered. It's always easier to escape across a frontier, and drive your misfits out instead of learning to live with your problems. When that frontier was finally conquered, man had a second chance

to learn to live with himself and with what he'd done. Instead, after wars and all kinds of trouble, he escaped again, this time to the planets. But he couldn't escape from himself — and eventually that frontier was filled up to the saturation point, too. So he escaped again, this time by launching the *Starward* — but that time he went just one step too far. And then the crash came. Every man had the choice: die in his armor, or take it off." He grinned. "I thought for a while, Brian, that you were a brontosaur."

Brian mopped his forehead. "I feel pretty extinct," he murmured. "Well, you can try teaching interstellar mechanics for awhile. The rest of the time —"

"Say —" Brian interrupted anxiously. "I don't have to start right away, do I? I'm fixing up a new set of lenses for the crew —"

Frobisher laughed, heartily and kindly, and put a hand on his shoulder. "Take your own time, my boy. The stars won't be bridged again for centuries. It's a lot more important to get your crew's eyes in good condition again." He rose abruptly. "Good — here is John, and I suppose by now, Mellen's on his way to Paula."

Brian quickly got to his feet as a tall dark-haired man in a white jacket came into the room. Even in the dim light the resemblance to Frobisher was obvious; he looked like an older, maturer Destry. Frobisher introduced the men, and Dr.

John Frobisher gave Brian's hand a quick, hard shake.

"Glad to meet you, Kearns. Tom Mellen spoke about you, last time I was in Marilla. Shall we be on our way?" As they turned outward, and crossed the lighted airfield, he and his father spoke in low tones, and for once Brian had nothing to say. Even his thoughts were not working as he put the pickup in the air. The reversal had been too fast. Then, abruptly, a memory hit him and he turned his head around to ask sharply, "Listen here, if you can receive radio signals, *how is it that no one answered the Homeward's call from space!*"

Frobisher looked a trifle embarrassed. He said gently, at last, "We use a special, tight-beam transmission. Your signals are the old wide-band ones, and they came in as bursts of static."

For some reason Brian felt incredibly relieved, and his relief exploded in laughter.

"I *told* Tom our radio devices would be obsolete" . . . he choked.

"Yes," Frobisher said quietly. "Obsolete, only in a way you hadn't planned for. The whole crew of the *Homeward* was obsolete — and you've been on probation all along. But you've come out of that now, I think. Wait a bit — don't go on to Norten just yet. Turn north — just a mile or two. There's something I want you to see."

Brian protested, "Paula —"

John Frobisher leaned forward.

"Mellen's wife—" and this time Brian did not bridle at the vulgarity, "—will be all right, Kearns. We don't get the gravity sickness very often, now, but any danger in it was knocked out even before the spacers quit running. The girl's probably uncomfortable, and it looks terrible, but it isn't dangerous. We'll have her fixed up within an hour."

And somehow Brian's anxiety slid away. The words didn't mean much to him, but his training had taught him one thing, at least; he recognized competence when he met it, and it was in every inflection of John Frobisher's voice. Acquiescently he swung the ship to the northeast. The rising sun broke in a wave of brightness over the horizon, revealing the far-away line of ruined buildings that looked down drearily over a too-flat strip of dismal, barren land where nothing grew, a straight level plain of gray concrete. For miles it seemed to stretch away; Brian, flying low, could see the grass that pushed its way upward through the crumbling concrete, the dreary gap-windowed buildings softened a little by ivy. And then he saw them: eight tall regular shapes, straight and still gleaming a little. . . .

"There are only two laws in our culture," Frobisher said quietly. "One is that no man shall enslave another. And the second—" he paused, looking straight at Brian, "—is that no man shall enslave himself. Which is why we have

never destroyed these ships. This was the old spaceport, Brian. Does it look very majestic? Would you care to land?"

Brian looked, thinking: this was what he had expected to see first. And yet, somehow, this was what seemed greatest to him: that man, having created this monster, should have the common sense to abandon its dreary domination—and the courage to leave it there. Men destroy only what they fear.

"Come on," Brian said steadily. "Quit riding me. Let's get back home—and I do mean home. There's a sick girl waiting for you, doctor. And even if it isn't dangerous, they're going to be worrying until you tell them it isn't." Abruptly he gunned the jets and turned the ship southeast toward Norten Village, into the rising sun. He was not aware that he had passed the final test. He was thinking about Paula, and about Ellie, waiting and worrying. He knew in the back of his mind that he'd come back here some day, look around a little, maybe even mourn a little; you couldn't put away the biggest part of your life. But he wouldn't come right away. He had work to do.

The pickup of the *Homeward* flew away, into the morning. Yet behind them the mighty symbols remained, cold and masterful, a promise and a threat: eight great starships, covered from nose to tail with green-growing moss and red rust.